

BEFORE THE CANTERBURY REGIONAL COUNCIL

UNDER the Environment Canterbury
(Temporary Commissioners and
Improved Water Management) Act
2010

AND

IN THE MATTER of the Proposed Waiau Hurunui
River Regional Plan

EVIDENCE OF ROBERT DAWSON

**ON BEHALF OF TE RŪNANGA O KAIKŌURA, TE NGĀI TŪĀHURIRI RUNANGA AND TE
RŪNANGA O NGĀI TAHU INCLUDING NGĀI TAHU PROPERTIES LTD**

1. HE KUPU WHAKATAKI - INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 My name is **Robert Dawson**. I was born in Woodend in 1946. My father is a Dawson from Ahipara, and my mother is a Karaitiana from Tuahiwi. I am here today to talk about my personal relationship with the Hurunui River.
- 1.2 I grew up at Woodend where I learnt how to gather food by my grandfather and uncles. This includes whitebaiting and catching flounders on the Ashley, hunting possums, gathering pipi and cockles from the Ashley river mudflats, and gathering eels from Lake Forsyth, the Hurunui and creeks near Woodend. Even as children my brother Bill and I would catch eels, even with our hands.
- 1.3 My father was the hunter. I learnt to hunt in 1955 and we would go about 3 times a week. There was no television in those days and when we got home from school we would get changed and go out to catch whatever we could.
- 1.4 I was taught by my grandfather and uncles how to catch eel, where to catch it, when to catch it and how to prepare it. Rather than using a whata (platform) to bleed and dry eels, my grandfather would split and salt eels, and then hang them up high in the macrocarpas at his home in Tuahiwi.
- 1.5 My earliest memories of eeling was when I would have been about 5 years old, going out to Lake Forsyth eeling before the winter. I used to love going over there with my grandfather and uncles. I used to enjoy listening to the old people telling their stories, reminiscing about the past, and the banter between them all, like who could hook the most eels. In those days I can remember the Skippers, Reuben's and Karaitiana's out at the lake.
- 1.6 I have always loved eeling. The old man would say to us "go get some eels you fellas," and we would go out eeling. We use to pāwhara the eels from the Ashley. We would eat eels fresh, fried, roasted, deep fried or curried. We use to eat a lot of eel.

2. MY EARLY MEMORIES OF EELING

- 2.1 The Hurunui was a special place. Although I've heard stories of people from Tuahiwi going to the Hurunui eeling I'm not sure who, how long and when. We never went to the Hurunui specifically for eeling. I guess it was too far for the old car to go, and there were other places before that where we could gather eels.
- 2.2 My earliest memories of the Hurunui is when I used to go to the high country stations with my grandfather and uncles. In those days my grandfather was a contractor blade shearer

and he would work in those high country stations shearing with my uncles and other men, mainly from Tuahiwi.

- 2.3 I went shearing with my grandfather and uncles from the age of 5 until I went to boarding school in the North Island when I was 12. They would go shearing from October to January. I would go up there during the school holidays or any other time my grandfather would ask me.
- 2.4 My grandfather would come around home and say to me "Well boy do you want to come up to the shearing shed?" I would say yes and then he would tell me to go get my swag. I would spend about 2 weeks a time up there, and would be going backwards and forwards during the shearing season. Looking back on it now I guess I used to miss quite a bit of school.
- 2.5 The first farm I would have gone to would have been the Glens of Tekoa station. I also recall going to other stations like Esk Head, Islands Hill and Lake Taylor. We would go through the Hurunui and work our way all the way down to the south bank of the Rakaia.
- 2.6 My aunties worked on the Glens of Tekoa station. My Aunty June Karaitiana was a land girl there and my Aunty Mere Karaitiana used to also work there doing all the cooking. When my uncles went out shearing my aunties looked after me who would feed me up on cakes and scones. There was always something to do. They certainly taught us to work hard. I really missed going up there when I had to go to boarding school.
- 2.7 During our time on the high country stations eels were a major part of our diet. We used a hinaki to catch eels. We had hinakis hidden underneath all the woolsheds. So when we arrived for the shearing season we knew where the hinaki were. Then when we left we would put the hinaki back underneath the woolshed for the following year.
- 2.8 The hinaki were usually made out of chicken netting and no.8 wire. The hinaki would be placed in the water with mutton or a sheep head in it, and we would put a sack over the hinaki it to make it dark. We would leave the hinaki in the water over night and check it the next morning.
- 2.9 Everytime it was full of eels. You couldn't pull the hinaki out by yourself, it always needed two people. In those days the eels were massive. I would say about 7 kilos in size. We would only take the large eels because I think this was what the old people preferred to eat. We only took enough eels to feed everyone, so for a gang of 10 we might take 5 big eels.
- 2.10 The eels used to be dried, split, and then cut into big steaks, and put in a roasting dish to be roasted. I can remember old Joby Skipper who used to stuff them. Joe Karaitiana who lived

