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Beyond Market Metrics:
Rethinking Nature's Value through Kaitiakitanga

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Abstract

This thesis examines and contrasts two ways of valuing nature: the Māori worldview, which focuses on interconnection and guardianship through the concept of kaitiakitanga, and the prevalent Western economic paradigm, which places an emphasis on commodification. A comparative analysis is conducted using the "intrinsic, instrumental, and relational value" framework, following the definitions developed by Himes et al. (2024). This framework helps identify key tensions as well as possibilities for integration and reconciliation between the two different perspectives.

With the growing legal and political acknowledgment of Māori rights in relation to the Crown, the Whanganui River (Te Awa Tupua) case serves as an example of how Indigenous worldviews can be incorporated into legal and environmental frameworks. As it will be shown, recognizing the river as a legal person is a significant milestone in reconciling fundamentally different perspectives on human-nature relationships. Finally, the thesis argues that while significant differences remain between these paradigms, pluralistic approaches that respect Indigenous knowledge systems can offer more holistic, just, and ecologically grounded alternatives.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Topic, Objectives, and Research Question

This study undertakes a critical examination of two different epistemological frameworks through which the value of "nature" is construed. Particular focus is assigned to the tensions between Western economic paradigms and Māori worldviews. Dominant Western economic systems—meaning those rooted in classical and neoclassical economic thought (Zaman and Karacuka 2012, 366)—instrumentalize "nature," reducing it largely to a resource or commodity. In contrast, Māori philosophy, in particular the concept of kaitiakitanga, articulates a radically different valuation paradigm: it foregrounds the relational and spiritual dimensions of the non-human world (Marsden, 1992), as will be shown throughout the thesis.

This thesis seeks to shed light on how these two ways of valuing "nature" differ and whether there exists a space in which they might be reconciled. A central objective is to examine and compare these two ways of understanding through the lens of "intrinsic, instrumental and relational value framework" by using the value definitions developed by Himes et al (2024). Drawing upon the legal personhood of the Whanganui River the possibility of reconciliation is also assessed. Finally, the work draws attention to the growing discourse about the role of Indigenous epistemologies in challenging and potentially transforming dominant models of valuation. The central research question guiding this thesis is: How do Western economic paradigms differ from the Māori worldview in how they value "nature"?

1.2 Situating the Research

As a Hungarian researcher shaped by Western traditions, my early understanding of "nature" was grounded in an anthropocentric view, in which "nature" (non-human) is often externalized, commodified, and subordinated. This contrasts with Māori worldviews, emphasizing interdependence and reciprocity between human and non-human. Recognizing this, I approach this research with openness and curiosity.

In this thesis, the term "nature" will be used in quotation marks. This is done so in order to recognize that it carries different connotations and meanings across the two worldviews. While the Western view often centers on human domination and a division between human and non-human, the Māori perspective—as will be shown throughout the thesis—emphasizes relationality and interconnectedness. Furthermore, the Māori perspective emphasizes that humans are not separate from but fundamentally part of the natural world (Marsden, 1992, p. 15). The use of quotation marks signals the existing complexities surrounding the interpretation of the word.

1.3 Methodological Approach and Theoretical Framework

The thesis adopts a qualitative methodology. It combines theoretical analysis with case study research to examine how different value systems—particularly Western economic valuation and Māori knowledge—conceptualize and understand the value of "nature." The research relies on a literature

review, comparative analysis, and legal analysis. The focus lies on the case of the Whanganui River in order to explore whether and how the mentioned frameworks can coexist within environmental governance. The thesis does this by drawing on a variety of multidisciplinary sources, such as legal theory, Indigenous studies, and environmental ethics, to offer a comprehensive perspective. This cross-disciplinary approach provides a holistic lens for evaluating each framework's foundations as well as its implications.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis unfolds over seven chapters. The introductory Chapter 1 outlines the research aims, methodology, and key terminological considerations. Chapter 2 presents the intrinsic, instrumental, and relational value frameworks, defining and justifying their use. Chapter 3 explores the historical development of Western economic valuation, tracing the shift from body-mind dualism to the commodification of "nature." Following this, Chapter 4 introduces Māori philosophical foundations and the concept of kaitiakitanga. Chapter 5 offers a comparative analysis between Western and Māori value systems, highlighting tensions and possible integrations. Chapter 6 presents the Whanganui River case study as an example of legal recognition of Indigenous worldviews. Lastly, Chapter 7 concludes with reflections and key takeaways.

2. Value Framework: Intrinsic, Instrumental, and Relational

2.1 Justification for Using this Framework

One of the most thorough attempts to bring together many perspectives on the value of "nature" is the review of this model by Himes et al. (2024). The authors of the paper "Why nature matters: A systematic review of intrinsic, instrumental, and relational values" (Himes et al., 2024) conducted a search across four major academic databases using 239 peer-reviewed publications to determine how various research defined and used the categories of "intrinsic, instrumental, and relational value" (ibid.). The authors developed a core meaning for each of the three value categories by aggregating several articulations. These fundamental definitions were carefully crafted, allowing for meaningful comparisons across worldviews. Given the comprehensiveness of their review, this thesis adopts the definitions of intrinsic, instrumental, and relational value framework as outlined by Himes et al. (2024).

