

# Māori names for marine mammals: ngā ingoa o ‘ngā tamariki o Tinirau’

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**ABSTRACT:** The first Polynesians to reach New Zealand found several species of sea mammals that do not occur, or occur only rarely, elsewhere in Polynesia. Some of the names that Māori established for marine mammals, and for some other animals and plants, varied from place to place. Today, there remain more names than animals, and many names are not very specific. This paper records the range of Māori names applied to marine mammals, and notes that, with the trend towards consistent standardisation of Māori throughout New Zealand, many names could be lost.

**KEYWORDS:** Māori names, marine mammals, whales, dolphins, seals.

## Introduction

New Zealand’s cool and subtropical waters are the home of whales, dolphins, seals and other marine mammals not found, or found only rarely as stragglers, in the warmer tropical waters of Polynesia (Baker 1983). As the Polynesian ancestors of the early Māori spread across the Pacific from Southeast Asia towards Easter Island and New Zealand, they gave names to the new animals they encountered. Marine animals were known collectively in Māori as ‘ngā tamariki o Tinirau’, the children of Tinirau, the son of Tangaroa, the great god of the sea.

Some transpacific Polynesian migrants took special place-names with them, so that, for example, Hawaiiki, Hawai’i and Savai’i are just local modern variant forms of the same original proto-Polynesian root word. Closer to home, we recognise that Māori place-names often change in pronunciation from place to place, such as Whangaroa, Wakaroa, Akaroa and Akaloa, and that some – like Whanganui, Aotea, Waitangi and Pukeora – were transferred and duplicated in other localities.

This geographic displacement, or migration, of the names of people and places seems readily accepted nowadays, but there is less awareness that within Polynesia and New

Zealand the names of some animals and plants were often transferred too, and not only from place to place, but also sometimes from species to species. Thus an animal or plant known by one name in one district may have had a different name in another district, while elsewhere the old name may have been conferred on a very different species. Therefore, there is now ample room for confusion over the different names that the early Māori gave to the marine mammals they met in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## Whale names

Sperm whales *Physeter macrocephalus* Linnaeus are conspicuous, with a high single spout, a blunt square head, and teeth to attack and shred giant squid in the ocean depths (Fig. 1). They are found mainly in warm tropical waters, especially near the Equator, but are also spread widely throughout all the oceans between latitudes 60°S and 60°N (Townsend 1935). The first Polynesian voyagers met sperm whales over vast expanses of the Pacific, and named them something close to *toforā* (modern linguists write this proto-Polynesian reconstruction as *tafura’a*). Thus, the sperm whale is today still called by old names like *tofolā* in Samoan, *tofuā’ā* in modern Tongan and *koholā* in Hawai’ian (Tregear 1891: 523).

After the first human wave of Polynesians spread across the Pacific, a later backwash carried some of their descendants back to inhabit various other islands, now called the ‘Polynesian outliers’, which are geographically inside Melanesia but culturally Polynesian. When I asked local people on these islands about sperm whales, they gave me very similar Polynesian names: *toforā* on Futuna in Vanuatu, *taforā* on Tikopia and the same on Anuta (where *taforā* was in use in the early twentieth century), *tahogāā* on Rennell and Bellona and *tohalā* on Sikaiana.

At some very early stage, somewhere nearer the heart of Polynesia, a new name had also arisen. This was something like *paraoa*, which remains with various spellings in Tahitian, Tuamotuan, Māori and, with some duplication, in Hawai‘ian (Tregear 1891: 523). As the ancestors of the Māori migrated further southwards, they took both names with them: ‘parāoa’ and ‘tohorā’.

In New Zealand, early Polynesian visitors attached the oldest name, *tohorā*, to a newly encountered animal, the southern right whale *Eubalaena australis* (Desmoulins), which is physically very different from the sperm whale. The new settlers – who became the ‘first Māori’ – called the new species an old name, so that now, unlike in other areas of Polynesia, *tohorā* refers to a right whale in Māori, not to a sperm whale, which generally is called *parāoa* (Williams 1957: 264, 431). Right whales have a distinctive double spout and, unlike sperm whales, they have no teeth but instead large plates of horny baleen through which they sieve plankton, including tiny krill. Right whales live mainly in cold, Subantarctic waters south of latitude 45° but, in winter, females move well north to calve and suckle their young in warmer, more sheltered waters off New Zealand. The northern limit for southern right whales is southeast of the Kermadec Islands. They have not been recorded anywhere else in Polynesia (Richards 2002).

