

## Commentary

**Enacting new freshwater geographies:  
*Te Awaroa* and the transformative imagination**Anne Salmond,<sup>1,2</sup> Marc Tadaki<sup>1</sup> and Tim Gregory<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup>*Te Awaroa Foundation, New Zealand* <sup>2</sup>*Department of Maori Studies,  
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**Abstract:** Water is a central element of social and material life, and the institutions created around water embody societal values. While mainstream interpretations focus on the quantity and quality of water, we argue that a greater risk to the health of waterways is the philosophical disconnection between people and water, expressed through institutions and technologies of alienation. A structural response based on cultural transformation is needed, cultivating diverse institutions of care that enable communities to reconnect with their waterways based on more-than-economic relations. *Te Awaroa* seeks to transform long-term relationships between people and water to ensure that waterways and their communities alike are in a state of *ora* (health, well-being and prosperity).

**Key words:** community-based resource management, environmental politics, nature/culture, social change.

Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au  
I am the river, the river is me  
Kei te mate te awa, kei te mate ahau  
If the river is dying, so am I.  
[Māori saying]

Water is a source of life and livelihood for all New Zealanders. The physicality and meanings of water – as ‘commons’, ‘private property’ or *wai maori* (fresh water) – are mediated through myriad institutions, ranging from the capitalist distribution of wealth, access and use, to planning and regulatory frameworks, discourses of disease and the costs of modernity, to the Waitangi Tribunal. Water circulates through social and environmental space, remaking human and non-human relations along the way (Linton & Budds 2013). Water has social as well as physical generative power.

If our ideas about the world and our values as a society are reflected through the ways in which we relate to water, it is worth asking: what kind of hydrological relations are we embodying in New Zealand? We might then ask, what kinds of relations do we *want* to embody, and how might we go about it?

In this commentary, we respond to each of these questions as follows. *First*, we briefly outline some key emerging concerns about water in the New Zealand context, and how these might be understood. *Second*, we describe the nature of some responses to these concerns and argue that they are insufficient and undesirable because the kinds of relations they propose are not fundamentally about creating and sharing prosperity and well-being in socioecological systems. *Third*, we suggest that in the context of these responses, there is a need

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for a new kind of strategy, which targets structural transformation across scales and which explicitly seeks to embed and empower moral and community-oriented ways of relating to water. We introduce *Te Awaroa* as an initiative that has emerged to contribute to such a transformative project and we describe its key features and commitments. We conclude by arguing that the space for bottom-up transformation need not be limited by geographical scale nor relational scope and that there is a need to build platforms for dialogue and collaboration that enable upscaling and embedding, rather than ‘rolling back’ collective responsibility for the meaning of water.

### **New Zealand’s environmental situation: What is the problem?**

The deterioration of water quality and the health of waterways across the country have increasingly occupied news headlines and political speeches in recent years. From lamenting the degradation of *tupuna awa* (river ancestors) (Waitangi Tribunal 2012) to claiming the title (justified or not) of harbouring one of the worst polluted rivers in the western world (see Tadaki *et al.*, 2014), breaching irreversible ‘tipping points’ in valuable ecosystems (Harding 2011), or allowing the majority of our rivers to become unswimmable (MfE 2013c), it seems that the state of New Zealand’s waterways are a matter of collective concern and that there is a broadly shared desire for improvement (MfE 2013a; New Zealand Government 2013).

There are different ways of framing the environmental ‘problem’ in New Zealand. One way might be to refer to the failure of regulatory agencies to fulfil their mandates, as central government has done, thus framing the solution as stronger top-down control of planning structures. This has happened in recent reforms, for example through the replacement of elected regional councillors in Canterbury with government-appointed commissioners (Nissen, 2014), or proposals for a regional planning template that allows for direct ministerial intervention (MfE 2013a,b).

An alternate view might argue that the system itself is flawed and that real actors in real situations always face a range of compro-

mises, ceding idealism to the harsh realities of finance, resourcing and the desire to find ‘balance’ (Johnson 2013).

