

# Guardian of the Waitohu Stream: an interview with George Gray

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The Waitapu stream governs the northern boundary of the region of Ngāti Raukawa while the Kukutauaki Stream bounds the southern most point. In the east are the Tararua ranges with the sea of Raukawa defining the western margin. This region is commonly described by Ngāti Raukawa using this proverb:

Mai i Waitapu ki Rangataua,  
Mai i Mīria te Kākara ki Kukutauaki.

The axiom above refers to an area conquered by Ngāti Raukawa following their migration to the south western coastal area of the North Island of New Zealand in 1819 (Royal, 1994:17). It describes landforms, streams and sites of significance for our people. Within this area there is a vast network of water bodies and landscapes that are familiar to our people who have grown up amongst them and who have heard the stories that have been passed down through many generations.

George Gray is a New Zealand Māori from the tribes of Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Porou, Rongomaiwahine and Ngāti Pukenga. He has lived in the small town of Ōtaki, New Zealand, all of his life. He has spent most of his time either in the water or on the banks of the many lakes, streams and rivers within the Horowhenua region. He attended St. Peter Chanel School in Ōtaki as a young child and spent his weekends and holidays scouring the banks of streams.

As a young child his family lived in a small thatched house that sat on the banks of the stream. His earliest memories are of being scooped up by his father from the torrent which swept through their small house as the stream flooded over its banks. He has vivid memories of his family's dependence on the stream as a provider of food, water and spiritual sustenance.

He recalls the families that grew up on the banks of the Waitohu Stream, a close-knit cluster of family. Unlike in today's society, they were in contact with streams, rivers and lakes on a daily basis. They knew their water sources very well. They also knew what it meant to be a kaitiaki, or a guardian of the waterways.

He was employed for 40 years in the Catchment Board River Works department as an Engineering Overseer of rivers, lakes and streams. He spent many years caring for the streams of the Horowhenua region that is located on the south western coast of the North Island of New Zealand.

His jurisdiction spanned a coastline of close to 100 kilometres. On his retirement he was gifted a photo that commemorates his role as Kaitiaki or guardian. It shows him kneeling beside the Ōtaki River. The caption recognises his role as a guardian of the river and throughout the region he is widely respected and acknowledged in this role. Retirement did not end his connection with or affection for the rivers of the region. He remembers his role fondly as he came to know intimately the geography and ecology of almost every waterway.

*My earliest memories go back to 1937, which would make me six years old. Now at that time there were three in the family: there was my brother Dennis, my sister Josephine and myself. I can remember Mum carrying my sister, Dad had Dennis and he was towing me behind because he couldn't carry me as well. I can remember the water swirling around me and this occurred just above the Waitohu Bridge at the Ōtaki Golf Course. Prior to that, we were in a hut that was situated on the Ahern's property just below the Waitohu Bridge and when we woke up the water was running right through the bach [house]. So that's my earliest recollection: being pulled through the water and taken to my grandfather's place which was about a thousand metres up the stream on the right bank. I know that the Waitohu used to burst out of its banks quite frequently and would go down the Coach Road into the Mangapouri stream and flood back right up to the school. It would get so deep in there that my Dad had an 18-foot clinker built boat. He used to go fishing throughout the season. We actually use to row this boat up the Mangapouri to the school. That's how much water there was in the stream. I can remember the water spilling over the banks and the eels coming out. We used these hoop-irons to get them. As they came out they'd travel across the paddocks in about six inches of water and we'd get them that way; but it was certainly a vicious sort of a stream.*

*I suppose if you advance a bit further, say around 1950, that's when things started to change and that's when the big reconstruction was just about complete on the Ōtaki River. Of course to enhance the work on the Ōtaki River they had to operate on the Waitohu stream, which meant diverting the Mangapouri stream into the Waitohu stream. This meant putting in several cuts below Old Coach Road to speed the water out to the ocean. They did this by cutting the river mouth and ever since that time there has been ongoing maintenance. It has helped because although it still floods, it only goes to the bank that was constructed to save the water pouring across Tasman Road and flowing out through the Rangiora floodgates.*

George Gray's memories go back over 70 years. He has witnessed significant changes in the management of the rivers, the behaviour of the rivers in times of flood, the volume of water in the rivers and streams and the diminishing abundance of fish life, particularly of eels, which populated the rivers. The sight of thousands of eels spilling out of the river during periods of flooding was relatively common in his childhood but today the eels are no longer there due to the significant changes in the management of the river. The dredging and realignment of rivers and streams by local government bodies responsible for this have removed and scoured out the eel habitat that once supported and nurtured the ecology of streams. The emphasis today is on managing the effects of flooding on communities. The life supporting capacity of water bodies has been diminished.



**Eel otherwise known as tuna to Māori**

Fifty years ago indigenous communities relied on rivers and streams to feed their families. It is therefore those indigenous communities that have suffered from the effects of modern management practices to a larger extent than urban populations that purchase their meat and groceries from the supermarket. The indigenous people who lived off the land and stream have inevitably changed from a diet of fish to become meat eaters. There is increasing evidence that the negative health impacts are evident in the increase of diseases such as diabetes amongst Maori people (Nixon 2007). For the local indigenous people, streams and rivers were the primary source of protein in our diets. In the past the streams were rich sources of eels living in the banks.

