

Building Sustainable Relationships with Indigenous Communities

Spencer Lilley^a

^aVictoria University of Wellington, NZ

spencer.lilley@vuw.ac.nz, ORCID 0000-0002-4881-4981

ABSTRACT

Over the past four decades, New Zealand's library and information management sector has shifted from a predominantly Eurocentric focus to one that actively integrates Indigenous knowledge and te reo me ōna tikanga Māori (Māori language and cultural practices). This paper explores the pivotal role of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) in shaping this transformation, highlighting how reconciliation efforts between Māori and the Crown (New Zealand government) have driven these changes. It examines the sector's efforts to create inclusive environments that empower mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) through collections, service delivery, and community outreach. By detailing cultural and professional initiatives aimed at fostering strong relationships with Māori communities, the paper underscores the significance of genuine partnership. Concluding with a discussion on evolving political dynamics surrounding Tiriti o Waitangi and Māori rights, the paper considers the implications of these changes for future relationships between library and information institutions and Māori communities.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Social Justice; Community Engagement; Continuing Education; Specific Populations; Information Needs.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Indigenous peoples; Māori; Libraries; Relationship Building; New Zealand

Copyright 2025 by the authors. Published under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 40 years the library and information management sector in New Zealand has been transforming, from institutions that were once Eurocentrically focused to institutions where Indigenous knowledge and *te reo me ona tikanga Māori* (Māori language and cultural practices) have been incorporated into building designs, collections, service delivery and community outreach. This paper commences with an explanation of the importance of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) and its relationship to library and information practice in New Zealand, including how this transformation has taken place in a social and political environment that has had reconciliation between Māori and the Crown (represented by the New Zealand government) as its driving force. It will then describe how library and information management institutions have demonstrated their commitment to providing an environment that is inclusive of Māori and ensuring that *mātauranga Māori* (Māori knowledge) is empowered. It presents an overview of cultural and professional initiatives that have contributed to building strong relationships with Māori communities. The paper finishes with a discussion about how the political environment regarding Tiriti o Waitangi and Māori rights is currently undergoing changes, and how these changes impact on the relationship between library and information institutions and Māori communities.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi

Te Tiriti o Waitangi was signed in 1840, as an agreement between *rangatira Māori* (Māori chiefs) and the British Crown. The agreement was created in English and translated into a *te reo Māori* version, with the majority of signatures (501) being collected on the latter (Orange, 2020). Although the documents were only a single page and consisted of a preamble and three short articles, there were distinct differences between the English and *te reo Māori* versions, which has led to an ongoing debate about how the agreement has been interpreted.

In Article One, the key difference is the concept of sovereignty. In the English version, Māori were said to have ceded ‘sovereignty’ to the British Crown. However, in the Māori version, the term used was ‘*kāwanatanga*’ (governorship), which does not directly translate to full sovereignty. Many *rangatira* likely understood this as granting the Crown the right to govern British settlers, rather than giving up their own *mana* (authority) (Walker, 2004).

Another major difference relates to *rangatiratanga* (chieftainship and authority). In the Māori version, Article Two guarantees Māori “*te tino rangatiratanga*”—their full chieftainship—over their lands, villages and *taonga* (treasures). The English version, however, refers to Māori land ownership but does not fully capture the broader concept of *tino rangatiratanga*, which includes

political and cultural authority and autonomy. In addition, the Māori version uses "taonga" to describe what Māori would retain control over, whereas the English version refers only to "lands and estates." (Orange, 2020). From a mātauranga Māori (Māori ways of knowing) perspective, taonga encompasses not just physical property such as land, waterways and other natural resources but can also include cultural, spiritual and intellectual treasures (Winiata and Luke, 2021).

With the agreement signed, representatives of the Crown were determined to assert their colonial power, including the introduction of British law and order, bureaucratic structures, and acquisition of land and other resources, regardless of whether these actions were aligned with the obligations stated in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Māori objections to these actions ultimately led to war, confiscation of land, and the suppression of te reo Māori and cultural values.

In the latter quarter of the 20th century, the government established the Waitangi Tribunal as a permanent commission of enquiry to investigate claims by Māori regarding the Crown's failure to always uphold and honour the terms of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Established in 1975, it was not until 1985 that the Tribunal was given the power to hear retrospective claims back to 1840.

