Identities of freshwater fishers

Ka mua, ka muri | Fish Futures Policy Brief 02

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Fish Futures

The Fish Futures research project aims to improve freshwater ecosystems in Aotearoa New Zealand and the lives of people who depend on them. The project seeks to foster local relationships, empower fishery managers, enhance the mana of kaitiaki and generate new approaches that integrate mātauranga Māori and Western science.

The research examines interactions between humans, fish and ecosystems by assessing the consequences of fish introductions and removals, identifying social barriers to restoring fish passage and co-developing fish management strategies with Māori, communities and other stakeholders.

Expected outcomes:

- improve understanding of the social–ecological factors that impact freshwater fish populations
- enhance capacity for sustainable freshwater and fisheries management
- increase collaboration between scientists, iwi and policymakers.

The project's findings will inform policy development and support community-based management and collaborative decision-making for healthier freshwater ecosystems and thriving fish populations.

Policy briefs in this series

01. Management of freshwater fish species
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04. Access to freshwater fishing
05. Harvesting and consuming freshwater fish
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Cover photos: (Left) Whitebait. Photographer: D. Nicholson; October 1959. Source: Archives New Zealand; AAQT 6539 3537 57/A71885. (Centre) Drying tuna. Photographer: unknown; September 1934. Source: Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections; 1691-109. (Right) Lake Taupō. Photographer: E. Woollett; February 1954. Source: Archives New Zealand; AAQT 6539 3537 51/A33961

Identities of freshwater fishers

Trout fishing and picnicking party, Waikato River. Photographer: T. Ransfield; November 1958. Source: Archives New Zealand – Communicate New Zealand Collection; AAQT 6539 W3537 55/A60060.

Key messages

- Representations of fishers in the media – by interest groups and in advertisements, photographs and stories – have privileged certain narratives over others.
- Freshwater fish contribute to our individual and collective identities, as well as our biases. They define some people's vision of a 'good life' while also being used as an indicator of subsistence living, poverty and 'ungentlemanly' behaviour.
- Freshwater fish and fishing practices and management are based on the ideals first established by acclimatisation societies in the 1800s and upheld by the growth of the 'recreational sport fisher'.
- Processes of identity construction have contributed to the marginalisation of some types of fishing and fishers through the institutionalisation of identity in policy.

Overview

From the 1940s to the 1960s, promotion and publicity of fishing identities exemplified what people, activities and behaviours were encouraged and gave little care or visibility to others. 'Correct' or 'gentlemanly' fishing practices overlayed these ideals and were used to build a picture of fisher identity that has shaped societal views on what is 'good' or 'bad'. Notably, while the hunter-gatherer way of life was declining in Aotearoa New Zealand, it was being romanticised in the reimagining of a post-war national identity. This period also marked the embedding of 'leisure time' in social norms, and the institutionalisation of the weekend as a time being reserved for travel and recreation.

This historical brief highlights narratives of fishers and fishing in New Zealand through themes of identity promotion, under-representation and invisibility. It seeks to reframe discourses surrounding freshwater fisheries management and practices by inviting readers to consider a series of questions: What are stereotypical fishing identities? How have these identity narratives been promoted? Why do fish and fishing still highlight differences in New Zealand society? The brief then outlines matters to be considered in regulation and non-regulatory practices.

To focus our analysis of identity, two well-known sources from the 1940s–60s have been used to examine the social construction of fisher identities and related notions of 'desirable' and 'undesirable' methods of freshwater fishing:

1. National Publicity Studios and their role in national and international tourism and promotion.[1]
2. Author Barry Crump, specifically his book *A good keen man*.[2]

These sources have been selected for their enduring impact on New Zealand freshwater fisher identities. The post-war period was a time of national identity and brand construction as New Zealand sought to differentiate itself from Britain and market its opportunities to the world.[3] The government produced promotional posters and images highlighting New Zealand tourism and recreation, many of which featured freshwater anglers.[4] These images were reinforced by the proliferation of fishing and hunting literature, including Barry Crump's influential works.[5,6] The ubiquity of these fisher representations meant that they became part of a national identity that in turn shaped freshwater fishing culture and policies.[3]

While fishing has changed over time and modern media portray more diverse fishers, these post-war identity narratives continue to circulate and hold cultural relevance. Close analysis of these sources sheds light on the origins of persistent fishing norms and narratives, and how they obscure other freshwater fishers and fishing cultures.