Another way of addressing the challenge is to insist that the ‘environmental problem’ is as much philosophical as it is practical and that in New Zealand and elsewhere, many scientists and policy-makers are using archaic assumptions to think and talk about relations with water (Salmond, *in press*). The idea that people command an inexhaustible nature that was created to serve them, for example, is an anthropocentric myth (see Glacken 1967), based on ancient cosmo-models (including Genesis) and unsupported by the findings of contemporary science. Nevertheless, it is reflected in ideologies of limitless growth, and talk about ‘resource management’ and ‘ecosystem services’, for example (Dryzek 2013).

Cartesian dualism is another case in point. While its radical divisions between mind and matter, culture and nature, people and the environment, the individual and society have been superceded by the findings of neuroscience, quantum physics and the environmental and social sciences. These binary oppositions are reflected in policy and scientific models that split ‘the environment’ from people, the natural from the social sciences and people from the communities that sustain them (Latour 1993).

Increasingly, however, such simplicities are being set aside in a search for a science of complex, dynamic systems, adequate to address the intricate, multidimensional patterns of exchange that drive contemporary environmental challenges – losses of biodiversity, climate change, the acidification of oceans and the degradation of waterways, among others.

In thinking about water in New Zealand, for example, one might argue that the kind of degradation that needs to be engaged with is not the abstract biophysical kind relating to the quality of chemical water but the quality of our patterns of relationships with each other, with our water and water ways, and with the other life forms that inhabit them. The increasing attention to deteriorating environmental conditions creates space for us to ask how we are living with our water places and whether we might do so in more strategic, fairer and healthier ways.

## Forms of response: Technologies of alienation

National responses to the degradation of waterways have typically sidestepped questions about what constitutes desirable and meaningful forms of economic and environmental life. Instead, they have deployed technocratic, instrumental means to institutionalise (and conceal alternatives to) a particular economic ideology in planning (based on a 'command-and-control' model of relations between 'the state' and 'the environment') through:

- stripping the concept of *kaitiakitanga* (stewardship) out of the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA) as a framework for decision making (PCE 2013);
- reframing questions of environmental governance as primarily financial, by amending the RMA to mandate regional councils to undertake cost-benefit analyses for planning decisions (Palmer 2013);
- stripping out the four well-beings from the Local Government Act 2002, thus reducing the role of councils to providing 'rates, roads and rubbish' rather than delivering shared prosperity and well-being in the exchanges among people, and between people, land and waterways in particular places;
- forcing regional councils to undertake new State of the Environment environmental monitoring that prioritises expenditure on national scale comparative measurements rather than understanding of the complexities of these relational systems (Tadaki *et al.*, 2014);
- reconfiguring national environmental research funding around the National Science Challenges 'to enhance primary sector production and productivity while maintaining and improving our land and water quality', thus redirecting research to subsidising producers in the short term<sup>1</sup>; and
- encouraging 'collaboration' with the community to produce water quality and quantity limits (MfE 2013a), a fractious and expensive process that regional councils do not receive central resourcing to undertake, and which risk being hijacked by powerful interests (Land and Water Forum 2012).

While there is good and bad across this restructuring, and not all of it is state-led, it is our judgment that these responses to the problem of waterway degradation amount to a set of *technologies of alienation*.

Efforts to reframe the water question as economic 'value' leads to empty answers, as water is – and should be – much more than a commodity, and public modes of reasoning about water should embody this as a central proposition. Communities should be supported to explore new ways of living that sustain ecosystems (including people as well as plants, animals, land and waterways) in a state of *ora* – health, well-being and prosperity. Technologies of alienation do not enable and support such efforts, because their effect is to embed and reproduce a very narrow range of interests and worldviews. Conventional responses to the problem of ecological degradation in this sense do not challenge us to dig deeply enough. Notions of 'balance' pit economy *against* environment rather than asking what kind of economy will deliver long-term human and ecological flourishing in the environments we inhabit.