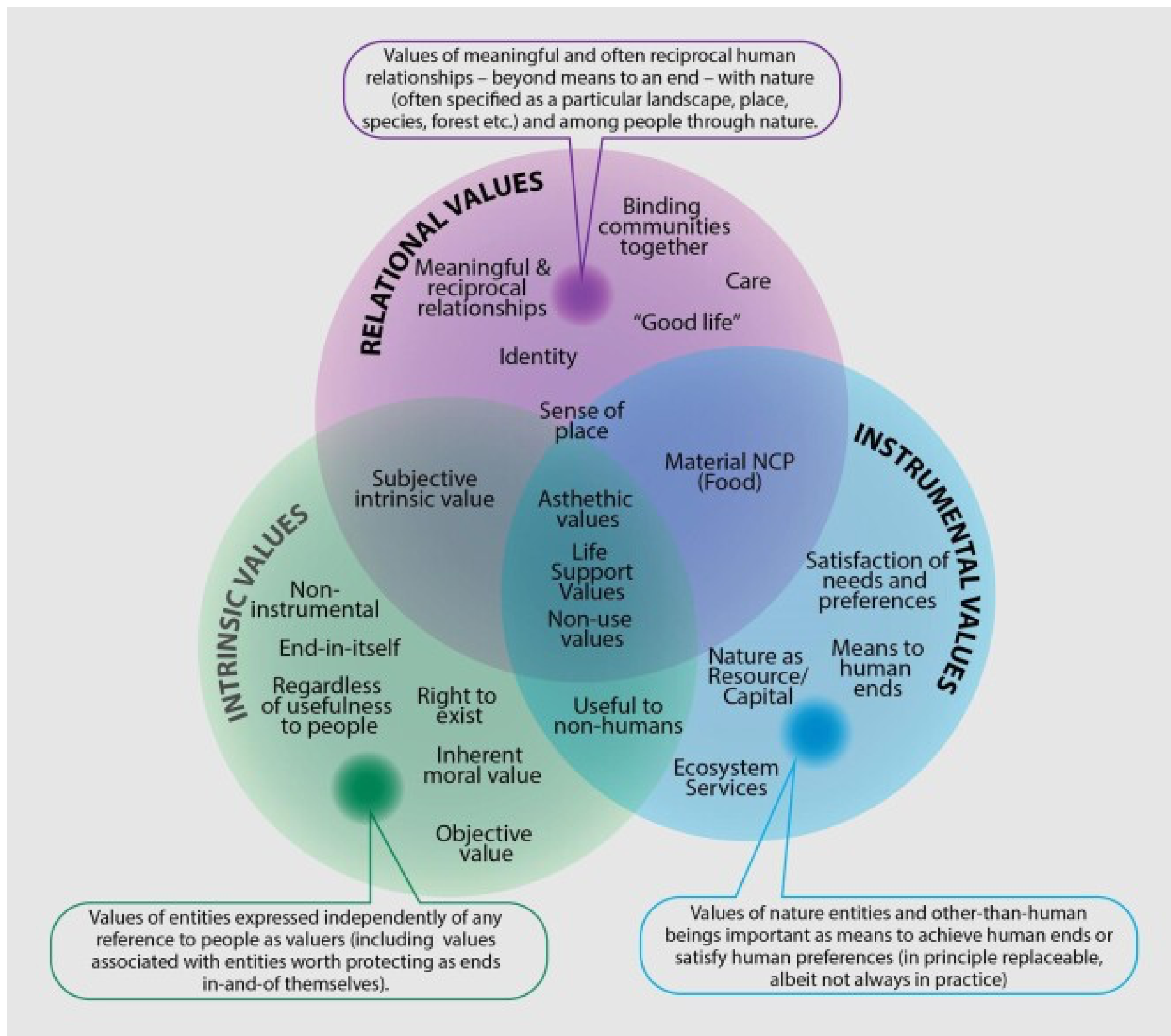

Figure 1. Overview of the intrinsic, instrumental, and relational value framework as outlined by Himes et al. (2024)
Source: BioScience, Volume 74, Issue 1, January 2024, Pages 25–43, https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biad109

2.2 Definitions of the Three Value Types

As mentioned above, the following definitions (ibid.), will be applied in this chapter as well as in chapter 5's comparative analysis. These definitions summarize the articulations, even if the literature offers a variety of interpretations for every value category. For this reason, this thesis uses the following three unified concepts for the sake of consistency and clarity.

