NAU MAI E NGĀ HUA

Kai Sovereignty and Systems Transformation in Rotorua, Te Arawa

healthy families Rotorua

He oranga whānau

KARAKIA

Nau mai e ngā hua e hora nei
I haramai rā koe
I a Tupuānuku
I a Tupuārangi
I a Waitī
I a Waitā
Tāwhia ki a Rehua
Ki a Tama i te ao mārama
E Rongo whakairia ki runga
Kia tina, tina!
Hui ē! Tāiki ē!

MIHIMIHI

Kai ngā kaipānui i tēnei pūrongo,
tēnā koutou.
Tērā te kōrero e mea ana:
Ko te kai a te rangatira, ko te kōrero.
Nō reira, kia kai wō koutou mata
pīkoko i ngā kōrero makue kai roto i
tēnei pūrongo.

healthy families Rotorua
He oranga whānau

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WHAT IS HEALTHY FAMILIES?

Healthy Families NZ is a large scale prevention initiative that brings community leadership together in a united effort for better health in the places we live, learn, work and play.

Our goal is for all New Zealanders to enjoy health promoting social and physical environments that enable healthy food and physical activity choices, being smokefree, drinking alcohol only in moderation and increasing mental health, resilience and wellbeing.

The Healthy Families NZ approach focuses on addressing the underlying conditions that impact our health and wellbeing, in order to reduce the risk of preventable chronic disease. All of the Healthy Families NZ localities are connected through this common approach and principles, which creates our prevention movement.

We seek to uncover the journey that leads to chronic disease, understanding the lived experience of whānau and communities so that we can determine together how best to address the conditions that lead to experiencing preventable chronic disease.

HEALTHY FAMILIES NZ PRINCIPLES

Implementation at Scale
Strategies are delivered at a scale that impacts the health and wellbeing of a large number of the population, in the places where they spend their time - in schools, workplaces and communities.

Adaption
Strengthening the prevention system requires constant reflection, learning, and adaptation to ensure strategies are timely, relevant and sustainable.

Collaboration for Collective Impact
Long term commitment is required by multiple partners, from different sectors, at multiple levels, to generate greater collective impact on the health of New Zealanders. Knowledge is co-created and interventions co-produced, supported by a shared measurement system, mutually reinforcing activities, ongoing communication and a 'backbone' support organisation.

Experimentation
Small scale experiments provide insight into the most effective interventions to address chronic disease. These experiments are underpinned by evidence and experience, and are monitored and designed to then be amplified across the system - if they prove effective.

Leadership
Leadership is supported at all levels of the prevention effort, including senior management, elected officials, and health champions in our schools, businesses, workplaces, marae, sporting clubs, and other settings in the community

Workforce
A dedicated prevention workforce who are embedded within their local community, driving and supporting systems change. Healthy Families NZ kaimahi are skilled in systems thinking, creating adaptive responses to complex issues in local and cultural settings, and are able to identify prevention activity with potential for sustainable outcomes.

Equity
Health equity is the attainment of the highest level of health for all people. Equity recognises that different people with different levels of advantage require different approaches and resources to achieve equitable health outcomes. Healthy Families NZ will have an explicit focus on reducing inequities for groups at increased risk of chronic diseases

Line of Sight
The line of sight provides a transparent view on how investment in policy is translated into measured impacts in communities, ensuring best value from every dollar spent on prevention.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi
Healthy Families NZ is committed to fulfilling the special relationship between Māori and the Crown under Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Te Tiriti).

Healthy Families NZ prioritises the inclusion and protection of mātauranga Māori as an important enabler of Māori health and wellbeing. We collaborate with partners across our communities to improve Māori health outcomes and active pae ora. Māori participation and decision-making at all levels of planning and implementation is critical.

WHAKARĀPOPOTOTANGA

Aotearoa's kai system faces immense pressure, rising costs, supermarket dependence, and unequal access strain whanau, with Māori most affected. Much of our food is imported, leaving local growers vulnerable. The weaknesses fuel preventable health issues that burden hospitals and clinics.

Nau Mai e Ngā Hua acts as prevention in action. By strengthening local food systems, elevating mātauranga Māori, and empowering community leadership, we're building resilience upstream reducing illness before it arises and supporting long-term wellbeing across generations.

