



The whakataukī research project – *weaving together ecology and culture*

New Zealand ecology is in a state of renewal, with the weaving together of mātauranga and western science, and building Māori capability. In 1999, Cilla began exploring the connections between ecology and mātauranga Māori leading to the whakataukī research project.

This project has led the way as an example of how to weave and connect different disciplines, and especially mātauranga. It has contributed both to cultural revitalization, and reshaping New Zealand ecology. What was previously a small interdisciplinary field in ecology has developed into an area of national interest.

Cilla conceived this research to track the evolution of conservation thought by dating language. From her own discipline, conservation biology, she sought collaborators with expertise in linguistics, mātauranga, and computational biology to enact this vision.

The team has succeeded in building new ways of understanding human responses to environmental crisis. Their 2018 paper featured in both national and international media. She also received the New Zealand Ecological Society (NZES) 2019 Outstanding Publication in New Zealand Ecology Award for this paper.

The team continues to work on whakataukī.

Dr Priscilla Wehi

1987 Bachelor of Arts in English, UC

1994 Bachelor of Science with Honours (First Class) in Zoology, UC

1996 Master of Science in Animal Ecology, Lincoln University

2006 PhD in Māori and Ecology, University of Waikato

Priscilla Wehi is an inspiring scientist who is driven by curiosity to explore the beauty in the world around her.

She is a conservation biologist whose research focuses on the links between culture and biodiversity, insect behaviour, and ecological restoration.

She was awarded the UC Prize for academic excellence in 1993.

After completing her PhD Cilla took on research roles, including Massey and Otago Universities and the Laboratoire Evolution et Diversité Biologique, France.

In 2014 she was awarded a Rutherford Discovery Fellowship at Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research in Dunedin.

Some of her most exciting research is at the edges of different disciplines. She has worked on wētā ecology, and partnered

with carvers and film makers to reimagine our relationship with Antarctica.

Cilla has strongly connected her research to Māori communities and cultural revitalisation, including infographics in te reo Māori to increase interest in the biodiversity of Aotearoa.

In 2019 Cilla was appointed Incoming Director of Te Pūnaha Matatini Centre of Research Excellence in complex systems. In 2020 she started a position as Associate Professor at the Centre for Sustainability, University of Otago.

She contributes extensively to the science community through mentoring, leadership, improving equity, and the building of interdisciplinary teams.

Her three children continue to inspire her to stay curious.

