

SURVIVORS

New Zealand's Maori defend an extraordinary creature—and themselves

TEXT AND ART BY
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THE FIRST WRITTEN ACCOUNT of a *taniwha* is most likely the one recorded by Captain Cook during his 1777 voyage. While anchored in Queen Charlotte Sound off the South Island of New Zealand, Cook wrote the following about statements by a local Maori: “We had another piece of intelligence from him, more correctly given, though not confirmed by our own observations, that there are snakes and lizards there of an enormous size. He said, they sometimes seize and devour men.”

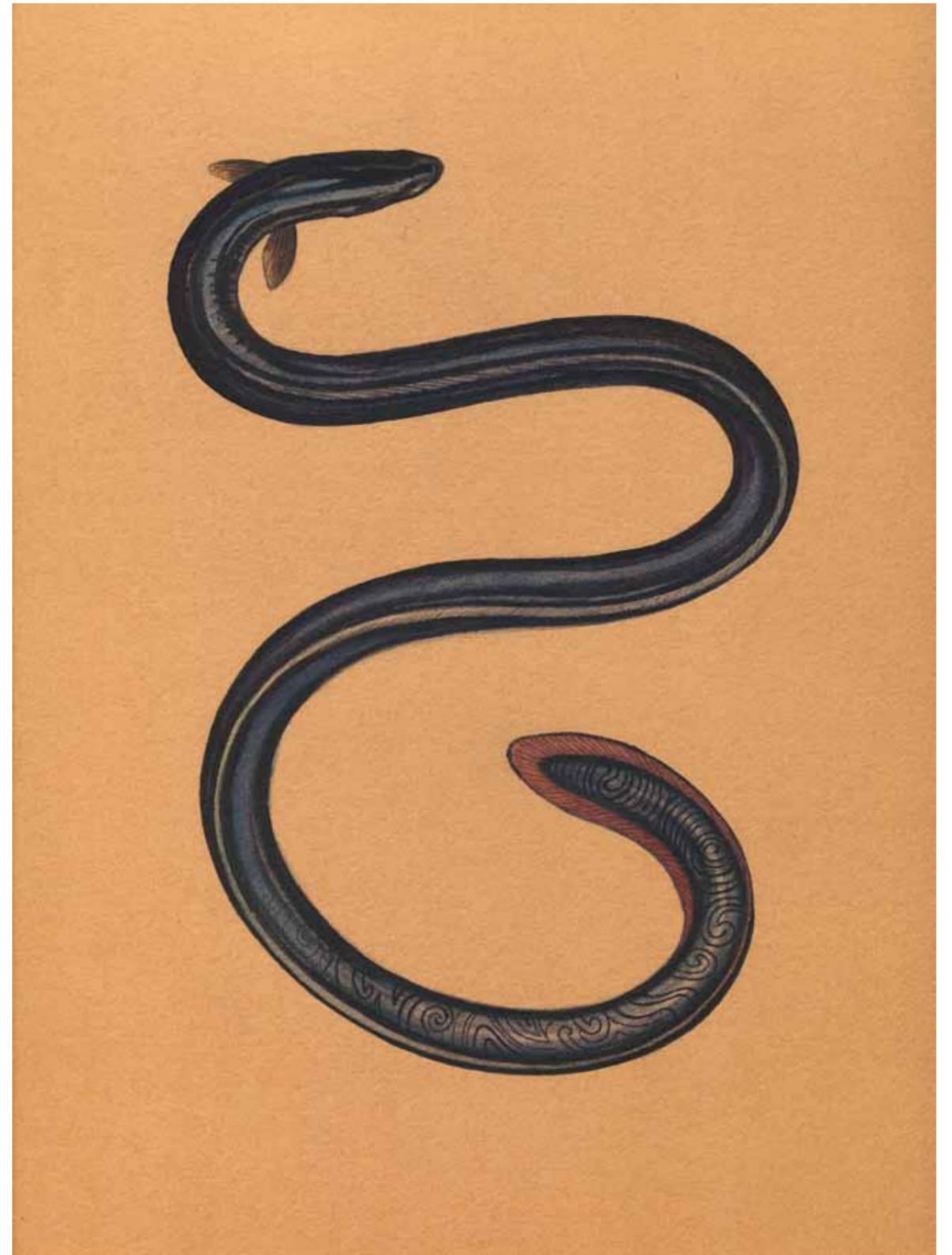
Maori would not have known a lizard of the size Cook related, and would never have seen a snake, as there are no native snakes in New Zealand. What Cook described, “eight feet in length, and big round as a man's body,” was most likely a longfin eel. I had been working on a book on eels for about three years when my friend David Seidler, a screenwriter in Santa Monica, asked me, “Have you heard about the sacred eels in New Zealand, mate?” I hadn't. Soon David had connected me with Stella August, a Maori who had just completed her graduate thesis on eel migration. I began an e-mail correspondence, and she agreed to be my guide. My visit would be an opportunity to listen to men who had grown up fishing and hunting in New Zealand, speaking a language and practicing traditions that had gone largely silent and underground since the arrival of the British in the late eighteenth century.