For the curious and inspired community or practitioner, prospects for reconnecting with water in enduring and beyond-economic ways are difficult. While water is on the agenda as never before, our communal institutions are being weakened and reshaped to channel relationships into pre-designated silos.

Non-governmental organisations, community catchment groups, regional councils – all are being expected to take up the slack from the rollback of state responsibility for freshwater governance, and none are being resourced to do it. An exception might be argued for the collaborative turn in freshwater planning, which is a crucial element for supporting community environmental governance. However, while a potentially transformative mechanism for community empowerment, the rationales being advanced for collaboration are largely instrumental and extractive rather than democratic and adaptive, predicated on producing quicker and less legally contested outcomes rather than a fair and deliberative process that delivers long-term shared prosperity and success (see MfE 2013a).

## Building a new environmental consciousness

While the institutional context for empowering beyond-economic modes of valuing and caring for water, community and environment leaves much to be desired, there are many in New Zealand who want to contribute to building institutions of care for our communities and waterways. In this sense, the political moment is ripe for a bottom-up social movement and a cultural project of reclaiming and enacting water as a public common and a source of broadly shared, diverse forms of prosperity. Quite simply, we do not need to ask for permission to care for water (or each other), and we should think about how to resource one another to do so.

However, two existential challenges confront any effort towards a collective non-state response to environmental governance, which both need to be understood and worked through. First, as mainstream critiques of neoliberal governance point out, relying on social movements or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to ‘fill the vacuum’ left by the roll-back of state responsibility for public welfare, is akin to privatisation by another means (Harvey 2005). NGOs may serve aspects of the public interest but are not themselves as democratic, representative or effective as the state *should* be.

The ultimate aim of recollectivising water should not be imagined as taking place entirely outside of governmental institutions. Rather, a social environmental movement should seek to draw together elements to enable *structural transformation* in a range of societal institutions, including governmental ones. For example, the extent to which river restoration projects (a public good) rely on volunteers and charity for resourcing limits their ultimate potential for transforming our relationships with water and water ways. We must consider how to embed *long-term relations of care* into our institutions (transforming them), rather than bolting them on as an optional extra. This comes hand and hand with thinking about how to link and scale up such transformations – not only in level or extent, but also in scope.

Second, governmental practices are not the only practices of interest, nor even necessarily

the most important ones. Reforms from central government, for instance, are not rigidly deterministic and there is room to do things differently if progressive mindsets and practices on the ground have a strong enough community mandate to experiment and scale up.

What is needed is not only a governmental project, but also a *cultural project* embracing diverse modes of caring for and collectively living with water-places and which emphasises the sharing and circulation of the multiple meanings of water in ways which relate across space and across relational domains. There is a need to narrate water in new and powerful ways in a range of sites, conversations and experiences.

We now turn to present Te Awaroa as a project that seeks to engage these concerns through a relational project of long-term connection and care.

### Te Awaroa as a transformative project

Te Awaroa (‘the long river’) first emerged as an idea at the 2011 Transit of Venus Forum, which brought science to bear on community discussions about the future of New Zealand. Originally, the project was conceived as a ‘1000 rivers challenge’, a national initiative to share practitioner knowledge and resources for waterway restoration, with the aim of restoring 1000 rivers by 2050.<sup>2</sup>

Its advocates were certainly not alone in feeling that the fragmentary character of experiments in caring for water can and should be addressed through a collective national project, and subsequent conversations with communities and practitioners across the country reveal this aim to be widely shared.

In the months that followed, Te Awaroa was simultaneously promoted and shaped through conversations and workshops with practitioners across the country. The core steering team and newsroom ‘Te Puna’ (‘the source’) was assembled in the latter half of 2013, and funding was generously supplied by the Tindall Foundation to enable strategic planning through conversations with diverse practitioners across New Zealand.

The name Te Awaroa (‘the long river’) embodies the long-term, dynamic, collective outlook of the initiative, drawing in all contributors and seeking the transformation of

existing practices and institutions rather than adding new ones and leaving existing patterns untouched.