Healthy Families Rotorua unlocks local leadership already present within our community. By mapping kai networks and weaving mātauranga Māori into food design, we support initiatives grounded in lived realities, not assumptions. Shifting resources to those closet to the whenua strengthens equity and resilience where it matters most.

COVID-19 reinforced this approach.
When supermarket shelves emptied, marae kitchens, māra, and food co-ops kept whānau fed with dignity. These experiences showed that local, community led systems are the quickest and most effective ways to keep kai on tables.

Investment in māra, marae infrastructure, and seed sovereignty builds long-term resilience. Change must be guided by whakapapa, tikanga, and lived experience embedded in both policy and funding.

Our Vision is a future where whānau are nourished in body, spirit, and identity through local, equitable, and resilient kai systems grounded in whakapapa. The vision lives daily in Rotorua as iwi, kura, marae, and workplaces design their own solutions. It advances through equity-driven action, collaboration, and innovation combining mātauranga Maori and local knowledge with new ideas.

Guided by Te Ohākī o Whakaotorangi, we can transform Rotorua's kai system, strengthen whānau ora, and relieve pressure downstream creating a secure, thriving, and resilient future.

WHĀNAU VOICE

"I would love to learn how to grow my own māra and share with those in my neighbourhood."

"Prices have gone up dramatically despite being a double-income home. We don't know how people are surviving."

"Community gardens, some sort of education initiatives in schools around growing kai"

"The cost of living here is crazy. I honestly don't know how some whānau survive. Back to basics."

"I had unnecessary expenses and done unnecessary spending which has now stopped"

"Yes, I can buy enough kai for my whare, but I find myself buying more rubbish kai as it's cheaper"

"I've always budgeted and prepped so that we always have kai no matter what. Living within our means is definitely a tikanga."

"Teaching people how to grow their own kai. Knowing where to get supplies from and what to buy or how to make your own garden boxes"

"Unfortunately, my economic position and cost of rent etc. Dominates my finances which contributes to my anxiety. Due to my poor health and being a solo mum it is so difficult to maintain a job and the needs of my family. Its not because I'm lazy. I'm actually a really hard worker"

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR ROTORUA

Kai is whakapapa - the seed carried across Te Moana-nui-a-kiwa, the breath of our tūpuna, and the promise to our mokopuna. When we plant, harvest, cook, and share kai, we are not filling our puku we are nourishing wairua, affirming identity, and strengthening bonds.

Although Rotorua produces plenty of food, much of our kai system is controlled by supermarkets and global supply chain. Many whanau still struggle to put kai on the table, with Māori communities hit hardest by rising costs and inequality. These pressures lead directly to preventable illnesses, financial strain, and entrenched in inequity.

Yet our communities hold many of the answers. Māra are being re-established across homes, kura, and marae places of manaakitanga that feed communities with dignity. Hapū and Iwi are leading this movement, grounded in tikanga and mātauranga Māori. Healthy Families Rotorua supports this strength, redirecting resources to whānau and iwi, ensuring Kai grown in Rotorua nourishes Rotorua first, and embedding mātauranga Māori in decisions about health, education, and local governance.

Mātauranga Māori is our compass, a living way of knowing that restores balance between people and the environment. By aligning growing and harvesting with natural rhythms, we heal through māra, strengthen identity, and reclaim kai sovereignty. Designing food systems grounded in Whakapapa ensures they remain sustainable, equitable, and resilient.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed these truths. Supermarket dependence proved fragile, while mara, food rescue, and co-ops flourished through collective action and manaakitanga. Communities shifted from consumers to kaitiaki, showing that true resilience is rooted in local knowledge, cultural strength, and shared care for the whenua.

> *He taonga tuku iho te whenua, nō ngā tūpuna, hei oranga mō ngā uri whakatupu.*
>
> **The land is a treasure handed down from the ancestors to sustain future generations.**

OUR APPROACH TO SYSTEMS CHANGE AND TRANSFORMATION

Our vision of a kai-secure Rotorua requires collective action across many layers of the system. Lasting health gains will not come from one-off projects, but from shifting upstream conditions so that prevention is embedded in everyday life. We are building the dam, not just bailing the floodwaters reshaping the foundations of our kai system so future generations inherit structures that uphold balance, equity, and sovereignty.

