Te Rimu Ahu Whenua Trust: Facing Up to Climate Change

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Abstract

Climate change poses an escalating global threat, with Māori—the Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand—disproportionately exposed to its cumulative impacts. Increasingly frequent and severe weather events require Māori landowners to develop adaptive strategies that protect and sustain lands to which they hold enduring cultural, spiritual, and genealogical ties. Despite this urgency, limited research examines how small, rural Māori land trusts navigate climate risks while upholding tikanga, whakapapa obligations, and intergenerational responsibilities. Drawing on my doctoral research, this article examines how Te Rimu Ahu Whenua Trust, located in Te Araroa on the East Coast, is responding to these pressures. Using a whakapapa research methodology, it centres the perspectives of five trustees who discuss the changing climate, its impacts on the Trust's whenua, and their aspirations for the future. Their reflections highlight mounting environmental concerns—particularly erosion, river instability, and ecosystem degradation—alongside the values, leadership practices, and succession needs that shape decision-making. The study provides new empirical insight into Māori climate adaptation and shows how Māori land trusts operate as critical, yet often under-recognised, sites of Indigenous climate leadership. By foregrounding place-based governance grounded in cultural values, the findings offer practical guidance for district and regional councils, government agencies, funders, Māori landowners, Māori land trusts, Māori communities, and Indigenous peoples globally who are confronting similar climate-related challenges.

Keywords: Māori land trust, whakapapa research methodology, climate impacts, Māori customary values.

Introduction

It is important to begin by acknowledging my positionality as a descendant of the Te Araroa community. Although I have not lived in Te Araroa, I maintain an enduring connection to the community through my involvement with Te Rimu Trust. This research reflects the perspective and connection of a single descendant to Te Araroa, while acknowledging the existence of numerous other connections and narratives held by fellow descendants. While I am not a resident of Te Araroa, this has not deterred me from contributing to my land trust and to the broader Te Araroa community from afar through the undertaking of this research.

Climate change is now pervasive across Aotearoa New Zealand, with increasingly frequent extreme weather events affecting communities, landowners, and infrastructure (NIWA, 2026, April 2). Māori, alongside other structurally marginalised groups, are disproportionately exposed to these impacts due to intersecting historical, socio-economic, political, and geographical factors. For Māori communities, climate vulnerability is compounded by legacies of dispossession, persistent marginalisation, and the challenges of rural isolation—conditions that also shape Te Rimu Trust's context.

These dynamics demonstrate that Māori climate adaptation is not merely a technical exercise but a deeply political and cultural challenge requiring responses grounded in tikanga, whakapapa, and place-based knowledge. Yet national climate policy frameworks often overlook the specific realities of Māori land trusts, particularly small rural trusts operating within colonially imposed land tenure systems.

By analysing Te Rimu trustees' experiences and perspectives, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature: how Māori land governance entities develop climate responses that are both culturally grounded and practically workable within structural constraints. The following section introduces Te Rimu Trust and outlines the research questions guiding this investigation.

Te Rimu Trust

During 2020-2025, the Tairāwhiti region on the East Coast of the North Island has been disproportionately affected by extreme weather events, including severe storms, heavy rainfall, flooding, cyclones, and destructive winds (Jones et al., 2014; Fellows & Barker, 2021). In 2023, Cyclones Hale and Gabrielle caused extensive damage to communities, businesses, and infrastructure, with Tairāwhiti among the hardest-hit areas (GDC, 2023). Te Rimu Trust, located within this region, was significantly affected by Cyclone Gabrielle, underscoring the urgent need to strengthen climate preparedness and mitigation capacity (Mackintosh, 2025).

Te Rimu Trust, based in the rural Māori coastal settlement of Te Araroa, was established in 1981 as an *ahu whenua* trust—the most common governance structure for collectively owned Māori land (Māori Land Court, 2021). Ahu whenua trusts manage

Māori land on behalf of their shareholders and operate under the authority and oversight of the Māori Land Court.