Identities nationally promoted

It is well established that in New Zealand the 'domineering freshwater fisher' identity was actively promoted through colonisation and acclimatisation, in both the national consciousness and fishing culture. 'No man can better deserve, no man can better afford a day's pastime than a New Zealand colonist', asserted the colonial propagandist Charles Hursthouse in 1857; 'and surely it is better far that he should nerve himself in rural sports "chasing the red deer and following the roe" than he should relax himself in city dissipations and the laps of ballet-girls'.[7]

The acclimatisation movement in its various forms has had a long and influential backing by government and been supported through wildlife and tourism legislation and policy. Through the 1860s, the various iterations of legislation to protect certain animals were sponsored by politicians who were also members of acclimatisation societies. Acts were passed merely to give temporary protection to acclimatised game animals until they became established in New Zealand, when hunting would be free to all.[8] They were also designed to secure a food source for settlers, although Māori were not given the same consideration.[9] Native food species were variously hunted to extinction, reduced through habitat loss, and predated and outcompeted by introduced species. Later, as concerns about species losses grew, the government began to introduce harvesting prohibitions.[8,10] Acclimatisation therefore diminished and restricted traditional food sources for Māori.

Proponents of acclimatisation and colonisation argued that modifications to native flora and fauna would help shape and solidify the New Zealand identity. New Zealand would be a sportsman's paradise with introduced trout and deer to rival any from the old country.[8] Sustained efforts in the 19th century to establish these populations were part of this narrative, including extermination campaigns and bounties to remove anything that stood in their way, including tuna (eels) and shags. With opportunities to hunt game species available to those who could afford the licences, time and prescribed equipment, the *ideal* of the hunting and fishing man was regarded as open to everyone (with options to suit their budget) by the 1900s. This egalitarian rhetoric became intertwined with the identity of the sportsman and acclimatised fish, and contributed to the perpetuation of both.[8,9]

Example one: National Publicity Studios

Public promotion of New Zealand and 'New Zealand culture' during the 1940s–60s was the role of the government. The Publicity Office was established in 1924 as part of the Department of Internal Affairs, and in 1930 was transferred to the Department of Tourist and Health Resorts. At the end of World War II, the Publicity Office was divided into the newly created National Publicity Studios and the National Film Unit.[4]

The post-war National Publicity Studios and National Film Unit were tasked with fostering national identity. They aimed to forge the sense that New Zealand had evolved from a British colony into a Commonwealth nation. For many years, the National Film Unit was the only significant film production facility in the country. In the 1950s and 1960s, they primarily focused on tourist promotions and government propaganda. This publicity largely drove the development of markets and industries rather than corporate brands and marketing.[11]

Representative images of trout fishing taken by the National Publicity Studios in the 1950s and 1960s: (Left) Trout fishing. Photographer: Mr Anderson; February 1965. Source: Archives New Zealand – Communicate New Zealand Collection; AAQT 6539 W3537 A76935. (Centre) Fishing – southern lakes. Photographer: K.V. Bigwood; December 1951. Source: Archives New Zealand – Communicate New Zealand Collection; AAQT 6539 W3537 A25773. (Right) Trout fishing. Photographer: G. Burns; February 1958. Source: Archives New Zealand – Communicate New Zealand Collection; AAQT 6539 W3537 A53349.

The National Publicity Studios took an array of photos during this time, covering various aspects of freshwater fishing and angling. The images are relatively simple and consistent in their messaging. The hero is various versions of the same male character, and the tone is calm with a lack of urgency, portraying recreational pursuits framed by outstanding natural beauty. The overall impression is that fishing is a wonderful pastime undertaken by a characterised proportion of society. Most images from this time also imply that trout and salmon were caught for consumption (as illustrated by the creel), rather than catch and release. Notably, while the National Publicity Studios did release images of women, male children, boating and whitebaiting, the majority are of men angling.

Example two: *A good keen man*

> … the trout started to run up the river to spawn and Harry decided to catch himself a ten-pounder rainbow. He'd carry his manuka rod in one hand and his rifle in the other, dropping down to the river every now and then for a bit of fishing, then climbing the ridge again to continue hunting.[2]

Barry Crump's first novel, *A good keen man*, was a publishing sensation following its released in 1960. It has been reprinted many times and remains a New Zealand classic. The novel is a fictionalised account of Crump's experiences during his deer-culling days in the central North Island, where he hunted red deer and pigs, cut tracks and built back-country huts as part of the government's plan to eradicate introduced pest animals. Underlying his stories are accounts of the skills and ways of life necessary to become 'a good bushman'.

A popular and prolific author and storyteller, Crump appealed to many New Zealanders as a 'man's man' who could tell a great yarn.[12] The novel advanced a stereotype of masculinity – the rough, wild practical joker – that struck a chord with the reading public.[5] *A good keen man* draws on New Zealand's humble, colonial and rural origins and evokes nostalgia for a male back-country world that was beginning to disappear in the 1960s with urbanisation and technological changes. The novel blurred the lines between fiction and autobiography and cast Crump as a cult figure, a bushman and an authentic source of the ways of the back country.