Our approach begins with listening and making visible the strengths already present. Mapping kai networks has revealed the people, places, and initiatives that anchor Rotorua's food system. Embedding mātauranga Māori tikanga, maramataka, and kaitiakitanga ensures that design and decision-making reflect whakapapa and cultural integrity. Amplifying whānau voices places lived realities at the centre of policy and practice, while strengthening equity and resilience addresses structural barriers and prepares communities for shocks.

This way of working is guided by the Prevention System Roadmap moving from knowledge to action, and from action to systems change. Insights from whānau and data are woven together and tested through co-design and prototyping. They are then amplified and embedded into policy, practice, and funding streams. Continuous feedback ensures learning and adaptation remain at the heart of the system.

Change is already visible. Community voices are shaping local food policy and council decisions. Marae, kura, and whānau-led initiatives are reshaping daily practices. Kai is being redistributed through co-ops, marae kitchens, and food rescue networks. Relationships between marae, kura, growers, and local partners are strengthening. Power is shifting closer to whānau and iwi. Mental models are changing, with kai increasingly recognised as a taonga and a collective responsibility.

Guided by mātauranga Māori, innovation tools, and collective vision, we are embedding sustainability into policy, practice, and culture. We pursue the highest peaks of transformation knowing the journey is shared and enduring:

> *Whāia te iti kahurangi; ki te tūohu koe, me he maunga teitei.*
>
> **Pursue the highest ideals; if you must bow, let it be to a lofty mountain.**

LESSONS FROM COVID-19

The Rotorua kai system illustrates the urgent need for change.. Nutrient-rich kai continues to be exported while local whānau face rising costs and limited access. Inequities are deepening, particularly for Māori, yet the community has already shown how solutions can take root. During the pandemic, māra kai flourished in backyards and on marae, kura gardens were tended, co-ops distributed food, and food rescue networks ensured that no one was left behind.

COVID-19 exposed the fragility of supermarket dependence, but it also highlighted the strength of local knowledge and relationships. Whānau rediscovered that kai is whakapapa, resilience is woven through whanaungatanga, and when global systems falter, it is our tūpuna knowledge that sustains us.

The pandemic shifted mindsets: from dependence on supermarkets to distribution diversity; from passive consumers to active kaitiaki; from generic advice to practices guided by mātauranga Māori; and from one-off projects to the beginnings of system change.

Investment in māra, marae infrastructure, and seed sovereignty builds resilience not only for today but for the next disruption, whatever form it takes. And lasting change will only come when whakapapa, tikanga, and lived voice are embedded in the policies and funding streams that shape our food systems.

These lessons power our next phase. We are committed to scaling what worked, embedding it in practice and policy, and resourcing Te Arawa-led solutions so that resilience is not the exception during crises, but the norm in everyday life.

The lessons are clear. Local supply and community leadership remain the quickest and most dignified ways to keep kai on the table in times of crisis.

> *He kai kei aku ringa -*
>
> **there is food at the end of my hands.**

TRANSFORMATIVE ENERGY OF MĀTAURANGA MĀORI

Rotorua's kai system is currently dominated by supermarkets, global supply chains, and inequitable access. Much of the food grown on our whenua is exported, while whānau face rising costs and limited local availability. This structure leaves many people vulnerable and disconnected from traditional ways of sustaining themselves, and the burden falls heaviest on Māori communities.

The vision for the future is very different. It is a kai system led by whānau and hapū, where māra flourish and co-ops and local markets thrive; and where kai sovereignty is not an aspiration but a lived reality. In this future, mātauranga Māori guides decisions and practices, ensuring resilience, equity, and sustainability. Whānau are not only nourished but empowered, and resources flow back to the communities that steward the whenua.

At the heart of this transformation is mātauranga Māori, which provides the compass for resilience and balance. Mātauranga Māori is not just knowledge, but a worldview that honours the reciprocal relationship between tangata and taiao. Through maramataka, we follow the rhythms of the moon and stars to plant, harvest, and fish at the right times. Through rongoā, we recognise the healing properties of the natural world. Through māra kai, we return to the soil, cultivating not only food but also whakapapa, identity, and connection.

Reclaiming kai sovereignty requires centring mātauranga Māori in system design across policy, education, and community practice. Only then can kai systems be sustainable, equitable, and deeply rooted in whakapapa.

> *Whatungarongaro te tangata, toitū te whenua.*
>
> **People pass on, but the land remains.**

STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION

Kai Rotorua

Kai Rotorua was born in the Healthy Families Rotorua office, where local leaders, innovators, and community champions came together to respond to food insecurity, poor nutrition, and disconnection from traditional growing practices.

