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BEYOND KIA ORA: INVESTIGATING MANAAKITANGA IN TOURIST-LOCAL INTERACTIONS

Helen Geytenbeek and Rachel Byars

The tourism industry is navigating a complex and volatile environment, grappling with challenges in recruiting and retaining a sustainable workforce. Factors such as the lingering effects of national lockdowns, shifting immigration policies, and a historical reliance on low-wage migrant labour have compounded these issues. Historically labelled as a “Cinderella industry” offering poor-quality jobs (Williamson, 2017), tourism and hospitality in New Zealand continues to suffer from the realities of long hours, low pay, and limited career progression (Insch, 2020). This includes staff retention issues, increased casualisation of the workforce, high turnover rates, and persistent labour shortages. These challenges are particularly pronounced in peripheral or remote areas, where access to skilled and reliable workers is often limited. These challenges have a flow-on effect and further implications for the tourism industry as a whole, particularly in delivering high-quality, culturally authentic visitor experiences.

To counteract some of these labour issues, employers have embraced the expansion of the working holiday visa programme, with half of respondents in a 2022 Tourism Industry Aotearoa survey indicating plans to recruit visa holders for seasonal roles (Tourism Industry Aotearoa, 2022). More recent government interventions, such as the 2024 temporary visa option for some seasonal workers, aimed to address challenges in recruitment and retention further by improving wages, working conditions, and access to skilled migrant workers (New Zealand Immigration, 2024).

However, these measures alone may not resolve deeper structural issues within the sector. Critics argue that the reliance on short-term migrant workers has diluted the authenticity of New Zealand’s tourism experiences and led to the exploitation of migrant workers, attracting a young, transient, international workforce (Leung & Ladkin, 2024; Newport, 2017; Stringer et al., 2022). Furthermore, as highlighted by Kimbu et al. (2023), the tourism industry faces a global scarcity of workers that predates the pandemic. Over a decade ago, Sir Paul Callaghan (2011) advocated for a shift toward a knowledge-driven economy to enhance productivity and provide meaningful employment for young people—a vision yet to be fully realised. Additionally, Newport (2017), in an article written about the tourist boom pre-COVID-19, claimed that heavy reliance on migrant workers had already led to the creation of experiences for tourists that might not be authentically ‘Kiwi.’ His argument was: how can destinations “be authentic if there are no New Zealanders there?” (Newport, 2017, p.19). Authentic Kiwi hospitality, according to Wang (2024), is renowned for welcoming guests as if they are family, fostering a warm and personal bond between hosts and visitors. It transcends basic service, cultivating a friendly and inclusive atmosphere.

Authenticity is central to tourism in both cultural heritage and indigenous settings (Jamal & Hill, 2004). It can be thought of as objective, referring to the real or original nature of objects, places and cultures (de Andrade-Matos et al., 2022); and experiential, which focuses on the tourist’s personal feeling of genuineness, self-discovery, and having real or meaningful experiences (de Andrade-Matos et al., 2022). A lack of authenticity, coupled with insufficient knowledge and understanding of manaakitanga (the Māori concept of hospitality and care), undermines the ability to provide meaningful and enriching interactions for visitors. Furthermore, limited promotion of cultural authenticity can lead to a homogenised tourism offering, detracting from the unique appeal of specific destinations.

Assessing the challenges identified above requires a multifaceted approach, including improved workforce planning, investment in training, and development and strategies to enhance job attractiveness and sustainability in the regions. Addressing these interconnected issues is essential for fostering a more sustainable and resilient tourism industry that values cultural integrity, supports local communities, and enhances the overall visitor experience.

The following scenario presents an illustration drawn from real-world observations, which is offered not as empirical evidence but rather as personal observation of our combined industry experience. It captures the fundamental disconnect witnessed between visitors and tourism workers and the challenges the industry is facing:

Emily, an Australian tourist, arrived in Queenstown, eager to experience the vibrant local culture she had read so much about. On her first evening, she dined at a popular lakeside restaurant, excited to try the region's local cuisine and hear stories about local life from the staff. Her waiter, however, was a young backpacker from Europe who admitted they had only been in Queenstown for two weeks and didn't know much about the area.

When Emily asked for recommendations on hidden local spots to explore, the waiter shrugged and suggested looking online, mentioning they hadn't had time to explore themselves. At her hotel the next morning, the receptionist, an international worker on a short-term visa, struggled to answer her questions about Māori cultural experiences, giving generic responses and directing her to the tourist brochure rack instead.

As Emily walked through town later, she reflected on how her interactions so far had felt transactional rather than engaging. She had expected to gain insight into Queenstown's rich local culture and unique identity but found it hard to connect with workers who lacked personal ties to the region. While the scenery was breathtaking, Emily couldn't help but feel a sense of disconnection, as if the authentic 'soul' of Queenstown was missing from her experience.

This disconnect between tourism workers and visitors is why it is important not to lose sight of the key cultural aspects that characterise a destination. Locals also need to be able to share in these authentic experiences by demonstrating reciprocity and hospitable interactions in the form of *manaakitanga*.

