



Trading Taonga

According to Ngāi Tahu, the taniwha Poutini was the guardian of pounamu for the atua Kahue. One day, while swimming in the waters around Tūhua – an island in the Bay of Plenty – he saw a woman bathing in the sea. Her name was Waitaiki. Enchanted by her beauty, Poutini kidnapped Waitaiki and fled to his home on the South Island's west coast. He lit fires along the way to keep her warm, being careful to make sure she was rested and looked after.

THE STORY OF POUNAMU

BY MATTHEW ROUT (NGĀI TAHU)

Tamaāhua, the husband of Waitaiki, soon discovered that she was missing. Using the power of karakia, he tracked Poutini south, finding pieces of precious stone in the ashes of each fire. When he reached the Arahura River, just north of Hokitika, he knew he had the taniwha trapped.

Poutini could sense that the end was near. With little chance of escape, he vowed that if he couldn't have Waitaiki, no one could. He turned Waitaiki into pounamu and laid her to rest in the cold water of the awa. In this way, Waitaiki became the mother of all pounamu found in the Arahura River. When Tamaāhua saw his wife, green and grey and completely smooth, he let out a long and painful takiaue. Some say his cry can still be heard ringing through the mountains today ...

UNLIKE ANY OTHER STONE

Pounamu, also known as greenstone or New Zealand jade, is a valued taonga for Māori. As captured in the tale of Poutini, it is shaped by the forces of fire and water, surfacing only in remote parts of the South Island.

Pounamu forms deep underground in the area where the Pacific and Australian plates collide. Here, extreme heat and high pressure trigger chemical reactions in certain rocks. As the Pacific plate is pushed upwards, these new rocks are lifted to Earth's surface – the same action that forms the Southern Alps. Over time, the pounamu washes down from the mountains to emerge in rivers like the Arahura.

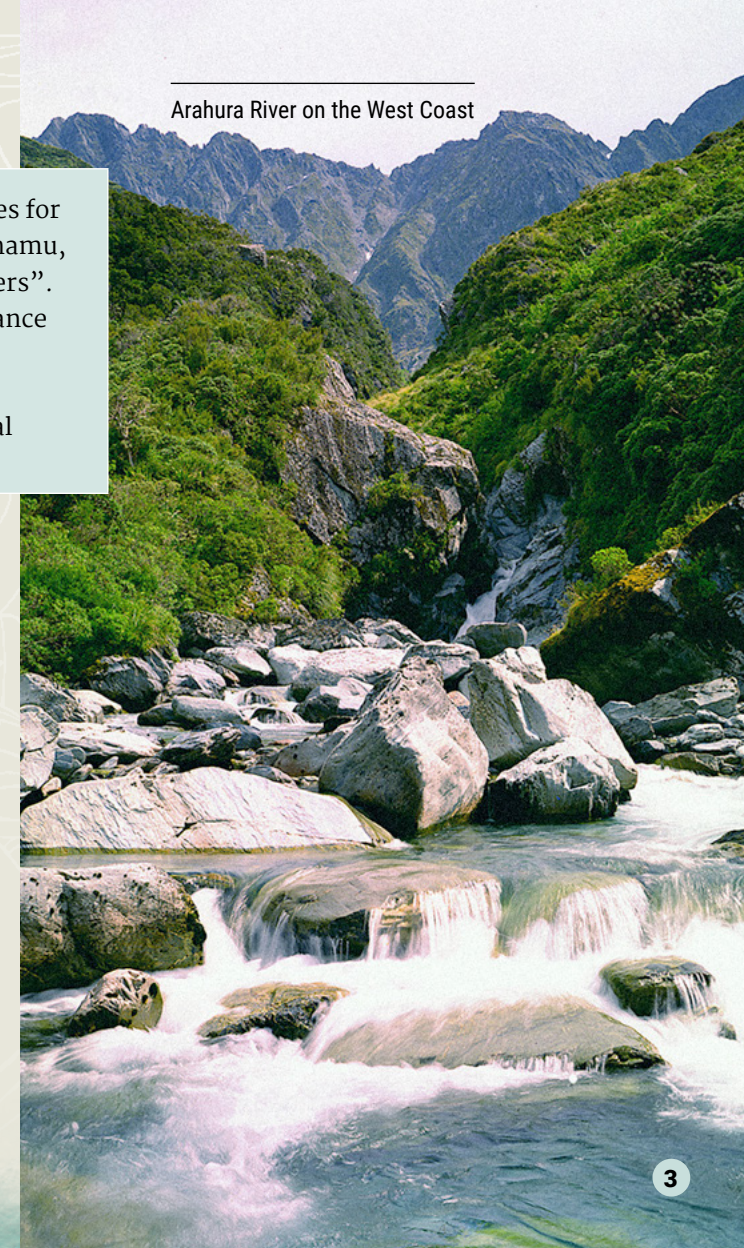
Pounamu looks like ordinary rock in its raw state. It's only after it has been cut and polished that its beauty can be seen, running from milky white to dark, lustrous green. Using traditional tools, it could take months, years – or even generations – for pounamu to be worked into its desired form. But the stone's unique properties made the effort worthwhile.