Te Rimu Trust was formed through the amalgamation of seven land blocks—Tokata A14, C12, and C13, and Whetumatarau C11, C12, C13, and C14—covering 239.9631 hectares (Māori Land Court, 2025). These blocks are collectively owned by approximately 350 shareholders affiliated with local hapū, including Te Whānau a Kahu and Te Whānau a Hinerupe. Amalgamation aimed to enhance commercial viability and improve land management efficiency (Mackintosh, 2025).

The Trust's whenua is ecologically diverse, incorporating fertile and marginal soils, wetlands, coastal dune systems, and the Karakatūwhero River, which traverses several blocks. This ecological complexity shapes both the opportunities the Trust can pursue and the vulnerabilities it must navigate in a changing climate, providing essential context for its emerging climate adaptation strategies.

Research Questions

Te Rimu Trust faces distinct climate-related challenges shaped by its geographical isolation, the enduring impacts of colonisation, and its deep cultural and genealogical connections to place (Mackintosh, 2025). This article draws on my doctoral research, which examines how the Trust understands and responds to these climate pressures. In particular, it investigates how climate change is affecting the Trust's whenua, the challenges trustees encounter, and the strategies they currently use or envision for the future.

Three research questions guided this inquiry:

1. What are the impacts of climate change on the whenua administered by Te Rimu Trust?
2. What challenges and opportunities does climate change present for the Trust?
3. How is, or could, Te Rimu Trust respond and adapt to these impacts?

Historical Landscape of Tokata

To situate these questions within their broader cultural and historical context, the next section provides an overview of Tokata—one of the significant landscapes within Te Rimu's whenua—and outlines its importance to descendants who maintain enduring relationships with this place.

Te Whānau a Kahu Pepeha

Ko Puketapu te maunga
Ko Punaruku te awa
Ko Kauwhakatuakina te rangatira
Ko Te Whānau a Kahu te hapū

Ko Te Pikitanga a Kauwhakatuakina te marae

This pepeha affirms Te Whānau a Kahu's longstanding authority over Tokata (McConnell, 1998). For the hapū, the landscape encompasses ancestral sites, boundaries, oral histories, and sacred places, embodying whakapapa, tūrangawaewae, mana whenua, and the taonga embedded in place (Mackintosh, 2025). Tokata's diverse ecosystems—mountains, plains, wetlands, rivers, lagoons, and coastline—supported generations through ecological knowledge grounded in reciprocity and kaitiakitanga.

European arrival in the 1830s profoundly disrupted these relationships, reshaping cultural, political, economic, spiritual, and environmental foundations. To examine these disruptions and their ongoing implications for Te Rimu Trust, this study draws on settler-colonial and decolonisation frameworks.

Settler Colonialism and its Relevance to Te Rimu Trust

Settler colonialism refers to the acquisition and occupation of Indigenous territories and the displacement and marginalisation of Indigenous peoples (Wolfe, 2006). It is an ongoing structure, evident in imposed political, social, and economic systems (Cornellier & Griffiths, 2016; Kauanui, 2016).

In Aotearoa, settler colonialism—accelerated by the New Zealand Company from 1839—enabled extensive land acquisition and diminished Māori authority (McAloon, 2008). Wakefield's settlement policies entrenched dispossession and weakened Māori sovereignty (Phillips, 2005). Breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, legislative mechanisms of land alienation, and the disruption of Māori social structures produced lasting inequalities in land ownership and political representation (Mutu, 2019).

Te Whānau a Kahu were directly affected. Crown breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the individualisation of customary title through the Native Land Court, and post-war socio-economic shifts—including large-scale urban migration—severed many from their ancestral lands and governance roles (Walker, 2004; Boast, 2017; Orange, 2013; Tapsell, 2021). These legacies continue to shape the hapū's relationship with their whenua.

Decolonisation

Decolonisation is both a theoretical and practical framework aimed at challenging the colonial structures that sustain inequality (Smeralda & Castro Romero, 2020). It involves dismantling domination and advancing restoration, self-determination, and Māori resurgence (Jackson, 2021).

