News
EarthBeat



New Zealand's Mount Taranaki, also known as Mount Egmont, has a warm glow lighting the snow peak, June 12, 2011. (AP/David Frampton, File)

Charlotte Graham-McLay

View Author Profile

Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Wellington, New Zealand — January 30, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A mountain in New Zealand considered an ancestor by Indigenous people was recognized as a legal person on Thursday after a new law granted it all the rights and responsibilities of a human being.

Mount Taranaki — now known as Taranaki Maunga, its Māori name — is the latest natural feature to be granted personhood in New Zealand, which has ruled that a river and a stretch of sacred land are people before. The pristine, snow-capped dormant volcano is the second highest on New Zealand's North Island at 2,518 meters (8,261 feet) and a popular spot for tourism, hiking and snow sports.

The legal recognition acknowledges the mountain’s theft from the Māori of the Taranaki region after New Zealand was colonized. It fulfills an agreement of redress from the country's government to Indigenous people for harms perpetrated against the land since.

How can a mountain be a person?

The law passed Thursday gives Taranaki Maunga all the rights, powers, duties, responsibilities and liabilities of a person. Its legal personality has a name: Te Kāhui Tupua, which the law views as "a living and indivisible whole." It includes Taranaki and its surrounding peaks and land, "incorporating all their physical and metaphysical elements."

A newly created entity will be "the face and voice" of the mountain, the law says, with four members from local Māori iwi, or tribes, and four members appointed by the country's Conservation Minister.

Why is this mountain special?

"The mountain has long been an honored ancestor, a source of physical, cultural and spiritual sustenance and a final resting place," Paul Goldsmith, the lawmaker responsible for the settlements between the government and Māori tribes, told Parliament in a speech on Thursday.

But colonizers of New Zealand in the 18th and 19th centuries took first the name of Taranaki and then the mountain itself. In 1770, the British explorer Captain James Cook spotted the peak from his ship and named it Mount Egmont.

In 1840, Māori tribes and representatives of the British crown signed the Treaty of Waitangi — New Zealand's founding document — in which the Crown promised Māori would retain rights to their land and resources. But the Māori and English versions of the treaty differed — and Crown breaches of both began immediately.

In 1865, a vast swathe of Taranaki land, including the mountain, was confiscated to punish Māori for rebeling against the Crown. Over the next century hunting and sports groups had a say in the mountain's management — but Māori did not.

"Traditional Māori practices associated with the mountain were banned while tourism was promoted," Goldsmith said. But a Māori protest movement of the 1970s and '80s has led to a surge of recognition for the Māori language, culture and rights in New Zealand law.

Redress has included billions of dollars in Treaty of Waitangi settlements — such as the agreement with the eight tribes of Taranaki, signed in 2023.

Advertisement

How will the mountain use its rights?

"Today, Taranaki, our maunga, our maunga tupuna, is released from the shackles, the shackles of injustice, of ignorance, of hate," said Debbie Ngarewa-Packer, a co-leader of the political party Te Pāti Māori and a descendant of the Taranaki tribes, using a phrase that means ancestral mountain.

"We grew up knowing there was nothing anyone could do to make us any less connected," she added.

The mountain's legal rights are intended to uphold its health and wellbeing. They will be employed to stop forced sales, restore its traditional uses and allow conservation work to protect the native wildlife that flourishes there. Public access will remain.

Do other parts of New Zealand have personhood?

New Zealand was the first country in the world to recognize natural features as people when a law passed in 2014 granted personhood to Te Urewera, a vast native forest on the North Island. Government ownership ceased and the tribe Tūhoe became its guardian.

"Te Urewera is ancient and enduring, a fortress of nature, alive with history; its scenery is abundant with mystery, adventure, and remote beauty," the law begins, before describing its spiritual significance to Māori. In 2017, New Zealand recognized the Whanganui River as human, as part of a settlement with its local iwi.

How much support did the law receive?

The bill recognizing the mountain's personhood was affirmed unanimously by Parliament's 123 lawmakers. The vote was greeted by a ringing waiata — a Māori song — from the public gallery, packed with dozens who had traveled to the capital, Wellington, from Taranaki.

The unity provided brief respite in a tense period for race relations in New Zealand. In November, tens of thousands of people marched to Parliament to protest a law that would reshape the Treaty of Waitangi by setting rigid legal definitions for each clause. Detractors say the law — which is not expected to pass — would strip Māori of legal rights and dramatically reverse progress from the past five decades.