Intrinsic value: "Values of other-than-human beings expressed independently of any reference to humans as valuers, including values associated with entities worth protecting as ends in and of themselves." (Himes et al., 2024, 29)

Instrumental value: "Values of nature entities and other-than-human beings important as means to achieve human ends or satisfy human preferences." (Ibid, 30)

Relational value: “Values of meaningful and often reciprocal human relationships—beyond means to an end—with nature (often specified as a particular landscape, place, species, forest, etc.) and among people through nature.” (Ibid, 31)

2.3 Intersections between the Value Types and Their Limitations

Recognizing the range and complexity of value expressions across cultural contexts is important to understanding how people value “nature.” Value categories like “intrinsic, instrumental, and relational” (ibid.) are not necessarily distinct or universally defined, as the thorough examination of Himes et al. (2024) emphasizes.

As environmental scholar Kai M. A. Chan explains, the term “relational values” emerged in response to a growing recognition that many people do not relate to “nature” purely in terms of use or inherent worth, but through morally grounded and meaningful relationships (Chan et al., 2018). The conceptual roots of relational values can be traced to early work by Brown, who emphasized the relational origins of all values, and by Muraca, who developed the notion from a philosophical standpoint. While Brown did not explicitly use the term “relational values,” his framing of “values in the relational realm” helped lay the foundation for the concept as it is understood today (ibid. 2–3).

Only lately did relational values enter the larger environmental discourse, and how they are interpreted often varies depending on regional customs and worldviews. In reality, boundaries between the three categories can become cloudy (Pascual et al., 2017), even though intrinsic values are usually defined as the antithesis of instrumental ones (Himes et al., 2024).

For instance, a forest may be valued both for its instrumental resources and for the related cultural or emotional bonds it creates. These overlapping meanings imply that no single value category can adequately convey the importance of “nature” in people’s lives and represent the complexity of human–nature connections. Yet, this value typology takes into account anthropocentric, biocentric, eco-centric, and pluralistic viewpoints, which in contrast to other frameworks—such as the social, economic, and environmental categories—is more inclusive. Since it enables a more nuanced understanding of how communities relate to their environments (Himes et al., 2024), this paradigm is a useful tool for comprehending the various ways that “nature” is valued across worldviews.

3. Understanding the Western Economic Paradigm of “Nature”

3.1 The Historical Separation of “Nature” and Society

The economic valuation of “nature” has its roots in Western tradition, more specifically in religious, philosophical, ideological, and historical developments that framed “nature” as distinct, knowable, and ultimately subject to human economic governance (Tulloch, 2015, 20–23). An understanding of these foundations is necessary before moving on to analyzing and comparing it to the Māori worldview.

Let me begin with one of the earliest and most influential foundations, namely the role of Christian theology in shaping Western anthropocentrism. Christianity is said to be the most anthropocentric religion in history, positioning humanity as made in God's image and separate from "nature" (White 1967). Two fundamental anthropocentric Christian doctrines—the idea of "imago dei" (Grasse 2016*)* (Image of God) and the doctrine of dominion over creation (Genesis 1:28 ASV)—are based on Genesis 1:27 and 1:28:

> And God blessed them: and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (Genesis 1:28 ASV)

This passage shows clearly how Christian narratives encouraged a hierarchical view of life, granting humans authority over the rest of the natural world. Thus, it should come as no surprise that anthropocentrism in Western thinking was largely established by the Christian worldview, placing a strong emphasis on human superiority. While Christianity laid the groundwork, the Enlightenment era brought another, more methodological transformation, stressing reason, empirical science, and individual property rights.

An influential shift in how humans conceptualized "nature" was brought by the philosophy of René Descartes. As Sakar et al. explain (2024), Descartes' "neti-neti" path of systematic doubt led him to a nihilistic position in his third Meditation, where he denies the reality of everything, including himself—yet he soon dismisses this position, arguing with the famous "Cogito ergo sum." This turn toward rationalism and human consciousness, placed above embodied experience, helped cement the idea of an observing subject standing apart from the natural world. The "mind-body dualism" of Descartes and the 'cogito' hypothesis was later criticized for denying human experience by allowing the mind to have control over the body (ibid., 4).

As Plumwood, an influential critic of Western anthropocentrism, also identified, similar to the "mind-body dualism," there is a recurring structure of dualisms in Western thought: culture/nature, mind/body, reason/emotion, human/non-human, subject/object, self/other, etc. (Plumwood, 1993, 45). Descartes' mind/body divide reinforced a hierarchical split between the rational human and a mechanistic "nature", which has laid the building-blocks for the domination and human management of "nature" or the non-human world (ibid., 40–50).

