

Department of Conservation Cultural Celebration

More than 600 Department of Conservation (DOC) staff have completed the organisation's Te Pūkenga Atawhai programme, a cultural awareness and capability wananga initiative developed to enable the department to build and nurture strong relationships with whānau, hapū and iwi.

The programme was started 23 years ago, and today forms an integral part of DOC's strategy to recognise that having effective Treaty relationships is critical to its work.

DOC, the government agency charged with conserving New Zealand's natural and historic heritage, has more than 2000 staff based all around the country. When DOC was formed in 1987, it became apparent that there was little recognition of Treaty partners, and staff were finding it hard to work with whānau, hapū and iwi in the conservation environment.



In 1995, DOC's Māori leaders were tasked with developing a cultural awareness programme to address these issues, which was launched in Rotorua in 1999.

Te Pūkenga Atawhai is a four-day programme held on marae around the country in partnership with a local iwi, covering four modules:

- Māori beliefs and values
- Interacting with Māori - tika (correct and appropriate) behaviour on a marae and delivering a mihi, waiata, poroporoaki and karakia in Te Reo Māori
- Treaty of Waitangi - history, principles and relevance to DOC
- Māori systems and structures - relevant to DOC's relationships with tangata whenua

Now, about 11 wananga are run each year, with staff in each region having the opportunity to attend as part of their induction to DOC. Staff stay on the marae for the entire course. DOC's current Director General Lou Sanson and all the senior leadership have taken part in the programme, which was developed and implemented by Te Kahui Kaupapa Atawahi (DOC's national Māori body).

Te Pūkenga Atawhai has become a critical tool in supporting DOC to reach its goal of enabling whānau, hapū and iwi to practise their responsibilities as kaitiaki of natural and cultural resources on public conservation lands and waters, says Director Strategic Capability Taute Taiepa.

It has also resulted in DOC taking a leading role amongst government agencies in building cultural awareness and capability, he says.

"Other government departments, including Te Puni Kokiri and NZ Police, have reached out to DOC to understand more about the programme and are considering ways to implement similar programmes. We have also included some of our partners, such as Air New Zealand, in the courses held to date."

Feedback from staff taking part in the programme shows it brings professional and personal benefits. Not only do they build awareness to enable better working relationships with tangata whenua, the safe environment that is created for staff on the marae allows them to ask questions and learn about the culture in a way that is hard to gain from other teaching environments.

“All staff who attend the programme come away able to say their own mihi in Te Reo, as well as to confidently sing waiata and say karakia. This enables our staff to confidently engage with whānau, hapū and iwi, and understand cultural traditions and knowledge and the effects this has on their own lives,” says Taute Taiepa.



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