

## Researchers working with Maori – our experiences

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### Introduction

First and foremost Maori land is taonga to the tangata whenua; and secondly a potential source of produce and income. W.H. Christy (1984) emphasised these values when the New Zealand Grassland Association focussed on Maori and the land. This order of importance is common to all Maori entities whether they are small family land holdings or big Maori Incorporations. However, what may differ is the way in which these entities are able to work with science.

How well positioned are Maori to use the products and services of agricultural research and development?

Since the release of land control from Maori Affairs and various lease arrangements (in the 1970's and 80's) the priorities have been to reduce debt and establish effective governance. However, many small family and trust holdings still lack the capital and size to be financially viable within a commodity, pastoral farming context. They are not immune to the current pressures of greater efficiency and resource aggregation. In addition, those people who have a governance responsibility often lack the knowledge of modern farm practices and businesses. Many are urban people. For many Maori who set the direction and expectations of Maori land use, the knowledge and skills residing in R&D institutions is unfamiliar territory.

At the moment, it seems that research is best received by Maori land based enterprises that have an informed governance body which oversees the operation of sound, farm business practice, i.e. "doing the business right". These commercially orientated Incorporations and Trusts are seeking new innovations to sustain their future business. In the recent Maori Farmer of the Year contest, structured arrangements between governance and farm management levels (e.g., performance criteria and communication channels) and high skill levels of farm managers were significant features of the farm enterprises that succeeded. Financial performance and productivity levels would place these farms in the 75-80% performance zone. These enterprises also sought to achieve high return on asset value and were therefore willing to invest in technological advancement (e.g., genetics, market channels). This attitude toward realising the full earning potential of land assets is not common for Maori farm

businesses. Often a positive bottom line is sufficient and the need for new innovations and changes is deemed to be unnecessary.

### What value can agricultural research offer Maori?

In essence, the opportunities to benefit Maori are as wide as for any other segment of New Zealand's land based sectors. Inside our research institutions there is a vast reservoir of knowledge and experience in implementing best farm practice. Researchers can provide learning opportunities for both governance and operational people; and strengthen the knowledge and confidence of other professionals servicing these Maori businesses. Working closely with the local, servicing professionals is a must. Research can also present new innovations to Maori farming businesses, but often the constraint to adoption is an aversion to risk. Changes must not jeopardise the ownership of, and sense of belonging to the land.

As researchers, we have been working with Maori since the late 1980's. Our involvement has spanned a range of topics and relationships:

- Farm monitoring and study groups [Puketapu, Tuwharetoa]. Activities included farm system design; target setting and performance monitoring. Both trustees and farm managers benefited from a better understanding of the biology of their farms.
- Taupo land use [Tuwharetoa]. Emphasis has been placed on understanding the link between farm practice and nitrification of waterways.
- Irrigation of rolling pumice land [Pouakani, Mangakino]. Irrigation and farm systems have been designed to improve the profitability of farming pumice lands, while caring for environmental values.
- Landscape capabilities (Ruawaipu, Ngati Porou). Designing acceptable farm systems that align with the owners' aspirations and capabilities of the soils and landscapes.
- Business reporting (Ngati Whakaeu, Arawa). Construction of farm business and financial reporting to strengthen governance-operational communication.

In working with farmers we have recognised several factors that are critical to the success of a

technology based project (Sheath *et al.* 1999). For Maori, there is an emphasis on relationships. Establishing trust and demonstrating integrity and sincerity is a must. This takes time and will involve regular contact to build a level of common understanding. It is important to remember that researchers are dealing with people and not necessarily institutions. Working with Maori will involve two levels (i.e.: governance and operational) and gaining the confidence and blessing of both levels is necessary. All this may seem like good business practice, but there is a greater emphasis on people relationships. Traditional networks and approaches that researchers use, do not service Maori farming well. Within this context, there is a very appropriate quote from Benjamin Franklin:

Koerotia mai	Ka wareware
Tell me	and it is forgotten
Akona mai	Ka maumaharatia
Teach me	its remembered
Whakaurua ahau	Ka matatau ahau
Involve me	I learn

Taking this approach and seeking to establish an informed relationship, researchers will better understand the objectives of whanau and the rate at which they wish to progress. Further, they will better understand who the decision makers are, and the competencies of those people who implement the changes in practice.

#### **If we look forward, where can R&D specifically add value to Maori land based enterprises?**

There is an ongoing need for people with current and future governance responsibilities to have a good knowledge of farm systems and agribusiness practice. Stronger competency in this area will strengthen decision making from both a farm system and value chain perspective. Because of size and diversity (e.g. climate, contour) there are significant financial opportunities to network the supply of livestock between properties; and to move raw and processed material through linked market channels. Co-operative supply arrangements within and between Maori enterprises provides the basis for not only economies of scale, but also for lucrative contracted supply of premium products. Many Maori enterprises are now both asset and cash rich (NZIER 2003) and could take the opportunity to move towards Maori branded products and value chains such as Tohu wine and Iho crafts. Establishing new value chains for niche, high value products (e.g. indigenous foods for the New Zealand tourist industry) will be one of the few ways in which small Maori land holdings will prosper from an economic perspective.

#### **What might be the ultimate use of Maori land?**

Given the predominance of Class 7 and 8 land in Maori ownership, there would seem to be huge potential to blend conventional agriculture with eco-tourism and the harvesting of indigenous bi-products (e.g., manuka honey, pikopiko). This would not be a “pull-the-plug” reversion process, but rather a business venture with the necessary capital and infrastructures. For cash rich incorporations, this may be the next step in evolving ancestral lands from which the tangata whenua will never be separated. Let’s do a “Kaikoura-Whale-Watch” on land and contribute to New Zealand’s indigenous biodiversity. Research can help.

The biophysical innovations that can drive these opportunities are equally applicable to other land managers, i.e., there is no exclusivity to Maori. They could involve superior animal genes, or high yield forage platforms. However, for Maori a key issue is that we understand the barriers to adoption when these innovation are disruptive, i.e. they require a big change in the farming system and/or business relationships. Are the constraints to using radical innovations centred around risk management, or to competency levels through the different levels of governance and expectation? This is an area of research that AgResearch will pursue over the next 3-4 years with FRST investment.

Making significant progress in the wise use of Maori land will be important to Maori and New Zealand as a whole. Maori own 1.2m ha of land in New Zealand (i.e. 9% of managed landscapes) and agricultural enterprises earn approximately \$700m annually (NZIER, 2003). This resource is becoming a cash cow for Maori to invest and diversity into other businesses. In striving for economic growth, future land use changes must retain a balance between cultural, social, environmental and economic values. Research can assist in gaining that balance. There is no more land and it is a treasure to us all.

#### **REFERENCES**

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