This divide contributed to paving the way for political and economic doctrines seeing land as property to be owned and managed. Modern understanding of property rights was influenced by Locke's (Waldron, 2023) views on "nature" and property, arguing that people naturally had the right to "mix" their hands with the land, and that by doing so, they gained ownership rights over it. Locke believed that when individuals utilize "nature" productively, its value is unlocked and that it can be bought or sold (Tuckness, 2024; Waldron, 2023). As Western thought converged into a worldview that saw "nature" as a resource for human use (Waldron, 2023), a logic that eventually informed economic valuation was born. These developments—Christian dominion theology, Cartesian dualism, and property theory—collectively laid the groundwork for viewing "nature" as a commodity or resource. In the next chapter,

I will look at how “nature” is constantly being framed as capital and consider the implications of this ongoing commodification.

3.2 Economic Valuation and the Commodification of “Nature”

This section expands on the historical division between “nature” and humanity by examining how “nature” has been incorporated into Western economic systems as capital rather than as a living thing. Modern economic systems increasingly view “nature” as a source of measurable value - as capital (Gómez et al., 2011) - instead of as something that is intrinsically valuable or alive.

Throughout this thesis, the phrase “dominant Western economic paradigm” refers to a worldview that predominantly conceptualizes “nature” in terms of its usefulness to humans (Zaman and Karacuka, 2012, 366). This paradigm, which has its roots in classical and particularly neoclassical economic theory, serves as the foundation for many popular economic and environmental frameworks. Ecological complexity is reduced to measurable and marketable units through the use of methods such as cost-benefit analysis, ecosystem service models, and natural capital accounting (Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2011).

Concepts like ecosystem services and natural capital push profit-driven economic thought onto the natural world by describing human-nature relationships in terms of utility (Gómez-Baggethun and Ruiz-Pérez, 2011, 623–624). Similarly, valuation techniques frame choices as matters of profit, efficiency, and scarcity (Vatn, 2005, cited after Gómez-Baggethun and Ruiz-Pérez, 2011, 623–624). As a consequence, “nature” gets valued economically, not for an inherent worth, which can reinforce the very system that causes harm to the environment (Gómez-Baggethun and Ruiz-Pérez, 2011, 624).

Understanding the effects of this change requires taking into account the structure of previous human-environment interactions. Polanyi (1944/1957, 383–385), a key critic of market liberalism, explains how land was linked with customs, beliefs, connections, and everyday life rather than being viewed as a separate commodity. Labor was not a separate economic input but rather a component of a larger social system. Land was viewed as a part of a larger order rather than just as a factor of production, and “nature” and civilization were seen as an integrated whole:

> Traditionally, land and labor are not separated; labor forms part of life, land remains part of nature, life and nature form an articulate whole. Land is thus tied up with the organizations of kinship, neighborhood, craft, and creed—with tribe and temple, village, guild, and church. (Polányi, 1944/1957, 187)

In contrast, contemporary environmental policy tends to treat ecosystems as something quantifiable and separate from humans. Robertson (2006) also highlights how mainstream policy now embraces the commodification of ecosystem services, framing them as a new domain for economic value. There is a well spread optimism believing that the challenges of valuation and measurement can be resolved, despite the fundamental complexities of ecological systems (ibid., 382–385). As will be further discussed in Chapter 5, international organizations too have embraced this commodified view of “nature.” This again reflects a growing trend to embed “nature” into economic systems by valuing its services in monetary terms (Kopnina, 2016, 1–2). Although these projects aim to better reflect the value

of "nature," they risk further commodifying ecosystems by reducing their worth to commercially quantifiable terms and reinforcing a purely anthropocentric perspective. This risk becomes clearer when viewed alongside Indigenous perspectives such as the Māori worldview, which offers a fundamentally different understanding of the human–nature relationship—an approach the next chapter will explore.

4. Māori Philosophical Foundations and the Concept of Kaitiakitanga

4.1 Māori Worldview and the Interconnectedness of All Life

To understand the Māori worldview and its approach to environmental ethics, let me begin with the concept of "whakapapa." The concept is widely acknowledged as the cornerstone of comprehending "kaitiakitanga." It underscores the idea that humans are just one element within a broader network, and that kaitiakitanga requires maintaining and honoring these "whakapapa" connections. (Beverland, 2022, 49)

Commonly translated as "genealogy" (Mika et al. 2021, 455), whakapapa in Māori worldview encompasses all aspects of the natural and spiritual world (Durie, 1998; Pere, 1994; Forster, 2003, 2019, as referenced in Beverland, 2022, 43). Whakapapa represents a profoundly relational worldview that holds that all things are interrelated. As Beverland puts it:

> "[F]or Māori, everything in the world has whakapapa, which is to say everything is related and relational. From the mountains to the sea, the land, sky, and everything in between, Māori have relationship with each other as well as to all that is spiritual and physical in nature." (Beverland, 2022, 43)

Above all, whakapapa binds people to the universe and to nonhuman beings (Amoamo et al., 2018a, 2018b; Black et al., 2012, as cited in Mika et al., 2021, 450). Furthermore, whakapapa frames humans as integral to the ecological and spiritual realm, grounding the Māori knowledge and experience in relationships with "nature" rather than notions of ownership or control (Beverland, 2022, 47–48).