These changes, most of which were put in place by the Fourth Labour Government (1984-1990), were happening during a period of Maori cultural renaissance. In addition to the Waitangi Tribunal's increased scope, te reo Māori became New Zealand's first official language, Māori broadcasting ambitions were realised, and Māori policy and service delivery units were formed in government departments to ensure that the government was meeting its Tiriti obligations.

The granting of increased powers to the Waitangi Tribunal in 1985 led to increased usage of libraries, archives and other information institutions by Māori claims researchers, Waitangi Tribunal staff, and legal teams wishing to gather evidence relating to a rapidly increasing number of retrospective claims being made to the Tribunal. This led to the creation of Māori specialist and liaison positions and increased professional and cultural development for non-Māori staff so institutions could deliver resources and services to these groups of users.

An important factor in this professional development was for institutions and their staff to gain an understanding of their Tiriti o Waitangi responsibilities. For libraries in educational institutions (including polytechnics, universities and wananga (tribal colleges)), greater recognition of Māori education needs and Tiriti responsibilities in the education system were included in the Education Amendment Act 1989, while in schools these responsibilities were included in the Education Standards Act 2001. Similar requirements were included in the Local Government Act 2002 which controls the governance and activities of local authorities and councils (including public libraries).

However, library and information institutions in New Zealand had, since the initial influx of Tiriti researchers, already been transforming and had not waited for the introduction of legislation instructing them to change. In addition to the creation of Māori positions and professional development initiatives, other activities included the introduction of specialist Māori collections, bilingual signage, adoption of Māori names by the institutions, story times and information literacy classes delivered in te reo Māori, community partnerships, digitisation and repatriation of Māori materials. In educational institutions, libraries are fully involved in ensuring that Māori students are provided with opportunities for academic success.

Although private sector library and information centres are not bound by the same legislative requirements as their public counterparts, they have recognised the relevance of te Tiriti in shaping the resources and services they provide to their internal clients. In these companies, Māori-focused divisions have become increasingly common as businesses seek to attract Māori clients who require specialised services. This growing demand is driven by the expansion of the Māori economy, now valued at NZD126 billion (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2025) which has been fuelled by government compensation through Tiriti settlements and strategic iwi (tribal groups) investments in industries such as forestry, fisheries, minerals and tourism. The sector requires expertise in legal matters, investment, banking, accountancy, and financial and business consultancy services.

The increased focus by library and information institutions on Te Tiriti o Waitangi issues and Māori research needs in the 1980s was followed by the transformation of the professional association¹ representing librarians in 1990, when it incorporated Te Tiriti into its mission statement (MacDonald, 1993; Lilley, 2013). As part of its restructuring, the Association created special interest groups (SIG), with the Bicultural SIG in 1991 being one of the first to be created. One of the key activities of the SIG was hui (meetings), which were held at regular intervals at different locations including marae. These hui aimed to provide SIG members with an understanding of the importance of Te Tiriti o Waitangi for library service, the impact that colonisation had played in repressing Māori knowledge and customs, and how libraries and librarians had a responsibility to identify how they could encourage more Māori to use library resources and services. An unexpected outcome from these hui was the emergence of Māori who were working in libraries, either as librarians, library assistants or in support roles (Garraway and Szekely, 1994). In 1992, Te Rōpū Whakahau (Māori professional network of library and information staff) was formed, initially as a SIG and then in 1994 as an independent association. In a further expression of commitment, the two associations signed a formal partnership agreement in 1995. Over the last 30 years, this agreement has resulted in a variety of collaborative activities. These have included professional education workshops focused on Te Tiriti o Waitangi issues, how to meet Māori service needs, understanding mātauranga Māori (Māori ways of knowing), co-organisation of conferences and other events, commissioning and undertaking research on bicultural issues and Māori information needs, developing a Māori subject headings thesaurus, and preparing submissions and joint advocacy on government policies and legislative measures. The strength of the partnership comes from both the signed agreement and the personal commitment that Māori and non-Māori have made to making it work (Millen, 2010; Lilley, 2013).

