

## Eels and Maori

FROM A TRADITIONAL Maori perspective the eel is a taonga, a major cultural treasure, honoured for its mythological origins and phallic symbolism, and prized as a rich and abundant food. Maori knew the two species of freshwater eel by a multitude of names – more than 150. To some extent these names merely record regional differences but they are also a measure of the role of the eel in Maori life. They reflect, too, the great store of traditional knowledge of the eel's many variations in size, shape, colour, taste, behaviour and habitat.

Eels were prolific and a staple part of the Maori diet. They were particularly important south of the Banks Peninsula where kumara was hard to grow. Easy to capture, they were taken by hand, or by spear, net, pot or bait. Eel weirs, often large and carefully constructed, were common on bigger waterways while in other areas, particularly at lake outlets, eels

were harvested using a system of channels dug out of the lake edge. The congregating eels would move into the channels and then be gathered out.

At certain times of the year some areas teemed with eels. Waihora and Wairewa (Lake Forsyth), on the southern side of Banks Peninsula, are both coastal lakes separated from the sea by shingle bars. During the great annual migration from lake to sea, in the late summer and autumn, a good run on a single moonless night could net two to three thousand eels from a single channel. Today's harvests are much diminished, but Wairewa continues as one of only two Maori eel fisheries in New Zealand (the other is Lake Horowhenua near Levin) and the traditional method of channel digging is still used.

Though no longer a feature of daily life, eels, and all the lore and custom and activity associated with them, are still regarded as a precious cultural resource. In the face of con-

tinuing destruction, Maori look to the Treaty of Waitangi for protection of this taonga. Twelve Maori groups have now filed claims with the Waitangi Tribunal which include grievances over eel fisheries and other traditional food resources. Of these claims, the only one reported on so far is the Ngai Tahu claim, which relates to the greater part of the South Island and deals extensively with the destruction of customary food resources and habitats. Ngai Tahu history about eels was prominent in the evidence before the tribunal. One Ngai Tahu kaumatua from Arowhenua recalled how at the age of 12 it had been his task to catch the winter supply of eels and how he was usually able to do this in two nights fishing from the river bank:

*"I recall taking 180 eels in one night and returning to the same hole the following night and taking 120 eels. I also recall in 1944 going towards the river mouth one night and coming upon the Heke, the migration of the eels to the sea to spawn. At the time the river mouth was blocked and the eels had elected to travel overland and across the shingle to the sea. I picked out of the grass and shingle as many eels as I could carry in the space of 15 minutes."*

Another Ngai Tahu elder recalled seeing the migration of eels from Waihora in late summer and autumn: "the beach was black with them. They used to tumble and twist. You could have walked on them." In the view of another witness, fisheries consultant Dr George Habib, "there is probably no more traditional fishery than the tuna [eel] fishery and no better example of a Treaty fishing right having been denied."

The Waitangi Tribunal's report in early 1991 on the Ngai Tahu claim recommended that the ownership of Waihora and Wairewa be returned to the tribe and that Ngai Tahu be given greater control over the fisheries and the inlet waters of the lakes. The tribunal also recommended that the fisheries in those lakes be jointly managed by Ngai Tahu and DoC. Ngai Tahu is currently negotiating with the government over the report's recommendations.

Clare Taylor



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*Preparing eels for drying at Wairewa in 1948. Enormous catches could not be eaten immediately and large quantities had to be preserved, first by smoking over slow burning fires and then by stringing them up on racks to dry in the sun and wind. Preserved in this way eels would keep for months.*