Because all living things are considered "kin" in Māori worldview, humans have an obligation to protect and care for the environment (Watene, 2016, 6). Given that "nature" is said to possess both metaphysical and physical realms, any abuse of it is viewed as detrimental, highlighting the interconnectedness of humans and the non-human world (ibid., 6–7).

Unfortunately, however, as respected Māori scholar and theologian Marsden (1992, 17) argues, the commodification of "nature" turns people from its stewards/guardians into its exploiters, resulting in desecrated fields, poisoned rivers and so on. Still, by advocating a relational relationship with the Earth, Māori environmental ethics challenge prevailing paradigms of exploitation of resources. The following section turns to kaitiakitanga, a term that demonstrates how care and guardianship are implemented within Maōri worldview.

4.2 Kaitiakitanga as Guardianship

Kaitiakitanga is a philosophy associated with human, physical, and metaphysical domains. Concerning Māori duties and obligations, kaitiakitanga is regarded as an environmental ethic. Kaitiakitanga is frequently used to support the Māori perspective on "sustainability, resource management, and the environment." (Beverland, 2022, 4–5)

In traditional Māori cosmology, the original kaitiaki were the "tawhito"—the spiritual descendants of Ranginui and Papatūānuku. Tāne, for example, was the protector of woods (Marsden, 1992). The natural world was governed by these spiritual "kaitiaki," and although people were allowed to utilize its resources, they had an obligation to respect and pay appreciation to these stewards. An example for giving back is rituals like releasing the first fish back to Tangaroa. Although traditionally reserved for spiritual guardians, the role of kaitiaki has expanded to include humans. The practice of kaitiakitanga is also inextricably linked to both the metaphysical and physical realms. (Beverland, 2022)

In essence, kaitiakitanga refers to "guardianship, stewardship, trusteeship, [or] trustee" (Moorfield, 2025), a concept that continues to inform Māori approaches to environmental care and ethical responsibility. Kaitiakitanga is not solely about resource use or protection, but is a manifestation of deep spiritual, ancestral, and relational connections. This marks a profound departure from anthropocentric models of environmental governance, and sets the stage for the following chapter, the comparative analysis of how Māori and dominant Western worldviews diverge in assigning value to "nature."

5. Comparative Analysis: Western Economic Valuation vs. Māori Value Systems

5.1 Introduction, Aims, and Analytical Lens

This chapter applies the "intrinsic, instrumental, and relational" (Himes et al., 2024) value framework to analyze how, on the one hand, dominant Western economic value systems, and Māori paradigms on the other hand, conceptualize value around "nature." This analysis uses the definitions constructed in a review conducted for the "Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services" (Himes et al., 2024), as detailed in Chapter 2.

5.2 The Western Economic Paradigm and the Value of "Nature"

As defined in the systematic review by Himes et al. (2024, 31), instrumental values refer to "values of "nature" entities and other-than-human beings important as means to achieve human ends or satisfy human preferences."

Instrumental value is "strongly and explicitly associated with ecosystem services and anthropocentric worldviews," as Himes et al. stress (ibid.). This relationship is demonstrated by the widespread use of

"ecosystem services" models and natural capital accounting, where the value of "nature" is measured and evaluated according to its capacity to offer humans measurable advantages. (Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2011) The above approach is in line with valuation models in the West, which place more emphasis on human-centered advantages and frequently measure resources depending on how useful they are to humans (see chapter 3).

As Kopnina (2016, 1) notes, framing the environment as a "natural resource" or "ecosystem service" has become increasingly common. The rising emphasis on economic valuation is also reflected by Brockington and Duffy (2010), suggesting that forms of capitalist conservation are getting increasingly intensive. They argue that this trend reflects a larger ideological shift within the conservation movement, where there is a growing consensus that capitalism can and ought to be a major factor in solving environmental issues (ibid.). International organizations like the UN promote a similar valuation system and use of language through a number of initiatives: TEEB ("The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity"), REDD ("Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation"), and PES ("Payments for Ecosystem Services") (Kopina, 2016, 1–2). In addition, national governments are incorporating natural capital accounting into their strategies—an approach that not only values environmental assets as capital (TEEB 2010) but also extends the commodification of "nature."

This commodification underscores the core link between the dominant Western economic paradigm and instrumental value. As Castree observes: "Along with the inelegant word 'commodization', it highlights the fact that the commodity status of a thing, object, idea, creature, person or what-have-you is not intrinsic to it but, rather, assigned." (Castree, 2010, 277) This illustrates how, within most Western societies, "nature's" value is not inherent but imposed through economic systems that reduce diverse values to monetary terms—precisely the essence of instrumental valuation.