In Aotearoa, decolonisation centres on reasserting tino rangatiratanga and reinstating Māori authority over land, knowledge, and cultural practice. This requires shifts in law, policy, governance, and societal attitudes (Mercier, as cited in Gildea, 2022). It is a shared responsibility: Māori revitalise their systems of knowledge and governance, while wider society confronts and dismantles colonial privilege (Gildea, 2022). Jackson

(2021) emphasises restoration—repairing Crown–Māori relationships through genuine partnership and structural change. The Waitangi Tribunal contributes to this process by addressing historical breaches of Te Tiriti and supporting restorative justice.

Post-Settlement Landscape

Aotearoa's post-settlement landscape reflects ongoing efforts to redress the impacts of colonisation and restore Māori autonomy. Two key institutions—the Waitangi Tribunal and ahu whenua trusts—shape the context within which Te Rimu Trust operates.

The Waitangi Tribunal

The Waitangi Tribunal plays a central role in decolonisation by recognising historical injustices and providing a mechanism for restorative justice (Gibbs, 2005). Its findings validate Māori experience and guide the Crown in meeting its Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations.

Te Rimu Trust lies within the rohe of Ngāti Porou and is therefore shaped by the iwi's Te Tiriti relationship with the Crown. The 2010 Ngāti Porou settlement acknowledged Crown breaches, including land loss and the erosion of rangatiratanga, and provided cultural, financial, and commercial redress (Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa, 2010). While significant, the settlement also carried notable limitations (see Mackintosh, 2025).

Ahu Whenua Trusts

Ahu whenua trusts have become central mechanisms through which Māori landowners exercise rangatiratanga over their whenua (Tapsell, 2021). As the most common Māori land trust structure (Māori Land Court, 2021), they allow trustees to manage Māori and general land under Te Ture Whenua Māori Act 1993 and the oversight of the Māori Land Court. Trustees hold dual accountability: fulfilling statutory obligations while upholding tikanga and responding to the interests of dispersed kin networks (Tapsell, 2021).

Ahu whenua trusts support collective ownership, enable governance shaped by tikanga, and provide commercial flexibility that advances both economic and cultural development (Chevalier-Watts, 2016). However, they also face structural constraints such as absentee ownership, beneficiary dispersion, and limited access to capital (Dewes et al., 2011). Te Rimu Trust navigates this complex environment, balancing the protection of collective land interests with the demands of sustainable, long-term management.

Establishment of Te Rimu Trust

Te Rimu Trust was formally established on 5 February 1981 as an ahu whenua trust (Mackintosh, 2025). Its creation involved amalgamating seven land blocks—portions of Tokata and Whetumatarau—to reduce fragmentation and enhance commercial viability. In the past, much of the land had remained fallow due to urbanisation and government policies (Mackintosh, 2025). Amalgamation represented a pragmatic assertion of tino

rangatiratanga, enabling owners to restore productive use of their whenua in ways aligned with tikanga and collective aspirations.

The Trust's establishment followed a series of hui in which landowners deliberated on the Trust Deed, selected trustees, and discussed appropriate land management approaches. These discussions informed the application submitted to the Gisborne Māori Land Court, which granted legal recognition (Mackintosh, 2025). Te Rimu Trust thus emerged from both broader post-settlement governance developments and a community-led effort to address local challenges facing Māori landowners.

Research Methodology

Whakapapa Research Methodology

This research is grounded in a whakapapa methodology, which operates as both a theoretical foundation and methodological framework within mātauranga. Whakapapa provides the structural and relational logic through which knowledge is generated, organised, and interpreted (Graham, 2009; Mead, 2022). Its conceptual authority derives from Māori cosmology—from Te Kore to Te Pō and into Te Ao Mārama—which symbolises iterative processes of inquiry, reflection, and illumination (Walker, 2004; Mahuika, 2019).

Within this framework, relationships between people, place, atua, and whenua are central to how knowledge is understood. My whakapapa to Ngāti Porou, Te Whānau a Kahu, and the whenua administered by Te Rimu Trust therefore forms part of the methodological foundation, shaping my responsibilities, ethical obligations, and interpretive positioning.

