

# RONGŌĀ FOR THE LAND

by Mere Whaanga (Ngāti Rongomaiwahine, Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Pāhauwera)

Taipōrutu is a sheep and cattle farm on the Māhia Peninsula. The land has been in the same whānau for twenty generations. It was once covered in native bush: tī kōuka, mānuka, rewarewa, tītoki, kahikatea, nīkau, and kawakawa. These species ensured the health of the land and the health of its people – but then they were cleared for farming. A few years ago, the family who owns Taipōrutu came up with a plan to restore their whenua. They called the plan Ahikāroa.

## BEGINNINGS

Ahikāroa means “long occupation” – when generations of people live on the land and use its resources. This is one of the most important ways Māori connect with their whenua and why the Ahikāroa plan begins with the ancestors. Their knowledge of the peninsula goes back more than eight hundred years.

The history of Taipōrutu starts with the great voyaging waka *Tākitimu*, which landed at various places along the East Coast, including Nukutaurua on the Māhia Peninsula. The waka was one of many that brought people from the homeland of Hawaiki to settle in Aotearoa. Because these migrations were planned, the ancestors travelled with everything they needed to start life in a new land.

## NAMING

One of the most lasting things the first settlers brought was their language, and they used this to name their new home. Oral history tells us that the word “taipōrutu” came from Hawaiki. Some say that Taipōrutu and Taiwānanga (the bay just to the south of Taipōrutu) were two sisters. A second explanation is that “tai” refers to the sea and “pōrutu” to the sound the sea makes when it strikes rocks. A booming noise can often be heard when the swell comes from the south-east and the waves break on the cluster of rocks in Taipōrutu Bay.

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Mere Whaanga (left) at Taipōrutu





## THE AHIKĀROA PLAN

Before Taipōrutu was cleared for farming, the 250-acre block of land was home to a large number of native trees and plants. Each species played a crucial role in maintaining the health of the waterways, the land, and the people. Some species prevented erosion or filtered rainwater, and this kept the waterways clean. Others provided a habitat for birds, reptiles, and bees and other insects, many of which helped plants to pollinate. There were also species that allowed the ancestors to survive in their challenging new environment. Many kinds of native trees and plants were vital rongoā (medicine) for the land and people, and the Ahikāroa plan focuses on the most important. These include tī kōuka, tītoki, and mānuka.



## TĪ KŌUKA

There is a pā above the landing site of the *Tākitimu*, and tī kōuka (*Cordyline australis*) grow on the hillside nearby. These trees were an essential resource for early Māori and had multiple uses. They were especially valued as a source of food and for weaving, which is why they were planted and cultivated. Tī kōuka also have a strong root system that helps prevent erosion.

The growing stem of a tī kōuka is known as the koata. People stripped away the outer leaves to reveal a small white core. Koata was a slightly bitter food whether eaten raw or cooked. Sometimes, the fleshy roots and stems of young trees were baked in an umu – an earth oven. The result was a sweet, fibrous food that was high in starch and sugar. The flowers of the tī kōuka weren't eaten, but they did offer the promise of food. When the flowers were abundant, people said it was a sign of a good growing season ahead.

The tī kōuka's fibrous leaves are tough – perfect for weaving. Māori used the leaves to make cord, rope, kete, sandals, snares, and raincoats. Because the leaves don't shrink in water, they were also used to make anchor rope. Harakeke fishing nets were often made stronger with strips of tī kōuka leaves.

Tī kōuka sometimes grew in pua manu. These groves attracted all kinds of birds, including kererū. Kererū were an important source of protein for the ancestors, and they were useful because they spread seeds, which allowed the forest to regenerate. Most tī kōuka flower in the spring. Their sweet scent attracts flies, native bees, honeybees, bumble bees, moths, and wasps. These insects help with pollination.