Manaakitanga is a fundamental Māori concept that embodies the principles of respect, kindness, generosity, and care for others. As a customary concept, it can be regarded as setting an expected standard of behaviour, including nurturing relationships, looking after people, and being careful about how others are treated (Mead, 2016). In the context of the tourism industry, "*manaakitanga*" or "*manaakitaka*" is translated as "hospitality" (Wikitera, 2019; Zygodlo et al., 2003). *Manaakitanga* focuses on service, respect, and treating people well, supporting the tourism industry in its aim to operate and act in *mana-enhancing* ways (Ransfield & Reichenberger, 2021). This reciprocity of hospitality and respect from one individual or group to another is based on the values of "*mana*" (prestige), which are reflected in culture, language, and the continuous effort to be generous hosts. *Manaakitanga* represents a deeply authentic approach to hosting and serving visitors that is intrinsic to the cultural identity of Aotearoa.

Manaakitanga is one of three key values, alongside *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship), and *whanaungatanga* (sense of belonging) which are central to the Tourism Industry Aotearoa Tourism 2025 and Beyond framework (Tourism Industry Aotearoa, 2019). In the New Zealand Tourism Strategy 2015 *manaakitanga* "implies a reciprocal responsibility upon a host and an invitation to a visitor to experience the very best we have to offer" (Tourism New Zealand, 2007, p. 5). More recently, 100% Pure New Zealand Travel Trade (n.d.) promotions have highlighted respecting the *mana*, culture, lands, and people of Aotearoa (New Zealand). This emphasis on cultural values and reciprocity was further enhanced by the launch of the Tiaki Promise in 2018, a collaborative project by the public and private sectors that seeks to inspire both international and domestic travellers to explore Aotearoa New Zealand responsibly, ensuring safety for all, preserving the environment, respecting cultural heritage, and safeguarding the country for future generations (NZ Māori Tourism, 2018).

For service providers in the tourism industry, manaakitanga is not just a professional obligation but a genuine expression of cultural values. Welcoming visitors with warmth and respect and treating them as honoured guests (manuhiri) goes beyond transactional interactions, creating meaningful connections that make visitors feel truly valued and cared for. Another more logical reason for the inclusion of manaakitanga is the fact that the tourism industry is a service-based industry and therefore there is a need for a level of respect for the visitor. These cultural interactions can be viewed as an opportunity for visitors to gain personal understanding of their new surroundings, culture, and the host community (McIntosh et al., 2004).

Māori businesses, in particular, can use storytelling to carve out a unique proposition (New Zealand Trade Enterprise, 2015). However, as most travellers are seeking authentic experiences (Cohen, 2004), there is a need to nurture an industry that respects local culture while ensuring visitors feel welcome, reflecting the values of manaakitanga and the relational and reciprocal nature of the indigenous culture (Dell et al., 2018). It is a balancing act between ensuring a high level of service, local culture and the authenticity of products. Manaakitanga goes beyond the physical aspects of hosting as it is about creating a safe and welcoming environment where visitors feel comfortable which involves engaging in meaningful kōrero and being genuinely interested in making connections. The use of manaakitanga in New Zealand tourism marketing highlights and promotes the significance of culture (Tourism New Zealand, 2023). Therefore, those visiting expect that they will genuinely experience this culture, applied in a way that benefits and protects both the local community and visitors rather than its being sold as cultural tourism (Puriri & McIntosh, 2019). Genuine manaakitanga demonstrates a generosity of spirit which extends beyond service and incorporates knowledge of the local culture, environment, and community, making visitors feel genuinely welcome and supported throughout their experience.

By integrating manaakitanga into their service approach, tourism providers in New Zealand can create experiences that are uniquely rich, meaningful, and deeply connected to the cultural essence of the destination through the people who are delivering the service. However, the heavy reliance on migrant labour (more significant pre-pandemic) remains a concern because it detracts from the authenticity of the service. Authenticity, as we have seen, is crucial in practising manaakitanga, as it cannot be a performative act but must come from a genuine place of care and respect. Visitors can sense when hospitality is genuine versus simply a scripted service approach. By letting local guides and community members share their narratives and culture, more interesting and real travel experiences are created. Such authenticity can set these experiences apart, creating lasting and meaningful connections with visitors and turning tourism from a one-sided transaction into a meaningful cultural exchange.

The key to a sustainable tourism future lies in the hands of passionate local operators who carry the tourism message with pride. These authentic cultural ambassadors do more than simply welcome visitors; they share lived, authentic experiences in every interaction they facilitate. By prioritising local expertise and professional development within host communities, the tourism industry not only creates meaningful employment opportunities but also ensures that visitors receive genuine, high-quality experiences that accurately reflect a destination. This approach transforms tourism from an economic activity into one that ensures cultural preservation, cross-cultural understanding, professionalism, and value for both communities and visitors alike.

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