

Galaxies Service 18 June 2006 - Matariki

Why do we celebrate Matariki? The calendar New Year of 1st January, signals the start of longer, warmer days in the Northern hemisphere but has quite the opposite feel here on the other side of the planet. We need a celebration of the return of longer and warmer days too and we have just the thing from our indigenous people, the Maori in Matariki

Matariki is our Aotearoa Pacific New Year but this cycle is based on the first appearance of Matariki and the first new moon after its sighting..

In the early morning of 2 June, the star cluster Matariki - or Pleiades - appeared in our dawn skies. The Māori New Year begins with the first new moon after the first appearance of Matariki, and this year the new moon appears on 27 June.

Astronomers generally refer to Matariki as Pleiades. The cluster is a group of many hundreds of stars about 400 light years from Earth and has been recognized since ancient times. The brightest stars are quite easy to see with the unaided eye in Greek legend bear the names of Seven Sisters, the daughters of Atlas and Pleone, Alcyone, Merope, Asterops, Maia, Taygeta, Calaeno and Electra. Some say that Matariki is the mother surrounded by her six daughters, other stories suggest that Matariki is a male star. These are the Māori names that make up the other six prominent stars of the Matariki cluster, Tupu-a-Nuku, Tupu-a-Rangi, Waitī, Waitā, Waipunarangi and Ururangi.

There are many stories about its significance as a navigational star and also as a portent on whether the coming harvests will be plentiful. If the stars in the cluster are clear and bright, it is thought that the year will be warm and productive. If they appear hazy and shimmering, cold winter is in store for us, and all activities during the period of Matariki must take this into account.

The bright star Puanga - or Rigel - also emerges at about the same time, and for some iwi it is the appearance of Puanga rather than Matariki that has significance and is celebrated.

During Matariki, all activities to do with providing for daily living take on spiritual significance, based on giving respect to the source of life. Crops are planted, and Rongo-ma-tane, the god of cultivated food, is appeased for a productive return. We celebrate our unique place in the world. We give respect to the whenua on which we live, and admiration to our mother earth, Papatūānuku.. We learn about those who came before us. Our history, our family, our bones.

It is a good time to gather pikopiko (fern fronds) and a host of native berries. It is also the right time to cast fishing nets and lines into the depths of Tangaroa, god of the sea, to make the most of bountiful supplies of migrating fish. It's a time of change. It's a time to prepare, and a time of action. During Matariki, we acknowledge what we have and what we have to give.

As the natural world regenerates, and another seasonal round begins, Matariki is a time to not only celebrate culture, language, spirit and people but also to pause and reflect - on the year that was, and the year that will be.

Let us celebrate a new year that starts out in the dark and the cold but brings longer days, greater light and warmth, new growth, new life?, new love?, new friends? the start of another important cycle in the life of our country and our relationships to all that is, to creator and sustainer God however you envisage Gos to be.