

# ALL IS FISH that comes to the NET

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For the people of the Pacific, seafood has always been a major part of our diets and seas are ingrained in our psyche. Our eyes are used to reckoning with the blue horizon that coats our land, never far from our mind's eye, and the sound of its waters lapping the waist of our islands is a constant reminder of our unfettered access to the bounty the sea offers, its blue veins flushing our coastlines with life. These oceans have long been woven into our Pacific origin stories and mythology, showing the importance and spiritual reverence that these bodies of water hold. Ancient sea-faring Polynesians were so in tune with the sea, they would know when to ride its waves by noticing the slightest changes of temperature, by dipping their scrotum into it to test it.

These waters not only help to define us, but they shape our lands too. Our own islands of Aotearoa, such as Te-Ika-a-Māui (the North Island) is said to be the fish that demi-God Māui caught, its head, our capital, where Aotearoa's oldest archaeologist sites can be found, is called Te Upoko-o-Te-Ika-a-Māui, the head of the fish of Māui. In fact, for these custodians of the sea, the head of the fish is not only the sweetest part, it is the most prized, saved for the most important member of the tribe to eat; the chief. It makes sense that a fish head would hold the most value, as containing eyes and cartilage it is the most nutritious part of

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the fish (along with the spinal column and viscera), offering extra potent levels of vitamins A, D, E and Omega 3s.

But talking to Dallas Abel, Lead Project Manager of the Kai Ika project, waves of colonisation that have helped to sever Māori and Pacific Islanders from their traditional ways, has meant that for some, this vital connection to the sea and its food has been lost. “For some people in South Auckland who may be struggling, they don’t have access to seafood. There are people that I’ve met who have never been out fishing. When, for hundreds and thousands of years their people relied on seafood. So for them not to have access to fish right now, doesn’t make sense to us.”

For Dallas and the Kai Ika project, when sense isn’t being made, solutions are found. It’s how the whole project was founded. In September 2016, at Auckland’s Outboard Boating Club on Tāmaki Drive, a private marina, members had set up a fish filleting bench for their fishers to use. After filleting, which only recovers around 35 per cent of the fish,



go with their kumara.

“Obviously they were a bit sceptical at the start” says Dallas. “They didn’t know why anyone would want to give away fish heads, but they trusted each other and from that they started collecting these fish heads and frames from the OBC.”

What started off with a modest 17kg, grew to 50, 100, then 1000kg and now the Kai Ika Project, which LegaSea, the Outboard Boating Club of Auckland and Papatūānuku Kōkiri Marae teamed up to develop, have now distributed over 165,000kg of previously underutilised fish parts, to families and community groups all over Auckland. It’s a win-win, a circular system that embodies a ‘waste not want not’ philosophy. With South Auckland housing the largest population of Polynesian people in the world, exceeding even Polynesia, and a widespread western diet that offers up land-based, fast-food as a cheap alternative, the Kai Ika project redistributes these unused fish parts, providing people who need it with kai which belongs to their ancestral diet; food

that nourishes, is nutritious, and their body knows how to digest.

Environmentally it ticks boxes. With fish heads and frames not clogging up our landfills, making it harder for any matter sitting there fighting for bacteria to help it decompose, more of the fish that is being caught is being utilised. Papatūānuku Kōkiri Marae even re-distributes parts of the collected fish offal to their kumara beds, creating a natural fish fertiliser that has given them their biggest yield of kumara. It’s not rocket science, but a simple 180 degree move back to how food should be used; away from the packaged and sanitised fish parts we buy from our supermarkets that blinds us to the fact that we kill animals for kai. When presented filleted and in plastic, it makes it easier for consumers to forget that we have taken life and so should use all of the animal to the best capability we can. It’s a philosophy that Pacific people and most Indigenous people have always known and lived by, having caught their bounty by their own hands. A shame that this vital, sensible

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the other 65 per cent — the head, frames and offal — were thrown into a skip bin, and sent to landfill. It felt wrong to do and they knew it, but at the time they didn't know of a better alternative at their disposal. So, they approached LegaSea, a non-profit organisation dedicated to restoring the biodiversity and health of Aotearoa's marine environment, who also help to elevate awareness around issues which recreational fishers face, asking them, 'We think we can do better. We don't know what that is or what that means, but can you help us?'

Co-incidentally, it was around the same time, that LegaSea Fisheries and Management Alignment Specialist Scott Macindoe, happened upon a newspaper article on Papatūānuku Kōkiri Marae, and this is when the jigsaw pieces of Kai Ika began to fall into place. "He saw an article about this marae in South Auckland that was growing thousands of kumara every year, which they would distribute to the community." Scott approached them, asking if they wanted some fish heads to

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knowledge has not been embedded into our present day food systems, adapted from those who know the lands and its seas best.

"It's almost like fish don't swim anymore" agrees Dallas. "You find them at the deli section at the supermarket, or covered in bread crumbs in the freezer aisle. It's how we're conditioned, that's how we expect our fish to be from our retailers and the fish and chip shop, all we do is expect fillets. But that's our goal to change people's perceptions to help them realise that fish heads and frames are the most delicious, most nutritious parts of the fish.