On the Chatham Islands, however, the Moriori name for the right whale was *Ko Rongo-moana*. This reflects not only Rongomai, the different Moriori god of the sea and of whales, but also, perhaps, a different human migration (Richards 2002).

Polynesians have long had close affinities with whales. The best known of several Māori traditions and whakapapa, or genealogies, refer to an early voyager, Paikea, the tipuna (ancestor) of Ngāti Porou. It is said that when Paikea left his original central Pacific home in Hawaiki, either he was physically a sperm whale, or he was riding upon a sperm whale (Fig. 3). When Paikea left home, the name used for whales

was a term similar to ‘tohorā’. Where, how or why Māori later changed the sperm whale’s name to ‘parāoa’ is unknown.

Another curiosity is that Paikea may not have reached New Zealand on a sperm whale but rather on a humpback whale *Megaptera novaeangliae* (Borowski), as some Māori have also used ‘paikea’ as a generic name for this species. The humpback whale migrates conspicuously along the east coast of the North Island to breed in warm waters off Tonga and south of New Caledonia (Townsend 1935). However, both localities seem less likely to have been the homeland of the early Māori, particularly on linguistic grounds, so Paikea seems most likely to have been a sperm whale from the more northern and tropical waters of the central Pacific.

Still, the records are not clear, and there is confusion in depicting the shape and species of the whale involved with Paikea. For example, this confusion was very apparent to zoologists viewing the 2003 film *Whale Rider*. The whales depicted in the film were all rather small and indistinct but, in the finale, the mass stranding seemed to be of right whales, a species that is not known to strand. Indeed, the New Zealand whaling statistics database shows that right whales have beached only four times since 1840, and all those animals were probably dead before they were cast up on shore. By contrast, had the film depicted a mass stranding of sperm whales, this would have matched the stranding of 54 whales at Wainui beach, just a few kilometres from Whangara, in 1970 (Anton von Helden, pers. comm., June 2007). Yet, in many Māori carvings, Paikea is clearly depicted as a humpback whale with long dorsal fins. Given the variation in Māori traditions of ancestral whale riders, it remains unclear exactly which species was Paikea (Fig. 2).

As the early Māori ventured further south, they developed more names for several unfamiliar marine mammals they encountered. The names ‘pakakā’ and ‘pakakē’ have both been recorded for the minke whale *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* Lacépède; ‘hakurā’ and ‘ihe-ihe’ for the scamperdown whale *Mesoplodon grayi* von Haast, which spouts noisily; and ‘tutuperu’ or ‘papa-tī’ for an unspecified species. The latter names do not translate further, but several names used for southern right whales seem to be descriptive in origin: ‘ngutuhue’ and ‘ngutu-pihi’ probably refer to the large split mouths of southern right whales, while ‘kumikumi’ and ‘pāhau-tea’ may refer to the large baleen plates inside their mouths, with rough translations like ‘big bearded mouth’ and ‘pale-bearded’. Perhaps the best-known name for right whales is ‘kewa’, after Kewa or Kiwa, the seagoing ancestor who is still known widely across the Pacific. A whale calf, presumably