The strength of such partnerships is not restricted to associations, and similar relationships have been forged between library and information institutions and Māori communities. Examples of these include the co-location of the Archives New Zealand Christchurch office with the Ngāi Tahu Tribal Archives, the ongoing formalisation of agreements between the National Library of New Zealand and iwi relating to ownership and access to collections held by the Library, and National Library's hosting and contribution to the development of Ngā Upoko Tukutuku (Māori subject heading thesaurus) in partnership with Te Rōpū Whakahau and the Library and Information Association of Aotearoa (LIANZA). As our national institutions, National Library and Archives New Zealand have devoted significant resourcing into digitisation projects

¹ The Association at that time was the New Zealand Library Association, it later became the New Zealand Library and Information Association and is now called the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa

designed to improve access to mātauranga Māori materials that enable research and ensures that these resources are preserved for future generations.

Within the public library sector, the creation of Māori specialist positions from the 1980s onwards has enabled libraries to form strong partnerships with local iwi. In addition to the creation of specialised Māori collections, there has been a concerted effort to involve iwi in the planning and design of new buildings. A key feature in these new facilities is the incorporation of cultural narratives reflecting mātauranga-a-iwi (tribal knowledge) and the gifting of Māori names for the building. As community hubs, public libraries host public activities and seminars celebrating significant occasions on the Māori calendar including Matariki (Māori New Year) and Te wiki o te reo Māori (Māori language week) (Lilley, 2024). Hosting these events assists these libraries to build stronger relationships with their local communities. The involvement of iwi members in governance roles guarantees that their perspectives are present in the decision and policy making processes.

Similar activities have occurred in university and polytechnic libraries, where strong relationships have developed between the library and Māori staff and students. Although new library buildings are a rarity within the academic sector, all eight of the university libraries have either been gifted or have adopted Māori names and are focused on ensuring their collections and services reflect their obligations in relation to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and indigenisation goals. This is reflected in the mission and goals expressed in strategic planning documents, and the professional and cultural education programmes that their staff participate in (Blake et.al., 2024).

Previous papers presented to ALISE (Lilley et.al., 2023; Lilley, 2024a) have outlined the role that library and information science (LIS) education in New Zealand has had in indigenising its curriculum. These programmes help develop a professional workforce that recognises the importance of integrating Māori perspectives and ensuring that both professionals and institutions are inclusive of Māori, and aware of the mutually beneficial aspects of building relationships.

Changing Fortunes

In 2023, New Zealand voted in a new coalition government comprised of three ‘right of centre’ political parties, and this has resulted in a conservative policy platform that is dismissive of ‘Tiriti o Waitangi centric’ initiatives (Eketone, 2024). Included as part of the coalition agreements was a bill that aimed to legislate definitions of the principles of te Tiriti o Waitangi to ensure that all New Zealanders are ‘treated equally’, and that no ‘special privileges’ for those who identify as Māori (ACT Party, 2024). Although there was a vocal minority that supported this approach, there was strong opposition to this legislation, as evidenced by an estimated 250,000 written submissions made to the parliamentary select committee responsible and the 42,000 protestors who descended on Parliament in December 2024 to oppose the planned legislation (Radio New Zealand, 2024). The legislation was defeated at its second reading and has not become law. However, other coalition actions are having a chilling effect on the progress that has been made in the relationship between Māori and non-Māori over the last 40 years. These actions have included the abolition of Te Aka Whai Ora (Māori Health Authority), axing equity criteria aimed at improving the health and life-expectancy outcomes for Māori and

Pasifika peoples and dropping research funding for the humanities and social sciences, where most research on Māori and Pasifika issues is funded.

Other planned changes include a pledge to review and remove ‘irrelevant references’ to the Treaty of Waitangi/ Te Tiriti from all pieces of legislation (New Zealand First, 2023). New Zealand First has also recently announced that it intends to introduce a private members bill that will remove all diversity, equity and inclusion requirements and regulations from the Public Service Act 2020, including any mandates related to ensuring that workforces reflected societal diversity, and those that promote diversity and inclusiveness as part of being a 'good employer', – this includes specific references to Māori involvement (New Zealand First, 2025).

