Mahinga Kai Crusaders

by Stanley Walsh

Before the arrival of Europeans – and long before supermarkets – Māori ranged far and wide collecting mahinga kai. Their food and resources came from the land, the forests, the endless coastline, and the hundreds of rivers and estuaries.

Although the tradition of gathering mahinga kai is fast disappearing, two Ngāi Tahu men are determined to keep it alive. One is taking a direct approach, passing his skills on to anyone who wants to learn. The other is harnessing the Internet to ensure knowledge of mahinga kai spreads across the globe.

A Rich Man

Karl Russell considers himself a rich man. He identifies as a kai crusader, living off the land in the same way as his tūpuna. Like them, everything Karl eats he has grown, hunted, traded, or collected himself.

It isn't easy being a kai crusader. It's wet and cold wading up a river in the middle of the night to spear slippery tuna. And Karl follows the seasonal traditions of the Ngāi Tahu calendar, which can mean working long days, especially in summer and autumn, when food is plentiful. Because some of the mahinga kai needs to last the winter, Karl also works to ensure it's properly stored.

"You don't get rich doing this mahi," Karl says. "Sometimes you've got to stretch the dollars a fair way." But the reward is eating the best food nature can provide – and not having to go to the supermarket to put a meal on the table.

So what exactly is mahinga kai? According to Karl, it's anything edible that can be grown, collected, or caught close to home. "If it runs, walks, flies, or swims – then I'll eat it," Karl says. Karl lives on the marae at Arowhenua, near Temuka. His whānau have hunted, gathered, and traded there for generations. "I call this paradise for one simple reason," Karl says, waving his arms in a big, wide circle. "Within two hours of my whare, I can collect all the kai I want. This place is my supermarket."

In the last month, Karl has picked blackberries, plums, apples, pears, and watercress. "When kai is in season, you collect it. When it's abundant, you share it," he says. A friend has just dropped off a sack of Māori potatoes that will last Karl all winter. Te Rūnanga o Arowhenua also has a huge vegetable garden, which grows right beside the whare kai.

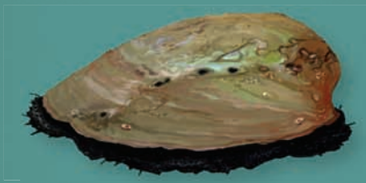
From the nearby beaches, Karl collects kaimoana: sweet-tasting tuaki, kūtai, pāua, and kina. He used to catch cod, tarakihi, kahawai, and elephant fish right off the beach. But these days, he says it's much harder to catch a feed, especially with all the large fishing boats that now trawl off the coast. From the lagoons and estuaries, Karl harvests kanakana, pātiki, inanga, herring, trout, salmon, and tuna. When he was a boy, Karl remembers they'd sometimes catch five hundred eels a night. These would be shared around all the local families.

"There was always enough for everyone," Karl remembers. "In those days, the rivers were bigger, with better backwaters for tuna to live in. But now farm irrigators are sucking them dry."

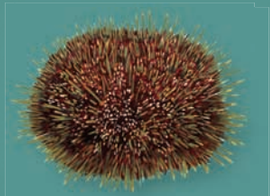
Karl has seen a lot of environmental changes. About this, he says: "Without clean water, there is no environment. Without the environment, there is no kai. If we don't have kai, we don't have a whakapapa. That's the bottom line."

tuaki

kūtai



pāua



kina

kanakana

pātiki

inanga

Several times a year, Karl and his whānau head into the hills to hunt game. They catch rabbits, hares, pigs, goats, deer, chamois, and thar. Then they make salami, saveloys, sausages, and bacon. “We store hundreds of kilograms of meat for those times when fresh food runs short,” Karl says. In winter, he goes south to harvest tītī from the Tītī Islands. Closer to home, and in season, he hunts ducks, geese, swans, and even seagulls. Sometimes he collects their eggs to cook in a hāngī.

If all this sounds like a lot of hard work – that’s because it is. “But what would happen if I didn’t keep the tradition of gathering mahinga kai alive?” Karl asks. “Those skills would be lost forever.” As a boy, Karl was taught what he knows by his whānau. They worked together over an open fire in the cooking shed behind the marae.