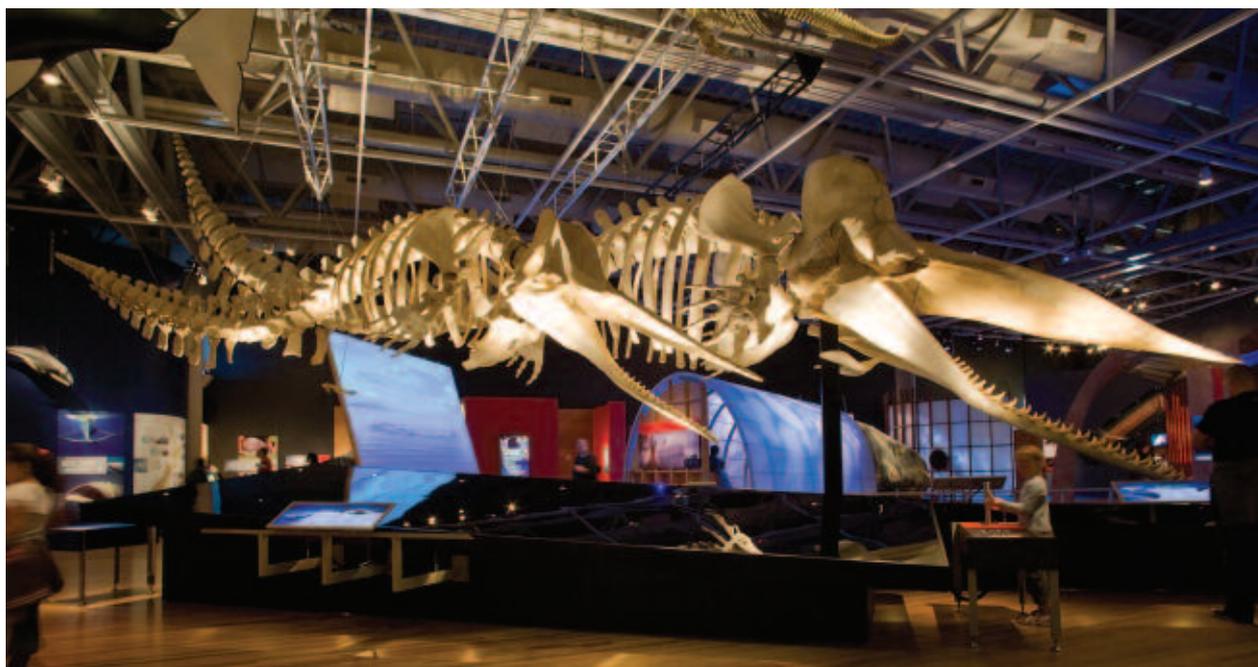


Fig. 1 Skeletons of a male (right) and a female (left) sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*), as displayed in the Te Papa exhibition *Whales – Tohorā* (photo: Te Papa, MA078235, by Michael Hall).



Fig. 2 The barge boards of this pātaka (storehouse) – kept at the Okains Bay Maori and Colonial Museum in Banks Peninsula, Canterbury – depict a whale being hauled up on the beach at Mahia Peninsula (photo: Don Brady).

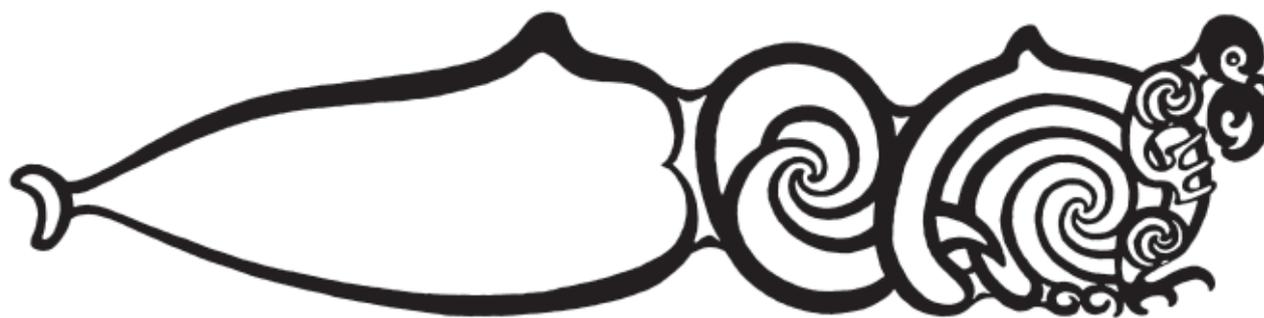


Fig. 3 Paikea riding his whale to New Zealand. The original was carved in about 1780 on a maihi (fascia) board placed on the eaves of a raised food store to signify abundance. From Te Whānau a Apanui at Te Kaha, this stylised Māori motif has been redrawn by Owen Mapp (Whitireia Polytechnic, Porirua, Wellington).

from a right whale, was called 'miha pakakē'. Yet another name used for a right whale was 'tūtara-kau-ika', although more often this name was used to describe a whole school of whales (Williams 1957: 106, 462; Strickland 1990: 63).

