

HE MĀTAI I TE TAIAO

TE NUKUROA O MATAMATA

KOI KAHEKO TE TUNA I TE RIKA LEST THE TUNA ESCAPE YOUR HANDS

"I think our role, in an ideal world, would be to actually set the priorities for the species and then use science and the mātauraka that we have for our area to inform all of the decisions made for the health of that species." Tūmai Cassidy pers. comm., March 2024.



Tūmai & Paulette Tamati-Elliffe at Te Nohoaka o Tukiauau

INTRODUCTION

Te Nukuroa o Matamata is a restoration project led by Te Rūnaka o Ōtākou designed to rejuvenate traditional mahika kai areas and practices. This project ensures that local kaitiaki remain connected to their taiao and the mātauraka that resides there is maintained. Part of Te Kereme o Ngāi Tahu (the Ngāi Tahu Claim) included the restoration of Ōtākou wetlands and for the last twenty years whānau have been dedicated to restoring wetlands and waterways degraded by the impacts of colonisation. The restoration of their taiao goes hand in hand with the rejuvenation of Kāi Tahu mātauraka, reo and tikanga. Critical to these kaupapa are the key kaitiaki such as Paulette Tamati-Elliffe (Kāi Te Pahi, Kāi Te Ruahikihiki [Ōtākou], Te Ātiawa, Ngāti Mutunga) and her whānau. Paulette's son Tūmai Cassidy serves as a senior ranger and cultural advisor for the Te Nukuroa o Matamata project. While working to restore water health and native species back to levels of abundance, the project also includes the restoration of place names, oral histories and traditional mana whenua contexts for understanding these natural systems.

The taonga species tuna (eels) features prominently in Kāi Tahu mahika kai traditions as well as in whakataukī as Tūmai explains:

“The tuna was one of the key food sources for our people across Te Waipounamu. Our earliest traditions and narratives of the South Island are actually built around tuna. A lot of our whakataukī, our proverbs relate to tuna. We have whakapapa connections there. It was key economically, as well as being a food resource for us that enabled our people to live the length and breadth of Te Waipounamu. Generations and generations of reliance and dependence on that resource has built a strong connection and relationship for us through the tuna, as well as all the species that the tuna relies on as well.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF KĀI TAHU MĀTAURAKA



Wetland landscape at Te Nohoaka o Tukiauau

Based in the lower Taiari catchment area of Te Waipounamu, Te Nukuroa o Matamata is a name that refers to the movements of the taniwha Matamata who carved out the Ōtākou harbour and the Taiari awa while searching for Kāti Māmoe chief Te Rakitauneke. The imprint of Matamata can be witnessed in the mixture of river channels, pools, swamps and forested islands of Te Nohoaka o Tukiauau (the dwelling place of Tukiauau, an early Kāti Mamoe chief) also known as the Sinclair Wetlands. Traditionally a rich pātaka for Kāi Tahu whānau where kanakana (lamprey), kōura (freshwater crayfish), tuna (short and long-finned eel) and weka thrived, current Kāi Tahu generations now work to develop weed and predator control strategies, regenerate ngāhere and waterways, and monitor biodiversity within a wetlands habitat that provides home and sustenance to many now endangered and threatened taonga species.

The strong connection between te taiao and Kāi Tahu was destroyed by the impacts of agricultural colonisation that involved draining lakes and wetlands, introducing invasive species and degrading waterways through pesticide and fertiliser use. Hydro dams now block the migratory pathways of tuna and kanakana, preventing the flourishing of animals and habitats central to Kāi Tahu identity, as Tūmai explains:

“The hydro dam cut off the access that the breeding eels have to reach the ocean, and as soon as they pass through the turbines they get turned into mince. Young elvers as they are trying to swim upstream, they hit the dam and they can't climb up it. It's only in recent years that the hydro dam company have actually started thinking about creating safe passage for kanakana, and as for tuna, with the current efforts being made, there is a lot of uncertainty regarding whether there are successful results from any of their trap-and-transfer programmes, including the release of elvers over the last few years.”

While hydro electrical companies publically state their committment to mitigating the impacts of their activities on the natural world, there is little legal imperative to do so. Given the endangered status of much of our mahika kai Kāi Tahu understand the urgent need to provide evidence to support best tiaki practices. Tūmai and other Te Nukuroa o Matamata rangers are now drawing on Kāi Tahu mātauraka to provide the evidence needed to help restore the mauri of these lands and waters and the taonga species that reside there. The tuna are regularly monitored to identify growth rates, health conditions and abundance. Wider habitat factors (tuna food sources, lunar cycles, seasonal changes) as well as knowing more about other species impacted by hydro dam activities are also a focus of the mahi. Tūmai describes their data gathering techniques in the following way:

[We understand the health of the tuna by] taking measurements of their length and weight, and more recently, looking at the growth rings on their otoliths, so aging the tuna. Then over the next couple of months we'll be looking at their food resources, small fish and invertebrates, those different kai. Over time we will build that data around population size and condition. It's not just the hydro dams that are impacting our mahika kai, its other land uses, agricultural, urban, forestry, even the introduced fish."

Through these activities the Ōtākou hapori are contributing to baseline data that can provide evidence of the impact and significance of kaitiaki-led monitoring practices. While commercial power companies reap the financial benefits of providing hydro-generated power to consumers, mana whenua and their associated lands and waters bear the costs of these activities first and foremost.

KAITIAKITAKA AND VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Both Tūmai and Paulette emphasise the importance of mana whenua being at the heart of all decisions to do with the state of Kāi Tahu takiwa. Paulette has a role on the recently formed Mata-Au Trust which is part of a mitigation package with electricity company Contact Energy. In this role Paulette will continue to act on behalf of te taiao and tangata as a kaitiaki. Tūmai is now on the Department of Conservation board which is another avenue to help spread Kāi Tahu aspirations for the environment. Storytelling also plays a role in these initiatives as Paulette notes:



Tūmai assessing Tuna

So, we're trying to just make gains where we can. Featuring at the 2024 Māoriland Film Festival on Friday morning is the launch of a short video, Mahika kai which features Tūmai as the narrator. Hopefully that's another way of shining a bit of light on the plight of tuna, sharing knowledge, and providing education to wider communities. We just continue working within our whānau and extended whānau, our hapū who keep connecting back to these places to keep our practice alive and continue intergenerational transmission of knowledge that we're trying to restore."

CONCLUSIONS

The customary rights of Kāi Tahu whānui to harvest from their lands and waters have been significantly impacted by the ongoing forces of colonisation and yet, as Te Nukuroa o Matamata demonstrates, Māori continue to uphold our obligations to the wellbeing of lands, waters, and all life. While colonial agriculture normalised the draining of wetlands (the kidneys of the whenua) and the spreading of nitrogen to green the deforested hills, Te Nukuroa o Matamata works to recloak the landscape, shade the waters and restore health to the habitat so that Kāi Tahu mātauraka can be made more visible to inspire and connect new generations to tiaki practices. Restoring and rejuvenating the whenua and awa once shaped by the taniwha Matamata, the Ōtākou hapori are determined to hand on these taonga to future generations so that all may flourish.



Tūmai and native restoration mahi.

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