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Māori warriors perform the haka, part of a traditional Māori welcome for China's President Xi Jinping and his wife Peng Liyuan, upon their arrival in Wellington, New Zealand, in 2014. // Anthony Phelps/Reuters

New Place Names Lift Māori Culture in New Zealand's Capital

CHRIS FITCH APR 23, 2019

A new policy in Wellington aims to revitalize the indigenous Māori language. First up: giving new, non-colonial names to sites around town.

On a hot weekday in late summer, Wellington's Civic Square is full of life. Children run around shouting, parents trying to keep up. Students sprawl in the sunshine, while suited businesspeople stride purposefully from one side to the other, deep in conversation. A jogger enters the square, eyes darting, as he seeks a path through the human obstacles in front of him.

Here, in the shadow of Town Hall, at the center of the city's urban landscape, Wellington's heart and soul are on show. In recognition of this special area of public space, the square recently acquired a new Māori-inspired name: *Te Ngākau*. Meaning "the heart," the name recognizes a place with a key role in bringing the city's roughly 400,000 residents together.



Under the new policy, Māori names are chosen for places around Wellington by local officials in consultation with *mana whenua*, the guardians of Māori culture. (Chris Fitch)

The new moniker is part of a city policy called *Te Tauihu*. Adopted in June 2018, the policy aims to promote the indigenous Māori language *te reo* ("the language") in a series of steps until it is level with English. (The name of the policy, *Te Tauihu*, refers to the ornately carved prows of Māori boats, leading the way forward through the waves.) Ultimately, the Wellington City Council hopes to make the city bilingual by 2040.

“I remember years ago, when people were saying, ‘What’s the point of learning *te reo* Māori?’” Deputy Mayor Jill Day, a central architect of the policy, told CityLab. “We’re showing people what the point is, because it’s going to be everywhere. It’s going to be in your interest to understand enough to be able to function in a community that’s acknowledging a really important part of our heritage.”

In New Zealand, the English names of towns and cities, streets and parks, are mostly imported from Victorian Britain. The capital itself is named after Arthur Wellesley, first duke of Wellington (1769–1852).

Captain James Cook launched Britain’s claim over New Zealand in 1769, a claim that was “formalized” in 1840 with the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi between the Crown and hundreds of Māori chiefs. A series of land wars then followed between Māori and the rapidly rising number of British settlers, many of whom owned land sold to them illegally, without consultation with the communities living there. (This problem was exacerbated by the two translations of the treaty offering different interpretations of territorial ownership.)

Backed by the might of the British Empire, which committed thousands of troops to suppress Māori resistance, the settlers emerged victorious, and the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw mass immigration from the United Kingdom. Now, more than 70 percent of the population of nearly 5 million are Pākehā (that is, New Zealanders of European descent), while the Māori population has dwindled to below 15 percent.

Although it is technically an official language of New Zealand, fluency in *te reo* Māori is extremely low; it is spoken by only about 3 percent of the population (English, by comparison, is near-universal). But interest in it does appear to be growing nationwide. Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, one of the country’s newer higher-education centers, reports significant year-on-year increases in numbers of *te reo* students, while Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has publicly promoted *te reo* learning, calling for 1 million new speakers by 2040.

While the rise in interest certainly predates Ardern’s election in 2017, her enthusiasm for the language has ensured federal support for this grassroots movement. Ardern has included *te reo* phrases in multiple high-profile speeches and gave her daughter the middle name *Te Aroha*, “love.”

For Wellington, Civic Square doubling as *Te Ngākau* is only the beginning. In consultation with *mana whenua*, the guardians of Māori culture (as decided by tribal authority and genealogical ancestry), officials are adopting vocabulary from *te reo* to create new dual place names around the city.

The nearby waterfront was recently christened *Ara Moana*—“ocean pathway”—acknowledging the vital maritime history of the space among both Māori and Pākehā. Frank Kitts Park has become Whairepo Lagoon, named for the eagle rays (*whairepo*) that inhabit the waters.

