

MĀTAURANGA MĀORI – EVIDENCE NOT DISTRACTION.



Credit: Auckland Zoo

I think the above image encapsulates, Mātauranga Māori, an appealing subject, obscured by many things, that can jump out when you least expect it. Most will enjoy the surprise, some will want to find out more, while others, think its blocking their view.

The debate concerning the legitimacy of Mātauranga Māori or Māori knowledge has reappeared, dismissing its acknowledgement, recognition and legitimacy are recurring themes. The dogma of western views or defence of it, will always cause disagreement. As a pracademic or practitioner-academic that focuses on health and safety practice research, I find the whole debate a distraction. Or what kaupapa Māori thinking neatly describes as the *politics of distraction*.

As a side note, although less dogmatic, the debate, concerning the place of the New View or Safety Differently propositions also involves legitimacy.

Mātauranga Māori as a science in western terms will always be questioned. It is a lived knowledge. The fit with Western ideas of systematic methodology based on evidence isn't aligned. However, some headway starts if we remove western ideas and reframe the debate in terms of producing evidence for Mātauranga Māori. That seems more productive.

Legitimacy is, however, the key word. As a discipline, the relationship between Mātauranga Māori and, conventional health and safety is so new, we are not as tarnished, by the above

debate. Nevertheless, the legitimacy and place of Mātauranga Māori needs to be addressed. More evidence of Mātauranga Māori illustrating its benefits to improve worker behaviour, and the performance of health and safety systems is needed. That will require more research and conversations. The litmus test being not a report, but at those six in the morning, cold toolbox starts, huddled in transportable buildings or trying not get blown over on some windy forestry clearing can, mātauranga Māori resonate with practitioners and workers, and enable them to re-examine the way they respectively practice and behave.

Mātauranga Māori has indeed a habit of jumping out at you, and its relevance is often obscured. Anzac Day is almost here. Did you know that, and thanks Scott Hamilton:

- In World War I, the Anzac Mounted Division used koromiko as part of rongoā Māori, or Māori medicine. Māori soldiers made tea from dried koromiko. The Anzacs reported that the tea calmed their stomachs, preventing diarrhoea.
- In 1936, the Soviet Bureau of Plant Information asked JA McPherson for koromiko seeds. Soviet doctors later during World War II, also used koromiko to treat troubled stomachs.
- Downes was a veteran Australian medical physician who during World War II used Mātauranga Māori and its knowledge of koromiko to prevent dysentery. The treatment was tested by Anzac troops in North Africa followed by NZ doctors distributing it at military camps on the home front.
- Māori and other Polynesian could read water, birds, and stars. They could spot changes in waves that meant an island was over the horizon. They knew which birds flew out from distant islands. The Pacific Island coast watchers were alert to changes in the shapes of waves and to the appearance of birds that signalled the presence of a large vessel beyond the horizon. They could spot a ship before they saw it.

And today, Kia Tupato or the value of caution, and Te Whare Tapa Wha, as products of Mātauranga Māori have been evidenced and are now used to improve worker behaviour and wellbeing. There are other examples of Mātauranga Māori making a discrete difference. I don't know them all, but every discovery is a new learning. That's important part of finding your identity as a unique Aotearoa NZ health and safety practitioner. Mātauranga Māori offers an untapped potential for improving health and safety outcomes and represents a positive narrative. Finding those Mātauranga Māori light bulb moments is invaluable. Being vexed with the politics of distraction, only inhibits us to grow as practitioners.



About the author. Vance Walker is a Director of Haumarū 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.

Disclaimer The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of Haumarū HS.