

# Kai Security: He Whenua Rongo, Seed, Soil and Food

**He Whenua Rongo: Indigenous Seed, Soil and Food Sovereignty Symposium dedicated to knowledge exchange, collaboration and empowerment.**

By Ranui Maxwell



The role that we must play in soil health in order to achieve kai security is a matter of urgency. That is the message from Dr Jessica Hutchins, convenor of He Whenua Rongo, kaupapa Māori researcher trained in environmental and indigenous studies, author and Hua Parakore (Māori organic) farmer. She is advocating for soil in Aotearoa to be given personhood status as a strategy for protecting the soil from degradation.

A report published by the United Nations in 2022 estimates that up to 40% of all soils worldwide are moderately or severely degraded – a figure that could rise to 90% by 2050 if deforestation, overgrazing, intensive cultivation, urbanisation and other harmful practices persist.

Intensive farming, especially monoculture is damaging the very soil it needs to grow healthy crops.

Healthy Families is a movement that is playing a pivotal role in back boning community contributions to kai secure futures and regeneration of traditional kai systems. Small scale efforts across the motu by all of our Healthy Families regions can reverberate into large scale efforts. Healthy Families East Cape, through our kaupapa Para Ika, are directly working on efforts to improve soil quality.

Kaimahi from the Healthy Families East Cape team along with kaimahi from Healthy Families South Auckland (Cause Collective) joined 250 other attendees from Aotearoa and around the world to participate in He Whenua Rongo : An indigenous symposium about seed, soil and food sovereignty. Held in Auckland at Mahuruhuru Cultural Marae, Point Chevalier, and Papatūānuku Marae, Mangere, last month. The three-day symposium is designed to support research and practice that champion kai atua and deliver biodiversity, food security and cultural heritage.

There was a diverse participation from across the motu including keynotes and manuhiri (visitors), Dr Vandana Shiva from India and First Nations People from Turtle Island. They shared their indigenous stories drawing parallels between these narratives and how our connection to our natural environment and kai systems have been disrupted. Through sharing their stories we could hear the deep trauma they have experienced from loss of land and loss of language. They shared their stories of reclamation of their traditional practices in seed collection, re-establishing their connection to the land, food systems and language.



*“The understanding that we came away with was that eating traditional food or culturally connected food connects us back to the land and harvesting practices.”, says Mamera Patchett, Communications Innovator for Healthy Families East Cape.*

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The discussions, presentations and new learnings from over the three day symposium raised our awareness of the importance of soil health. We are able to better understand the connections between policy, power, education and community, and how we are better able to adapt. Building our capacity in this area supports the movement of our kaupapa. We have come away with the understanding that we all play a critical role in our connection back to papatuanuku and ensuring we protect and improve the health of our soil. There is mahi being done at all levels of the systems and that mahi was articulated across the three days;

- The discussion around GMO and Free Trade Agreements, and how this has had an impact on our food systems
- The impact of commercialisation on both the health of the soil, food systems and ultimately our overall health and wellbeing
- This is a movement that has spanned generations but there is still mahi to be done
- Sharing the mahi that is being done at all levels of the system to shift the conditions for better outcomes for our people

The Para Ika fish fertilizer prototype seeks to improve soil health as well as encouraging how we facilitate food waste.



Our disconnection to the natural environment has had consequences that have a profound effect on our health and wellbeing. Reconnecting back to the whenua will sustain us as a people, using mātauranga Māori as an accelerant for innovation. Now is the time to be audacious in our approach and our thinking and actions to protect papatuanuku from further degradation.



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