Positionality and Kin Insider Status

As a descendant of Te Whānau a Kahu and a beneficiary of Te Rimu Trust, I entered the research as a kin insider. These relationships enabled culturally aligned communication, eased access to participants, and supported trust throughout the research process. Whakapapa also provided the interpretive lens through which community roles, relationships, and responsibilities were understood.

Kin Accountability

Kin accountability—a principle grounded in reciprocal obligations within Māori society (Kawharu & Tapsell, 2019)—guided my conduct and decision-making. I upheld these obligations through regular participation in Trust hui, AGM attendance, ongoing engagement with trustees and shareholders, and transparent reporting of research progress. This accountability ensured the research remained aligned with collective rather than individual benefit and upheld participants' mana through aroha ki te tangata and respect for their terms of engagement.

Methods

The research design reflected whakapapa as both philosophical grounding and relational practice. Recruitment was based on whanaungatanga, and data collection centred on kōrero (interviews) complemented by participation in community and Trust hui. These methods emphasised reciprocity, relational ethics, and cultural alignment with Māori research practice.

Kōrero

Kōrero served as the primary data collection method. Five trustees and four kaumātua participated, bringing extensive lived experience and deep ties to the whenua. Semi-structured kōrero balanced guided questions with conversational flexibility, allowing participants to determine the direction and emphasis of discussion. Most kōrero were individual, with small-group sessions used where shared issues—such as river management—required collective input.

All kōrero were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, analysed thematically, and returned to participants for verification. While kanohi ki te kanohi was prioritised, practical constraints—including distance, COVID-19 restrictions, and participant availability—required flexibility. Four kōrero were conducted in person and one via Zoom, in locations selected by participants.

Recruitment beyond the Trust proved challenging due to the absence of pre-existing whakapapa-based relationships in the Te Araroa community, underscoring the centrality of relational networks in Māori research contexts.

Limitations of the Study

Three key limitations shape the interpretation of this study. First, participant recruitment was limited to trustees and kaumātua shareholders. While these individuals hold deep knowledge and authority, this focus may restrict the breadth of perspectives represented. Given the large number of shareholders, it was not feasible to capture views across the wider ownership base or broader Te Araroa community.

Second, COVID-19 disrupted the research process, delaying hui and kōrero, particularly during marae closures. Although alternative venues such as the Te Rimu Trust's workshed were used, coordination within a small rural community remained challenging. Vaccination requirements further limited participation.

Third, wider events—including Cyclone Gabrielle—caused additional logistical disruption. Although managed, these external pressures affected the timing, accessibility, and overall scope of the research.

Findings

This study examined the perspectives of five Te Rimu trustees on the challenges and opportunities posed by climate change for the whenua of Te Rimu. Their kōrero reflects

shared concerns, priorities, and aspirations as they navigate the impacts of a rapidly changing climate. Collectively, these insights highlight Te Rimu's specific vulnerabilities, the trustees' emerging and ongoing responses, and their long-term vision for the whenua. The findings are organised into six themes: (1) climate change impacts, (2) current and potential responses, (3) values and aspirations, (4) leadership, (5) community engagement, and (6) long-term goals for Te Rimu Trust.

1. Concerns and Impacts of Climate Change on Te Rimu Trust

Trustees reported a heightened awareness of climate-related impacts on the whenua, noting that Tairāwhiti has experienced five extreme weather events within the past 18 months. Cyclone Gabrielle was identified as the most devastating of these events, causing extensive erosion and the loss of several hectares of land along the Karakatūwhero River. Across the interviews, river instability, flooding, and erosion were consistently described as the most persistent and immediate threats to the Trust's whenua. One trustee reflected on the scale of recent changes:

> *With more severe rain, and more often up the coast, it's been raining constantly—and heavy rain. So that must definitely have an impact. Over the past five years, I have seen a big difference in the erosion of the river. It has washed away hectares. When I went up there (Te Rimu) to check after Cyclone Gabrielle, I was just dumbfounded. A lot of the land had just washed into the river… but this one was impactful on Te Rimu (Trustee).*

Although flood protection was acknowledged as a potential mitigation strategy, trustees expressed uncertainty regarding who would be responsible for funding such measures. They also situated current erosion within a longer historical trajectory of land degradation, referencing earlier land loss in the Kopuapounamu Valley. Te Rimu's coastal location was identified as an additional point of vulnerability, offering limited options to safeguard the whenua from sea-level rise and storm surges.

