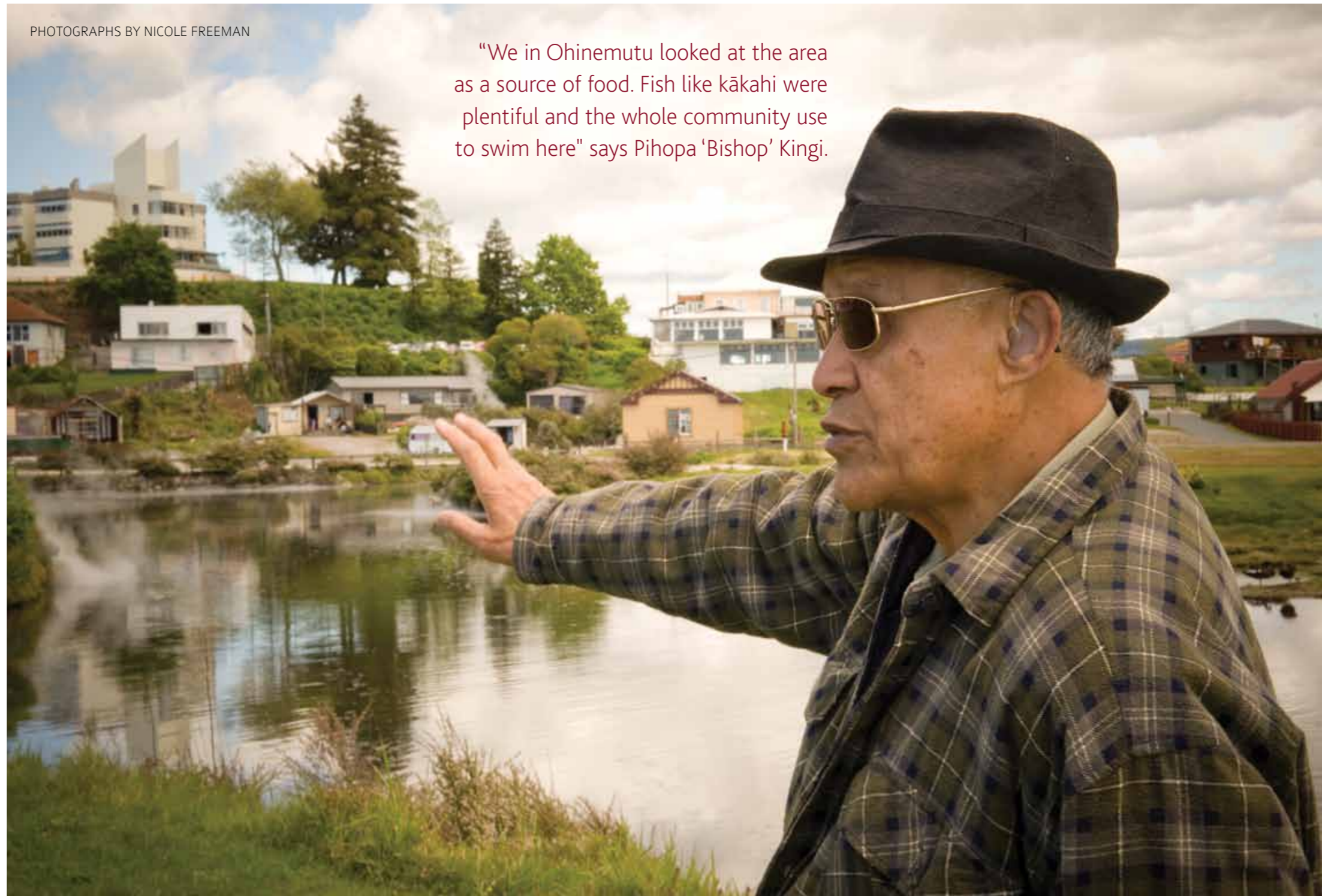


PORTRAIT OF A LOST ERA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICOLE FREEMAN



"We in Ohinemutu looked at the area as a source of food. Fish like kākahi were plentiful and the whole community use to swim here" says Pihopa 'Bishop' Kingi.