What began as small projects evolved into a dedicated trust with a clear vision: to advance kai sovereignty, revitalise mātauranga Māori, and create sustainable food systems. Healthy Families Rotorua remains connected to the practical work of Kai Rotorua, keeping the kaupapa grounded in the legacy of our revered tūpuna wāhine, Whakaotirangi.

At the heart of the kaupapa is the mission to reconnect people to Papatūānuku through teaching, growing, and collective action. This has meant restoring traditional practices of cultivation and harvest, embedding maramataka and Matariki into food planning, and creating living classrooms such as a syntropic community food forest in Kaharoa and an organic market garden. A Food Hub vision has also been articulated, imagining a central space where learning, growing, and distribution can be woven together.

Kūmara has remained the symbolic and practical taonga of Kai Rotorua, reflecting the foresight of Whakaotirangi and the whakapapa of Te Arawa. Through tāpapa seed beds, tipu hardening, maramataka-aligned planting, and soil restoration using organic mulches, whānau are reconnecting with both kai and whakapapa.

The Kaharoa food forest extends this vision further, demonstrating regenerative agroforestry where fruit trees, vegetables, and native plants grow in carefully layered systems that restore soil, water, and biodiversity while providing food.

Seasonal workshops and community working bees have become a rhythm of life for the kaupapa. Volunteers gather to save seed, compost, and plant, building confidence, whanaungatanga, and intergenerational learning. In September 2025 alone, working bees and spring workshops at Maraeroa and Kaharoa drew whānau together to celebrate collective progress. Kai Rotorua has been strengthened by a wide network of supporters, including philanthropic funders, local government, businesses, and community champions. These partnerships, alongside whānau mobilisation, have enabled its growth and impact.

The results are cultural, ecological, and systemic. Culturally, maramataka-based growing and kūmara traditions are being normalised. Ecologically, regenerative practices are restoring balance to land and water. Socially, whānau confidence and resilience are being strengthened. Systemically, Kai Rotorua extends Healthy Families Rotorua's intent by embedding sovereignty and resilience into Rotorua's food system.

Kai Systems Conditions of Change in Action

The transformation of Kai Rotorua can be understood through three interconnected shifts:

1. Shifting Mindsets
Normalising mātauranga-led growing practices – maramataka, kūmara traditions, and regenerative methods – reframes kai as whakapapa and responsibility to Papatūānuku.

2. Strengthening Relationships
Workshops, working bees, and the food forest bring whānau, schools, funders, and local champions together, embedding whanaungatanga and intergenerational learning.

3. Transforming Structures
Becoming an independent trust and developing long-term initiatives like the syntropic food forest and Food Hub shifted Kai Rotorua from short-term projects into structural change.

What began as a kaupapa incubated in the Healthy Families Rotorua office has grown into a stand-alone trust with deep cultural grounding, strong governance, and an expanding portfolio of regenerative projects. Kai Rotorua shows how community-born initiatives can grow into enduring movements, transforming not only what people eat but also how they live in relationship with whenua, whakapapa, and each other.

Te Ōhākī o Whakaotirangi

The story of Whakaotirangi, our tūpuna wāhine who carried the precious kūmara aboard the Te Arawa waka from Hawaiki, is one of foresight, resilience, and intergenerational responsibility.

By safeguarding kai, she ensured the survival and flourishing of her people. That legacy continues in Rotorua today through *Te Ōhākī o Whakaotirangi* – a kaupapa that restores traditional kūmara cultivation, storage, and ceremonial use as a pathway to sovereignty.

Initiated in 2022 through a partnership between Healthy Families Rotorua, Te Arawa Whānau Ora, iwi leaders, Kai Rotorua, and community champions, the first umu kohukohu whetū during Matariki became the catalyst for rediscovering ancestral practice. Traditional varieties such as hutihuti and taputini were planted alongside Ōwairaka Red, guided by maramataka rhythms. At the same time, knowledge of rua and ana kūmara storage, thought nearly lost, was revived with Ngāti Pikiao tohunga and koeke. Ancient techniques of layering, flooring, sealing, and placing a mauri stone were reinstated, reconnecting the community to cultural practices of preservation.