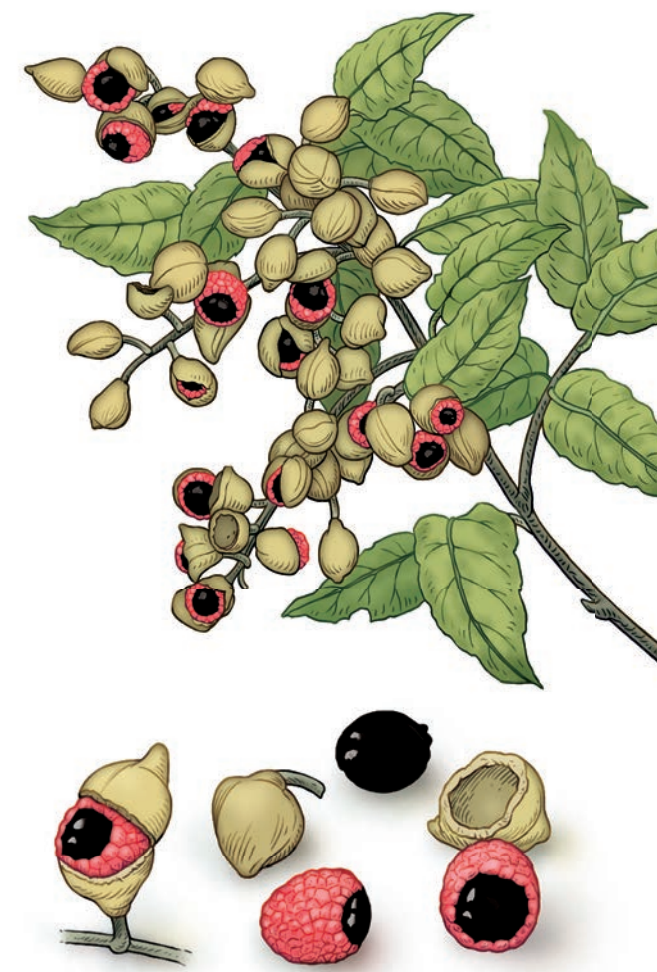


## TĪTOKI

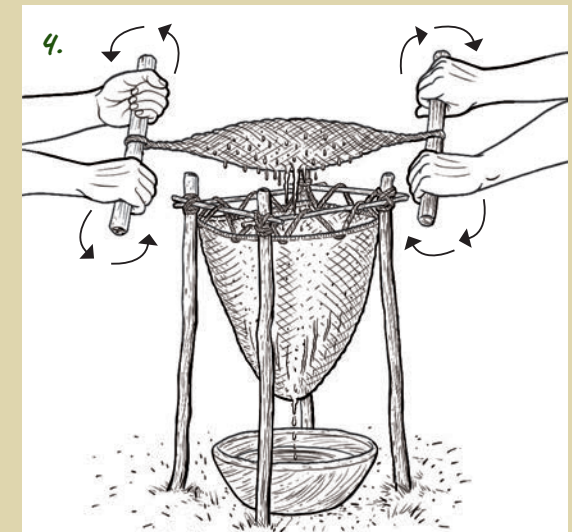
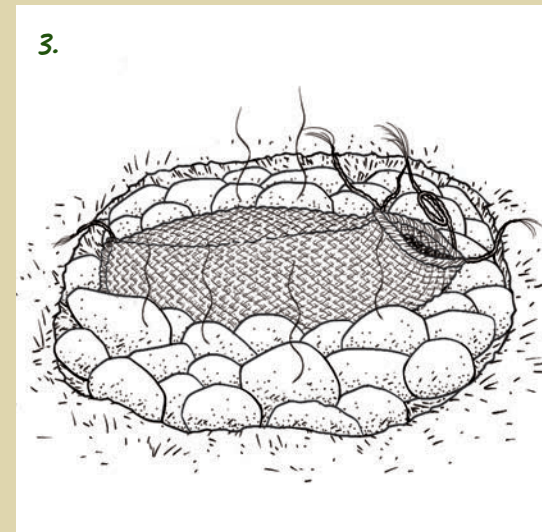
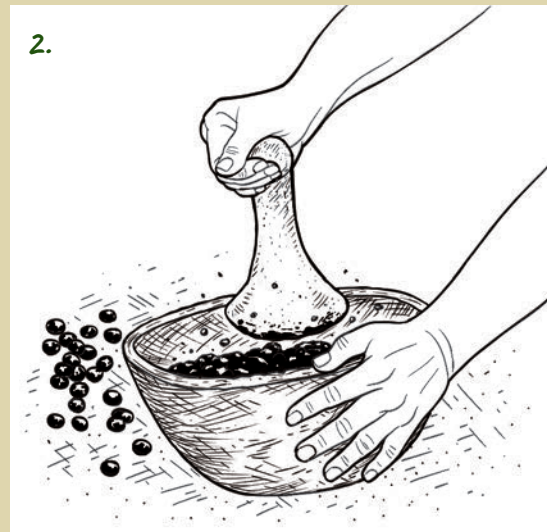
Another species the ancestors planted was tītoki (*Alectryon excelsus*), and Taipōrutu has an ancient tītoki grove. The trees grew straight, and their timber was strong, but the ancestors were more interested in the shiny black seeds. These were valued for their high-quality oil. Tītoki oil was scented with leaves from heketara, akeake, hīoi, mānuka, and manakura and used to condition hair and skin. It also had healing properties and was rongoā for sore eyes, wounds, and chapped lips.

Making tītoki oil was hard work. First, the berries were collected in kete and soaked in water (1). The soaked berries were pounded and washed to remove the pulp from the seeds, and the clean seeds were crushed with a tuki (2). The crushed seeds were then put in a finely woven harakeke bag, called a kopa whakawiri tītoki. This bag was either heated in an umu or nestled among hot rocks (3). Finally the kopa was wrung (whakawiri) by placing two sticks at each end and twisting them in opposite directions to squeeze out the oil (4).

Because tītoki oil was so difficult to extract and most tītoki trees only produce a decent crop of berries every four or so years, the oil was highly prized. Usually it was reserved for rangatira. When Captain Cook's *Endeavour* anchored off the peninsula in October 1769, men rowed a waka out to meet the ship. Three of the men in this waka wore perfumed sachets around their necks that were made using tītoki oil. Some people think the oil may have come from Taipōrutu.