Mere Takoko, Managing Editor of *Koha*, talks with Te Arawa FoMA elder Pihopa 'Bishop' Kingi about the ongoing pollution of Lake Rotorua.

ABOVE: Ohinemutu was the original settlement of the Ngāti Whakaue iwi. Bubbling hotpools and drifting steam provide a reminder of its volcanic past. Pictured L-R: Mere Takoko, Kuia Inez Kingi and Pihopa Kingi.

On the western shore of Lake Rotorua is the famous village of Ohinemutu. It's home to the people of Ngāti Whakaue who chose the location for its lakeside setting and abundance of geothermal energy for cooking, bathing and heating.

For centuries, Lake Rotorua was a means of sustenance for Ngāti Whakaue, who for their part, had always maintained cultural protocols informed by traditional knowledge to ensure the resources and health of the lake would be unaffected.

"We in Ohinemutu looked at the area as a source of food. Fish like kākahi were plentiful and the whole community used to swim here," says local kaumātua Pihopa 'Bishop' Kingi.

Standing beside the nearby Ruapeka stream, Pihopa's concern is obvious as he continues to reminisce about his childhood when the village of Ohinemutu was a haven for community gatherings. "When we were youths this stream used to be very deep and only the best divers could get to the bottom. It used



This page: At the centre of the village of Ohinemutu is the paramount marae of Te Arawa, Tama Te Kapua, captain of the Te Arawa canoe.

Top right: Pihopa and his wife Kuia Inez Kingi both want to see Rotorua lake returned to good health.

Bottom right: Remembering the fallen. Pihopa takes a moment to offer a prayer to the soldiers who rest in the village cemetery.

to be a breeding area for inanga (white bait) which were always a part of our staple diet.”

But the inanga have long fled from the area, their nesting grounds destroyed by pollutants including heavy metals, DDT, dioxin, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB’s), and a number of recently banned pesticides. While regulations were introduced in the 70s to cut down the amount of pollution entering Lake Rotorua from nearby Waipa Mill caused dangerous levels of toxic chemicals known as dioxin were pumped into the lake until the late 80s.

“The lakes were in a pristine condition when they were taken over by the local council as a result of the Fenton’s agreement signed in 1880,” says Pihopa. “But very few are healthy enough to swim in today.”

As a long time spokesperson for the Te Arawa branch of the Federation of Māori Authorities (FoMA), Pihopa has raised a number of concerns about the way local authorities have historically managed Lake Rotorua and other water bodies in the district. While millions of dollars have been allocated to the local authorities to clean up the Lakes, Pihopa says the money has been lost.

“While the algae bloom as been controlled to some degree, it has not been eliminated. I have always been very disappointed in the way that the establishment has failed in the task of keeping all the lakes, rivers and streams in a reasonable state.”

Over the past decade, an overload of chemical nutrients being pumped into local waters from sewerage, agricultural and forestry sites have continued to cause Lake Rotorua to reach dangerous

levels of eutrophication. Current research estimates that 70% of nitrogen and 40% of current phosphate loading is of farm origin.

“There is a level of runoff, and our local Māori authorities are working hard to reduce the runoff from the farms, but it is unfair because most of the historic pollution that has made the lake vulnerable has not come from Māori.”

Te Arawa FoMA members are currently working towards a win-win solution with Environment Bay of Plenty and have developed a number of innovative approaches for cutting down nutrient loads from farms. This includes modifying feed, using nitrogen inhibitors and runoff water filtering systems. Ngāti Whakaue have just completed a trial using watercress to take up nutrients from

stream water. Watercress is a traditional Māori plant that the research projects have shown takes up more nutrients than it requires for normal growth.

“It’s a good cultural way of helping to sustain the health of our lakes. It’s an example of our traditional cultural knowledge in practice,” says Pihopa.

In a practical sense, clean technologies are helping the local iwi of Ohinemutu to forge ahead in their efforts to minimise the impacts of local farming activities on the lake. But it’s the spiritual sustenance of Te Arawa that is most concerning to Pihopa who says that the wider population of Rotorua needs to join with Māori bring back the health of the lake.

“If we can do that, we will be able to hold our heads up and have our children go down there and swim once again.”