From just 30 kūmara, more than 1,000 tupu were propagated and shared across Te Arawa, ensuring continuity of planting, harvesting, and redistribution. Gardens at Te Puea Orchard and community plots flourished, with harvests distributed through hautapu ceremonies, marae kitchens, and soup kitchens. Hands-on participation became a source of pride and identity, particularly for tamariki and rangatahi who engaged directly in the cycles of planting and ceremony.

The impact has been profound. In 2023, more than 600 kilograms of kūmara were harvested, including 100 kilograms of traditional varieties. Of this, 120 kilograms were successfully stored using revived ana kūmara techniques, ensuring produce carried both nourishment and spiritual meaning into hautapu ceremonies. National coverage highlighted the kaupapa as a model of mātauranga Māori revitalisation.

Kai Systems Conditions of Change in Action

The transformation led by Te Ōhākī o Whakaotirangi can be seen through three interconnected shifts:

1. Shifting Mindsets
Kūmara is no longer seen simply as a crop, but as a taonga that embodies whakapapa, ceremony, and sovereignty. This restores cultural identity and affirms intergenerational responsibility.

2. Strengthening Relationships
Hautapu ceremonies, planting days, and revived storage practices brought whānau, marae, iwi, and rangatahi into collective action, embedding cultural practice and strengthening iwi leadership.

3. Transforming Structures
The transition from Healthy Families Rotorua-led, to co-delivery, to iwi authority fully restored represents structural change. Authority over kai practices has returned to iwi leadership, embedding tino rangatiratanga into the food system.

By 2025, Te Hautapu umu kohukohu whetū o Ngāti Whakaue was fully iwi-led, supported by marae, iwi structures, and council. Kūmara itself has been reframed not as a crop, but as a taonga linking whakapapa, sovereignty, and identity.

Te Ōhākī o Whakaotirangi is more than gardening; it is a cultural movement restoring balance to kai systems, strengthening iwi leadership, and reconnecting communities to legacy. It demonstrates systems change in action: from Healthy Families Rotorua-led, to co-delivery, to iwi authority fully restored. The outcome is not only food security but also cultural survival, intergenerational equity, and tino rangatiratanga.

Ka Pai Kai Rotorua

In the mid-2010s, Rotorua's tamariki faced stark inequities. Childhood obesity was among the highest in the OECD, oral health outcomes were poor, and nearly half of children under nine lived in the most deprived neighbourhoods. Teachers saw hunger daily: children arriving tired, disengaged, and sometimes absent out of whakamā.

Healthy Families Rotorua recognised that while influencing home meals was complex, the school lunch was one meal the system could directly shape. From this insight came Ka Pai Kai Rotorua – a systemic intervention grounded in dignity, equity, and prevention.

Launched in 2017 with just 100 lunches a week, the kaupapa began in borrowed kitchens, powered by volunteers who rose before dawn. From the outset, Ka Pai Kai was designed as more than food provision, it was a lever for systems change across education, health, economy, and social wellbeing. Over time, operations moved into a network of commercial kitchens across Rotorua and Whakatāne, including a repurposed teaching kitchen at Te Wānanga o Awanuiarangi.

When tourism collapsed during COVID-19, Ka Pai Kai reframed disruption as opportunity, partnering with displaced hospitality workers and repurposing idle kitchens to scale almost overnight. Within eight weeks, it was producing thousands of meals each day and keeping 38 whānau employed during lockdown. This ability to pivot under pressure demonstrated the strength of community-led systems.

In 2021, Ka Pai Kai Rotorua transitioned into Ka Pai Kai Aotearoa through a joint venture with a local iwi trust. This partnership brought governance capacity, investment, and shared ownership, while safeguarding founding values. By 2024, the kaupapa was producing 8,500 lunches daily, employing 120 kaimahi, and generating $12 million annually for the local economy. Procurement remained deliberately local, prioritising growers, Māori enterprises, and small businesses.

The impacts rippled across systems. In classrooms, teachers described calmer learning environments, improved concentration, and consistent attendance. For some tamariki, reliable access to lunches ended chronic absenteeism. Health outcomes shifted as sugary foods gave way to whole kai, and kura adopted Wai Māori only policies. Socially, universal provision eliminated stigma, reinforcing dignity and inclusion. Economically, the kaupapa proved that food contracts could strengthen local supply chains rather than extract from them.