### *Structural features*

Te Awaroa intends to become a distributed network of communities and practitioners, a kind of meta-network rather than an NGO per se. It seeks to intervene by galvanising relationships among people and between people and their water places that drive towards 'ora', facilitating the relational scaling of initiatives, rather than the design and conduct of grassroots projects (though its contributors are actively pursuing these as well).

Simply, Te Awaroa is concerned with drawing together projects into local, translocal, regional, national and international networks, sharing stories about water being done differently and drawing on its relational capabilities to engender new structural transformations in new spaces and scales. It aims to galvanise open-ended, expansive and inclusive networks of relations and learnings around water, which anyone can contribute to.

### *Approach*

Te Awaroa seeks to drive change by developing two interrelated streams of thought and action – problem-solving networks and cultural movement building. Te Puna, the 'newsroom' or core team will act as a hub for communications, tasked with circulating and curating inquiry, events, projects and stories into a coherent and emergent larger project of living with water differently. The key contribution of Te Puna relative to other hubs is its focus on structural transformation, explicitly trying to link innovations and re-framings across multiple scales (e.g. from streamside to catchment, regional, national and global) and support them in gaining traction.

A cross-scalar theory of change has been developed for Te Awaroa through conversations with practitioners – we present this in Figure 1 and Table 1. This theory of change emphasises the linking of streamside actions through to international circuits of knowledge and practice. It also provides an empowering political context for engagement in which environmental citizenship trumps 'institutional' prerogatives – unleashing our collective potential to inspire

and think creatively beyond the confines of often constraining institutional roles, many of which involve technologies of alienation.

Te Awaroa's approach is fundamentally about connecting people and ideas, resourcing people to do things differently in their places and providing an empowering structural context in which to act. Here, actions lead to transformation rather than the reproduction of disconnecting technologies that lead to destructive relations (i.e. *mate* – ill-being, failure, sickness and dysfunction) between people and waterways.

Te Awaroa aims to connect the dots of restoration, industrial and technological innovation, new forms of land use and governance improvisations into a larger project of inclusive, inspiring, forward-looking, place-based environmental governance and community decision making. It seeks to help generate the right 'cultural conditions' to connect New Zealanders to one another through water, creating awareness of the pivotal role of waterways in generating healthy, prosperous communities and production systems that enhance rather than degrade ecosystems and our common life.