One of the original Māori names for the South Island is Te Waipounamu, meaning “the greenstone waters”. This name reflects the importance of pounamu to Māori. In 2013, Te Waipounamu was formally recognised as one of the official names for the South Island.



Pounamu boulders cut in half, revealing their distinctive green interior

Arahura River on the West Coast





Mere Pounamu



Whao Pounamu



Toki Pounamu

As the most durable material available in Aotearoa – similar in strength to steel – pounamu was made into tools like **toki** and **whao**. Because of its beauty, it was also carved into jewellery and ornaments, including hei tiki and hei matau pendants, kapeu and kuru ear pendants, and cloak pins. Yet while all these items were highly valued, pounamu mere were the most precious. These short-handled weapons were the main symbol of rangatira and **ariki**, handed down through generations. Some pounamu mere were given names and carried stories of battles fought by revered tūpuna. Like all pounamu artefacts, they had their own mana and, in some cases, were even said to possess magical powers.

ariki: high chiefs
toki: adze
whao: chisels



Portrait of Ngāti Maru woman Pare Watene holding a mere pounamu, a sign of her chiefly status (Lindauer, 1878)

CONTROL OVER POUNAMU

Ngāti Wairaki were the first iwi to live on the rugged West Coast, sometimes called Te Tai Poutini (The Tides of Poutini). The steep mountains of the Southern Alps and the wild oceans of the Tasman Sea meant that, for many years, Ngāti Wairaki were protected from other tribes. Here, they discovered pounamu in the rivers that ran down from the mountains.

By the mid-1600s, Ngāi Tahu were expanding further into the South Island, while Ngāti Wairaki were forging new trails through the mountains. According to tradition, a woman named Raureka became the first person to discover a mountain pass from Te Tai Poutini to the east coast after arguing with her Ngāti Wairaki **whanauka**. Raureka entered what is now the Canterbury Plains and stumbled across a group of Ngāi Tahu men felling a tree with a stone adze. Surprised to see them using such an inferior tool, Raureka unwrapped her pounamu adze and cut the tree down for them. The group were amazed.

whanauka: relatives

They implored Raureka to show them her route through the mountains. Raureka obliged, and the increasingly dominant Ngāi Tahu set their sights on the stone.

Both Ngāti Wairaki and Ngāi Tahu sought to claim kaitiakitanga of pounamu.

Eventually, Ngāi Tahu was successful and continue to be recognised as guardians of this taonga. In time, members of Ngāi Tahu who had moved to the West Coast merged with the remaining Ngāti Wairaki, forming what became known as Poutini Ngāi Tahu.



Watercolour of Nōti Raureka (Browning Pass) from the eastern side

TRADE NETWORKS

By the 1700s, Ngāi Tahu were trading pounamu along the eastern coast of Te Waipounamu and into Te Ika-a-Māui (the North Island). At first, this involved small groups trading pounamu taonga with allies and whanau. But as more people became aware of the stone's unique properties, its popularity increased. The trade networks became larger and more complex.

Trails to new pounamu sources were discovered, with at least fifteen routes in use by the 1800s. Most of these sites were difficult to reach, which limited the supply of pounamu and increased the demand. Where possible, people used waka to transport pounamu along waterways, but most sites were accessible only by foot. Expeditions included up to thirty people, each with different skills. Waewae mānā were famed for their light-footed endurance, while waewae taurekareka were known for speed. Leaders navigated the trails using "memory maps", relying on recall and place names to find specific locations. Often, the strength of every member was needed to split the pounamu boulders into pieces

small enough to carry. Some trails were even operated by dedicated porters, who carried goods to and from various pā and trading hubs.