At a broader regional scale, trustees raised concerns about declining roading infrastructure, emphasising its implications for emergency response, community connectivity, and long-term resilience. Some suggested exploring alternative infrastructure solutions—such as establishing a barge or wharf facility in Te Araroa—to enhance community adaptability in an increasingly volatile climate.

2. Te Rimu Trust Responding to a Changing Climate

Trustees described a broad suite of initiatives currently underway to enhance climate resilience while maintaining their cultural, ecological, and economic responsibilities as kaitiaki (Mackintosh, 2025). These efforts include transitioning from traditional land uses, such as pastoral farming, toward restoration-oriented practices; undertaking both native and exotic tree planting; restoring and fencing wetlands; carrying out weed and pest control; and extracting metal to manage sediment in the Karakatūwhero River. The

Trust has established a solar farm to reduce emissions and support renewable energy generation.

As one trustee explained,

> I think the Trust is playing a huge role in addressing climate change. I think planting of trees, fencing off the wetlands, and proper management of the wetlands […]. The value is that those things go hand in hand with the whenua, the awa, and the moana. They must have value in that sense. It must be plant life as well. That's the means by which you look after the awa. You know the trees and all that stuff. The means in which you do that.

Restoration work emerged as a consistent priority across trustee perspectives. They highlighted the cultural and ecological importance of species such as harakeke and mānuka, emphasising their contributions to biodiversity, river health, and the revitalisation of cultural practices. Wetland restoration and fencing were identified as critical interventions for controlling erosion, supporting ecosystem recovery, and strengthening the resilience of the wider landscape.

Collaboration is increasingly central to Te Rimu's climate response. Partnerships with Fulton Hogan and local authorities to support river management. Additionally, trustees stressed the need for coordinated action across the catchment. Despite their commitment and suggestions for further sustainability initiatives—such as electrifying machinery, reducing vehicle use, or creating community water storage—trustees identified financial constraints and limited technical capacity as key barriers. Short-term government funding enables some projects, but uncertainty affects the long-term continuity of planting and pest control.

Across their kōrero, trustees underscored the need to balance cultural, ecological, and economic considerations. Native planting offers cultural and environmental benefits but minimal financial return, while ventures such as the lime orchard provide combined social, educational, ecological, and economic value. Maintaining this balance was viewed as central to fulfilling their kaitiaki responsibilities. As stated by one trustee:

Climate change must lead to the values of our organisation. It is the value we have in the whenua, the value in how we use the whenua and our commitment to the taonga. When we make a decision, we need to take that into considerations. We must think about what are the implications of our decision on the whenua.

3. Trustees' Aspirations and Fundamental Values

Trustees articulated aspirations centred on strengthening the relationship between tāngata and whenua through kaitiakitanga, whakapapa, and long-term environmental stewardship. Their overarching goal is to restore and protect Te Rimu so that future generations inherit land in a healthier and more resilient state. Economic development—particularly the establishment of a stable and independent financial base—was viewed as essential for supporting both the whenua and the wellbeing of

Trust members. Trustees also expressed a desire to facilitate stronger connections between shareholders and their ancestral land by developing community facilities and shared activities that foster whanaungatanga.