### Making tītoki oil







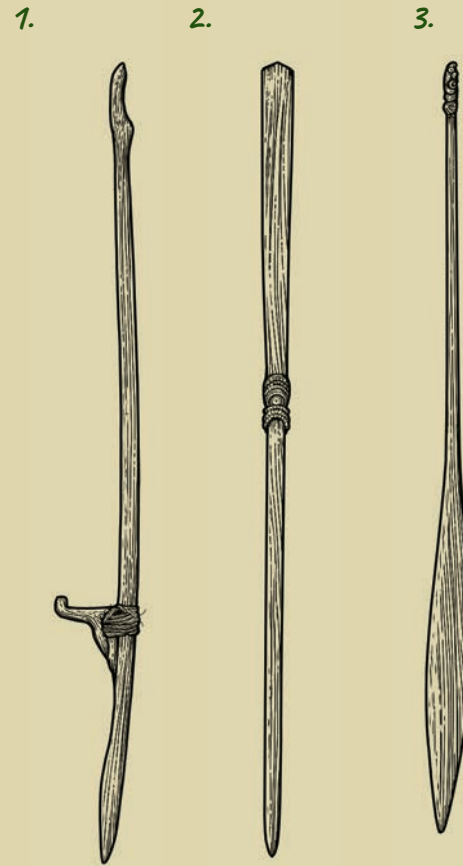
## MĀNUKA

Mānuka (*Leptospermum scoparium*) is a fast-growing native that thrives in all kinds of soils and climates. It does especially well in exposed coastal areas, including the Māhia Peninsula. The trees' roots help to prevent erosion and filter hill country run-off, cleaning the water before it reaches the streams. Typically, mānuka are one of the first trees to grow back when land is left to regenerate, and they provide shelter while other young natives grow.

Mānuka is valued around the world because of the healing power of mānuka honey. The ancestors also knew about the value of mānuka, and they used every part of the plant to make rongoā. They boiled the leaves to make a vapour for treating colds, and they burnt the bark to make ash for treating skin infections and inflammation. Mānuka bark was also used in ointment for burns, and it was boiled to make tea that was drunk as a sedative.

Mānuka wood is strong. The ancestors used it to make all kinds of useful items, including gardening tools (such as kō), weapons (such as pouwhenua), waka paddles (called hoe), and whare. The inner bark of mānuka is waterproof, and this was used to line a whare's roof and walls.

Taipōrutu's wild stands of mānuka flower in November and December. These flowers are loved by bees. It's said that kina are fat when the mānuka are flowering.



1. kō 2. pouwhenua  
3. hoe 4. whare



## HEALING THE LAND

Many more native trees and plants once grew at Taipōrutu. These species were found in the forest's understory and margins, along the coastline, and in planted groves. Their regeneration is being encouraged in all of these places, a process that will speed up once the land is no longer farmed. A wetland has also been fenced off to encourage the birdlife to return. Two breeding pūkeko have already made their nest among the kuta reeds.

The whānau who wrote the Ahikāroa plan have many ambitions. They want plantings along the Taipōrutu stream, harakeke and wharariki fire barriers, and stands of toetoe kākaho to control erosion. The whānau also want to provide resources for artists. This includes timber, such as tōtara and rimu, which can be used by future carvers. The starting point is to heal the land and its waters. Then the health of the people will follow.



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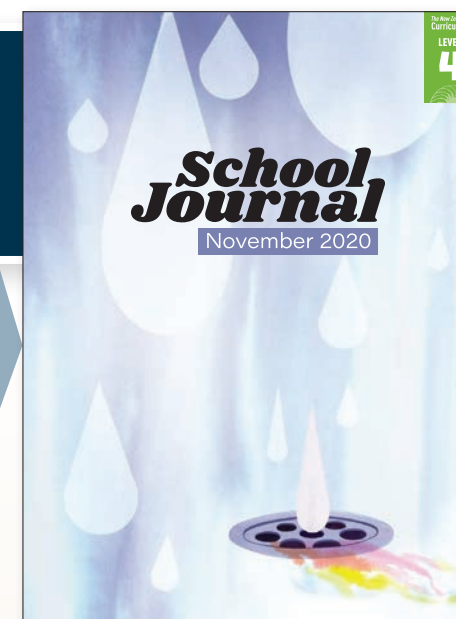
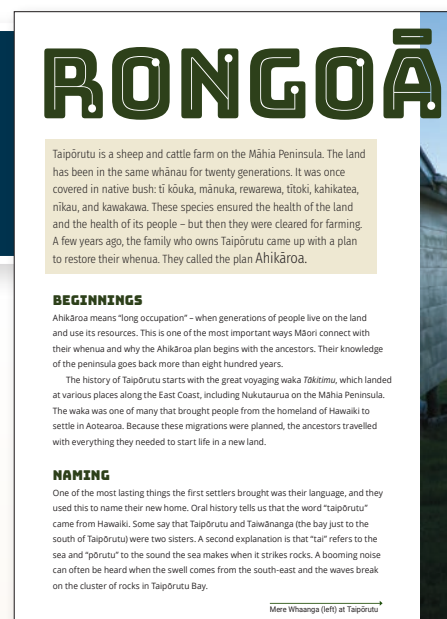
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