

# HULA SKIRTS AND HARD HATS.



Credit: Microsoft

The migration of humankind, specifically indigenous groups, is well-known—from the crossing of the Beringia ice bridge to voyages across the Pacific. Exploration is a tricky business. Do you think indigenous people, perhaps your ancestors, understood the value of health and safety?

I'm talking about animals that ate you, famines that starved you, volcanoes that incinerated you and ice ages that froze you—not your typical working-at-heights day.

Do you think they assessed risks before venturing out? Did they train and prepare? Did they use practices to keep safe? Did they try to stay healthy as they crossed the unknown? I'm going to use this post to:

Describe indigenous safety culture and;

Moot examples of indigenous knowledge that can inform modern health and safety practices.

If you'd like to help with this or simply want to find out more, then please follow my posts and articles. I plan to run it for at least three years, to coincide with my professional doctorate studies. Eventually information will become more rigorous but at this stage I'm focused on creating a presence.

In this post I am going to cover why I think indigenous culture and knowledge is relevant to health and safety today.

Developing safety culture is a long game and indigenous peoples are its longest players.

The Australian Aboriginal peoples have occupied the same land continuously longer than any other human group. Findings suggest they are the direct descendants of migrants who left Africa up to 75,000 years ago and the earliest indigenous peoples, dating back 60,000 years. As migrants then explorers in their own lands, they are quite possibly the earliest practitioners of health and safety. They remain attuned with their natural surroundings and for the most part, are able to live safely within it. Here is my first point:

Indigenous peoples have had thousands of years to cultivate their health and safety knowledge. Their practices maybe faded, obscured or outdated but the reasoning may still prove useful today.

Imagery becomes important when you try to persuade someone of something that's intangible. It's easy to picture indigenous peoples as hunters and gatherers leading simple village lives or wearing hula skirts surrounded by palm trees. Its less common to imagine them as disenfranchised at-risk workers wearing hard hats. The New Zealand Government has reported indigenous Maori workers are 44 per cent more likely to be injured at work than the general population. This disparity is not uncommon for indigenous peoples which brings me to my second point:

Indigenous peoples are the among the most at-risk workers in the world.

I'm not meaning or demeaning the extremes of exploited workers. Those situations require more than a cultural nudge. I am instead, referring to the sometimes difficult to see worker who is reticently indigenous and employed in a labor intensive job by reasonable people. The workplace adopts conventional health and safety systems that leaves the worker less than interested because the systems fail to be practically understood and the overall culture shows little empathy towards the worker. In this case both the workplace and worker are disadvantaged and the workplaces health and safety system is under-performing. This leads me to my third and final point.

Certain workplaces can be made safer if their health and safety culture and systems are attuned with relevant indigenous culture and knowledge.

I'm also hypothesizing that other non-indigenous workers such as new migrants, those with similar socioeconomic backgrounds can affiliate with health and safety cultures and systems that reflect indigenous culture and knowledge. I'm alluding to workplace diversity but my thinking has yet to be shaped so I'll visit that subject later. In the meantime you may have some ideas?

Our friend in the above image is working. He's hunting. I doubt he's bothered filling out any risk assessment card, but I'm certain he knows where those mammoth will go and how they will meet their end. I'm equally sure his tribe shares his thinking and understands their tasks; when to hide, when to move, where to go and where to avoid. That kind of thinking doesn't come together overnight. It's the product of hundreds of years of knowledge. in way it could be describe as learning from why things go right at work, as well as why they go wrong. Could Safety II not be that new after all?

Being trampled by woolly mammoth doesn't really get a mention in near-miss reports these days but the thinking remains the same, knowing your risks and keeping safe.



About the author. Vance Walker is a Director of Haumaru HS Limited and its international brand, IndigeSafe. Vance is a health and safety professional and practice researcher. He is a recognized leader of indigenous Māori health and safety.

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