Now, Karl travels all over Te Waipounamu, sharing his kai Māori skills. He wants to make sure the tikanga survives. “Until my last breath, my job is to pass this mātauranga on. I don’t own any of it … I’m purely a kaitiaki for something our people have been doing for thousands of years. My role is to look after it, to protect it, and to pass it on.”

Riding a Global Wave

Ngāi Tahu artist Simon Kaan’s working day often starts before dawn, when he’s on his surfboard, watching the sun rise over a beach on Otago Peninsula. This peaceful morning ritual connects Simon to the ocean and to its moods and tides. Then he heads home for breakfast with his family before he starts his day in his studio on Otago Harbour.

As a professional artist, Simon is constantly looking for creative ways to tell a story. A few years ago, he was invited to an international electronic arts symposium in the United States. This led to a smart idea: people communicating about mahinga kai through an interactive website. And so Kai Hau Kai was born.

The Kai Hau Kai website encourages whānau to post short video clips about mahinga kai. All of the videos so far are about growing, harvesting, preparing, or sharing traditional Māori food. Simon points out that anyone, from anywhere in the world, can post a clip.

One special video is from Bluff kaumātua Tiny Metzger. In the 1970s, he recorded the methods his whānau use to preserve tītī in kelp bags. Known as pōhā tītī, it's something Tiny's whānau has done for centuries. Now, Tiny's videos have an international audience. "It's very exciting to see people using online technology to pass on their knowledge – but especially their ideas and memories," Simon says.

Simon's also excited about the website's international potential. He sees it as "a kind of cultural exchange in cyberspace between indigenous people of the world". Simon enjoys cross-cultural exchanges and has contacts all over the globe. In 2004, he spent three months in Beijing, working with other artists. It was a challenging but enriching experience that pushed him outside his comfort zone. But, as Simon says, "We learn about our own culture through the eyes of others."

Simon's love of the ocean dates back to his childhood, playing on a beach near Aramoana with his family. He never went home without a feed of tuaki, his first real experience of mahinga kai. He also remembers taking tītī sandwiches to school.

Visit Simon's website to find out more: www.kaihaukai.co.nz

Now with three young tamariki of his own, Simon is passing on his family's mahinga kai traditions. "Having primary-aged kids is a huge motivation for me. I want them to retain their Ngāi Tahu identity," he says. "I want them to see mahinga kai as something normal … and it gets them out in the environment and connects them with the ocean."

But the Internet can be a big distraction from the ocean. Simon sees how children are drawn to it. "This makes the Internet a powerful medium to exchange ideas." He says Kai Hau Kai is designed to stir memories more than to explain traditional practices. He hopes the website will encourage kids to ask their grandparents about the mahinga kai they collected when they were children. "I see conversations like that as a trigger for children to go out and learn new skills themselves," says Simon.

The Kai Hau Kai project is evolving all the time. Who knows where it will go from here? "It's still early days," Simon says, "and I'm not a mahinga kai expert. I'm an artist, and this is my way of contributing from an artist's point of view. Someone who has a bigger vision might pick it up – and that would be great." Whatever happens, Simon hopes that the website will be around for a long time.

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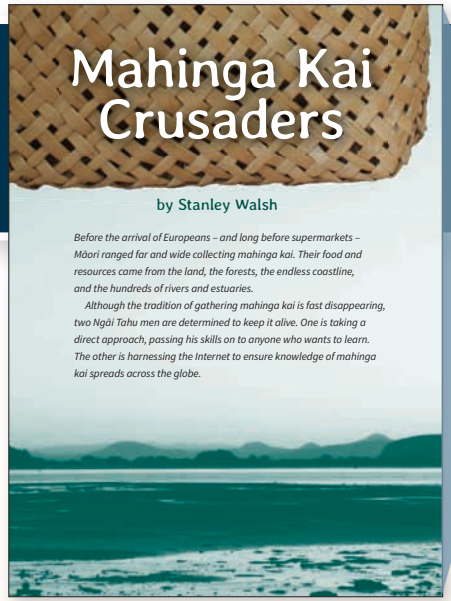

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