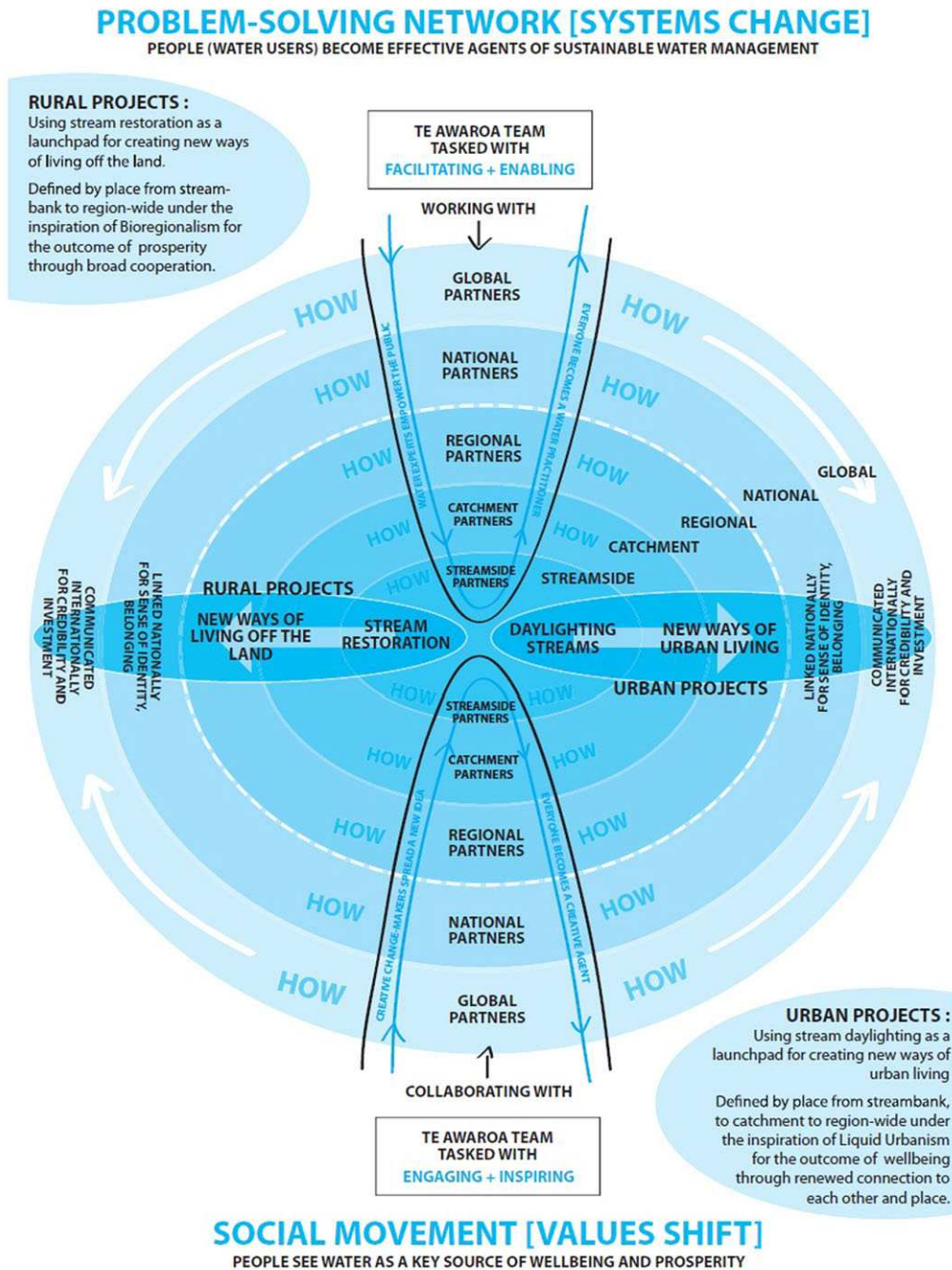
## **Conclusion**

What roles exist for communities, knowledge producers, practitioners, academics (including geographers), communicators and grassroots organisers, in a structurally transformative project of community-environment connectivity? In short, all roles are open.

As an emergent network, Te Awaroa builds from the energy of those who contribute to it – everything from school field trips and science projects to community action research or innovative river science. In concluding our commentary, we encourage others to get involved with the building and transformation of collective environmental institutions, including perhaps that of Te Awaroa. We have presented Te Awaroa an emergent response to a collective sense of alienation from our waterways and as a way of embracing water as lifeblood of our communities and the land.

The aim of our intervention has not been to advertise Te Awaroa as the only project of this nature, nor even the most significant, locally





**Figure 1** A provisional framework for enacting kaitiakitanga across scales and sectors, through two workstreams.

Source: Te Awaroa (2013).

