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SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2025 \$3.20

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WEEKEND KITCHEN



# Fish-head project reels 'em in

A food rescue initiative distributing free fish-heads and frames has its grateful recipients hooked

## FOOD SECURITY

Lucy Cooper

A food rescue project delivering free fish-heads and frames to Masterton communities is nourishing more than just the body.

Chris Jupp, who heads Wellington's branch of the Kai Ika Project, said his organisation's latest collaboration with Waiwaste was "restoring access" to a "precious resource", transforming the public's perceptions and building community.

### A precious resource

Every month, six Wairarapa community groups share about 400 kilograms of fish-heads and frames distributed by Waiwaste through its partnership with Kai Ika.

While these parts of the fish are routinely discarded by some recreational and commercial fishers, for many – particularly in the Māori and Pasifika community – they are a nutritionally dense and much-loved delicacy.

"All those communities that value those parts of the fish, absolutely, it's loaded with cultural significance," Jupp said. "So we're seeing that there's a lot of reconnection to ways of cooking kai and enjoying fish-heads and frames that are able to come back up because access is being restored."

In Jupp's experience, bridging the gap between those who value fish-heads and frames and those who perceive them as waste has far-reaching positive impacts on individual and community wellbeing.

"We acknowledge that not every person who catches fish is going to start eating the heads and frames. But when [they do] realise the value and then connect with a family in their neighbourhood who would love them, we're setting up this ... community connection [between] worlds that often would otherwise not connect, and it's building community resilience."

Being able to "enhance the incredible mahi" that Waiwaste was doing was a privilege, Jupp said. "The story here is actually very little to do with Kai Ika."

"It's about this precious resource that we can look at differently, and it's about the people on the ground who are standing up for one another so that everyone



Chris Jupp, from the Kai Ika Project, believes the value of restoring access to protein-rich fish-heads and frames isn't just in their nutritional makeup, but in the connections that sharing this kai can help build in local communities. **BRUCE MACKAY/THE POST**

can have a full puku and can thrive."

### 'Gosh, is this for free?'

Waiwaste manager Vic Ross said the take-up of the fish-heads and frames by the local community was going "wonderfully well", but she admitted that when first approached by Kai Ika, she wondered how popular the free fish-heads would be.

"I didn't know how well that was going to go down. Being Pākehā, it wasn't part of my diet growing up. But when I started asking around, I quickly realised that that was a very narrow opinion and people were absolutely thrilled to be getting them."

With food prices at the supermarket remaining stubbornly high, Waiwaste is grateful to be able to provide the popular protein to the community for free.

"Some of the stories that we hear

about people struggling are actually quite difficult to hear. In this country that we live in, where we produce so much food, no-one should be hungry, no-one should be unable to afford food, and as far as I can tell, it's not getting any better," Ross said.

Georgina Lologa, community connector at recipient organisation Pasifika o Wairarapa, said interest in the fish-heads and frames was immediate.

"A lot of the Pacific Islanders like to eat the fish-head with ... coconut cream. When we put out the call that we've got fresh fish-heads, they all came in and had their bags or pots. They were really stoked to get a nice kind of fish ... that still had flesh on it."

Pick-up days were also opportunities for communities to connect, Lologa said.

"It is definitely connecting all our different Pasifika groups here. Like our

Fijians, our Samoans, our Tongans, our Solomons, those from Vanuatu. And anyone, not just our Pasifika community, but anyone else – Māori, European, whoever."

The project has been equally popular at Whaiora, said Jo Surtees, the centre's community team lead. "We have some people who say, 'Oh my gosh, is this for free?'"

"To a lot of people, the fish-heads are a delicacy. It's not everybody's cup of tea, but the eyeballs are apparently the favourite, and people will spread them on toast."

Like Ross and Lologa, Surtees is seeing ongoing food insecurity in the community.

"We fill up [our pātaka kai] every day, and it goes every day. It seems to be getting a lot harder, particularly for people with young families and pensioners. And coming up to Christmas, we all know that's a time where people really struggle."

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