

An introduction to Mahinga kai for Canterbury farmers

This information sheet has been put together to explain the concept of mahinga kai and its relevance in today's farming environment.

Why is mahinga kai important today?

Te toto o te tangata, he kai; te oranga o te tangata, he whenua

Food supplies the blood of people; their welfare depends on the land

Do you have freshwater crayfish in your drain?
Lizards in your flax? Whitebait in your creek?

There is a term for these treasures and the habitats that support them – in Māori, it is mahinga kai.

Mahinga kai relates to the traditional value of food resources and their ecosystems, as well as the practices involved in producing, gathering and protecting these resources.

Mahinga kai is about more than just survival for Ngāi Tahu, it is about thriving, and maintaining those things that sustain and nourish us, and that bring us wellbeing – clean water, clean air, clean soil and sufficient shelter. Access to and being able to gather clean and healthy kai, as the ancestors did, and doing this in a sustainable way, is also important. These things are the essence of kaitiakitanga, mana and manaakitanga or what many people today call guardianship.

This practice remains a foundation of Ngāi Tahu values today, although it has become increasingly difficult as sites, species and habitats are lost, degraded or compromised.

These days, farmers and landowners are also custodians of the land and the resources they contain. For many, an affinity for land and resources ensures that they now assume responsibility for protection of mahinga kai, as Ngāi Tahu tūpuna or ancestors did before them.

Farmers' reasons for doing so are not that different – there is something special about providing the best environment for these treasures, and watching them do well.



The area around Te Waihora/Lake Ellesmere is of enormous historical significance to Ngāi Tahu. Traditionally, the lake and its surrounds were a plentiful gathering ground and a remarkable tribal resource.



Pātiki (flounder) are a taonga, and a prominent species.

What exactly is mahinga kai?

Ka hāhā te tuna ki te roto; ka hāhā te reo ki te kaika;
ka hāhā te takata ki the whenua

If there are no fish in the lake; there will be no language or culture resounding in the home; and no people on the land; however, if there are fish in the lake; language and culture will thrive; and the people will live proudly on the land - Nā Charisma Rangipuna i tuhi.

Mahinga kai areas are likely to be those special areas of your property that you are already actively taking care of for their environmental or biodiversity significance – but it could also be for things that you were not aware of – the little things.

Because it refers to numerous species rather than something specific, there is no one list of exactly what is mahinga kai for any given property. Mahinga kai includes things such as species, natural habitats, materials and practices used for harvesting food, and places where food or resources are, or were, gathered. This can include:

- All waterways, drains (with water), wetlands, and springs
- Native vegetation and riparian areas
- Areas with specific mahinga kai species and their habitats.

By way of example, inanga, or whitebait, are an important mahinga kai species. Today they are valued by most people, not just Māori, and can live and spawn in all waterways, including farm drains. Much of their critical spawning habitat occurs along vegetated waterways, particularly near the coast. Their habitat is susceptible to disturbance, particularly from grazing animals and farm operations, which is why its protection is essential. Some of the steps you can take include simple fencing, and adjusting farming practices when spawning occurs in Autumn.

Whose responsibility is mahinga kai protection?

Toitū te marae o Tāne; toitū te marae o Tangaroa;
toitūte iwi

If the forests of Tāne are protected; and the oceans of Tangaroa are protected; so too are the people

Everyone has a part to play in protecting and enhancing mahinga kai, although as the current guardians of the land, there are clear responsibilities on land owners.

While the active protection of mahinga kai is a key

We can help



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Visit our website at
ecan.govt.nz/farmers-hub



Pātiki (flounder) provides a great harvesting experience for the whole whānau. Photo courtesy of Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu.

foundation of the Treaty of Waitangi, it is also simply part of wider environmental stewardship or kaitiakitanga. Looking after mahinga kai sits alongside ecosystem health and biodiversity as an essential environmental objective in our region.

Farmers are now required to achieve a mahinga kai target when implementing their Farm Environment Plans. This means you need to identify and understand mahinga kai values and risks on your farm, and respond to these when carrying out good management practice.

The management targets will not necessarily limit the way you use your land, but they do require you to manage the risks of farming on mahinga kai.

What should I be doing?

Your Farm Environment Plan actions will need to take mahinga kai values into account. This will include actions such as:

- protecting mahinga kai species and habitats when waterways are managed or cleared; and
- sustaining mahinga kai through management of remnant native vegetation and wetlands.

The Industry Agreed Good Management Practices you are already working on will also contribute to restoring mahinga kai, through improving water quality and habitats.

How do I find out exactly what to do?

Find out more about mahinga kai values and species that might be on your farm at ecan.govt.nz/farmers-hub.

Together, we can restore the strong cultural and natural values in this land.