It's why Kai Ika's motto is He Kai te Rongoa he Rongoa te kai, 'Food is medicine and medicine is food', in part of their effort to try to re-educate people to re-examine the way they eat fish by choosing parts that they may have originally considered as waste. And there is a shift occurring globally that is helping to re-orientate people's minds too; Sydney's famed Saint Peter's restaurant,

admired by the *New York Times*, is helping to re-imagine what parts of fish are edible and delicious too, creating dishes fit for the most discerning gourmand; trout with its tripe, sauces made of fish bones, fish livers and parsley on toast, kingfisher black pudding, fish-eye chips and when it's season, even the sperm of certain species. As head chef Josh Niland says, "My desire is to encourage you to see fish differently and consider it as more than just the sum of its fillets." Kai Ika does too, and on their website, you'll find easy recipes such as one for their fish stock for you to try at home.

As popular health foods such as collagen supplements and bone broth sales spike, Kai Ika are also looking to use the excess bones and offal of the snapper, that make up around 95 per cent of the fish they recover and share, to make these medicines and help generate more income. "With the revenue side of things, as we continue to struggle to keep up with demand, our costs explode," explains Dallas. "We're trying to generate revenue. We currently rely on generous grant providers, partners, public donations, but we're trying to come up with a business case study to potentially identify different products we could create to build revenue. Whether that's fish soup that we could stock at retailers, or fish stock that we could create from the commercially caught fish. We're a non-profit obviously, we're not trying to make money for our own benefit, but it's for our kaupapa, we're just trying to do more."

For inspiration Kai Ika are turning to countries like Iceland, where this circularity is already embedded into their food systems, and where they already utilise 80-90 percent of the fish they catch, by creating entire pharmaceutical and bio-chemical industries using the by-products of all fish caught. It's a circularity model that Kai Ika has already tapped into, with its filleting service helping to create revenue streams that feed back into the project. For one of their early partners OBC, Kai Ika employs expert filleters to process the members' caught fish for a small fee, meaning Kai Ika automatically gain access to all the fish heads that come through that marina.

The service has expanded, so that Kai Ika now employs two full-time filleters and a handful of part-time filleters, with more filleting trailers making their way through the North Island.

"We still fillet at OBC every weekend, but we also introduced a custom-built filleting trailer down at Westhaven Z Pier Marina, the busiest in Auckland. And now we have an additional filleting trailer being built by Around Sheetmetals which will be on the road by the end of the year, potentially travelling around the North Island, going to fishing competitions, attending different events. The idea of that is to raise revenue, to spread awareness around the North Island about maximum utilisation of fish, and to share heads and frames with different parts of the North Island. Kai Ika is not just for Aucklanders, Auckland marae and Polynesians, it's for everyone in the country."

Part of Kai Ika's food resiliency is not only harnessing the medicinal properties of fish for humans, but its medicinal properties for our soils too. While Kai Ika is aiming for 90 percent human consumption of all fish caught, the other 10 percent can go straight to our gardens to regenerate soil as Papatūānuku Kōkiri Marae has shown us. Currently Kai Ika are working on producing a 100 percent organic fertiliser using the large quantities of inedible fish parts they also receive, getting ahead of the volumes that will continue to increase as more fish comes their way.

With the pandemic at Aotearoa shores, getting ahead hasn't always been easy for the Kai Ika project. But as the pandemic increased demand, it meant that in order to meet it, they were able to branch out by obtaining source from commercial fisheries. "We were just getting along at 300 kilograms a week, that was for a few years, we were happy with that, the community was happy with that. Unfortunately, the pandemic exacerbated the food insecurity that many New Zealanders experience, this forced us to scale."

During the first lockdown last year, they went from their usual 300kgs, to a sudden 0 and then to over 1000. With the most recent lockdown, they went through

the exact same thing; their demand exploded. "We were distributing 1,000, 1,500 kilos a week and then all of a sudden people didn't know whether they could put food on the table for their families. So we were getting calls, people were lining up at seven in the morning waiting for fish, we'd see hundreds of cars waiting in line and we had to find fish. The worst thing that we can do is to say, 'Sorry we've got no food for you today.' Basically, my job was to find any fish head in Auckland and see if I could get our hands on it."

This is the biggest hurdle Dallas continues to face; to find enough fish frames and heads to feed people who need it. It was his goal the week I spoke to him, and is his continuous goal to find sources, whether they are from commercial or recreational catches. It's a goal I hope he continues to reach. As I hang up the phone to him, I imagine tracks of Kai Ika's fish filleting trucks running and looping up and down the North and South Islands, picking up fish from marinas and commercial fisheries and redistributing them to communities in need. And it is then I realise, with the North Island shaped like a fish, and the South Island shaped like Maui's canoe, that the ancient Polynesians probably knew those wise words long before anyone else; 'You are what you eat.' ISLAND