



# Māori Myths, Legends and Contemporary Stories

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Whaitere – the enchanted stingray

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## Whaitere – the enchanted stingray

### Whaitere – the enchanted stingray

Koro Pat watched from his driftwood seat as the three children danced around the small fire, clusters of sparks billowing into the evening light.



"Do you see that?" Koro Pat pointed out to sea. Two black triangular wings broke the surface, slapping down on the orange coloured water.

"It's a stingray!" yelled the kids in unison, running to the water's edge. Kimi picked up a stone ready to throw but Koro Pat stopped her short.

"Hoi, you wouldn't throw a stone at your Mum would you?" Kimi looked confused, she dropped her stone.

"Haere mai, noho mai," Koro patted the driftwood log. Kimi, Jason and Marama came and sat next to him.

"I'll tell you about a stingray, a kaitiaki of this place."

"Our own one that looks after us?" Marama asked.

"Āe, yours, mine, our marae, all of us. We look after the water, this land, and our kaitiaki looks after us."

Kimi used a stick to pull her pāua, cooking in its shell, from the fire. The others followed suit, crouching over the stones, listening. Koro began.

"Whaitere was a stingray, from the black wings whānau, who lived in a small bay, at the head of the fish of Māui. Her parents raised her as others were raised – gathering food and playing with her fish friends in the weed and around large rocks.

Whaitere was taught from a young age to be wary of the people fish, who covered the water with their fish traps catching anything that crossed their paths. They were known to travel on the surface of the water, suddenly arriving upon huge noisy shadows to feed their sticky traps into the sea.

The people fish had already taken many from Whaitere's small community, although she was too young to know they would never return.

As the years passed, changes to Whaitere's home became more noticeable. Food was harder to come by, friends suddenly disappeared, and one evening when Whaitere returned to the resting place she called home, her parents were nowhere to be seen.

Whaitere spent that night searching, swimming blindly in the dark shadowed sea. Stories of the people fish flashed through her mind, overwhelming her with fear. With heaviness in her wings and sadness in her heart, Whaitere floated slowly to the sea floor, her saltwater tears joining the huge ocean.

Whaitere remained on the sea floor through the night and the next day. Sand covered her dark skin so that only her eyes protruded, watching from beneath. Tāmure and other fish friends searched for Whaitere and her parents, calling into the weed. But none of them were found.

Rimurimu, drifting in the currents, heard the fish calling and knew she would have to tell of what she had seen. She whispered into the tide, "The people fish have come with their fish traps, stretching across our home, taking our children, the black wings too."

Whaitere heard the whispers on the currents and sprang from her hiding place.

"They haven't taken my parents, they haven't, they haven't!"

Whaitere sped herself away, flattened herself on the sandy bottom and once more closed her world around her. Tāmure tried his best to comfort his friend, he brought her food and sang her songs, but without success.

In the days that followed, Whaitere could think only of her mother and father. She remembered the karakia they said each morning giving thanks to Hinemoana and Tangaroa.

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"Why would the people fish take my parents when they were so good to others?" Whaitere cried. And her wings became heavier still, sinking further into the sea floor.

It was a dark quiet place, deep inside herself where Whaitere found a calmness that settled her heart. And from that place a karakia of her own emerged, words not formed, not said, but felt and given.

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Her karakia, filled with love, floated in the tides, washed against the shores, rode on the waves of the great seas and spoke to Tangaroa, Hinemoana and all of their children. Hinemoana came to Whaitere in the form of a wave, a deep blue wave of enchantment. With encircling arms Hinemoana picked Whaitere up and carried her away. Away to the deepest parts of the ocean they flew, finally descending through the darkness, past the gates of Hinenuitepō and into Rarohenga, the home of all who die.

"This is Rarohenga, the underworld – your parents now dwell here," Hinemoana said as she gently released Whaitere from her grasp. "Should you eat the food of this place, you will remain here forever. I will return at the day's end for our journey back."

With that, Hinemoana disappeared back towards the way they had come and Whaitere swam into a sea, tinted with the colours of the rainbow and surrounded by the dazzling creatures of Rarohenga.

Whaitere didn't recognise her parents at first, but could tell by their shape that they were whai. Their black wings had been transformed into the colours of the pāua shell, intricate patterns woven into their skin. When they called her name, Whaitere knew that her mother and father were once more by her side. She could only embrace them and cry.

"Why did you leave me? I don't want to be by myself!"

Whaitere's parents said nothing in return. Instead, they embraced their daughter then took her on a journey to see the sights of the underworld.