*That area was very rich in food and kaimoana [seafood]. If you didn't get food from the outlet of the Mangapouri, they were upstream in that area. You'd find there were a lot of migrating eels coming back and that's where they lived right upstream towards the Convent School. When I was a little kid I used to go with my grand aunt and she used to sit on a little box just in front of Tainui Marae [ancestral home] with her bob [a line with worms as bait] and she would say: "Boy, I'll bob and you hit them", so she would stick this bob in the water and she would put her hand in and pull out an eel and just hit it on the head and that was it. Those eels were the genuine product. They were what we call the puhi in those days. They were silver and golden belly. So in that area there was an abundance of eels.*

This description reminds older local people of that abundance and the quality of the eels. The description of 'bobbing' is one that many older people remember with fondness. It involved gathering and then stripping leaves from a fibrous plant known locally as flax and making it into a type of snare. Earthworms were intertwined within the fibre and it was these that attracted the eels. Children enjoyed going out at night during the waning period of the moon, for a night of eeling using this method. George's description of his grand aunt asking him to hit the eels is a reminder that when they were pulled from the water it was necessary to stun them so that they could be handled and thrust into a sack or bag to be taken home and prepared for eating. People who went eeling in this way with a companion learned how to cooperate with one another in order to have a successful night of eeling, which was then celebrated by those who enjoyed the meal the next day. There was also a reminder in this story of the abundance of puhi. These were eels that were in prime condition and ready to migrate. The flesh was sweet and tender and the oil content was such that they could be cooked to perfection.



**Fresh eel drying**

George remembers the impact that draglines and other similar heavy construction machinery had on the rivers within the Ōtaki area. The changes brought about by these were dramatic. Not only were the changes significant in terms of the way the river was now being controlled, but it also changed the ecology within the river's greater environment. That included the main streams and wetlands that drained into the Ōtaki River, the areas of lowland between the Ōtaki River and the Waitohu stream and the many smaller waterways that drained out into the Ōtaki River and into the ocean. He admits that alterations made to the rivers and streams definitely changed the velocity of water and the behaviour of the stream or river. He also believes that the work that was done in the 1940s was done very well.

*In approximately 1946 with the help of the big dragline they dug the Ōtaki river straight out to sea. They put stop banks on both sides and the stop banks went down around to Kapiti Lane on the northern side of the Ōtaki River. Of course they had to cut the Waitohu stream off there because they would have had all of the water ponding behind that stop bank. So that's how the reconstruction went on and I believe it has worked quite well.*

*Of course if you do any alteration to a stream it does alter it. So if you straighten up and take a bend out it will naturally speed up. There are all different ways you could stop the speeding. You can leave an obstruction in the cut to slow it down.*

*Before the reconstruction went in the water level was much higher. There was a lot more weed in the drains that fed the river. We used to get a number eight wire to catch the big eels. We put a hoop in the top of the wire and once you got a big eel you just let the eel wrap itself around the wire and just pull it out. There was no trouble getting eels. Where the Mangapouri stream discharges into the Waitohu stream, I would bet there would be some colossal eels and trout in that area, because at one time we had to use gelignite to blow these trees out. At the time there were no regulations, you just blew the tree out, as you didn't have a machine to shift it because hydraulic diggers were just a dream then.*

George Gray began his work on the waterways of the Horowhenua as a young man in 1952 and was initially there for six years. He was one of very few Māori in a job with those responsibilities. He made decisions about the waterways and the farmlands in the greater Ōtaki area. In 1965 he became a pilot.

*In 1965 I was lucky enough to get a pilot's licence, and we'd fly over the rivers. When you spend that much time on the river it's a photograph that's in your mind. I could fly along, use the radio and give a report straight away and that's how we would do it. The work was actioned on that report. Prior to that you'd be up and down the river looking at it. Within half an hour of us getting in an aeroplane and going up and photographing it we would have a much better idea of what was needed.*

George Gray was very pleased to share his significant knowledge of rivers in the area. Since his retirement he is frequently asked to speak to groups such as historical societies, service groups, environmental education and restoration groups and individuals who have moved to this area. He is a very interesting speaker with a very quiet and unassuming presence. Locally he is respected for the knowledge he has and the long association he has had with the local area. During his lifetime he has witnessed changes that are considerable. As a young man the water in the rivers was of pristine quality while today many of the streams have degraded water quality and the abundance of fish life has been seriously diminished.

He is always pleased to talk to people and said:

*It's been my pleasure to talk to you because I think it is like a lot of things, a lot of people take it to their grave and it's unfortunate. I am pleased that you have come around to interview me because I look at it as my contribution to the future.*

## **References**

Nixon (Benton) M.A.Z. (2007) *Credibility and validation through synthesis of customary and contemporary knowledge*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

Royal, T.C. (1994) *Kāti au i Konei*. Wellington: Huia Publishers.

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Thanks to George Gray for sharing his knowledge and memories of a lifetime spent working on the rivers in the local area. He is a very willing interviewee and I hope that other indigenous peoples throughout the world can appreciate his story.

This interview was part of a series of interviews about the changes that have occurred in the rivers and streams in this area. The tape-recorded interviews are deposited in the Oral History Centre, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand and in Te Wānanga-o-Raukawa library, Ōtaki, New Zealand. The interviews were audiotape recorded on 60-minute tapes and are available for researchers to review in the future. Caleb Royal was present at the interviews and assisted with the recording of the interviews. Ngāhuia Hemara-Wahanui transcribed the interviews. The team contribution to collecting these memories is acknowledged.