



Te Puni Kōkiri
MINISTRY OF MĀORI DEVELOPMENT

How Māori Land Ownership Works Today

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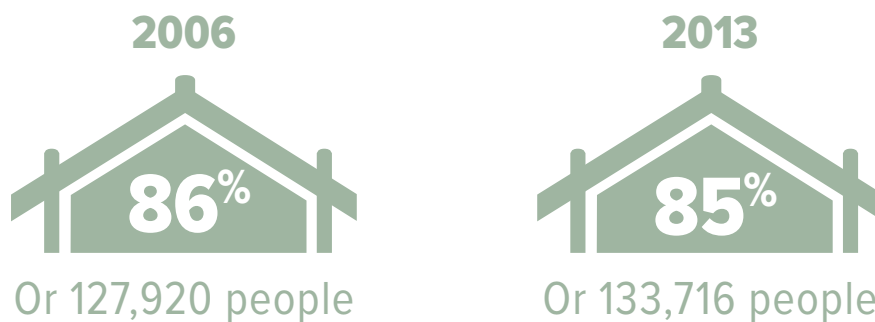
Ownership of Māori land is complex — there are often many people involved, and strict rules and processes around how it can change hands.

Collective ownership in the past

Most Māori freehold land is still collectively owned, but not in the same way as in the past.

Before Pākehā arrived, our connection to whenua was part of the iwi, hapū and whānau we belonged to – we were collectively responsible for our land.

Most Māori know their Iwi affiliations.



“Ownership” of land was a Pākehā concept that changed the collective way we lived. When the Crown started issuing individual titles for blocks of land, no more than 10 people could be named as owners. This changed the hapū-wide connection to the whenua, and was one of a number of things that led to many of us feeling disconnected from our ancestral land.

Ownership today

These days, our collective ownership involves a “shares system” — whānau with officially recognised interests in a block of land have “shares” in the whenua. It’s a similar idea to holding shares in a business – no one person owns the business, it’s owned collectively by the shareholders.

When a shareholder dies their interests, or shares, are divided between their descendants. This means that over time, there are more and more owners, or shareholders, in a block of land. Some blocks now have hundreds of shareholders.

This fragmented ownership can make it difficult to make decisions about the whenua, though it can also provide a wealth of skills and knowledge.



Shares system

How ownership is transferred

The Māori Land Court holds an official record of which whānau members have interests in blocks of Māori land. When your name is in the record as a current owner, you can participate formally and vote on decisions about the whenua, and receive payments if there are any distributions.

To change the names in the official record of owners of Māori land, you need to apply through the Māori Land Court to:

Become an owner through succession

Succession is when interests or shares in whenua Māori are passed on to whānau after an owner dies. It's an official process done through the Māori Land Court.

Set up a whānau trust for whenua shares

You can set up a whānau trust to hold shares on behalf of the whānau.

If you create a whānau trust, anyone who is descended from the tūpuna named in it will be included in the trust — their shares in the whenua will automatically be held as part of the trust.

Gift or sell your whenua interests

Owners or trustees can gift (or sell) Māori land to others, but only if:

- it goes to members of whānau and hapū associated with the whenua (known as the “preferred class of alienee”), and
- they go through the formal process with the Māori Land Court so that the ownership change is recorded in the official record.

Governance structures

When whenua has many owners, it can help to appoint a group of people to govern it and make decisions on behalf of all the owners.

There are different types of governance structures, including:

- land trusts, like ahu whenua trusts
- Māori incorporations
- reservations, for areas like marae, fishing grounds or urupā.

