

KO AU TE AWA KO TE AWA KO AU
I AM THE RIVER, THE RIVER IS ME

A Call to Action for Unity and Environmental Stewardship.

Written by the Indigenous community leaders and international filmmakers involved in the film I Am The River, The River Is Me.

The Whanganui River in Aotearoa / New Zealand – is the first river in the world that gained recognition as a legal person in 2017, after 150 years of struggle by the Māori.

The Whanganui Māori proverb, recognizing the river as their ancestor and as a living spiritual being, says: *Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au. I am the river and the river is me.* The proverb teaches us about our fundamental interconnection with nature: the environment and a people are one and the same. They cannot be separated. And so there is a responsibility to protect the river's integrity and lifeforce. A responsibility that is non-negotiable.

This proverb does not apply only to the Māori and to the Whanganui River. Now that our world is on fire, rights for all that lives and climate justice are more crucial than ever. It is time to act.

We need to bring about a value shift: in how we all – everyone in the world - relate to nature and to each other.

It is time to recognize that we are all the river, and the river is us.

What does this mean? It means it is time to recognize that human beings are inseparable from nature, we are not outside nor above nature. Nature is not something to merely visit or look at: it is part of us. We can no longer exploit nature as an endless extractive resource for short-term economic benefit. Our overheating planet and the alarming extinction of all kinds of living species are signalling this to us now in the loudest terms.

We know it is important to look after ourselves and our environment. But this requires us to think and look at the world differently:

1. To see ourselves as a part of our environment, interwoven and indivisible.
2. To recognize that we are on this planet just for a short time, and so we have a responsibility to take care of our environment through intergenerational care. To honor those who have come before us, and the future generations who will come after us. The Māori call this *kaitiakitanga*, or guardianship.

What we desperately need now is to shift from thinking about nature as something to be owned, possessed and exploited, with short term benefits, and instead think and act as guardians and stewards of the water, air and land.

For those who cannot be open to the sacred dimension that the Māori recognize in honoring and protecting their ancestor, the river, it is enough to recognize that all human beings are 60% made up of water. And so if we do not take care of water properly, then we are not taking care of ourselves. The reciprocity between the river and us is simply practical. If we do not take care of our environment, then we do not take care of ourselves. And we are putting all of us in danger.

Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au. I am the river and the river is me. The Māori proverb is also a call for unity. For the river unites, it does not separate. It weaves together all its descendants, and all those who live along its banks. It accepts all who come to its waters: indigenous and non-indigenous alike. And it has inspired us – the writers of this call to action – to come together to advocate for environmental guardianship.

To recognize our common shared humanity, where the similarities we have as human beings outweigh our differences - and that this unity is necessary to confront the extraordinary challenges facing our planet and all that lives today.

What can you do then?

1. Act locally: take care of your own waters. In whatever shape or form this may take in your own local community.
2. Take the idea of the rights of nature seriously and see how it can be applied to your own environment. There are plenty of initiatives in this fastest growing legal movement in the world around the rights of nature – which the Whanganui River has inspired to take off. Join one.
3. Reflect upon how internalizing an intergenerational perspective on environmental guardianship in your own life might change your daily life.
4. If you would like to screen the film in the cinema, or for educational, community and impact purposes, visit (weblink Journeyman)
5. If you'd like to learn more about our film, and would like to get in touch, visit website: www.iamtheriver.org

We conclude with this Māori proverb: *Kauaka e kōrero mō te awa, engari kōrero ki te awa*, Don't merely talk about the river, connect and communicate with the river.