

Hokianga Accord Update #11

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What Fish? There Are No Fish.

Years ago people in the north could always rely on catching a few kahawai to feed our mokopuna, but not anymore. In one generation kahawai have gone from being abundant and a staple part of our diet to being just another bait in a West Australian craypot or exported as cat food

This depletion issue has been talked about for the past three years at Hokianga Accord hui and, in light of the recent Court of Appeal kahawai decision, it will continue to be an agenda item for some time to come.

Maori value kahawai above many other fish, snapper included. Kahawai is great for using in raw fish and a hot, smoked kahawai is mouth-watering.

Kahawai are also an important part of the food-chain so it is a major concern that fish numbers have declined so much.

Some people do not even go to the beach anymore because it is not worth the effort or the fuel costs.

Last year our whanau from Taheke, halfway between Kaikohe and Opononi, provided the following feedback to the Ministry of Fisheries' Shared Fisheries proposals that sought to limit people's catch of fish,

“Before 1998 we would go fishing once a month, depending on our Maramataka/Maori calendar. The fishing was good back then as we traditionally performed our karakia on arrival and departure and always cast the first fish back.

Fishing was a great time for whanaungatanga/relationships, kotahitanga/togetherness and wairuatanga/spirituality. Much meditation and sense for Kaitiakitanga/environmental welfare would determine our prosperity into the future.

Because we are in-landers it was usually a weekend occasion. We would always check the weather before leaving home for our 60-kilometre journey.

Unfortunately the numbers of fish we catch today are very poor and we have been forced to either buy our fish or go to the east coast, when we can afford it.

Every year we have noticed a marked decline of catch. In 1999 we were catching on average 30 fish, mainly kahawai, between four fishermen. By 2006 the average had reduced to five fish.

We accept catching one fish is a blessing. But there is something terribly wrong out there in the moana and suspect we are suffering the impact of commercial fishing in the area. What else could it possibly be?

Now the government is proposing to limit our catch as customary and recreational non-commercial fishermen, we ask WHAT FISH? THERE ARE NO FISH.”

Far from being a recreation, fishing has become a necessary weekly event to put food on the table but the Taheke example proves there is little point spending money to go fishing if there is no food to bring home.

The Hokianga Accord's concerns are not just about the sustainability of our fish and the environment but also being able to teach our mokopuna how to fish using traditional methods.

The sooner we reach our goal of “more fish in the water/kia maha atu nga ika ki roto i te wai” the better off all our people will be.

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