Kai Systems Conditions of Change in Action

The transformation of Ka Pai Kai Rotorua can be seen through three interconnected shifts:

1. Shifting Mindsets
Ka Pai Kai reframed school lunches from deficit-focused provision into a universal, dignified right that supports hauora, equity, and learning. This mindset shift reduced stigma and normalised healthy kai in kura.

2. Strengthening Relationships
The kaupapa built bridges between schools, iwi, whānau, and local businesses. Partnerships with hospitality workers, growers, and Māori enterprises during COVID-19 showed the strength of collective action and embedded resilience into local systems.

3. Transforming Structures
By evolving into Ka Pai Kai Aotearoa and embedding iwi governance, local procurement, and government investment, the kaupapa reshaped school food provision from a volunteer-based system into a structural, long-term solution.

Nau Mai e Ngā Hua – Sustainable Gardening

Nau Mai e Ngā Hua emerged from a simple truth: sovereignty begins in our own backyards. In Rotorua, rising costs and supermarket dependence have left many whānau vulnerable, even as traditions of māra kai, rongoā, and seed guardianship remain close at hand.

Healthy Families Rotorua, alongside partners including Maraeroa Mahinga Kai, Rotorua Seed Library, One Foundation, and Toi Tangata, convened workshops to reconnect whānau with whenua, whakapapa, and intergenerational knowledge.

At Maraeroa Mahinga Kai in Ōhinemutu, the series unfolded in seasonal modules guided by maramataka. In August 2024, participants created tāpapa kūmara to produce tupu for planting. Later that month, they built compost to restore soil mauri. In February 2025, they learned to save seed – gathering, drying, and storing for future harvests. Each session privileged practice over theory: gumboots in the soil, compost turned by hand, seeds sorted and stored. Mātauranga Māori was woven through, reminding participants that planting and harvesting are acts of identity and sovereignty.

The kaupapa revitalised both knowledge and practice. Whānau reconnected with ancestral methods and reframed them as resilience strategies for today. Confidence grew to start or expand māra kai, and soon seeds, seedlings, and surplus produce were being shared within communities. The workshops became hubs of connection, linking kaumātua wisdom, kura curiosity, and local gardeners.

The ripple effects extended beyond the garden. Short videos and posts sparked kōrero across social media, generating sign-ups for future sessions. By early 2025, over 50 participants had engaged directly in three workshops, with many more reached online. Participants reported stronger confidence in composting, seed saving, and māra management, and described feeling reconnected to whakapapa through growing kai.

Kai Systems Conditions of Change in Action

The transformation sparked by Nau Mai e Ngā Hua can be understood through three interconnected shifts:

1. Shifting Mindsets
Whānau redefined māra kai, seed saving, and composting from being survival skills of the past to acts of sovereignty and resilience today. Kai growing is seen as whakapapa in action, not just a way to fill the cupboard.

2. Strengthening Relationships
The workshops created intergenerational and intercultural spaces where kaumātua, tamariki, kura, and gardeners worked together. These connections extended into seed swaps, surplus sharing, and stronger networks linking iwi, marae, kura, and kai leaders.

3. Transforming Structures
By embedding maramataka and tikanga into everyday practice, and by shifting power and resources back into households and communities, Nau Mai e Ngā Hua is beginning to transform local food systems – reducing supermarket dependence and strengthening resilience.

Nau Mai e Ngā Hua has shifted systems in subtle but important ways. Power has moved back into the hands of whānau, who now hold skills, tools, and seeds. Mātauranga Māori has been normalised in everyday practice, maramataka guiding planting and tikanga shaping harvests. Distribution diversity is emerging through seed sharing and swap hui, reducing reliance on fragile supply chains. Networks linking iwi, marae, kura, and kai leaders have strengthened the social infrastructure of resilience.

This kaupapa demonstrates prevention in action. By strengthening household kai security upstream, Nau Mai e Ngā Hua reduces downstream hardship and health costs. It shows how seed, soil, and skills can generate identity, confidence, and intergenerational knowledge, while embedding equity and rangatiratanga into daily life.

Rongoā Waitāwhara – E Kai!

For many whānau, the everyday relationship with kai has been shaped by price, convenience, and global supply chains, while the deep legacy of mātauranga Māori – foraging, rongoā, stone cookery, preservation, seasonal rhythms – has faded from daily life.

