TANIWHA

Taniwha are fantastical mythical water based monsters that dwell mostly in rivers, lakes and the ocean or anywhere there is water e.g. swamps. They mainly live in dangerous areas where there are fierce currents, strong breakers or rocky shorelines.

Taniwha have a great variety of forms. In the oceans they can be seen as Pakake (whale) and sharks or great monsters with razor sharp spines with fish scales and large teeth. Some have wings and can even fly. Many can disguise themselves as floating logs.

They also have a variety of names, Marakihau is one of them and has great bulbous eyes, three fingers, a serpent like body and a tongue that is a long tube used to suck unwary sailors from the surface.

The early Taniwha arrived from Hawaiki (the traditional mythological Māori place of origin) and were generally guardians of the ancestral canoes that arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand. They helped create harbours for the canoes and opened channels to the sea to enhance travel as well as protecting their people from the elements of the seas and enemies.

Taniwha can be a ferocious and bitter enemy when riled or seeking utu (revenge) for an injury or death of one of his people, or when it is hungry. There are many famous stories of how it has taken up to 200 warriors to kill one giant Taniwha. But it takes a lot of guile and skill to do this as they are intelligent creatures.

A Taniwha can also protect its own and so long as the tribe observes the respect and customs due to it. If people had to pass by a Taniwha's cave or wanted to go fishing in the area of the Taniwha's home they would often leave an offering of a green twig. Some people offered the Taniwha the first vegetable of the crop or the first fish or bird of the season. Taniwha often gave their people early warning of the approach of enemies and escorted the fishing waka (canoe) safely back to shore. Although mainly invisible to humans the Taniwha can sometimes be seen on the water as a mark of respect when a leading Rangatira (chief) dies.