The Māori name for the killer whale *Orcinus orca* (Linnaeus) was 'kera wēra', which is possibly just a transliteration of the English name (Williams 1892: 317), although 'wē ra' could also mean 'much oil' as in 'wē parāoa' for whale oil (Williams 1957: 481). The name 'mimiha' was given to a black kind of chewing gum washed up on beaches and believed to be from whales, though definitely not the same as ambergris (Williams 1957: 201). The whale food called 'krill' was 'kōura rangi uraura', and 'tūtāe wera' was whale excrement, known elsewhere as 'whale scats' (Strickland 1990: 64).

There are very few explicit references to name variations in different dialects or districts. In giving general names for all whales, Williams recorded 'pakake' from 'East Cape', and 'tohoraha' from 'Rarawa' in the Far North (Williams 1892: 317). Strickland (1990: 63), quoting Herries Beattie in 1920, includes three local names from Ngāi Tahu: 'paikea' for humpback whales, 'raratahuhuri' for finback whales (*Balaenoptera* spp.) and 'tuterakihaunoa' for sperm whales. However, information on iwi and regional variations is very poorly recorded in the literature, and the original diversity may be lost entirely unless some traces remain, and can be recorded, from Māori oral histories.

## Dolphin names

Dolphins have several common Māori names, such as 'aihe'; 'kākahī'; 'terehu', especially in the north; 'puhipuhi', which

also means to blow, referring to the spout; and 'upokohue', which in the south can also mean a fin whale *Balaenoptera physalus* (Linnaeus), or a 'blackfish'. The latter name can also refer to long-finned pilot whales *Globicephala melas* (Traill), which often strand in large numbers. Other names are 'ra-rata-whiri-whiri', which has also been used to refer to a very large seal; 'rara-huri-huri', also used for a fin whale; and 'tukuperu'. A school of dolphins or whales was 'he kai rahi' or 'ūtara kauika', while a frightened, stampeded or stranded school was known as 'ūtara kauika rarawa' (Williams 1957: 106, 462; Strickland 1990: 63).

Hector's dolphins *Cephalorhynchus hectori* (van Beneden) would have required a local name since they are found only in New Zealand, mainly in shallow waters off the north-west coast of the North Island, the west and east coasts of the South Island, Tasman Bay and the Marlborough Sounds (Baker *et. al.* 2002: 714). Recently, two different subspecies have been recognised: *C. hectori hectori* (van Beneden, 1881) in the South Island, and *C. hectori maui* Baker *et. al.* 2002 in the North Island, also known as 'Maui's dolphin'. Williams (1892: 182; 1957: 275) recorded 'tūpoupou' for '*Cephalorhynchus hectori*, porpoise' but, unfortunately, no Māori name for Maui's dolphin was located in the literature.

Unlike the great whales, common dolphins *Delphinus delphis* Linnaeus were hunted by the early Māori using bone harpoons and nets. No doubt these animals were well known to their hunters, and as such were probably given different names that distinguished them by age, sex and even colouring. However, the surviving names cannot be translated with certainty. Some of those used are: 'pehi-pehi' (or 'puhipuhi'), 'wai-āua', 'tutumaire-kurai', 'upokohue', 'tupaipou' and 'topoupou'. (Williams 1957: 275, 463, 467, 475).

## Seal names

New Zealand fur seals *Arctocephalus forsteri* (Lesson) were once much more common and widespread than they are today, visiting northern New Zealand, the Kermadec Islands and, rarely, Tonga (Smith 1989, 2002). The Māori terms 'pakakē' or 'pakakā' and its variants provide plastic, generic names for all seals but, by far the most common name for the fur seal is 'kekeno' (Williams 1957: 143). The name 'kakerangi', which surely in southern Māori would have sounded more like 'kakeraki', was also commonly used, as were 'karewaka', 'oioi' and 'tūpoupou' (Williams 1892: 182; 1957: 101). In the Chatham Islands, the Moriori word for fur seal was *puhina*, although on Pitt Island the group's southernmost tribe used *kekune* for fur-seal skins (Richards 1990: 34).

