

Connecting climate change with place and culture

Investigating how climate change connects with the places we live, learn, and work can inspire climate solutions based on localised thinking. Connecting culture to place highlights opportunities for culturally-sustaining climate responses.



Taking a local view

Our research suggests that many schools, particularly primary schools, have values around sustainability, kaitiakitanga, and caring for the environment. However, schools are less likely to be connected into local and regional climate planning and action. While some learners have opportunities to get involved in positive local and place-based climate and environmental activities, this could be happening more consistently across the school network.

Connecting culture to climate

Cultural knowledge can also be brought into the foreground of localised climate action. For example, investigating mana whenua histories and relationships to places, and identifying how colonisation and land use changes have impacted people, the environment, and the climate. Restorative environmental actions—such as planting and caring for mahinga kai—has cultural, environmental, and climate benefits.

Some learners have cultural and community connections to other places that are affected by climate change; for example, the Pacific Islands. Schools can support students by creating space for them to explore what climate change means for their communities, and affirm their cultural identities through climate action.

“If we combine the science knowledge with kaitiakitanga practice, we can start adapting and mitigating”.

(Māori tertiary educator, scientist)

Putting it into practice

Some schools are engaging their learners and communities in conversations about their climate futures. Some learners have gathered the voices of their communities to ensure these are represented in local government climate planning. Some schools work with mana whenua to restore mahinga kai and other important natural places to support climate mitigation, adaptation, and sustainable futures.

Grassroots youth movements such as Te Ara Whatu, Pacific Climate Warriors, and 4 Tha Kulture show the power of indigenous youth activism

The Pacific Education Action Plan¹ talks about celebrating and valuing Pacific youth who are contributing to the community through fighting climate change.

¹ See <https://conversation.education.govt.nz/conversations/action-plan-for-pacific-education/>

and leadership on climate, emphasising the relationship between climate and indigenous sovereignty, and highlighting Aotearoa New Zealand's roles and responsibilities in relation to the Pacific.

What impacts will climate change have for your place?

Most secondary school teachers and school leaders surveyed by NZCER in 2020 thought their communities will experience negative physical, biological, social, cultural, and health impacts in relation to climate change, during students' lifetimes. Some people could also envisage positive impacts across some of these domains (see Table 1); for example, greater community cohesion, and local adaptation towards greener ways of living. Just over half anticipated positive physical impacts in their school's place and communities, suggesting some optimism that our built environment will be informed by climate-conscious planning and design.

Table 1. Secondary teacher and school leaders' expectations of climate change impacts in their places, 2020 survey²

	Likely or very likely	
	Negative	Positive
Physical impacts	79%	52%
Biodiversity impacts	75%	37%
Social impacts	66%	61%
Health impacts	59%	26%
Cultural impacts	50%	58%

² See <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/climate-change-and-sustainability-secondary-schools-report>

Scientists can model the likely impacts that climate change will have in different parts of Aotearoa New Zealand, and what that might mean for specific places and communities.³ However, impacts will vary based on the extent to which local, national, and global mitigation and adaptation plans and strategies are implemented.

The key message is that the actions we take now will help to determine what kind of futures our places and communities will experience.

Questions to discuss in your school

- What are the likely future impacts of climate change for our area?
- What local and regional climate actions can we get involved in?
- Are we informed about local government climate plans?
- How strong are our connections with mana whenua in this area?
- How can students connect and strengthen their cultural identities through climate response?

³ See <https://www.mfe.govt.nz/climate-change/likely-impacts-of-climate-change/how-could-climate-change-affect-my-region> and <https://niwa.co.nz/climate/research-projects/our-future-climate-new-zealand>

