

16 December 2022

Tēnā koutou katoa – Greetings to you all.

I am deeply honoured to represent the peoples of Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, the Pacific - the largest of the United Nations' socio-cultural regions. While some think oceans separate nations, for indigenous peoples, we aren't separated by oceans, we are connected by them.

Our ancestors navigated, explored and settled a third of the surface of the planet long before our colonisers. Mapping our languages along the way. As my late friend, Dr Teresia Teaiwa said: "Pacific peoples sweat and cry salt water so we know the ocean is truly in our blood."

Exactly 380 years ago this week, the first European, arrived off the coast of Te Waipounamu (the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand) and the first thing he did was rename the land he saw. It turned out he was lost, so when he returned to Europe another random name was chosen for my homeland. When I passed through customs the other day, that same random name - New Zealand, is still on my passport. Yet at home, many of us are now calling it Aotearoa New Zealand.

Indigenous peoples have been fighting for basic human rights for millennia: The right to our lands, environments, identity, language and culture. Fundamentally, the right to exist as the indigenous peoples of our respective homes. Will we still be fighting for another millennia?

Like others here, our language was banned in schools, our children were punished for speaking Māori and told it was of no value – our language was forcibly replaced with English.

My people's battle for the Māori language has been fought in our homes, on our streets, in our classrooms, courts and our parliament.

50-years-ago less than 5 per cent of Māori children could speak Māori. Today it is now the first language of nearly 25 per cent of Māori children, thanks to our collective efforts.

We are on a journey and although we are not there yet, we are making good time. It takes one generation to lose a language and three to restore it as a living language.
So how did this happen for us?

Firstly: Māori people mobilised through grassroots community initiatives that have become institutions of our society;

Secondly: The government used the law to protect our language, establishing a Māori Language Commission 35 years ago and then partnering with Māori people and creating Te Mātāwai in 2016.

And finally: More New Zealanders are embracing our language and are helping to normalise it. 8 in 10 New Zealanders now see te reo as part of their national identity while 3 in 5 of all parents want their children learning Māori at school.

We are a nation of 5 million, mostly monolingual, non-Māori people. Yet in the middle of the COVID lockdown when we called on our country to get 1 million people speaking, singing and celebrating our language at the same time: 1.1 million people joined us.

While some critics thought protecting our language in law would divide us: it has done the opposite. The Māori language doesn't separate us. Like our ocean, our language unites us. Despite our advancement, the story is not the same across our region. If current trends continue, we will lose 250 languages by the end of the decade: and of the world's languages, 1 in 5 are from the Pacific, and they are under threat.

In our region, severe weather events are devastating island nations, costing trillions and forcing people to move. Changes to the environment pose significant threats to Pacific people and languages. These are not just natural disasters: they are a result of human inaction and therefore humans must take action to address them.

We cannot sit idle and allow climate change to displace Pacific peoples to other nations where their languages may not be welcomed and where they may not thrive.

Our ancestors explored and settled the Pacific Ocean using our own indigenous knowledge and our own languages.

We are also on a journey today and just like our ancestors: there are no passengers.

Everyone has a role to play.

Governments have the most powerful role of all.

Governments must use their power to protect irreplaceable pieces of our human identity.

Languages tell the stories of humanity. They are an anchor to our past and a compass to our future.

Aotearoa New Zealand has shown that an endangered, indigenous language can become a powerful, uniting force.

Indigenous languages can unite nations, at a time when we need to unite more than ever before.

We invite the rest of the world to join us.

Tēnā koutou katoa

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