



Title: “Morning has broken”

Description: Urupā (Māori cemetery) at dusk

Photographer: Henrik Moller

Where, when: Koputauki, 10 km north of Coromandel township, New Zealand, December 2020.

Sustainability? Last December I spent three evenings and mornings trying to photograph the Koputauki Urupā, about 10 km north of Coromandel township. The urupā (Māori cemetery) sits in a bare paddock, right on the edge of a beach.

The urupā speaks to me of identity and continuity – two keystones of sustainability. A similar photograph was taken the previous evening (“*Haere atu ra*”) and is included in this gallery. You can read more about why this site moved me so much in the sustainability commentary with that other photograph. You can also read a more general blog discussion called “Becoming Native to Place” on the Ecosystems Photography “Conversations” page for how the issues arising from this image affect many of us.

The Koputauki Urupā is gradually being eroded away because of sea-level rise caused by climate change. How distressing and unjust to have to protect their *tupuna* (ancestors) from a threat coming from far away, and well beyond their control as *kaitiaki* (environmental guardians) of that sacred place. Some aspects of sustainability challenges are unjust.

There has been a gradual recognition in the international literature that environmental justice must be part of any sustainability interventions or policies. If the decisions don’t take most people with them, inevitably they will be undermined and will not last. New Zealand’s Conservation Act, Environment Act and Resource Management Act all have high-level statements to give effect to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. However, many Māori communities have reported that they feel left out of significant decisions and roles to make that happen.

I think that one of the challenges for more effective partnership is a mismatch of scale in governance and sites of action – agencies like Department of Conservation and the Regional Councils usually work on an area much bigger than that of a local hapū or rūnaka. The kaitiaki’s intense passion, knowledge and jurisdiction over a local area is a very powerful force for sustainability and conservation if it can be empowered. In this case a relatively small group of people are trying to defend their urupā from a much bigger threat, and that will be costly and ongoing.

The degree of sea-level rise is much debated in the scientific literature. There is broad consensus that it is occurring, but estimates vary widely. In 2019, a study projected that in a low-emission future scenario, sea level will rise 30 centimeters by 2050 and 69 centimetres by 2100, relative to the level in 2000. In high-emission future scenario, it will be 34 cm by 2050 and 111 cm by 2100.

A 30 cm rise in sea-level may not seem very much, but when coupled with tidal fluctuations and storm surges, this will have a huge effect on coastal land and communities, including their infrastructure like houses, roads, or in this local case, on their urupā.

One of the challenges for mobilising action to manage climate change is its slow onset and focus on those intense storm events. I get frustrated when I hear land users talk of “Acts of God” when a storm or earthquake causes mayhem – certainly there are forces of nature that trigger shocks, but their damage is all the greater because of “Acts of Humans”, or more appropriately, “Inactions of Humans” through unsustainable energy use, transport and land use. It’s time we looked in the mirror and each other instead of blaming God.

That would be a new dawn for the urupā photographed here.

Photo notes: Single exposure, 1/160s, 17 mm focal length, f/20, ISO-100.

Digital specs: 6,786 x 1,857 pixels (12 MP).

Key words: Place, Sea-level rise, climate change, urupā, Māori, cemetery, dusk, sea, spiritual, environmental justice, Aotearoa, New Zealand, Sustainability.

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