

New Zealand mountain gets same legal rights as a person



Mount Taranaki is considered sacred and an ancestor of the local Māori people

A settlement under which a New Zealand mountain has been granted the same legal right as a person has become law after years of negotiations. It means Taranaki Maunga [Mt Taranaki] will effectively own itself, with representatives of the local tribes, iwi, and government working together to manage it.

The agreement aims to compensate Māori from the Taranaki region for injustices done to them during colonisation - including widespread land confiscation.

"We must acknowledge the hurt that has been caused by past wrongs, so we can look to the future to support iwi to realise their own aspirations and opportunities," Paul Goldsmith, the government minister responsible for the negotiations, said.

The Taranaki Maunga Collective Redress Bill was passed into law by New Zealand's parliament on Thursday - giving the mountain a legal name and protecting its surrounding peaks and land. It also recognises the Māori worldview that natural features, including mountains, are ancestors and living beings.

"Today, Taranaki, our maunga [mountain], our maunga tupuna [ancestral mountain], is released from the shackles, the shackles of injustice, of ignorance, of hate," said Debbie Ngarewa-Packer, co-leader of political party Te Pāti Māori [the Māori Party]. Ngarewa-Packer is among one of the eight Taranaki iwi, on New Zealand's west coast, to whom the mountain is sacred.

Hundreds of other Māori from the area also turned up at parliament on Thursday to see the bill become law. The mountain will no longer be officially known as Egmont - the name given to it by British explorer James Cook in the 18th Century - and instead be called Taranaki Maunga, while the surrounding national park will also be given its Māori name.

The Taranaki Maunga settlement is the latest that has been reached with Māori in an attempt to provide compensation for breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi - which established New Zealand as a country and granted indigenous people certain rights to their land and resources. The settlement also came with an apology from the government for the confiscation of Mt Taranaki and more than a million acres of land from local Māori in the 1860s.

Paul Goldsmith acknowledged that the "breaches of the Treaty mean that immense and compounding harm have been inflicted upon the whānau [wider family], hapū [sub-tribe] and iwi of Taranaki, causing immeasurable harm over many decades".

He added that it had been agreed that access to the mountain would not change and that "all New Zealanders will be able to continue to visit and enjoy this most magnificent place for generations to come".

The mountain is not the first of New Zealand's natural features to be granted legal personhood. In 2014, the Urewera native forest became the first to gain such status, followed by the Whanganui River in 2017.