Whairepo Lagoon, or Frank Kitts Park, was named for the eagle rays (*whairepo*) that inhabit the waters. (Chris Fitch)

Errors made by Europeans in the spellings of Māori names they carried into the public domain are also being corrected as part of *Te Tauīhu*. So Waripori Street is likely to become either Wharepouri or Wharepōuris Street in the near future.

The renaming of the city's electoral wards reveals fascinating stories about the underlying geography of Wellington. For example, Lambton ward was once home to hill slopes full of *hīnau* trees, from which delicious berries would grow. While the trees may be gone, the addition of *Pukehīnau*, or “hill of the *hīnau* tree,” recognizes this ecological history in the new name “*Pukehīnau* – Lambton.”

Additionally, the large Miramar Peninsula, where the city's airport is located, was once a separate island known as *Motukairangi*, the “sky-gazing” (or “sky-eating”) island—one of the most prestigious locations in the entire landscape, according to Māori legend. Renaming what is currently Eastern ward “*Motukairangi – Eastern*” acknowledges this heritage.

Plenty of city institutions and businesses are also adopting the policy. Wellington Zoo is introducing *te reo* names for its different zones. The newspaper *The Dominion Post* took a second *te reo* name, *Te Purongo o te Upoko-o-te-Ika* (meaning “the report from the head of the fish,” in reference to a Māori legend about New Zealand's North Island once being fished out of the ocean). And Wellington's netball team, the Pulse, is now known as Te Wānanga o Raukawa Pulse, and there are Māori words printed on the players' uniforms.

Whether or not most residents are aware of the policy, their engagement with *te reo* Māori looks set to increase simply through the steady implementation of these changes.

Of course, making a city bilingual requires a lot more than adding new names to street signs. Another big part of *Te Tauihu* is telling stories from Māori ancestry that have been covered up by the city's British colonial dominance (as demonstrated by the large statue of Queen Victoria on the central Kent and Cambridge terraces). A heritage trail will eventually mark the locations of old Māori villages. Bilingual playgrounds will incorporate Māori stories into their designs, and Māori legends will be commemorated at the iconic Mount Victoria (which may be re-anointed with the name *Tangi te Keo*).

Ocean Mercier, who teaches Māori Science and Cultural Mapping at the Victoria University of Wellington, describes the policy as similar to cleaning a pair of glasses: “It's almost like there's a colonial filter over everything that's preventing us from accessing these amazing stories,” she said.

Perhaps the ultimate question for Wellington is whether the city name itself might, one day, be changed to something that's not colonial. As Vini Olsen-Reeder, a lecturer in the School of Māori Studies at Victoria University, points out, there was originally no reason for Wellington to have a singular name: The various tribal villages in this location never saw themselves as parts of one whole, as we view the city now. The *te reo* equivalent *Pōneke* is currently used by the city council, but the future of this particular point is left unaddressed by *Te Tauihu* at present.

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Wellington has a reputation as a young, progressive bastion in New Zealand, and support for the *te reo* policy is consistently above 90 percent. That would likely not be matched in other parts of the country. (“Yes, we are probably in a bit of a bubble,” Day, the deputy mayor, admitted.)

Even so, *Te Taihū* will be no overnight revolution. For now, the policy exists mainly in the minds of its proponents and the glossy documents handed around in the offices of the city council. Very little public signage appears to yet reference *Te Ngākau* or *Ara Moana*, while there is plenty that still points the way to either “Civic Square” or “Waterfront” (new signs will be in place by 2020, according to the plan’s timeframe). Pronunciation will also take time. “We’ve still got a journey to go for people to pronounce names correctly,” Day said.

Plenty of signs in Wellington are still all-English. (Chris Fitch)

Te Tauihu has the potential to be much more than an inclusive gesture. Across the world, indigenous languages are dying out. Half of the world's roughly 7,000 languages are expected to be extinct by the end of this century. "From a revitalization point of view, it takes one generation to lose a language and three to get it back," Olsen-Reeder said. So a two-decade timeframe of concerted action might be necessary to drive real, lasting change to bring back this particular language.

That could help other cities, regions, and countries bring their own unique dialects back to life.