Pounamu became the driving force of the Māori economy, exchanged for everything from dried fish and finely woven mats to services like tattoos. Trade networks developed largely along whakapapa lines, extending all the way to Te Tai Tokerau in the north and even to offshore islands like Rēkohu. Sometimes, trade would flow in the opposite direction, with hapū travelling directly to Te Waipounamu to barter for the stone. These networks ensured a reasonably equal distribution of skills and resources that were rare, seasonal, or regional. As well as pounamu, obsidian from Tūhua (Mayor Island), argillite from Nelson and D'Urville Island, and basalt from Tahanga in the Coromandel were all exchanged across the country.

Where Pounamu was found and traded



KAIAPOI: CENTRE OF TRADE

Before pounamu was transported north, it was worked into tools, jewellery, and weapons at dedicated Te Waipounamu trading hubs. Kaiapoi Pā, near modern-day Christchurch, was one of the main trading and carving centres in the Ngāi Tahu network. It was renowned for its jewellery and weaponry. The wealthy settlement was home to many skilled carvers who fashioned the stone into valuable items. These carvers were often older chiefs who were no longer able to fight. They embedded their mana into each item they worked, telling stories of people and events through the patterns they engraved.



Engraving of Kaiapoi Pā circa 1830



THE TRADITIONAL MĀORI ECONOMY

For most of Aotearoa New Zealand's history, people did not use money. Instead, they bartered for goods and services. In some cases, these exchanges took place right away, with each person acquiring new items in an efficient trade-off. But most of the time, a "gift" was not returned immediately. Instead, the person or group who had received the gift was expected to return something of equal or greater value later on.

As well as helping to distribute surplus resources, this system of gifting helped to bind Māori society together. It created long-term social connections and meant that people and groups relied upon one another, with trails of gifts often going back many years. Failure to return a gift diminished the mana of all involved, and of the gifting process. The best way to restore mana was to return an even better gift, providing a strong incentive to make and trade high-quality goods.

THE LOSS OF POUNAMU

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Crown purchased most of Te Waipounamu from Ngāi Tahu. The Arahura River was not included in the sale, and Poutini Ngāi Tahu were promised continued access to this important pounamu source. In reality, not enough land was set aside, and as Pākehā settlers moved in, the iwi were increasingly cut off. In the following century, Poutini Ngāi Tahu lost all control over their taonga.

The loss was a devastating blow to the mana of Ngāi Tahu. As historian Bill Decker wrote in his submission to the Waitangi Tribunal, “The loss of land and the loss of traditional resources deprived [Ngāi Tahu] of an economic base for their communities, which eventually forced more and more of them to migrate to where there was work. Once the strength of the communities was broken in this way, the people were exposed increasingly to the predominantly negative European attitudes to the Māori and Māori culture. Hence loss of economic strength flowed through into loss of culture.”

Following the Crown’s purchase, the supply of pounamu largely dried up. Knowledge about where pounamu was found, how it was worked, and the meaning behind the designs were lost to the iwi. In its place, a largely non-Māori industry sprung up. European settlers and foreign tourists developed a liking for greenstone jewellery, and by the 1960s, pounamu items featuring knock-off “Māori” designs were popular souvenirs. With little oversight by the government, a million-dollar, black-market trade developed, with helicopters used to poach boulders from remote locations.



Hei tiki made for the New Zealand tourist market circa 1960

RESTORING MANA

In 1986, Ngāi Tahu lodged the first large claim with the Waitangi Tribunal – the result of 150 years of resistance and protest. The iwi detailed hundreds of grievances and broken promises, including inadequate payments for land and the wrongful takeover of the pounamu trade. The Crown “apologised unreservedly” for the decades of suffering they had inflicted on Ngāi Tahu. As part of the Treaty settlement, legal ownership of all pounamu within the Ngāi Tahu **takiwā** was returned to the iwi.

takiwā: territory



Pounamu carver using modern tools to create new designs



Members of Ngāi Tahu witness the passage of Ngāi Tahu settlement legislation, 30 September 1998



Regaining kaitiakitanga of pounamu was a significant moment for Ngāi Tahu. Both symbolically and in practice, it represented a return of economic and cultural independence. Since the settlement, Ngāi Tahu have worked to revive the pounamu economy, blending traditional knowledge with modern methods. Like their tūpuna before them, they are ensuring the pounamu industry can endure long into the future, mana intact.