These aspirations are grounded in core values: respect (manaakitanga/whanaungatanga), trust, belonging, and connection through whakapapa. Such values shape decision-making processes and underpin the Trust's approach to climate change adaptation. Respect was described as encompassing both environmental care and social cohesion, emphasising the need to uphold kaitiakitanga while balancing ecological wellbeing with economic imperatives. As one trustee explained:

> I think respect is paramount. Respect for the whenua. Respect for the awa and the waterways. Respect for whatever else is living on the whenua or waters—respect for the whole ecology. The other respect is respect for each other, for the people connected to the land, for the memories of those who went before us and those who will follow. So, respect is the key.

Trust, transparency, and open communication were identified as essential for maintaining unity, particularly in light of historical tensions within the Trust. Belonging and whakapapa were seen as vital for deepening connections to the whenua, especially for descendants who reside elsewhere. Trustees emphasised that hui, wānanga, communication platforms, and land-based projects offer important pathways for reconnecting members to their papakāinga and sustaining intergenerational relationships with Te Rimu.

4. Te Rimu Trust's Leadership

Strong leadership emerged as crucial for navigating climate change and advancing the Trust's strategic goals. Trustees highlighted the need for governance expertise, including business management, finance, engagement with government, and the ability to secure funding. Leaders' personal qualities—such as determination, humility, and constructive engagement—were also seen as vital. This is reflected in one the trustee's statement:

> Te Rimu has very good leadership because of the people and skills. People who know how to create a business, how to operate a business and how to manage it. People who know how to interrelate with authority to those who regulate the laws. So, that is something we have - forget what whakapapa or what family you belong to and I think that is the biggest challenge for a lot of the shareholders is to block this out. I think we need to block it out and think about the skills that are there… This is the key. It's having the right skills and the right leadership to do it.

Trustees acknowledged the importance of prioritising capability over whakapapa in trustee selection to ensure effective governance. While leadership challenges have occurred in the past, current trustees emphasised collective strengths that support

sound decision-making and project delivery. Succession planning was identified as essential for maintaining long-term progress.

Leadership specifically related to climate change was seen as increasingly important. Trustees recognised the need for leaders who can assess risks, coordinate responses, seek expert advice, and secure adaptation funding. The emergence of younger trustees and volunteers, particularly through land-based projects, demonstrates growing leadership capacity grounded in inherited values such as kaitiakitanga.

5. Community Engagement

Te Rimu Trust places strong emphasis on contributing to the Te Araroa community, guided by values of kaitiakitanga, whakapapa, whanaungatanga, and manaakitanga. Trustees identified education grants, scholarships, employment opportunities, and partnerships with local schools as key mechanisms for strengthening community relationships. The nursery work and environmental projects reflects the Trust's commitment to reciprocal engagement.

While the Trust Deed permits discretionary support for Māori community purposes, trustees view community engagement as a cultural and moral obligation rather than a legal one. They stressed the importance of reciprocity, noting that trust support (e.g., grants, employment, training) should be matched by active community participation. Expanding collaboration was seen as a way to build collective capacity for climate adaptation, aligned with the Trust's whakataukī, "Whakapūpūtia ō mānuka kia kore ai whatu", translating "cluster the branches of the mānuka, so they will not break". This means strength can be found in unity and together we will thrive.

Trustees also suggested exploring future structural arrangements that enable broader benefit-sharing with hapū and iwi while maintaining effective governance. Strong relationships require attention to power dynamics, transparency, trust, and open communication.

6. Trustees' Long-Term Aspirations

Looking ahead, trustees envisage Te Rimu as a central anchor for shareholders, descendants, and the wider Te Araroa community—delivering social, cultural, economic, educational, spiritual, and environmental benefits. The whenua is understood as a unifying foundation that reconnects people to their ancestral landscape, strengthens identity and heritage, and sustains intergenerational relationships. As one trustee reflected:

> I would like to see Te Rimu still there, still carrying on. The hapū and whānau base still going strong and still connecting people—whether in London, Australia, or Tikitiki. They are all part of it and remain a touchstone for people. It's all about identity, about heritage. It's about belonging somewhere.