A good keen man fed into the homogenised narrative of New Zealand's wild and rural identity, that of the iconic 'Kiwi bloke' – men such as Crump, Ed Hillary, and later Fred Dagg and Wal Footrot.[13] These ideals and narratives still linger in policy development and marketing campaigns based on 'the New Zealand way of life' that privilege introduced recreational fisheries and the rights of those fishers to freely roam the back country.[14,15]

Identities not nationally promoted

The complexity in fisher narratives comes through in what is missing or under-represented in those images and stories. Consideration of the historical context reveals groups of people, fish and fishing practices that have been obscured by processes of identity building.[10,16] For example, mahinga kai practitioners, women fishers, coarse fisheries (e.g. perch), kanakana fisheries, subsistence fishing, gifting and fish monitoring. To rectify these omissions, we need to turn our attention to how day-to-day fishing practices and societal expectations differed between Māori and Pākehā, including both their worldviews and experiences. An awareness of class, gender and socioeconomics is also required when examining how recreational fishing became an established pastime while customary fishing was publicly marginalised and even criminalised through colonial policies and narratives.[10]

Photographs taken in the 1940s and 1950s showing different approaches to tuna fishing. (Left) Fisheries experiment with apparatus for stunning fish, Horokiri Stream, Wellington. Photographer: E. Woollett; January 1953. Source: Archives New Zealand – Communicate New Zealand Collection; AAQT 6539 W3537 A29395. (Right) Catching tuna during migration, Lake Forsyth. Photographer: unknown; 1948. Source: Alexander Turnbull Library; Ref: ½-040702-F. Reproduced with permission from the Alexander Turnbull Library.

Māori continued to follow traditional fishing customs in the 20th century, using customary practices and mātauranga such as maramataka, and prohibitions like rāhui.[16] The roles of women and men were defined within their hapū and whānau, including the allocation of specific areas that were their responsibility to manage. This ensured that both the ecosystems and targeted species were available for future generations.[17]

However, Māori were rarely the subject of national publicity and tourism promotion, or when they did appear, they were typically portrayed as a historical novelty or assimilated people. Their customary practices and stewardship of resources were rarely visible or promoted. Out of the public conscious, Māori were inequitably affected by legislative and private restrictions on access, habitat, materials, preferred species, practices and fisheries.[9,10]

> My next mate was a Maori named Mori, who was so keen on cooking and eating weird things he never had time to become much of a hunter. All the shooting he did was for food … When I filled in the Day Book, I'd ask Mori for his tally and he'd reply, 'Found a beauty huhu log, boy,' or 'Caught a beauty eel.' Sometimes it was a beauty trout, or a beauty fat pig.[2]

These contrasting portrayals raise important questions around values, identity and stereotypes in New Zealand society and culture. Popular representations and absences both shape public perceptions of what counts as 'good' and 'bad' fishing. For example, there is a dichotomy in how technology is portrayed in customary and recreational fishing. Dominant narratives of targeting introduced species like trout using advanced fishing gear uphold Western notions of progress while dismissing customary Māori fishing practices and mātauranga. The identity narratives also reveal tensions between traditional New Zealand practices of fishing for consumption and the modern practice of catch-and-release fishing.[18]

Wildlife and conservation are embedded in the New Zealand identity and, ironically, stem in part from the visible and immense impact of colonisation on native species. Dominant ideas about nativeness and species protection arose in the context of widespread loss of species and ecosystems.[9] Such narratives disregard centuries of sustainable use of native species by Māori, and thus serve to obscure or delegitimise customary harvesting. Meanwhile, since the mid-20th century, introduced freshwater fish narratives have become a tangled web of aggressive acclimatisation, legal priority over taonga species, concerns about declining numbers and access to sport fish. Sitting alongside these issues are environmental advocacy and new practices, such as catch and release to protect fragile fisheries.[15]

In response to concerns about the health of introduced fisheries, Fish & Game New Zealand imposed restrictions on fishing methods (keeping incompatible methods separate), season length and daily bag limits. The North Island and South Island Fishing Regulations 2023/24 remind anglers that 'while catch and release fishing is widely promoted by some as a conservation minded approach to angling it remains the angler's choice. However, the catching of large numbers of fish in a day can impact on individual fish and also on the angling experience for others.'[19]

In line with this strong identity and publicity, the Freshwater Fisheries Regulations 1983 and related policies are designed for salmonids and anglers. It is not as easy to find or navigate the rules and policies for other freshwater fish and fishers.[15,20] Consideration needs to be given to whether other freshwater fish and fishers are being marginalised and / or regulated according to what is deemed appropriate by the dominant freshwater fishing identity, namely angling.

