

# Aitutaki Taunga Vairakau Māori Protocol

[Aitutaki Traditional Medicines  
and Healers Network Protocol]

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For medical issues, people are encouraged to seek medical advice both from health clinics and general practitioners as well as traditional medical practitioners.

This document was developed by Retire Puapii, Daniel Robinson, Miri Raven and members of the Aitutaki Taunga Vairakau Māori network.

# Background to Aitutaki & the Protocol

Aitutaki is an island in the Cook Islands. Aitutaki, one of 15 small islands of the Cook Islands, is part of the Southern Cook Islands. The Cook Islands has both traditional governance (House of Ariki, in Cook Islands Māori: 'Are Ariki) and representative democracy (Parliament). Avarua, on the island of Rarotonga, is the national capital in the home of the National Parliament and the House of Ariki (Chiefs). Traditional governance is based on a traditional hierarchy structure Te Aronga Mana (traditional leaders) including Ariki (paramount chiefs) and Koutu Nui (sub-chiefs) including Vaka Mata'iaipo. Polynesian peoples are believed to have settled the islands of Aitutaki around AD 1225–1430. The island was formally annexed to the British Crown as part of the Cook Islands by Proclamation dated 9 October 1900. In 1965 Cook Islands entered into self-governing in 'free association' with New Zealand. This arrangement allows Cook Islanders to hold New Zealand citizenship a right of free access to New Zealand.



Arutanga (Arutunga), the main village of Aitutaki, sits on the west side of the main island. The population is approximately 2000 people. The island is often described as an "almost atoll", because it consists of a lagoon within an encircling atoll with biodiverse reefs, several small motu (a reef islet formed by broken coral and sand), and a significant area of high land on the West side of the lagoon. It has a maximum elevation of approximately 123 metres (404 ft) with the hill known as Maunga Pu close to its northernmost point of the atoll (Pyle et al., 2019).

The coastal flat is dominated by *Guettarda speciosa*, coconuts, Hibiscus, Pandanus, and *Hernandia moerenhoutiana*. The slopes are mostly Hibiscus tiliaceus interspersed with taro patches. The inland plateau is extensively cultivated, with plantations of coconuts, banana, citrus, and other food plants, as well as assorted introduced decorative shrubs. The high ground on the island was cleared during World War 2 for military installations and now consists of grasses and introduced plants. The motu have *Pemphis acidula* scrub on the seaward side, phasing to *Suriana* scrub and coconut forest, with the volcanic islands containing small forests of *Calophyllum inophyllum*. The island is also home to a number of bird species, and is an important habitat for some bird species like blue lorikeets (McCormack, 2007; Stoddart, 1975a,b).



On Aitutaki, Roundup and paraquat chemicals have killed many of the medicinal herbs. Because some medicines are weeds, people might remove them without knowing their use. Crawling herbs (such as vines) are disappearing because of the use of Roundup, and any collection could be dangerous due to the toxins left by the weed killer. This is a problem. There needs to be education and awareness about the Aitutaki environment and plants, the need to protect medicinal herbs, and to be careful with the use of the pesticides on the island.

Land clearing for coconut plantations has been a problem on Aitutaki. The Government gave agriculture the right to clear and then use weed killer which also kills herbs and medicines. Some palm trees were introduced and have brought pests with them.

Sometimes plants are still available at people's houses and people will ask for them. But there are not enough medicinal plants on the island. We have considered asking the Aitutaki village plant nursery to stock medicinal plants, but there are problems with resources. We have also discussed the possibility that each village has its own plant nursery that grows medicinal plants without the use of weed killers.

# Taunga Vairakau Māori – Traditional Healers and Medicine

The traditional healers (Taunga Vairakau Māori) of Aitutaki have an informal network that meets occasionally. There are several people from each district and settlement of Aitutaki who make up the traditional healers' network across the eight districts — Amuri, Ureaia, Arutanga, Reureu, Nikaupora, Tautu, Vaipae, and Vaipeka. Most of the people in the traditional healer's network are government workers, in the private sector, a few are self-employed: fishing, planting/ agriculture and similar. The other main occupation on the island is in tourism. There are no leaders for the Taunga Vairakau Māori network. It is organised by family and the traditional medicines are shared through oral sharing within family lines. Individuals within the Network look after medicinal plants on their own land. We also retain medicinal knowledge within family lines, sharing with the next generation.

At the moment, there is no formal structure – we do not meet much. We share knowledge of healing through our families. Within our traditional healers network there is interest in having more regular meetings, discussions about formalising our network, and ongoing activities.