Trustees also aspire for Te Rimu to serve as a model of sustainable land use, inspiring other Māori landowners in Te Araroa to actively develop and care for their whenua. Their vision includes strengthening unity among shareholders, fostering community-centred leadership, and supporting social and economic wellbeing across the region. Upholding inherited Māori values—such as mana, manaakitanga, rangatiratanga, kaitiakitanga, whanaungatanga, whakapapa, and tikanga—was emphasised as fundamental for guiding Te Rimu Trust into the future and ensuring that its development remains anchored in cultural integrity and collective responsibility.

Discussion

This study examines the people, lands, and narratives of Te Rimu Trust through a climate justice lens (Mackintosh, 2025). Climate justice builds on environmental justice by highlighting the disproportionate burdens borne by marginalised communities—especially Indigenous peoples—arising from historical and ongoing inequities such as colonialism (Jones et al., 2024). Both frameworks emphasise equitable environmental protection, fair access to resources, and meaningful participation in decision-making. Viewed in this way, Te Rimu Trust's history, cultural responsibilities, and climate-related vulnerabilities demonstrate how structural conditions shape differential exposure to risk and inform more just, culturally grounded adaptation pathways.

Environmental justice emerged from the civil rights and anti-toxic movements of the 1960s, with events such as the 1982 Warren County PCB protests illuminating the racialised siting of environmental hazards (McGurty, 2007). Climate justice extends these concerns to the global scale, foregrounding the ethical and human-rights implications of climate change (Lefstad & Paavola, 2024). As warming approaches 1.5°C, the burdens on vulnerable groups—including Indigenous communities—are intensifying, often without commensurate increases in adaptive capacity (Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2019). For Te Rimu, this disparity is evident in trustees' repeated accounts of escalating climate hazards alongside limited technical and financial support.

Colonialism remains a key driver of these uneven impacts. The legacy of land alienation, suppression of mātauranga, and political marginalisation underpins the present-day vulnerabilities identified in this study: erosion linked to historical land-use change, infrastructure decline driven by regional underinvestment, and governance challenges associated with fragmented land tenure. Recognising these interrelated pressures is crucial for interpreting trustees' concerns, priorities, and aspirations, and underscores climate justice as a critical framework for analysing Te Rimu's adaptation context.

Climate Justice and Te Rimu Trust

The findings demonstrate that Te Rimu Trust's climate challenges are not simply environmental but deeply political. Trustees' uncertainty over who is responsible for flood protection, their reliance on short-term project funding, and their need to balance kaitiakitanga with economic pressures all reflect the structural legacies of colonisation and contemporary governance arrangements. A climate justice lens helps to make these

dynamics visible by linking everyday adaptation challenges to broader histories of land loss, limited resource access, and constrained decision-making power.

Historical land loss, political marginalisation, and breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi have weakened Māori environmental authority and contributed to contemporary inequalities (Joseph et al., 2018). Achieving climate justice for Te Rimu requires restoring Māori leadership, honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations, and dismantling structural barriers to tino rangatiratanga. The Crown's obligations under Te Tiriti and UNDRIP include protecting Māori rights, supporting cultural connection to land, and enabling self-determined climate solutions; persistent failures in these areas continue to exacerbate Te Rimu's exposure to climate impacts.

Despite these structural inequities, the findings also show that Te Rimu's cultural values—kaitiakitanga, whakapapa, manaakitanga, and whanaungatanga—provide a coherent foundation for adaptation, guiding trustees toward strategies that integrate ecological restoration, cultural rejuvenation, and economic sustainability. When adequately resourced, these values enable transformative pathways that align climate adaptation with intergenerational responsibility and Māori self-determination (Mackintosh, 2025a). The climate justice framework clarifies why such support is urgently needed and underscores the importance of recognising Indigenous authority, honouring Te Tiriti, and enabling mana motuhake as essential components of a just climate future for Te Rimu.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that climate adaptation for Te Rimu Ahu Whenua Trust is inseparable from its whakapapa relationships, its history of colonisation, and the cultural values that underpin its governance. The central argument advanced is that Māori climate resilience is fundamentally relational—emerging from connections between people and whenua, shaped by historical and structural conditions, and enacted through values-based governance. As a descendant researcher, this study shows how trustees understand and respond to accelerating climate impacts while upholding their responsibilities as kaitiaki.

