

Untold stories of the Opihi River SPONSORED

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The Opihi River's high quality water has made it the most ideal source of water in the district.

THE OPIHI RIVER AS A CLASSROOM

For as long as he can remember, 'kai man' Karl Russell has gathered food from the Opihi River.

"I have eight brothers and four sisters. My father was a labourer and money only went so far in those days so we basically supplemented our food with the traditional kai like eels and whitebait from the Opihi River."

As a young boy, Russell fondly recalls gathering eels after flooding. "As soon as the floods started dropping, we used to be sent down there with sacks to collect the eels trapped in the paddocks.

"I gained a lot of my knowledge from being there at the Opihi River as a child. You weren't just collecting kai, the importance was in learning about how a river lives and breathes."

Russell's father was key to teaching him how to understand the seasons of the river. "We were only kids and were always thinking what the hell are you looking at the hills for?

"He was looking at how much snow was falling on the ranges and therefore how much water was going to come. If there was a really good snowfall, it was going to be really good white-baiting."

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Karl Russell learnt much from much from his father, including how to respect the river and understanding the seasons of the river.

LIFE LESSONS

One of the most important lessons Russell learnt from his father, is to never take more food than you needed from the river.

"If you ain't gonna eat it, you better not kill it. End of story. I'm pretty hard on that. You grow up with old people telling you 'that's enough boy. Remember next week when you might need to come back and get some more'. That's all part of the whakapapa of the Opihi. It was a food basket for our people."

In the late 1970s, commercial eeling began in the Opihi River, with companies catching eels by the tonnage. By the mid-1980s it became clear to the local iwi that things were taking a turn for the worse. In the 1990s, following the treaty settlement, an eel management plan was put in place which included trigger points used to indicate when to reduce quota.

"That worked for a while but there was still no real improvement to the system."

So the rūnanga went for a mātaihai – protection order – on the Opihi and Temuka rivers. This banned all commercial fishing on these rivers. But there's still a long way to go to restore the Opihi and its tributaries to their former glory, Russell says.

"Is there a half way line we could meet to achieve that? I don't believe there is until we, as human beings, look at the environment for what it is and leave it alone. We have the answer but are we prepared to go down that course?"

THE OPIHI RIVER AS AN EMPLOYER

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Tony and Afsaneh Howey produce food that is consumed across the world, from Asia to Europe. Their organic blackcurrant operation ViBERi NZ Ltd has been a finalist in the New Zealand Food Awards for three years running.

South Canterbury farm business people Tony and Afsaneh Howey produce food that is consumed across the world.

Their organic blackcurrant operation ViBERi NZ Ltd has been a finalist in the New Zealand Food Awards for three years running and their vegetable/grain operation, Alpine Fresh Ltd, supplies approximately 20,000 tonnes of produce that includes potatoes to McCains, wheat to Farmers Mill, carrots to JPNZ – a juice company that largely exports to Japan, and onions to Malaysia, Indonesia and other parts of Asia and Europe annually.

When Tony Howey first started farming in the area back in 1987, the biggest issue with the Opihi River was that it had no restrictions on water takes and often ran dry – leaving it an unreliable source of water for all stakeholders.

"It was bad for farmers, it was bad for the environment, and it was bad for fish. It was bad for everybody."

As a result, the South Canterbury Catchment Board started investigating water restrictions on the Opihi River.

"The level of restrictions being proposed meant that irrigation would have become uneconomical. But basically the writing was on the wall. Unless there was a way of storing or harvesting water, this area would become pretty much desolate in terms of any form of farming."

Cue the Opuha Dam – a solution that would see better and more reliable river flows into the Opihi River.

The Opuha Dam was quite appealing to the whole community, Tony Howey says.

"Since Opuha has been in place, the river has not gone dry. It got very close to it the two seasons before now, but the dam had just enough water to keep the river going, so I really do believe it has been a win-win for all the community."

Having a reliable water source in the catchment has had a direct impact on the economic growth of South Canterbury.

"When the onion factory first started up in the late 90s, we needed 80 people so I went through WINZ and asked them to organise some staff. They just told people, anyone who wants to work at Southern Packers, show up at the WINZ office at 9am. 700 people came," Tony Howey says.

And yet now, they have to bring in workers from outside the district because there are not enough people locally.

"Water brings employment and growth and jobs, but it just needs to be balanced with environmental concerns to ensure we're not polluting rivers and waterways and that we're managing the environment sustainably."

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