in Birdlings Flat used to stuff them and roast them. He was famous for it. They were magnificent.

- 2.11 When I returned from boarding school I worked at the freezing works. My brother and I used to go hunting all the time. Since I knew most of the cockys they would let us hunt on their farms for pigs and deer. If we were to stay up there the night then we would take a small collapsible eel net, which could be set in a hole in the river with fresh pork and venison offal to catch eels. I kept on hunting until about 15 years ago.

3. EELING AT THE HURUNUI TODAY

- 3.1 In 2009 I started my own commercial eeling business. When I was made redundant from the freezing works 3 years ago eeling seemed a natural thing to do as I have been doing this since I was a kid. Back in the 70s eeling was booming and I did it part-time to earn a bit of extra money for the family. So I got a commercial license and quota with my friend John Spice.
- 3.2 I am an ardent supporter of sustainable fishing and hold eel in high regard. From September through to May I eel with fyke nets. I pretty much eel most of the rivers and tributaries between the Jed River and the Waimakariri, in particular the Hurunui, Waiau, Waipara, Pahau, Lake Taylor and the Hurunui estuary. I returned to a swimming hole that I last used 55 years ago and caught 30 eels. The local cocky wanted me to eel the swimming hole because the kids didn't want to go swimming there because of the eels.
- 3.3 I set up my own eel processing plant at my home in Woodend where we dry, smoke and vacume pack eel into small packs. Up until now we have been selling our smoked eel at farmers markets and boutique outlets. We enjoy selling at the markets because it gets the eel out to the local people who otherwise would not be able to obtain it. We also have the opportunity to explain how we catch, where we catch and the nutritional value of eel. Our customers love to share their childhood stories of how their parents and grandparents took them eeling in the dark with torch and spear. It brings back memories for them and we find this encouraging.
- 3.4 We ensure that our product is processed to a very high quality, and we endeavour to provide it to the New Zealand public at an affordable price. We won the Best Food Producer from the River or Sea at the 2011 Taste Farmers Markets New Zealand Awards.
- 3.5 Water clarity and quality is absolutely vital for the well-being of eels. An opening out to the sea is crucial so elvers can enter and swim up our rivers. The wetlands, side braids and

tributaries are also important because eels like to be in the softer water, and these are also really important habitat for eelers.

- 3.6 One of my real concerns is the quality of water within our rivers. Obviously stuff in the water can be taken into the flesh of the eel, and I need to be guaranteed that the water quality is at a level that the eels I catch won't be contaminated and endanger human health. This should never happen.
- 3.7 My business and livelihood relies upon being able to sell 'safe' eel to people. I must be able to meet food standards and for eel this means that the water quality from where the eel is harvested is important. While water quality is important from a customary perspective, it is now extremely important as my livelihood relies on clean and fresh water.

4. FINAL COMMENTS

- 4.1 I absolutely loved eeling as a child with my grandfather and uncles. When the family comes around they expect a feed of eels and I like to be able to koha eels at tangi, hui and other events.
- 4.2 The methods that I now use are basically the same as the traditional methods I was taught except for the use of modern fyke nets. When you hunt and gather you need to be in touch with the elements. You need to look at the water, determine whether there is any tuna there, just by the habitat, the riparian margins, flax and toi toi.
- 4.3 You take enough mahinga kai for our own needs, while passing on the resource in the same state, if not better, to your children. I have no choice in this. There is an onus on those who take water to show respect for nature, and to maintain the ecological balance.
- 4.4 This is what I was taught and what was expected of me by my grandparents and uncles. I have a responsibility to pass on to our children and grandchildren the skills that we have, so they in turn will carry on after us.

R Dawson

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