

An overview of Pacific voyaging and navigation including in Aotearoa New Zealand

This paper presents a summary of the historical roots and current practice of ancestral navigation and voyaging knowledge throughout Oceania. It emphasises that this ancestral knowledge is currently being practiced and taught across the wider Pacific region, including in Aotearoa (New Zealand).

About Pacific voyaging and navigation

For many thousands of years indigenous Pacific people have used ancestral navigation and voyaging knowledge to accurately traverse the world's largest ocean. From their origins in the far west of Oceania, these ancestors voyaged and settled the many islands of the tropical Pacific, including as far north as Hawai'i, as far south as Aotearoa, and as far east as Rapanui (Easter Island) and the coast of South America.

The sophisticated ancestral navigation systems of the Pacific use the passage of celestial bodies – the sun, moon, and stars – to track the course of a vessel and to mark the passage of time. These are supplemented by other signs, such as swells, currents, winds, clouds, changes in ocean temperature, and the movements of birds and marine life. Although these navigation systems are specific to the places and cultures they come from, there are also substantial common elements in navigational knowledge throughout Oceania. The principles of traditional navigation as practiced by Māori in Aotearoa, for instance, have much in common with the rest of the Pacific. Navigation sits within a wider body of holistic indigenous knowledge about relationships between people and their environments, including the ecological, cultural and spiritual aspects of these relationships.

The decline and recovery of voyaging knowledge

Most long-distance Pacific voyaging, along with the construction of large voyaging canoes, ceased with the colonisation of the region by European powers. The imposition of European beliefs and languages impeded the transmission of navigation and voyaging knowledge that was encoded in story, songs, and other forms of cultural expression. Even the history of Pacific navigation was obscured: for much of the 19th and 20th Centuries, school curricula in Aotearoa and many other parts of Oceania portrayed these far-voyaging ancestors as unskilled sailors driven by storm-winds, who found new islands by accident when lost at sea.

In the 1970s a renaissance of Pacific voyaging began with the construction of the Hawaiian canoe Hokule'a. Pius Mau Piailug, a master navigator from the atoll of Satawal in the Caroline Islands of Micronesia, guided Hokule'a on its first voyages. Breaking with the tradition of his people, Mau also taught navigation to a group of students from around the Pacific, including Aotearoa, Hawai'i and the Cook Islands, tasking them with passing on this ancestral knowledge themselves in their own homelands.

Contemporary navigation and voyaging

In 1991 the first Māori voyaging canoe of modern times, Te Aurere, was constructed in Aotearoa by the master canoe builder Tā Hekenukumai Puhipi (Sir Hector Busby). Since then, the renaissance of ancestral Pacific navigation and voyaging knowledge has continued, and there are now once again voyaging canoes in Aotearoa, the Cook Islands, Fiji, Hawai'i, Samoa, and Tahiti, as well as many other parts of the Pacific. Long-distance voyages using ancestral navigation are once again taking place, along ancient sea paths that have not been sailed for hundreds of years. The recovery of ancestral navigation is intimately tied to the recovery of indigenous languages, meeting the challenges of climate change, and protecting the health of the ocean; contemporary Pacific voyagers are deeply involved in all of these.

Across Oceania there is a strong sense of community amongst these navigators and voyagers – both those who have recovered their ancestral knowledge in recent decades, and those from islands that did not experience breaks in their oral transmission of voyaging knowledge. Importantly, several contemporary master navigators have founded their own schools of learning, such as Te Kura o Ngā Kurī a Tarawhata School of Traditional Celestial Navigation in Aotearoa. At these places ancestral navigation and voyaging knowledge is being taught to, and practiced by, new generations of voyagers from throughout the Pacific.

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