

Our playground: the Waitohu Stream

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Borgia Kurupae Hakaraia was born in Ōtaki, New Zealand in November 1932. Ōtaki is a small coastal community on the west coast of the North Island of New Zealand, an hours drive north of Wellington. She attended the local Convent School from five years old and went 15 miles north to Levin to attend the High School when she finished primary school. After secondary school she moved to New Zealand's capital city, where she trained as a nurse at the Wellington Public Hospital. In 1960 she travelled to the United Kingdom where she was employed as a nurse in Kingston-on-Thames. Borgia was a Major in the New Zealand Army Medical Corp Territorial Force, she was a Charge Sister at Wellington Hospital and after returning home to Ōtaki, she worked in the local doctor's surgery for many years providing medical support and assistance to many from the community including her own extended family. Borgia is strongly connected to this town, a place where she has lived for most of her life. She lives on family land near to extended family, many of which live within a mile or two. Her son Te Whena, lives within three miles of Borgia's home, with his wife and two sons. They are equally connected to the place, Ōtaki, much in the same way that Borgia has been all her life.

The Convent School that Borgia attended was attended by her son and may be attended by her grandsons. The Church, which has played an important role in her life, is the church in which her son and grandsons were baptised and is located next to the Convent School, which many of the family have attended. To the north of the Church and School the Waitohu Stream meanders from hills to the sea, another place which has played a significant role in their lives and that of their extended family. To the south of the township is the Ōtaki River, which runs from the hills in the east down through a gorge to the coastal dune area. The river also played an important role in the lives of local families in the 20th century. The locals, including Borgia, describe both the stream and the river as a playground. The stream and river were places where many long summer days were spent swimming, fishing and exploring the environs. It was a place where families sat in the evening enjoying conversation and catching up on the days events, while others fished. Its banks were well worn, as that was the pathway from the town to the sea and back towards the town again.

The stream and river were 'owned' by families. It was their place. Kids were territorial about sections of the river and stream. Particular families 'owned' the mouth of the river, the north side, the south side, the bend, the higher reaches, the mid-section, the lagoon, and the shallows. They

had names for particular bends, hills, hillocks and dunes. The families noted when after a flood the stream or the river changed. After the winter rains changed the river, the summer was a time to find a new swimming spot, a new deep place to dive into, and a new place to catch eels or to position a whitebait net. New places were part of every day lives.

Borgia was interviewed in October 2004, by local oral history researcher, Pataka Moore. This was one interview in a collection of oral history interviews, recorded for a research project, which investigated the ways in which local Māori people in Ōtaki traditionally used the Waitohu Stream and how they viewed it as part of their own locale. Borgia describes how she regards the stream.

The Stream was a playground for us from a very early age. When my sisters went fishing or eeling they took us younger ones with them. We would take a picnic lunch and spend the whole day on the river. We were comfortable there – going to places that feel like our own. The river was ours; it belonged to us as a people. Despite there being farms on either side it was a playground for us. There wasn't an inch we weren't familiar with. Each summer we would find a new swimming spot. The old spot might be shallow after winter rains and floods so we would move along to find a deeper place.

When we were young we went through the back of the Sanatorium [a local hospital] and swam while others fished along the stream, for koura, (crayfish) eels, trout. As we got older, we could wander everywhere along the stream. I spent more time on the Waitohu than the Ōtaki River. Even though we lived closer to the Ōtaki River, it was the Waitohu Stream where our friends and family were, so we went there to meet up with them.

The food was plentiful in the Stream but it's virtually all gone now. There was heaps of whitebait and trout. I couldn't stand touching the eels, but others put their fingers in the holes on the bank and felt for the eels. Their fingers would end up in the eels mouth. Then they were able to haul them out on to the bank. The boys would put their hands underneath the trout and the next thing they would bring them out. They were plentiful, not very big but we took them home and ate them. We weren't into fishing with lines – couldn't afford them.

'Tickling' was a method used to catch trout in the streams. Local men have described their escapades as boys when they spotted trout resting in the water they gently moved the palm of their hands under the trout inserting fingers into the gills and lifting them out.

Borgia described an eel migration known locally as the 'tuna heke' when the eels migrated back to the sea and returned to the Pacific Ocean to spawn. They travelled the thousands of miles from local streams in New Zealand through the ocean to seas around Tonga in the South Pacific Ocean. They began the journey late in the summer or early spring in local inland lakes and streams, migrated out to the ocean in their hundreds or thousands, a site which was witnessed annually by local Māori. Some have said you could hear them coming down a stream thrashing against each other in the water. Today few people can recount having seen the migration due to a reduction in numbers and quality of eels. However eels (known as tuna by local Māori) were a staple part of the Maori diet. Many families ate tuna and vegetables five nights a week so all young boys and many girls were taught to catch them, clean them and prepare them for eating. Māori families prepared the eels in many different ways. Some are: boiling with vegetables,

baking, wrapped in leaves and grilled or baked, jellied, dried, barbecued. Borgia describes an occasion when she saw the mass of eels squirming their way towards the ocean over land.

I have witnessed an eel run at Lake Waiorongomai when the eels wriggled across the sand because the stream had dried up. There were hundreds of eels wriggling across to the sea and you could just pick up the ones you wanted. It was a fabulous sight.

The Catchment Board men used to come once a year and clean the river with big diggers. I recall seeing this humungous eel once - an awful ugly thing. The current of the stream would gouge out the side of the bank and the eels live in under there so when the diggers cleaned out the stream, the eels would be pulled out and lie on the bank amongst the mud. One I saw was so big that when my cousin tried to lift it with a garden fork he couldn't because it was too big and heavy. It put us off swimming for a while because of the size of the thing. I wondered where it had come from and how long it had been there. There were also many ordinary sized eels.