The Implications for Library and Information Institutions

Library and information institutions in the public and academic sectors are dependent on their parent organisations for funding and strategic guidance, leaving them vulnerable in a changing social and political environment. It is too soon to predict what, if any, impact the planned changes will have on library and information institutions in these sectors. Although government policies can be declared at any time, any major changes will require amendments to the Acts that relate to the parent organisations. It is possible that any such amendments will not require public or academic libraries to alter how they provide services and resources to Māori. However, library and information institutions that receive direct central government funding, including the National Library of New Zealand, Archives New Zealand, and library and information centres within government departments, may be significantly affected by changes to the Public Services Act 2020 as proposed by New Zealand First.

Regardless of whether Te Tiriti o Waitangi clauses are removed from the Local Government Act 2002, Education Amendment Act 1989, or the Education Standards Act 2001, those providing library and information services in local government, academic, and school libraries will continue to have a duty of care to ensure that they are delivering services that meet the needs of all their users, including Māori. In addition, the 40 years or more of relationship building by institutions and their respective Māori communities are too important to be discontinued due to political change, stepping away would constitute a professional and cultural dereliction of duty in relation to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and a major waste of the time, effort and goodwill that has been invested in these activities by both parties. As a profession, there is a need to be more than just a fair-weather friend to Māori, after all, a government and its policies are temporary constructs which could easily change at the next general election. In contrast, building relationships with Māori is a continuous process that requires enduring commitment.

Acknowledgments

This paper is a result of research being conducted through an award from the Royal Society of New Zealand’s Marsden Research Fund (VUW22/12).

REFERENCES

- ACT Party. (2024). 'Equal rights for all'. <https://www.treaty.nz/>
- Blake, M., Huatahi, M., McDonald, R., Roberts, S., & Tairi, K. (2024). Ko te tangata (for the People): The Challenge of Indigenizing Libraries in Aotearoa. *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, 30(2-3), 251-272.
- Eketone, A. (2024). The empire strikes back: Maori and the 2023 coalition government. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 36(4), 12-18.
- Garraway, J. & Szekely, C. (1994). *Ka mahi tonu: biculturalism in New Zealand librarianship 1992-1994*. New Zealand Library and Information Association.
- Lilley, S. (2013). *Te Rōpū Whakahau: waiho i te toipoto, kaula i te toiroa: celebrating 20 years 1992-2012*. Te Rōpū Whakahau.
- Lilley, S. (2024). Overcoming barriers to te reo Māori usage in libraries: Providing access to Māori knowledge. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 56(3), 645-657.
- Lilley, S. (2024a). Indigenizing research methods: making research outcomes better for all. In *Proceedings of the Association for Library and Information Science Education Annual Conference: ALISE 2024-The Ethics and Evolution of Truth and Information* (pp. 1-7). Portland, Oregon.
<https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/journals/aliseacp/article/download/1692/1456>
- Lilley, S., Campbell-Meier, J. & Krtalic, M. (2023). Indigenizing the information studies curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Association for Library & Information Science Education*, (pp. 1-9) Milwaukee, WI.
<https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/journals/aliseacp/article/view/1299/1155>
- McDonald, T. (1993). *Te Ara Tika: Māori and libraries: a research report*. New Zealand Library and Information Association.
- Millen, J. (2010). *Te Rau Herenga, a century of library life in Aotearoa: the New Zealand Library Association & LIANZA, 1910-2010*. Library & Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa.
- Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. (2025). Te Ōhanga Māori 2023: the Māori economy 2023. <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/dmsdocument/30486-te-ohanga-maori-2023-report-pdf>
- New Zealand First. (2023). Coalition agreement: New Zealand National Party and New Zealand First Party.
https://assets.nationbuilder.com/nzfirst/pages/4462/attachments/original/1700784896/National_NZF_Coalition_Agreement_signed_-_24_Nov_2023.pdf
- New Zealand First. (2025). NZ First introduces bill to remove woke 'dei' regulations from public service. <https://www.nzfirst.nz/bill-to-remove-woke-dei>
- Orange, C. (2020). *The Treaty of Waitangi: Te Tiriti o Waitangi: an illustrated history*. Bridget Williams Books.
- Radio New Zealand. (2024). What now for the Treaty Principles Bill?
<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/te-manu-korihī/534246/what-now-for-the-treaty-principles-bill>
- Walker, R.J. (2004). *Ka whawhai tonu mātou: struggle without end*. Penguin.
- Winiata, W. and Luke, D. (2021). *The survival of Māori as a people*. Huia Publishers.