**Table 1** Five scales of doing water, and processes of scaling transformation

| Scale      | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Examples                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Scaling up                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Scaling down                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Streamside | Engage with communities that live and work with water, enabling and resourcing transformative projects and ways of creating and sustaining wai ora on the ground. Draw together networks to collaborate around the creation of ideas and (structural) practices for this purpose: fostering creative neighbourhood level engagement, artistic projects, supporting community networks, build and create new networks. | Citizen Science engages communities directly in the co-production of environmental knowledge. This includes initiatives like the Science Wananga, Enviroschools and other activities built on experimental collaboration between scientists and community groups.<br>Living neighbourhoods – supporting the actions and ambitions of local groups to improve their quality of life and the immediate environment, so they become guardians of their own unique environment within a wider structural context. | Effective (online and local) networks connect projects to other actors for (i) resources, (ii) ideas and expertise, and (iii) structural support.<br>Narrate the projects upscale to link them with wider shifts in thinking, meaning and practice through conversational platforms and the online portal.                                                                                                     | –                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Catchment  | Bring together streamside groups at a catchment level to develop a compelling vision for their waterways, centred around prosperity and well-being for their locality.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Integrated Catchment Management – a process through which people can develop a vision, agree on shared values and behaviours, make informed decisions and act together to manage the natural resources of their catchment.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Enabling and supporting opportunities and infrastructure for grassroots participation in local government planning and investment decisions around water.<br>Projects are situated and celebrated within the structural context of their achievements.                                                                                                                                                         | Detail these visions at local level, getting support and resource from community.<br>Encourage and support local groups to become change-agents/creative entrepreneurs and take initiative in local area (e.g. setting up Friends of the River group).    |
| Regional   | Build understanding of land-use and infrastructure decisions that affect how water is managed in their region, and the potential for exciting water-centric alternatives. Engage community with decision-making processes. Work with designers, landscape architects, urban designers, artists, philosophers to reimagine our community relationships with water.                                                     | Bioregionalism – Focused on particular regions with their distinctive landscapes, ecologies and communities; seeking to find way in which they can prosper in the widest sense.<br>Liquid Urbanism – Daylighting streams and rivers, restoring freshwater ecologies that enliven water and create water-rich urban spaces.<br>Water Sensitive Cities – where water's journey through the urban landscape is managed with regard for its rural origins and coastal destinations.                               | Regional conversations feed into discussions about the future of the rural sector and urban living at interregional and national forums, e.g. Land and Water Forum, community collaboratives, universities and research institutes.<br>Transformative regional visions provide landmark examples to inspire other regions. Show how regional initiatives strike to the core of our identity as New Zealanders. | Enable a collaborative process that combines visualisation and practical techniques, allowing people to design a water-centric planning approach in their catchment.<br>Wai ora – across scales and sectors – placed at the heart of the regional vision. |

**Table 1** (continued)

| Scale    | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Examples                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Scaling up                                                                                                                                                                               | Scaling down                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| National | Promote water-centric planning that has been constructed in close dialogue with local values, aspirations, knowledge and practice.<br>National visionary platforms for launching and spreading ideas, campaigns (e.g. 1000 Rivers by 2050) and build national commitment (e.g. 'Go back to the Water' – a metaphor for cultural change). | Water-Centric Planning – planning with a view to restoring ora to waterways – whether for a single site or an entire province.<br>Resource, land use and community design decisions will be made with an eye towards their potential impact on watersheds. | Take new framework and create international alliances across best-practice water governance.<br>NZ innovation recognised for doing transformative work with waterways across the nation. | Deployment and implementation of planning for wai ora into regions, catchments and streamside communities.<br>Mobilise new national imaginaries, inspiring and sharing new regional visions. |
| Global   | Connect with global movements and networks around water, pluralising development, land-use, reframing 'commons', participatory democracy.<br>Develop platforms for engaging, spreading and implementing innovative ideas for future sustainability.                                                                                      | Global thought communities – engagement with the international community through keynote lectures and collaborative projects, such as the Heinrich Boll Foundation in Berlin or the Commons Strategy Group                                                 | –                                                                                                                                                                                        | Draw global leaders and organisations into New Zealand to connect with, and contribute to advancing Te Awaroa as a world-leading project.                                                    |

Source: Te Awaroa (2013).



or otherwise. However, we have impressed the idea that any community-led response to restoring the ora of our waterways must consider and develop a strategy that amounts to *structural* change and the *embedding* of new progressive forms of meaning. Structural transformations can already be pursued through existing projects across the country and by strategically connecting to each other we can coordinate and accelerate the process of upscaling. The extent to which an ethic of long-term care is visibly embodied across our institutions and circulates through cultural discourse will be the final arbiter of any environmental movement. Let us make sure that we set out to change the system, rather than rearranging the pieces on the board.

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## Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/budget-2013-national-science-challenges-announced-budget-boost-735m>
- 2 <http://www.longbushreserve.org/documents/TeAwaroaForestAndBird.pdf>

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