There is some concern that the younger generation might not take on the taunga vairakau Māori knowledge. Education is different from the past, different now. Because of this, the taunga vairakau Māori are in the process of deciding whether we should meet as a group/committee to decide on things, such as ownership of, and access to knowledge.

It is also known that researchers from Rarotonga and Australia have been in Aitutaki in the past. These researchers made an approach to the Aitutaki Island Council. They wanted us to give them our medicine to register it to the Cook Islands Department of Health and then to sell it. The Taunga Vairakau Māori Network don't want to sell medicines. It is important to note that some plants are endangered.

Some Taunga Vairakau Māori are interested in documenting our procedures, helping to organise and formalise the informal Network, and to discuss issues that might arise over time. There is interest from the Network in revitalising the traditional medicines of Aitutaki and taking this process further, such as potentially through documenting a list of healers and/or a list of remedies. We also want to coordinate the next steps of the network, and to hear testimonies and examples of the healing done in the past and recently.

The group agreed to discuss developing a protocol for the benefit of the Taunga Network, but not necessarily to document the specifics of all taunga knowledge, unless families agree to document it. We agreed to have a report, poster and perhaps a website. The Network are keen to formalise our group and organise more meetings. We would like to do this to assist with developing the protocol and work with medicines, including knowledge sharing where permitted, so that the knowledge isn't lost.

With further work, discussion and agreement within the network we may consider the possibility of registering knowledge with the Are Korero under the Traditional Knowledge Act (2013) administered by the Ministry of Cultural Development.

# Values and Custodianship

Aitutaki culture today is based on Christian values, with Christianity arriving in 1922. Traditional medicines have co-existed with Christianity since this time.

## Support for the Development of the Protocol

This protocol was developed with the support of the Australian Research Council Discovery Grant *Indigenous Knowledge Futures: Protecting and Promoting Indigenous Knowledges* (DP180100507), headed by Professor Daniel Robinson and Dr Miri (Margaret) Raven from UNSW Australia. The team are interested in ways of respectfully implementing the *Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)*. The Nagoya Protocol encourages countries and researchers to respect customary laws and community protocols of Indigenous peoples and local communities in relation to their knowledge and biodiversity.

In 2018, preliminary discussions took place with Mr Retire Puapii (Principal of the local primary school at Aitutaki) and a leader of the local traditional healer's network (which we will call the Taunga Vairakau Māori Network)(the Network for short). Discussions also took place with the local Island Council and several other contacts, and it was agreed that Prof Robinson and Dr Raven could come back for further discussions.

In 2019, Prof Robinson and Dr Raven first met with the traditional healer's network to discuss the possibility of a biocultural protocol. There was interest in documenting procedures, organising and formalising the informal network, and to discuss issues that might arise over time. They have also undertaken additional workshops in Aitutaki with the Taunga Vairakau network in May and August 2023 to finalise and translate the protocol.



# Aitutaki Taunga Vairakau Māori Network Protocols

## Purpose of the Protocol

The purpose of the Aitutaki Taunga Vairakau Māori Network Protocol is to create a framework to enable the Aitutaki Taunga Vairakau Māori Network to have discussions about traditional knowledge and create the basis for how to make decisions on the conditions on which this knowledge can be shared. The Protocol is also a basis to enable outsiders to understand the Aitutaki Taunga Vairakau Māori Network and how traditional may be accessed and use.

The Aitutaki Taunga Vairakau Māori Network Protocol includes sections for:

- Rules based on Traditional Governance
- Rules for Protecting and Transferring Knowledge
- Taboos and Restrictions on Some Plants
- External Researchers



# 1. Rules based on Traditional Governance

1.1. Traditional healers of Aitutaki are not registered through the Cook Islands Government or Aitutaki Island Council. We are separate from the Department of Health. We have considered registering but that is an ongoing discussion.

1.2. Mataiapo (chiefs) are separate to the Taunga (Ariki are paramount chiefs). They may not have anything to do with the medicines, unless they are also healers. These people (healers) keep it in the family. This is important for the 'mana' of the medicine. The power of it. If you copy it, or use it without permission, you might die. If you are not told about it by the original or proper person who makes it, it will not work when you try it.

1.3. Special groups perform traditional medicines and healing – it is sacred. The medicine often comes to us from dreams, including how and when to deliver it to the person who needs treatment.

1.4. Knowledge is passed from family members to younger ones who are interested in learning. Some medicines and medicinal knowledge can be given to people outside of the family – it depends on the medicine.

1.5. If you know what's wrong with the person, you go to the person and they make the medicine from plants and ingredients. It is good to tell your friend that you are sick so that the message is passed on, so people can help you. If you keep it to yourself, no one will help you.

