

New Zealand Waitangi Day

New Zealand celebrates statehood with Waitangi Day

On Feb. 6, 1840, the British government signed the Treaty of Waitangi with a number of Maori chiefs at a Bay of Islands settlement called Waitangi.

The treaty was written in both Maori and English and handed over governorship of New Zealand to the British. It enabled the peaceful purchase of land for settlement and gave the British authority to establish rule in the country. In return, the British were to guarantee and actively protect Maori tribal authority over their possessions.

The ultimate intention of the Treaty of Waitangi, from the British perspective, was to protect Maori interests from the encroaching British settlement, to provide for British settlement and to establish a government to maintain peace and order.

Relevance of the Treaty

The treaty has proved to be an enduring document. In 1988 when the Labor government tried to sell off state-owned assets, the New Zealand Maori Council contested its right to do so in the courts.



Maori culture guides based in Whakatane explain their history to visitors. NATIV CONNECTIONZ/NEW ZEALAND TOURISM

The Maori Council's actions slowed down the government's sale program and forced it to enter into negotiations with Maori. Its argument was based on the principle that Maori ceded governorship to the crown or British in 1840 when they signed the Treaty of Waitangi, but not ownership of assets such as

forestry. Forestry was part of the package of assets the government wanted to include in the sale program.

Over the years there have been many settlements with Maori tribal groups based on the Treaty that have forced governments to adopt a more consultative approach when developing new policy and regulations. Treaty considerations are now embedded in many official policies.

The signing of the Treaty of Waitangi is commemorated each year with a national holiday on Feb. 6, known as Waitangi Day.

In the past, this day has been tarnished by angry protests as Maori fought to have rights that had been promised to them under the Treaty, honoured by the government. However, in recent years, many "iwi" (tribes) have had their grievances settled by the government and Waitangi Day has become a peaceful celebration of nationhood.

Waitangi Treaty Grounds
In 1932, the grounds where the Treaty was first signed

were gifted to the nation in trust by Lord and Lady Bledisloe. Lord Bledisloe was a former governor general of New Zealand.

Today the Waitangi Treaty Grounds, part of the 1,000 acre gifted site, are referred to as the birthplace of New Zealand.

The grounds include one of New Zealand's oldest and most visited historic homes. Treaty House, originally named "The Residency" was built for the first British resident, James Busby, and his family. The name was changed to Treaty House at the request of Lord Bledisloe after the house was restored in 1933.

NZ cultural icons

The Waitangi Treaty Grounds are also home to two of the nation's cultural icons: "Te Whare Runanga" and a ceremonial "waka taua" (war canoe).

'Te Whare Runanga' is a carved Maori meeting house erected to commemorate the centenary of the first signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. Carvings in the house were produced by the local Ngapuhi tribe, though the building is representative of all Maori tribes.

Ngatokimatawhaorua, one of the largest Maori waka, sits on the grounds. The 70-year-old waka has been refurbished ahead of relaunching as part of the 2010 Waitangi Day celebrations. At 35.7 meters long, up to 2 meters wide and weighing 12 tons, the vessel is an impressive sight on the water with a crew of up to 80 paddlers and 55 passengers.

The Waitangi Treaty Grounds are a popular destination for tourists, both domestic and international. The Waitangi Visitor Centre has an impressive audio-visual show that tells the story of Waitangi and surrounding areas. There are also live cultural perfor-

mances, a gift shop and an artefacts gallery.

Impact to visitors

Most laws and policies have been developed, arguably, within the framework of the Treaty.

Maori have long respected and welcomed overseas visitors to New Zealand. As "tangata whenua" or the people of the land, Maori command certain rights that are a consequence of the Treaty and recognize their status as the indigenous people of "Aotearoa" (the Maori word for New Zealand).

This unique relationship has birthed a nation slowly maturing to a point where a number of races and cultures exist freely, but where Maori retain a strong identity as the indigenous people.

The article is excerpted from



A girl examines a traditional Maori carving at the Te Hana Te Ao Marama Maori Cultural Centre, near Auckland. TE HANA TE AO MARAMA/NEW ZEALAND TOURISM

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"Waka" war canoe at Waitangi NEW ZEALAND TOURISM