Furthermore, instrumental values are strongly associated with "utilitarianism and paradigms of managing nature" (Himes et al., 2024, 31). As defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (2025), utilitarianism is "the system of thought that states that the best action or decision in a particular situation is the one that brings most advantages to the most people." This clearly aligns with instrumental value, which also centers on utility and human benefit. In the West, this principle is deeply embedded, as "nature" is primarily assessed and managed for the advantages it provides to human populations. This is evident in practices such as cost–benefit analysis and ecosystem service assessments (Kopina, 2016, 1). All things considered, the prevailing Western worldview has a close alignment with instrumental values, evaluating the value of "nature" mostly based on how well it meets human needs.

5.3 The Māori Philosophical Paradigm

As will be shown in this part, the Māori worldview presents a profoundly relational understanding of the environment, grounded in principles of interdependence, kinship, and sacred obligation (Marsden, 1992, 17). Central to this paradigm is the concept of kaitiakitanga, often loosely translated as "guardianship" or "stewardship." However, as Marsden (ibid.) explains, such translations fall short of capturing its full cultural meaning. While the word tiaki means "to guard" or "to preserve," the addition

of the “-tanga” indicates a holistic, lived practice of protection and conservation (ibid., 15). In contrast to Western notions of stewardship—which often imply managing someone else’s property—Māori concepts of environmental care are not based on ownership.

Marsden emphasizes that the idea of private property was foreign to Māori thought before European contact. Natural resources were held communally, and the land was not something to be possessed, but a living ancestor from whom all life descended. Humans did not own the earth; rather, they belonged to it. (Marsden, 1992, 15)

“All natural resources, all life was birthed from Mother earth. Thus the resources of the earth did not belong to man but rather, man belonged to the earth.” (Ibid.)

By portraying the earth as a source that humans are subordinate to rather than a resource to be possessed, this statement suggests an inherent understanding of “nature’s” value. However, the emphasis lies not solely on the inherent value of “nature” in isolation, but on the close, reciprocal relationship between humans and the land. Māori thought also reflects this: the relational perspective is expressed through “whakapapa,” or genealogy, which binds all elements of existence—human, animal, plant, river, etc.—together (Moorfield, 2025). Myth and genealogy are not regarded merely as folklore but as essential knowledge systems (Marsden, 1992, 2, 9–11).

As mentioned in chapter 4, Māori understand the cosmos as an interconnected whole, and the practice of kaitiakitanga as inextricably linked to both the metaphysical and physical realms (ibid., 13). This unity underpins the Māori approach to environmental practice, which includes rituals of propitiation and acts of respect before harvesting natural resources. For instance, the first fish caught would be released to “Tangaroa,” god of the sea, or the first wood chips from a felled tree would be burned as an offering to “Tāne,” guardian of the forest. These practices are not symbolic niceties; they are vital expressions of the reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world (ibid., 15–16). This holistic perspective highlights the close kinship and shared obligations between people, the spiritual and the natural environment, indicating relational value. Similarly, “Rahui,” the traditional restriction imposed on a resource or territory is a notable example too. By temporarily banning activities such as hunting and fishing in a certain region, “Rahui” served as an ecological regulating mechanism (ibid., p. 18).

Relational value is “strongly associated with relational, pluricentric or noncentric worldviews that question strict separation between nature and culture, society, or humanity and stress interdependence among all beings” (Himes et al., 2024, 31). This is evident in the Māori worldview, where concepts like kaitiakitanga and whakapapa express the deep interconnection between people, the land, and the spiritual realm. As shown above, the Māori universe is viewed as a single, interrelated whole in which humans and non-humans are all a part of a vast kinship system. This approach, which overlaps with relational values, also questions the clear separation between “nature” and civilization.

Additionally, according to Himes et al. (ibid.), relational values are “strongly and explicitly associated with broad values, such as stewardship, responsibility, care, affection, reciprocity, harmony with nature,

good life, and justice." Many of these principles are integral part of Māori thinking. As demonstrated in chapter 4, kaitiakitanga represents care, reciprocity, guardianship, stewardship, and a sacred obligation to the land. Care and balance are emphasized both by the concepts of rahui, as well as kaitiakitanga.

Finally, relational values are also "associated with cultural ecosystem services, as well as with spirituality" (ibid., 31–33). As previously demonstrated, Māori environmental efforts are deeply embedded in their theology and culture. This close bond also highlights how relational value is reflected in Māori thought, incorporating spirituality as well as cultural identity.

5.4 Comparison and Conclusion

Clearly, there are significant differences in how the Māori and the Western economic paradigm see the value of "nature." The Western understanding of it is mostly instrumental, since it focuses on the value of "nature" largely as a resource that can be controlled or managed in a way benefitting people. On the other hand, the Māori paradigm represents a mostly relational worldview in which humans have reciprocal responsibilities with "nature," rather than viewing it as an external resource. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the separation of human and non-human or "nature" and human is also not as strong as in the Western understanding. Māori beliefs, especially the concept of kaitiakitanga, place a strong emphasis on spiritual connection, guardianship, and care, acknowledging the environment as a living ancestor and a component of a holistic system. This relational approach includes aspects that are mostly missing from Western economic assessments, such as spirituality, cultural identity intertwined with our relationship with "nature" and a strong sense of belonging.