1.6. Medicine can pass from mother to daughter or from mother to sister, then they are the only ones who can use it for healing purposes it. The medicine may not work if other people administer it, if they use the wrong ingredients, or do not make a prayer. It can be men and women, both who receive the knowledge and sometimes men are receiving knowledge from their mothers when there are no women in the family to receive it.

- One taunga vairakau Māori said that their medicine was passed to her from her grandmother, and mother. She is writing it down to turn it into a book for my own family so it doesn't end up with others or lost.

- Another taunga vairakau Māori said the medicine (vairakau) they make is not their mothers, it is my dad's, but because of sickness he gave it to my mother and then she gave it to me (a woman). It is ok as long as it remains within the family.



1.7. We never write down medicines for others, we just talk, but maybe write down for our own families/people. Only special taunga vairakau Māori people can do it. The medicine is from the people, for the people.

1.8. Some medicines we have are from Mangaia and brought to Aitutaki, but because a lot of women get sick – there is an inter-island medicine. There is knowledge sharing between islands – it is only shared with their permission. It can go to our families in Australia and New Zealand with family permission too.

1.9. These species are significant to the taunga vairakau Māori. We don't farm them. Coconut oil is a good example. It grows everywhere, so it does not need to be farmed. Akari Tiare Māori and coconut oil products were never sold in the past and now they are. These days some people take money for the medicines, but as healers we don't think they should.

1.10. The mana within the medicine is taken off if money is involved and it won't work. Some medicines we can make but we cannot sell. They are not supporting the selling but just telling us about this. There is just an after-sun dry skin oil, old tradition which has been sold it in a shop because not everyone is interested in making it.





## 2. Rules for Protecting & Transferring Knowledge

2.1 Ownership of traditional healing knowledge is within the family. The one who practices, 'owns' it and passes it down.

2.2 Traditional knowledge is passed to children, those who are keen, on the island, in their families. If not living on the island, they have to ask them to come to the island. Some pass it on to all of their children.

2.3 The vairakau ingredients haven't changed but the method may have changed.

2.4 The knowledge comes to the person in a dream – it will come to them – the mother and father send to you in a dream. The dream specifies/alerts to the timing of an illness.



### 3. Taboos & Restrictions on Some Plants

3.1. Some plants are protected and not to be harmed. To use protected plants you must go to the National Environment Service (NES) to get permission to use or cut them and replant them back.

3.2. There is a taboo around women's periods – they cannot use medicines/pick from trees when having their period.

3.3. Some medicines should not be pick when it rains. They will not work when they have been picked in the rain. We do not go picking when it is raining for this reason. Some medicines also cannot be collected or used in Winter because they are seasonal.

3.4. A specific type of Pandanus must be picked or planted by only the men. There are rituals associated with it and other trees.

3.5. Yes, there are totems. One village has the sunrise. There is a crab for one village– Tautu has the papaho ('walk on') crab. There is jasmine for one family.

3.6. Medicinal trees should not be cut down without permission. We want to encourage people to take cuttings and plant them around the island with the support of people in the Network.

### 4. External Researchers

4.1 If a company or researcher comes to seek our knowledge, then we won't allow it. We need to form trust with people coming in from outside of Cook Islands and Aitutaki before we will consider allowing access to our knowledge.

4.2. If, and when, we establish ourselves as a committee, researchers need to meet with Aitutaki Taunga Vairakau Māori Network committee to discuss their proposed access of our knowledge.

4.3. To make a decision on whether to allow access, the company and/or researcher would need to present information on how the knowledge will be used, and where it will end up.

4.4. It is up to the healers to decide if they want to share their knowledge and medicines. Outsiders sometimes don't come through the right channels. Therefore, it is important to have the Network and this group can decide.

# Testimonials about Healing

Some vairakau Māori medicinal 'miracles' have happened.

One of our healers had a dream about a traditional cancer medicine. The sick person thought there was no harm in trying this. A friend who came back who had a serious cancer that doctors couldn't cure. They took one bottle of their medicine first and it was ok and seemed to help. Then they took a few bottles of the medicine, and then soon there was no cancer, it was all clear.

One of our healers knows of a man had cysts and blood clots in his head near his brain. Using a traditional oil, he was able to remove these through his nose and sinuses after some time of treatment. Eventually he recovered fully.

We know of a woman with breast cancer surviving through the use traditional treatments too. One of our healers has a special medicine for this. There is a weedy plant used for stomach ulcers. And one person used white bread to remove puss to heal a wound which it helped it heal quickly.

## References

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Mii Jacob  
Teiti Teiti  
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