Whitebaiting at the Kahutara River, Kaikōura. Photographer: R. Silcock; December 1968. Source: Archives New Zealand – Communicate New Zealand Collection; AAQT 6539 3537 86/A88299.

Recommendations for policy- and decision-makers

> A good game fish is too valuable to be caught only once. (Fishing Magazine, 2024)[21]

The prevalence of these dominant narratives in media, advertising and policy has contributed to identity biases that continue to influence how different fishing practices and practitioners are perceived and treated in contemporary New Zealand society. Recognising and reconciling this complex history and its modern manifestations will be critical for advancing a more just and equitable approach to freshwater fisheries management. We need to question if and how policy and legislation have responded to these ideals or been influenced by biases.

In considering identities in New Zealand, there are always issues regarding whose culture is doing the assessing and who is being assessed. The task is further complicated by retrospectively examining whether particular identities or stereotypes ever existed, or if they were as impactful as the dominant narratives may imply.

What should policy- and decision-makers do with this information?

- Increase awareness of the history of acclimatisation and conservation in New Zealand, as well as their underlying biases and effects on tangata whenua and taonga species.
- Acknowledge the inherent biases towards introduced fisheries and recreational fishing that exist in current regulations and non-regulatory practices and tools.
- Increase awareness of how certain groups have been marginalised from positive narratives, recognising our duty to act in good faith.
- Understand the importance of these considerations in shifting and articulating New Zealand identities both domestically and internationally.

How can policy- and decision-makers effect action and change?

- Undertake a deliberate and considered strategy to identify and counter biased narratives and the multiple forms they take (e.g. stories, images, statistics).
- Showcase positive and authentic narratives that illustrate diverse fishing practices and histories, ensuring that the communities being represented influence their narratives and how they are expressed.
- Incorporate mātauranga Māori in defining, analysing and expressing these identities, e.g. by giving customary rights equal weight in policy decisions to other fishing practices.
- Recognise and provide for Treaty partnership and settlements in tools, methods and outcomes by including Māori customary practices in steps for action and change.

Selected glossary

Term	Definition
Hākari	Feast, celebration
Hau kāinga / hau kāika	Home people, local people of a marae
Hīnaki	Traditional woven basket-like fish traps
Īnanga / īnaka	Main whitebait species (*Galaxias maculatus*)
Kaihaukai	A Kāi Tahu tradition involving the reciprocal exchange, bartering or sharing of food among kinship groups
Kaitiaki	Guardian
Kākahi / kāeo / torewai	Three species of freshwater mussel (*Echyridella menziesii*, *E. aucklandica*, *E. onekaka*)
Kanakana / piharau	Lamprey (*Geotria australis*)
Kōaro	Climbing galaxiid (*Galaxias brevipinnis*), a whitebait species
Kōkopu	Three species of galaxiid, also whitebait: giant kōkopu (*Galaxias argenteus*), banded kōkopu (*G. fasciatus*), shortjaw kōkopu (*G. postvectis*)
Kōura / kēkēwai / kēwai	Native freshwater crayfish (*Paranephrops planifrons*)
Kōwaro / hauhau / waikaka	Five species of mudfish (*Neochanna burrowsius*, *N. heleios*, *N. apoda*, *N. diversus*, *N. rekohua*)
Mahinga kai / mahika kai	Food-gathering sites, traditions and methods
Manawhenua	Customary authority over a particular area and use of its resources
Maramataka	Māori lunar calendar
Mātauranga Māori	The body of knowledge originating from Māori ancestors
Nohoanga	Seasonal occupation sites used by Kāi Tahu
Pā kanakana / utu piharau	Lamprey weir, used to catch lamprey swimming upstream
Pā tuna	Traditional weir for catching tuna
Porohe	Common smelt (*Retropinna retropinna*)
Rāhui	A temporary ritual prohibition, closed season, ban, reserve
Raupō	Bullrush (*Typha orientalis*), a common wetland plant
Salmonids	Trout and salmon species
Tangata whenua / takata whenua	Local Indigenous peoples
Tiriti o Waitangi	Te reo Māori text of New Zealand's founding document
Treaty of Waitangi	English-language text of New Zealand's founding document
Tuna	Freshwater eels, including the longfin eel (*Anguilla dieffenbachia*) and shortfin eel (*A. australis*)
Upokororo	Grayling (*Prototroctes oxyrhynchus*), extinct

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