

An expansive view of kai – Kai Ora: Restoring local Māori food systems

This research report story's the project titled Kai ora: Restoring local Maori food systems. In the wider context of exploring and restoring local food systems as a means of climate action, this research takes shape in the Southern Kaipara. Led by Southern Kaipara marae, Te Aroha Pā, Te Kia Ora, and Rewiti, their marae researchers, and supported by the Toi Tangata research team, this research explores the kai stories, memories and experiences of Kaipara kaumātua.

This project is underpinned by whakapapa and whanaungatanga, calling forth an expansive view of kai, and the many layers of whanaungatanga that constitute kai, with an emphasis on te taiao. The research process was guided by Kaupapa Māori research, centering marae, whānau and knowledge production through whanaungatanga, wānanga and lived experience.

Three wānanga were held with kaumātua around the summer of 2023/2024. These were led by the marae researchers, who were well known and trusted members of the whānau. Four key themes were identified from the wānanga. The first two themes were Kaipara Moana Kaipara Whenua, reflecting the importance of place, and Kaipara Whānau, reflecting the importance of people and community. In these discussions, kaumātua also spoke to how, in recent times, their intimate relationships with the moana, whenua, and whānau, had been disrupted. This shaped the following two themes: damage and disruption of Kaipara Moana Kaipara Whenua, and the disruption of Kaipara Whānau.

The stories, memories and knowledge shared by kaumātua contain rich insight into the intergenerational relationships that constitute Kaipara lands, waters, and whānau. These stories are an important reminder of the way that kai, and the wider local food systems, are foundational to the ways that whānau relate to te taiao. Kaumātua stories exemplify the way that intimate intergenerational relationships with te taiao, and the knowledge that emerges from these relationships (mātauranga Māori), allow us to understand deeply, the impacts of climate change.

Kaumātua stories remind us explicitly that with worldviews and ways of life centered on whanaungatanga, whānau have always been adapting to changing contexts, have long been engaging with climate change, and know best how to enact climate action within their local environments. In having long standing intergenerational relationships with the Kaipara, whānau and marae are the experts on their lands and waters. In turn, kaumātua stories guide the conceptualisation of climate action in the following ways: centring mātauranga Māori, naming damage and disruption, being present with lands and waters, and honouring the mana of whānau and marae.