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Whanganui River to gain legal personhood

Haunui-Thompson, 2017b

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In a world first, a New Zealand river will be recognised as a person.



Whanganui River Photo: 123RF

The Whanganui River Claims Settlement Bill was passed today, giving the Whanganui River the same status as a legal person.

Te Urewera, the former national park, was granted the same status when Tūhoe settled with the Crown in 2014.

In Whanganui they have a saying: 'Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au' - which translates into English as, 'I am the river and the river is me.'

The river will now be the first in the world to have such a status - but for the iwi of the river, it recognises something they say they have always known.

Te Tai Hauāuru MP Adrian Rurawhe said some people might find the concept strange but it was completely normal for Māori.

"The river as a whole is absolutely important to the people who are from the river and live on the river.

"I'll repeat something that [MP] Chester Burrows said in [Parliament] today - it's not that we've changed our world view but people are catching up to seeing things how we see it."

(a Māori worldview)

Nice quote!

Treaty Negotiations Minister Chris Finlayson said the new law would work just like a charitable trust or an incorporated society, with trustees for the river legally required to act in its best interest.

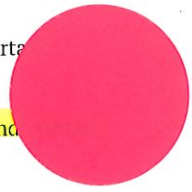
"There some precedents for it overseas - there had been a lot of talk that this is actually a really good way of ensuring that the particular resource is able to have representative to address the kind of environmental degradation that so many natural resources suffer from."

Mr Rurawhe said iwi had been fighting for over 160 years to get this recognition for their river.

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From a Whanganui viewpoint the wellbeing of the river is directly linked to the wellbeing of the people and so it is really important that's recognised as its own identity," Mr Rurawhe said.

Mr Finlayson said the legislation recognised the deep spiritual connection between the Whanganui iwi and its ancestral river and a strong platform for the river's future.



Māori Party welcomes bill's passing

The Māori Party also welcomed the bill's passage through Parliament, saying it reflected the courage of those who first tabled the claim 26 years ago.

The party's co-leaders, Marama Fox and Te Ururoa Flavell, said history had been made with the creation of the new entity, Te Awa Tupua.

"We have a chance to restore Te Awa Tupua to its life-giving essence and, in doing so, to gift back to the Whanganui River iwi their rightful obligations and responsibilities to the river that runs through their veins," Ms Fox said.

Mr Flavell said the party was proud and humbled to have been able to support the legislation.