

PROTECTING THE WATERWAYS

by Keri Welham



Des Heke Kaiawha was a student at Maungatapu School in the 1980s. Since then, he has helped build knowledge of te ao Māori in the school. He spoke to **Keri Welham** about the waterways of Tauranga and his work to protect them.

Keri: *What were the harbour and tāhuna like when you were growing up?*

Matua Des: We used to fish for pātiki (flounder) in the moana. And we gathered tītiko (mud snails) for my whānau and to feed people who came to events at the marae.

Keri: *How have the harbour and tāhuna changed?*

Matua Des: As I got older and the city grew, I noticed the stormwater that runs out of the drains was polluting the harbour. The water was no longer clean enough for some species of fish to live there.

Keri: *How has this pollution changed the moana?*

Matua Des: It's harder to gather kai now. There are fewer pātiki and tītiko and other native kaimoana (seafood). People also built houses on the waterfront. They cut down the mānawa (mangrove trees) where lots of native species lived as they wanted to be able to see the sea and launch their boats and kayaks. This has destroyed some of our oldest tuna holes – where the eels lived. It has also damaged the places that are a refuge, or safe place, for young fish.

All these things make it difficult for us to gather kaimoana from the tāhuna. This Māori custom is called mahinga kai. Our hapū, Ngāti Hē and Ngāi Te Ahi, can only gather food from the tāhuna if it's healthy.

What is stormwater?

Stormwater is the water that runs off roads and footpaths when it rains. It picks up dirt, rubbish, and chemicals, which then wash into the sea.



Keri: How do you help to protect the environment?

Matua Des: I work as an environmental advocate, which means I speak out to support the environment. When the council decides how Tauranga city will grow and develop, I advocate or argue why this might change or damage the environment. I use mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge). I use my knowledge of the environment around Tauranga Moana too.

Keri: Does that mean you are a kaitiaki?

Matua Des: Yes. It's important that people want to be kaitiaki to protect our environment. The estuary is our food basket – it provides us with kai. We have a duty to take care of it. If we look after nature, nature will nurture or look after us.

I'm proud to see the students at Maungatapu School monitoring the tāhuna so they can protect the environment.

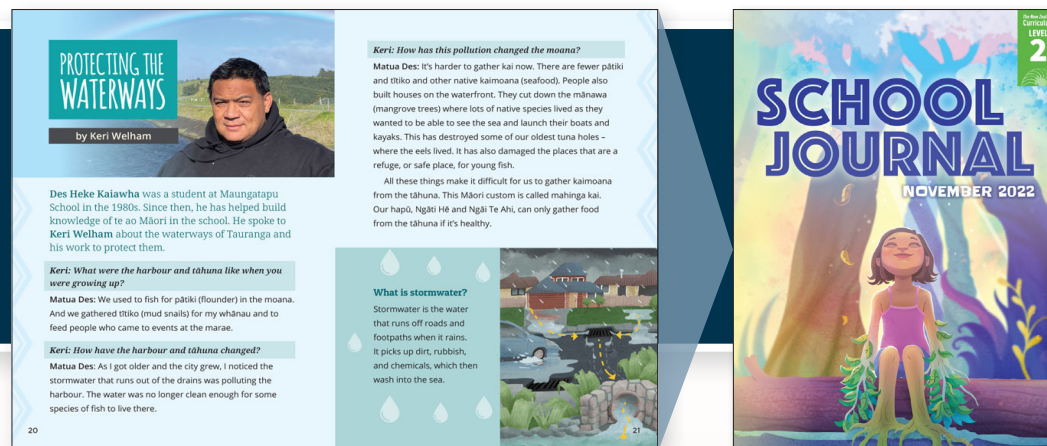
Keri: What are young people in your hapū doing today?

Matua Des: Some young people still gather watercress from the streams with their grandparents. They go to the tāhuna to look for fish. They have learnt to notice how healthy the environment is. They ask: Has the watercress been sprayed? Are there eels in the streams near the stormwater drains? Is this part of the tāhuna polluted?

Gathering kai keeps us in tune with our environment. With young people taking on the role of kaitiaki, there is hope for the future of the tāhuna.

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