The Rongoā Waitāwhara: E Kai! wānanga at Kearoa Marae, Horohoro, was designed to change that. Co-facilitated by Healthy Families Rotorua with chefs from the E Kai Māori team, the three-day immersion brought whānau together to reclaim skills, knowledge, and pride in their kai culture.

From pōwhiri and whakawhanaungatanga that grounded participants in tikanga, the wānanga moved quickly into practice. Groups foraged along ngahere and awa edges, learning to identify edible plants and rongoā and to harvest with care. In the wharekai, stones were heated, leaves prepared, and traditional steaming and smoking methods demonstrated. Weaving workshops reconnected craft with kai, showing that nothing in the system of food was separate from another.

Evening kōrero explored the history of Māori food systems, the disconnection caused by colonisation and globalisation, and the possibilities of weaving ancient practice into contemporary life.

The impact was immediate. Participants described being surprised at how simple reconnection could be, leaving with practical skills to forage, prepare, and cook using ancestral methods. Tamariki and rangatahi learned alongside pakeke, ensuring knowledge flowed across generations. Many spoke of pride and belonging, describing how the wānanga enabled them to stand taller in their identity through kai. For many, food was reframed – no longer something bought in a supermarket, but a taonga drawn from the taiao, governed by tikanga, seasonality, and care.

Kai Systems Conditions of Change in Action

The transformation of Rongoā Waitāwhara: E Kai! can be seen through three interconnected shifts:

1. Shifting Mindsets
Participants reframed kai from being something purchased through supermarkets to being a taonga gathered, prepared, and honoured through tikanga and seasonality. This restored pride in Māori identity and kai culture.

2. Strengthening Relationships
The wānanga wove together whānau, rangatahi, marae, chefs, and knowledge holders. Shared foraging, stone cookery, weaving, and kōrero deepened intergenerational learning and positioned marae as living classrooms of kai and wellbeing.

3. Transforming Structures
By embedding mātauranga-led food practices into marae kitchens, whānau routines, and community networks, the kaupapa began shifting the structure of local food systems – normalising ancestral knowledge as a foundation for health and resilience.

The systemic shifts are already visible. Marae kitchens and households are integrating seasonal, local species into menus. Whānau have begun foraging walks with tamariki, sharing practices within networks. The wānanga positioned marae as places of food education and normalised mātauranga-led learning as health promotion. Relationships between marae, knowledge holders, and whānau deepened, and mental models of kai and wellbeing shifted.

Rongoā Waitāwhara: E Kai! shows how ancestral practice is powerful upstream prevention. By equipping whānau with enduring skills, the kaupapa reduces reliance on fragile supply chains, strengthens everyday resilience through foraging and preservation, and restores identity and connection. It is systems change you can taste – kai reclaimed as whakapapa, resilience, and sovereignty.

Waitawa Restoration – Revitalising the Puna, Returning the Kai

Ngāti Hurunga-te-rangi's rohe stretches from Ōhinemutu to Waingaehe, with Ngāpuna "many springs" a reminder of a landscape once defined by puna, ngāwhā, and clean streams. For centuries, these waters sustained hapū with tuna, kōura, koaro, trout, and watercress, as well as places to swim and practise tikanga. Over time, however, Waitawa Stream was degraded and treated as a stormwater drain. The kai disappeared, water quality declined, and kawa and cultural practice were lost.

In 2021, Healthy Families Rotorua began working alongside mana whenua, residents, and environmental experts to restore the mauri of Waitawa. The kaupapa began with whakapapa-first research and haerenga, unearthing stories, heritage features, and local knowledge. Mapping revealed the stream's original course and showed that industrial development only arrived in the 1960s, long after the puna had sustained generations.

Stage 1 began in December 2022 with a karakia by kaumātua. From the outset, the project was designed as a systems shift: restoring ecological health while rebalancing power and resources so tangata whenua could lead. The Puna Ora Care Group Agreement formalised this governance, bringing together Ngāti Hurunga-te-rangi, Bay of Plenty Regional Council, Rotorua Lakes Council, Te Arawa Lakes Trust, and technical advisors. Work at Neil Hunt Park followed, where a riparian strip was restored, shading and weeds cleared, and native planting scheduled. Resources were cycled back into community – mulch distributed to marae and gardens, wood returned to kaumātua while kura and kōhanga reo were engaged in planting and monitoring.