New Zealand sea lions *Phocarctos hookeri* (Gray) would have been common when the first Polynesians arrived in New Zealand, but now they are restricted to the Subantarctic Islands, with only a few specimens seen on sandy beaches of the southern South Island. Sea lions had numerous Māori names, many of which also applied to fur seals. Their main name was 'pakekē', with the large males called 'whakāhao' or 'whakāhau', 'whakāhu', 'kautakoa', 'pākahokaho' or 'poutoko'. The much smaller females were called 'kake' or 'kaki', although these names were sometimes also used for male seals (Williams 1957). A legend records that the first settlers on the Chatham Islands used the name *mimiha* for fur seals (Richards 2001: 114). Ngāi Tahu used 'popoikore' for a hair seal, but this also sometimes referred to any seal (Beattie 1994: 595).

In the north, leopard seals *Hydrurga leptonyx* (Blainville) were called 'rāpoka', 'popoiangore' or 'poipoiangori', and in the south they were known as 'popoikore', although sometimes these variants were used to name any seal (Beattie 1994: 595; Williams 1957: 292). Southern elephant seals *Mirounga leonina* (Linnaeus) were called 'ihupuku', meaning 'swollen nose', which describes the engorged nose of the adult male when aroused. Females probably had another name, now lost, although possibly this was 'ihupiro' (Williams 1957: 75). Despite some suggestions that 'ihupuku' is a recent creation, it seems to be an old name among both Ngāi Tahu and Moriori (Beattie 1994: 582; Richards 2001: 114).

## Discussion

In addition to the specific Māori names mentioned in the above sections that can be assigned to particular groups of

marine mammals, other generic names developed to cover all large sea creatures and taniwha (deep-water monsters). Thus, terms such as 'pakakē', 'pakakā', 'mimiha' and 'wera' were used often and more or less interchangeably to cover any or all whales, seals and other sea-dwellers. Other names used for whales, without specifying the species involved, were 'ika moana', 'kau-ika', 'momori', 'ngohi-moana', 'pāpatī', 'tohorā', 'wēra' and 'warawara' (Williams 1957: 106, 462; Strickland 1990: 63). Moreover, when one seeks to identify each species separately, there is an overlapping and duplication of names. Thus, a seemingly simple list of all the surviving names becomes a bewildering mix, full of repetition and confusion.

Why were there so many different names for the same marine mammal species? Why were some names used over and over for different species? Old-time Māori were neither unobservant nor ill-informed about the natural world upon which they depended for their daily food and survival. Nor were later European collectors careless and guilty of recording mistakes.

In fact, the number of names is highly significant. Different groups of Māori used different names for the same marine mammal from district to district. Moreover, this transference phenomenon has several parallels among fish and birds. Many inshore fishermen know that Māori names for some fish species change bewilderingly from coast to coast, and from place to place. For birds, this diversity of local names was recorded explicitly by Herries Beattie in 1920:

A point that is absolutely essential for a thorough grasp of Maori names of birds, fishes, trees, etc. is that the same names are used for totally different objects in the North and South Islands respectively. Thus the *kuaka* of the North Island is the godwit, and the *kuaka* of the South Island is a kind of muttonbird, the godwit being called [in the South] *powaka* or *poaka*. The *piopio* is a thrush in the North Island, but is the morepork owl in the South Island. The *pipi* is a completely different shellfish to the *pipi* of the South, and so on through scores of instances.... The difference in the Maori identification [and naming] of many objects common to both islands must never be forgotten by anyone desirous of accuracy. (Beattie 1994: 38)

Thus, there can be no certainty that a Māori name for a marine mammal was standard, uniform or immutable throughout the whole country. A name used in one locality might well mean something else in another locality. It cannot be said now that a designated name is wrong, only perhaps that its use was likely, or unlikely. Present trends are moving strongly towards a tidy, consistent standardisation of 'Māori'

names throughout New Zealand. While this is certainly a logical and practical approach, it seems likely that it will reduce both the regional diversity and flavour of the original Māori language.

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