Trustees identified erosion, river instability, and the severe effects of Cyclone Gabrielle as key threats that compound long-standing vulnerabilities created by land fragmentation, isolation, and underinvestment. Their responses—ecological restoration, wetland protection, river management, pest control, and renewable energy development—reflect a deliberate balancing of cultural, ecological, and economic priorities. Māori values such as kaitiakitanga, whakapapa, whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, and tikanga remain central to decision-making and long-term aspirations for the whenua.

This study contributes to Māori climate adaptation scholarship by offering an in-depth account of an ahu whenua trust navigating climate change within a colonised landscape. It illustrates how Māori governance draws on cultural values, local knowledge, and community leadership to enact resilience while confronting structural inequities. These findings reaffirm that Māori climate adaptation must be understood as both environmental practice and relational, decolonial governance.

The research has practical implications for Māori land trusts and policymakers. Te Rimu demonstrates the importance of culturally grounded, intergenerational strategies that integrate restoration, economic development, and community reconnection. The findings also highlight the need for targeted adaptation funding, improved infrastructure, and collaborative planning that aligns with Māori values and land tenure structures. Strengthened partnerships between Māori landowners and government agencies are essential for building resilience in highly exposed regions.

Future research could examine climate adaptation across multiple Māori land trusts, explore intergenerational leadership pathways, and assess the long-term cultural, social, and economic impacts of adaptation initiatives. Overall, Te Rimu Trust's approach offers a meaningful model of Māori climate resilience—one that strengthens both the whenua and the relationships that sustain it, now and for generations to come.

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Glossary

aroha ki te tangata – good will and respect for the people

atua – ancestor with continuing influence, god, deity, supernatural being

awa – ancestral river, stream, creek

hapū – subtribe, clan, kin group

harakeke - New Zealand flax, *Phormium tenax* -

hui – gathering, meeting

iwi – tribe, nation, extended kin group

kaitiaki - trustee, minder, guard, custodian, guardian

kaitiakitanga- guardianship, stewardship, trusteeship, trustee

kanohi ki te kanohi - face to face, in person

kaumātua - adult, elder, elderly man, elderly woman

kōrero – talk, discussion, conversation

mana - prestige, authority, control, power

manaakitanga - hospitality, kindness, generosity, support

mana whenua - territorial rights, power from the land, authority over land or territory

marae - courtyard - the open area in front of the *wharenui*, where formal greetings and discussions take place

mānuka - tea-tree, *Leptospermum scoparium*

Māori - Māori, indigenous New Zealander, indigenous person of Aotearoa/New Zealand

maunga – ancestral mountain, peak, mountain

Ngāti Porou - tribal group of East Coast area north of Gisborne to Tihirau

pepeha - tribal saying, tribal motto, proverb (especially about a tribe)

rangatira - chief (male or female), chieftain, chieftainess, master, mistress, boss

taonga - treasure, anything prized

tāngata - people, men, persons, human beings

tangata whenua - local people, hosts, indigenous people

Te Ao Māori - the Māori worldview, encompassing a holistic perspective that emphasizes the interconnectedness of people, nature, and the spiritual world

Te Ao Marama – the world of light, physical world of existence, enlightenment and life.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi - Te Tiriti o Waitangi (known in English as the Treaty of Waitangi), is an agreement made in 1840 between representatives of the British Crown and (ultimately) rangatira Māori.

tikanga - correct procedure, custom, habit, lore, method, manner

tino rangatiratanga - self-determination, sovereignty, autonomy, self-government

tūrangawaewae - standing, place where one has the right to stand

wānanga - seminar, conference, forum, discussion

whānau - extended family, family group

whakapapa - genealogy, genealogical table, lineage, descent, layering

whakataukī - proverb, significant saying, formulaic saying

whakawhanaungatanga - process of establishing relationships, relating well to others

whenua - land, nation, country, territory

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