The narrative of Waitawa has begun to shift. Light and flow are returning, laying conditions for tuna, kōura, koaro, and watercress to flourish. Communities are preparing for the return of practice: rama, gathering, swimming, and tikanga around wai. Mana whenua leadership is visible, rangatahi are reconnecting, and agencies are aligning with Te Mana o Te Wai.

Kai Systems Conditions of Change in Action

The transformation of Waitawa can be seen through three interconnected shifts:

1. Shifting Mindsets
Waitawa has been reclaimed as a living puna, restoring its role as a source of kai, tikanga, and whakapapa. This mindset shift helps both whānau and agencies to see wai as life-giving, not expendable.

2. Strengthening Relationships
The kaupapa brought together Ngāti Hurunga-te-rangi, councils, kura, kōhanga reo, technical experts, and residents. Planting, monitoring, and resource sharing created collective ownership and intergenerational learning, strengthening bonds between hapū, community, and environment.

3. Transforming Structures (Hanganga Panoni)
The Puna Ora Care Group Agreement shifted governance and decision-making power closer to mana whenua. By embedding iwi leadership into water management, aligning agencies under Te Mana o Te Wai, and ensuring resources cycle back into local use, the kaupapa is restructuring how wai and kai systems are cared for.

The impact is ecological, cultural, and systemic. Restoring puna conditions is restoring kai pathways and re-establishing wai as life-giving. Governance has moved closer to tangata whenua, resource flows remain local, and community participation has become integral. Healthy streams buffer shocks, sustain ecosystems, and return customary kai. They create safe spaces for learning and play, reconnect people to whakapapa, and embed rangatiratanga by restoring iwi leadership of wai systems.

Waitawa Restoration shows that revitalising puna is a doorway to the return of kai. By re-centring whakapapa, aligning councils and agencies under iwi leadership, and taking practical action in riparian care, the kaupapa is moving Waitawa from drain to living stream. As puna come back to life, so too do the kai, practices, and relationships that sustain mana and resilience for generations.

KUPU WHAKAKAPI – STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION

These six kaupapa, Ka Pai Kai Rotorua, Kai Rotorua, Te Ōhākī o Whakaotirangi, Nau Mai e Ngā Hua, Rongoā Waitāwhara: E Kai, and Waitawa Restoration – show that systems change is not a distant goal, but a lived reality unfolding in Rotorua today. Each demonstrates the power of mātauranga Māori, community innovation, and collective leadership to reframe kai not as a commodity, but as whakapapa, identity, and sovereignty.

Together, they have transformed everyday spaces like schools, marae kitchens, streams, seed banks, and backyard māra, into places of pride, resilience, and tino rangatiratanga. They remind us that prevention begins upstream: when whānau hold the skills, resources, and authority to shape their own kai systems, the ripple effects extend across health, education, the economy, and the environment.

At the heart of these stories lies whakapapa the anchor that grounds this work, gives purpose to the struggle, and carries the vision forward for generations. By shifting mindsets, strengthening relationships, and transforming structures, Rotorua is demonstrating what becomes possible when communities are trusted to lead.

Guided by Healthy Families Rotorua, these transformations show that real change is most enduring when it is locally led, culturally grounded, and collectively owned. They are proof that kai can be the doorway to equity, dignity, and resilience – and they stand as a call to action: to honour the legacy of our tūpuna, uphold the mana of our whenua, and secure the wellbeing of our tamariki for generations to come.

NGĀ MIHI

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NGĀTI WHAKAUE

MARAEROA MAHINGA KAI
(CUSHLA PAICE, LANI KEREOPA WHĀNAU)

NGĀTI HURUNGA-TE-RANGI

KARAKIA WHAKAMUTUNGA

Unuhia, unuhia
Unuhia ki te uru tapu nui, a Tāne
Kia wātea, kia māmā
Te ngākau, te tinana, te wairua, te hinengaro, i te ara takatū
Koia rā e Rongo, whakairihia ake ki runga
Kia wātea, kia wātea. Ae rā, kua wātea!
Hui ē! Tāiki ē!

KUPU WHAKAKAPI

Closing Words

He waka eke noa —
we are all in this waka together.

Guided by Te Ōhākī o Whakaotirangi, we will keep building resilience upstream so that wellbeing flows downstream.

Nā tō rourou, nā taku rourou, ka ora ai te iwi.

healthy families
Rotorua
He oranga whānau

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