In conclusion, while Western models tend to compartmentalize and commodify "nature," Māori perspectives challenge the strict divisions between humans and the environment, offering an inclusive framework that integrates multiple dimensions. While there are obvious tensions between the two, recognizing and promoting a pluralistic approach seems to be essential for environmental governance and conservation (Pascual et al., 2023; Himes et al., 2024, 1) An effort at this kind of pluralistic integration and, thus, a partial reconciliation between Indigenous relational worldviews and Western legal systems may be seen in the Whanganui River case. The next chapter will take a closer look at this situation.

6. The Whanganui River Case Study: Legal Personality and Māori Worldview

6.1 Historical Background and Legal Journey

The Whanganui River (Te Awa Tupua) has a deep spiritual and genealogical significance for the Whanganui iwi (tribe), as they consider the river to be an ancestor and integral to their identity and wellbeing (Whanganui River Claims Settlement, 2017, point 71). The phrase "Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au" (ibid., point 13) (I am the river, the river is me) encapsulates this relationship, in which humans

and the river are bound together through whakapapa—a genealogy linking people to all other things, to the sky and earth in general (Beverland, 2022, 40–50). However, colonial governance disrupted these relational forms of being and imposed property-based and extractive logics through for instance land confiscation (ibid., 62–64). Furthermore, dam construction and exclusion of Māori from decision-making marginalized Indigenous authority and sovereignty, reshaping rivers like the Whanganui into resources to be controlled rather than something to be respected (Kramm, 2020, 308). This led to decades of legal resistance and complaints by Whanganuu tribes fighting for recognition of their custodianship and beliefs. The resistance formed a scene for the river to be understood as a legal person—creating a partial restoration of Maōri authority over lands and waters (Whanganui River Claims Settlement, 2017).

6.2 Overview of the Legal Personhood Case

The Whanganui River Claims Settlement Act (2017) is the result of a long legal and political journey, beginning with the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840. It is important to mention that there are two versions in the Treaty of Waitangi, an English one (the Treaty) and a Māori one (te Tiriti), and they do not exactly match regarding their content (Manatū Taonga, 2017). While the Treaty affirmed Māori sovereignty in Article 2, colonial interpretations enabled extensive dispossession and legal marginalization. After years of negotiations and submissions to the Waitangi Tribunal, a landmark agreement was reached, culminating in the passage of the Te Awa Tupua Act. This legislation recognizes the Whanganui River as a legal person, possessing "all the rights, powers, duties, and liabilities of a legal person" (New Zealand Government 2017, 14). The Act also establishes a dual guardianship model (Te Pou Tupua), representing both the Crown and iwi interests. (ibid) Firstly, the joint entity Te Pou Tupua serves as the river's "human face": it is composed of two representatives—one member is chosen by the New Zealand government, while the other is a representative of a Māori iwi. Secondly, an advisory body (Te Karewao) also supports Te Pou Tupua. Te Karewao is composed of one member appointed by the trustees, one by iwi with interests in the Whanganui River, and one by local authorities. (Whanganui River Claims Settlement, 2017 points 27–33, 18–25) This model embodies a compromise that gives partial institutional form to the Māori worldview, while embedding it within the framework of New Zealand's legal system.

6.3 Indigenous Rights, International Law, and the Question of Reconciliation

In addition to being a significant advancement in New Zealand law, the Whanganui River's recognition as a legal person also speaks to larger global discussions on environmental preservation, Indigenous rights, and legal pluralism. It represents continuous attempts to reconcile Western legal systems with Indigenous worldviews, providing a partial but significant answer to the calls for environmental justice.

European philosophy, politics, and law have experienced significant changes since at least the 18th century, moving toward a human world primarily understood in terms of responsibilities and rights. It is difficult to comprehend how revolutionary this has been and how wide these ideas have spread (Tănăsescu, 2022, 10). The Western world developed a form of political economy characterized by an ongoing growth of capitalism and, at the same time, rights became a more significant category (ibid., 11).

The recognition of Rights of “Nature” (RoN) is a growing legal and philosophical development that challenges traditional anthropocentric legal frameworks. Himes et al. (2024, 29) argue that intrinsic values can be understood not only through objective indicators, but also through people’s subjective recognition of the worth of nature, such as rights attributed to other-than-human beings. RoN frameworks exemplify this by granting ecosystems legal personhood—such as the right to exist—regardless of their utility to humans. While distinct from Indigenous legal traditions, this development reflects a move that resonates with many Indigenous worldviews, including that of the Māori in New Zealand, by treating nature as an entity with agency.