Whitebait is a small delicacy caught in whitebait nets on the banks of freshwater streams during the spring months when they migrate from the ocean back to the streams. Māori families have traditionally caught whitebait in large quantities at the mouths of rivers and further inland on the banks of the rivers. Whitebaiting can be a time consuming activity but one enjoyed by people who park themselves beside their favourite places on the bank of the stream for weeks at a time waiting for the tiny fish to swim in shoals towards their nets. Families were known to relocate to the banks of a stream sometimes camping for months at a time, particularly in the spring to fish for this delicacy. They were territorial about their fishing places and descendants return to the places their grandparents claimed in the past. Today it is a waiting game as quantities are smaller than in years gone by. However they are a precious food and gratefully received if fishermen bring the gift of a small jar of whitebait to those who don't have the time or inclination to sit on the banks of a stream with a net in the water waiting and hoping for a catch. Some elders are not able to fish in the cold early mornings or in wet weather so a gift of this fish is always appreciated.

For people who are retired or able to spend days at the river in the spring, it is a time to renew friendships and spend time with locals who return to the same places each year with their nets. Families have their favourite places and these are respected by others who recognise the 'ownership' these families have because of their long associations with the river. Waiting on the bank of a river in the early morning cold is a real test of commitment and tenacity. Yet these people also enjoy watching the sun rise over the hills and daily experience the warmth spreading amongst them – warmth of companionship and the warmth of the early morning sun. As Borgia notes, whitebait was something to give away in her childhood and youth. Today people sell it for cash. It can fetch up to \$150 a kilogram.

When I was nursing in Wellington many years ago, one of my sisters was given a caravan which she parked at the end of the street at Ōtaki Beach near the stream and took a week off work to fish for whitebait. When we arrived she had her net in the stream, but she handed us a 4-gallon bucket full of whitebait. We went up to her caravan and began to cook it. I like mine with milk. I put milk in the bottom of the frying pan, and then pour the whitebait in and after a couple of stirs it's ready. To make a fritter you have one egg and bit of flour and pour the whitebait in and the whitebait fritter is as big as the frying pan.

We didn't have freezers in those days; in fact we didn't have a fridge. The surplus used to be given away. It wasn't sold. A lot of people didn't eat them. I think it was only Māori people that ate whitebait and they used to give them to the extended family because a lot of people did not have the time or the energy or the desire to go whitebaiting but a lot of people liked to eat them. Surplus wasn't wasted; it was given to family and friends. It's so different now – imagine being given a bucket of whitebait. You don't get the volume now. The river's changed in a lot of ways. It's been polluted of course. People fished in my day because it was plentiful.

In days gone by Borgia's family used the stream as not only a source for food but also for their households. When the water tanks ran low the stream water was used.

My sister lived near the Stream and used the water for the house. When the tank was low, they would pump water from the Stream. They used it for washing and drinking – we wouldn't do that now though. They used it to ferment corn. The corn had to be placed in a bag in the current so the water was going through the rotten/fermented corn. That too was a delicacy.

Streams, rivers, the foreshore and the seabed are today thought of as a community or national resource (particularly by non-indigenous people) and to be managed under the authority and control of local or national government. In 2004, New Zealand's government introduced the Foreshore and Seabed Bill, which removed the foreshore and seabed from Māori ownership. The introduction of the Bill resulted in one of the largest protest marches ever seen in New Zealand, the resignation of a Māori Member of Parliament from the governing Labour Party and the establishment and flowering of the Māori Party. Māori in particular, were incensed that their customary ownership had been removed without consultation and negotiation with Māori. There were scaremongering suggestions that the indigenous Māori might stop non-indigenous people from accessing beaches if this legislation did not pass through parliament. Māori have shared all the resources of New Zealand with all migrants for over 200 years.

Māori people believe that we belong to the land and the environment rather than regarding it as an asset that we own and on which we put a monetary value. Relatively recently our ancestors relied on the ocean, rivers, streams and the land for our very existence. They provided food and sustenance before we came to rely on the supermarket. Local streams were special places to be respected. Many local people describe having a special connection to a local stream having grown up on its banks. There is a sense of ownership of a stream, a sense responsibility for it and a desire to have input into its management although this is often overlooked by local and regional government. Borgia described her sense of ownership of the stream.

The stream is ours. We are all responsible for it and for saving the environment. The kids are taught about how to care for the environment from kōhanga reo (pre-school) and from primary school. I think it should start with the young people so that when they are older they know what to do to manage the stream. No one realised when we were young that we would get to the situation where we can't use it because the water is so polluted. It's our responsibility to support restoration of the rivers and streams because we leave them behind for our kids and for the future of the country. When we were young it was a great place for us to live by.

Borgia continues to live in the town where she was born, where she has worked for much of her life and where many of her extended family resides. She has been a keen sportswoman playing

tennis and hockey and supporting many others who pursued their dreams on the sports fields as well. Ōtaki is her local town. The Church and the school have been central to her life as she has served on many of the committees that manage the education and the spiritual needs of the extended family.

In 1995, Borgia's contribution to the community was recognised when she was awarded a New Zealand Order of Merit. The Governor General in recognition of outstanding service gives these awards twice a year.

Borgia Hakaraia's voice represents an indigenous woman's voice and her life's experiences are representative of indigenous New Zealanders who have a strong commitment to a home place. It is often said in Ōtaki, that until you have been here for 50 years you are not a 'local'. Many people today are very mobile and move to new communities for work or for other reasons and often lose the connection to the place their parents and grandparents called home. Ōtaki is a community where there are families who have been here for nearly 200 years and they have a strong connection to the people, the community and to the place.

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