They visited the crystal caves, where songs and languages of every sea creature are embedded in millions of different coloured crystals.

They visited the underwater rainbow, a mountainous spiral of rainbow colours where sea creatures fashion their own particular ways of dancing with the sea.

They visited the eternal gardens, where every food imaginable continues to replenish itself.

Whaitere dived down and settled herself amongst the huge range of colourful foods, considering them carefully with her wing tips.

"If I eat here in Rarohenga, I'll always be with you."

Her parents looked at each other and then back to their daughter.

"Come with us we have one more place to visit", said her mother.

Together they swam past the eternal gardens and down into a huge circular cave. "This is the eternal spring, said her father, one of the sacred veins of Papatūānuku."

With that her mother said a special karakia and they continued down into a tunnel of light, deep into the veins of Papatūānuku.

After travelling for some time, they came to a cavern branching off to one side, illuminated with a deep green light reflecting from its walls. In the centre of the cavern was the source of the green light – a large flat piece of pounamu was suspended just below the water's surface, rippling with magic.

"Rest on this rock," Whaitere's mother gestured.

Whaitere cautiously drifted down to rest as she was told. When her underbelly touched the surface of the pounamu she was instantly transformed, weaving pāua shell colours into her dark skin. Layer upon layer of magical power surged through her body, gifts from her creator, Papatūānuku.

"The overworld and the underworld are inherently connected, without one there will not be the other," said her father.

"You've been chosen as a guardian for the overworld, teach others to respect your home as you do." said her mother.

"But I want to stay here with you!" Whaitere complained.

"Your magic will allow you many things, including the ability to come and go from both worlds as you wish," her father replied.

Whaitere flapped her newly coloured wings, swimming up to the surface thinking to her self, and then returned to where her parents were waiting. She stretched out her multi-coloured wings and embraced them both.

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"As long as I can always come and see you," she said.

And with that they returned up through the veins of Papatūānuku and into Rarohenga where they continued to take in the wonders of the magical underworld.

At the end of the day Hinemoana returned as she had promised and carried Whaitere back to the world she knew.

Tāmure and his friends first thought they had a stranger in their midst until Whaitere spoke.

"It's only me." she said, "Our tipuna, Hinemoana, took me to the underworld, to where my parents now live. I have seen and felt the magic of our creator Papatūānuku."

"Whaitere – the enchanted stingray!" Tāmure called.

And sea creatures from all around came to marvel at the beautiful pāua shell colours of Whaitere's skin.

The small bay was so filled with excitement that the water boiled with life. All of sudden the shadows of the people fish were seen approaching and the alarm went out. Panic spread through the large gathering and they all began to scatter.

Whaitere floated to the surface looking down at the mayhem below her.

"Stop!" she said, "We need to teach the people fish that we have as much right to this place as they!"

As Whaitere was speaking a huge shadow raced towards her. The assembly of sea creatures were spellbound as Whaitere dove under the shadow, and turned onto her back. Her skin pulsed with magic as she flapped her wings and a massive surge of water hurtled towards the dark shape. The shadow wobbled and shuddered then a people fish toppled into the sea. Other shadows headed towards them, but soon succumbed to the same fate.

The people fish swam to shore, all except one who sank to the bottom of sea. Whaitere and the others watched as his lungs filled with water, his eyes enlarged with a blank stare and his arms stretched out.

"Teach them to respect your home."

Whaitere could hear the words of her parents echoing in her mind.

Whaitere looked into the eyes of the people fish, then spoke to him in a language he could understand. "Go back to your people and teach them to respect this place. Our bay will be an example for all your kind and a safe place for ours." With that, Whaitere lifted the people fish onto her back and returned him to shore.

From that time on, fishing was limited in the small bay and once more it became a safe place for all sea creatures. Whaitere was seen as the kaitiaki, the guardian, and respected as such by people fish and sea creatures alike.

The people fish came to marvel and dance with the sea creatures, new songs floated up from the underworld and once more life continued as it should.

Koro Pat looked at the wide eyed children in front of him. Kimi held her pāua shell up to the sky. "I want to have pāua colours, magic ones," she said.

"It takes magic to look after a place like this", Koro replied.

"Is that why we only get enough pāua for us to eat?" asked Marama.

"That's why." Koro said.

"And Whaitere is real because we saw one, eh Koro?" Jason asked.

"That's right, and when you're old like me, you'll tell this same story to your mokopuna, won't you?" Koro asked.

"That's for sure." Kimi answered.

And the three children sprung to life, spread their arms and chased each other like enchanted stingrays in a magical underwater world.

(c) Wiremu Grace

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