The limitations of anthropocentric legal systems were first brought to light in the Sierra Club v. Morton case, where the U.S. Supreme Court denied legal standing to the environment, arguing that no direct human occurred (van der Does, 2023; Kahui et al., 2023). Christopher Stone (1972) argued for a fundamental shift in legal theory as a result of this. His reconceptualization, advocating for the recognition of trees as a subject with rights, later influenced legal innovations, including the Te Awa Tupua Act in New Zealand (Kahui et al., 2023).

Stone argued that recognizing legal rights for nature would require a shift in perspective, where essentially human interests may, at times, be balanced against the needs of ecosystems, rather than always prevailing over them. Since then, the recognition of RoN has grown globally. In 2008, Ecuador became the first country to include the rights of “nature” in its Constitution. Meanwhile, Bolivia, New Zealand, Colombia, India, Bangladesh, Canada, Australia, Mexico, Spain, and numerous U.S. jurisdictions have followed suit with similar legal experiments. Although the extent and application of these legal innovations differ, they all show a rising support for a more eco-centric thinking. (Kahui et al. 2023)

One useful way to understand the Te Awa Tupua Act is as a recognition of relational legal plurality. Even though it gives the river legal personhood and some rights, its main goal is to at least partially repair past injustices that the Crown had imposed on Māori communities. Despite being praised as a groundbreaking example of the rights of “nature”, Te Awa Tupua is more importantly affirms Indigenous legal authority and rights (Cribb et al, 2024, 6).

While RoN endeavors like Te Awa Tupua move in the direction of acknowledging ecosystems as legal subjects, the conversation around human rights continues to evolve and takes environmental issues into account too. Despite known as anthropocentric, human rights frameworks have demonstrated remarkable flexibility. For example, Article 11 of the 1988 Protocol of San Salvador acknowledges the “right to live in a healthy environment,” and Article 24 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (1981) declares a collective right to a “general satisfactory environment” (Protocol of San Salvador, Art. 11; African Charter, Art. 24). The most current resolution establishing a “universal human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment” was passed by the UN General Assembly in 2022 (UNGA Res 76/300).

Even in systems that have historically been based on anthropocentric and individualistic ideas, the environment is increasingly recognized as being essential to the fulfillment of other rights. Instead of being in opposition, the recent evolution of human rights and the rise of RoN can both be seen as legal responses to global ecological crises.

In conclusion, the recognition of the Whanganui River as a legal person shows how environmental governance can improve by incorporating Indigenous legal customs and values. Te Awa Tupua represents a step toward a more relational and pluralistic legal future. The Whanganui River case is a convincing example of how to balance environmental preservation with justice as both the rights of "nature" and human rights frameworks start to adjust to global issues. It shows that rethinking current legal systems via a more inclusive, reciprocal, and ecological lens may be a successful way to go ahead. (Chan et al. 2016; Himes et al. 2024, 1)

7. Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Key Arguments

Drawing on the model of "relational, instrumental, and intrinsic value" (Himes et al., 2024) this thesis suggested that Western approaches to "nature" mostly prioritize instrumental values. According to an instrumental view, "nature" is viewed as capital or resource that is primarily valued for benefitting humans. In contrast, the Māori perspective on "nature" is primarily defined by relational values, placing emphasis on kinship, spiritual and cultural ties, and shared responsibility. The concept of kaitiakitanga, in particular, challenges the dominant Western economic paradigm by viewing the environment not simply as a resource, but as a living entity to be cared for and respected.

A growing endeavor to reconcile fundamentally different worldviews is exemplified by the Whanganui River legal personhood case. The New Zealand government made a significant effort to integrate Māori values and beliefs into its legal framework. Even though this is a significant step forward, there are still conflicts and mistrust because of the profound differences between Maōri and the Crown. Ultimately, the need for adopting pluralistic value frameworks that acknowledge and include many perspectives on "nature" is emphasized in this thesis. This is because, in order to more fairly and successfully address complicated environmental issues, such diversity is believed to be necessary. (Chan et al., 2016; Himes et al., 2024, 1)

7.2 Reflections and Final Thoughts

Whether reconciliation between Indigenous relational values and dominant Western systems is possible remains a question of crucial relevance. Cases like the Whanganui River are significant and constructive steps toward greater acknowledgment and respect, even if the depth and complexity of Māori understanding and connection to "nature" may never be entirely captured. Even though the underlying

distinctions in worldview, language, and epistemology make full reconciliation arguably impossible, these advances show that significant progress can be made.

In a wider sense, this investigation underscores the value of pluralistic strategies that acknowledge many coexisting perspectives on “nature’s” worth. Such diversity promotes governance models that honor many traditions, challenging the widespread use of instrumental valuation and commodification.

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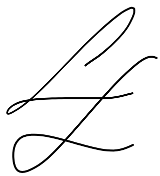

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