THE STORY IN COOK'S LOGBOOK may have been about an eel. But not every eel is a *taniwha*, and a *taniwha* is more than an eel. The *taniwha*, pronounced *tanifa*—*wh* in Maori language is always pronounced *f*—would be the first important element of my education. In the *Reed Dictionary of Modern Maori*, the transla-

tion of *taniwha* is “water monster, powerful person, ogre.” More often than not the *taniwha* takes the form of a giant eel. “If you harm a *taniwha*,” Stella said, “if you spear or capture an eel that is a *taniwha*, it will cry like a baby or bark like a dog, or change colors. Something about it will seem strange. It will indicate that it is not like the others. If you kill a *taniwha* eel, you have a *makutu*, a curse, put on you. You start going crazy, like you're possessed. Then you've broken *tapu*—something sacred or off limits.”

Taniwha or not, the longfin eel is an impressive creature. Like other members of New Zealand's distinct fauna—the now extinct moa bird (killed off by the first Polynesian settlers for food) that once stood over twelve feet tall, the native kakapo (the world's largest parrot, now endangered), as well as the largest living insect, a kind of cricket called a *weta*—the eel has a tendency toward gigantism. Capable of growing to over eighty pounds and living more than a hundred years, it is the largest and longest-lived freshwater eel species in the world. The longfin has been a consistent and available food source for Maori as long as they have been on the islands and for that reason, along with its impressive stature, it has garnered awe and respect, inspiring many stories.

The longfin eel is one of fifteen species of eels in the world that spend their adult lives in freshwater and migrate to the open ocean to reproduce, a life history that makes them catadromous, as opposed to anadromous fish like salmon and shad. The eels that live in the streams and ponds near my home in Connecticut travel to the Sargasso Sea, the western part of the subtropical gyre of the North Atlantic between the West Indies and the Azores. The spawning place of the New Zealand eels is unknown, but



is thought to be somewhere east of New Caledonia. No one has ever been able to find a spawning adult, or witness any freshwater eel spawning in the wild. For eel scientists, solving this mystery of eel reproduction remains a kind of holy grail.

TRADITIONALLY, Maori had sacred eel ponds, where the eels would be fed daily. Sometimes the eels were brought to these ponds and kept there, with no access to the sea, where they would live, some Maori say, for hundreds of years. But most eels were kept in the pool of a creek or river, and could come and go as they pleased. Often they stayed for a long time—perhaps because of free meals, or the love that was imparted by the people around them. But their ultimate goal was to store up enough energy to get to their spawning grounds.

“The eel’s life is about travel,” Stella said to me as she drove. Stella was half Maori, born on a coastal farm on Hawke’s Bay (on the east coast of the North Island) of an English mother and Maori father. She had long, dark hair and a strict, authoritative way of speaking. Her love of eels and other creatures came from her father, who had drowned in a fishing accident when Stella was only sixteen. “The only reason they stay still is to store food for their long journey. A male shortfin eel spends an average of twenty-five years in freshwater, a longfin eel more than thirty.” The longfin eel is the larger and longer lived of the two species, identifiable by a dorsal fin that starts closer to the head than that of a shortfin. “The eel’s movement is universal in Maori culture. As the eel moves, they leave the path of life behind them.”

Stella stopped at a convenience store in a small coastal village called Kawhia, and I followed her to a back shelf where she grabbed a few cans of dog food. “For the eels,” she said, putting them on the counter.

“How big are these eels?” I asked. “I mean, are they really as long as a person?” She gave me a sly look. “You’ll see.”

A bit farther down the winding road, where it skirted the beach, Stella pulled off. A small sign hung on a moss-covered gate, and on it was painted a small black eel. We drove down the gravel drive to a modest ranch-style home. Barely visible beside the house was a pool of water that collected seepage from a cold spring. Below the pool, a small brook ran, choked with watercress. An old man came out to greet us.

“We’ve come to see your eels,” Stella said.

“Oh, them eels isn’t mine, they’re her thing,” he said, referring to his wife, who introduced herself as Beryl. “We first moved here

ten years ago; the place was covered in blackberry and gorse,” she said. “When we cleared the yard we found the spring and dug it out just enough to hold a few ducks.” Soon the crystal pool was rimmed with a green collar of watercress. Large, dark shapes began to appear, attracted by the bread that Beryl fed her ducks.

“I don’t know where they’d come from. I guess they’d always been there.” She looked into the pool. “They just keep getting bigger and bigger. They’re my babies, just like the three bulls, the two goats, the dog, the dozen-odd chickens.” The ducks, Beryl added, had relocated to another pond since the eels showed up. She tied a piece of steak to a string, and we watched her wade out into the shallow pool in her gumboots. As she waved the steak in the current, I saw a few large heads emerge from the watercress. Giving in to a natural reflex, I took a step back.

“Don’t be afraid,” Beryl said, “they won’t harm you—unless you’re holding food; they might bite you by accident.”

As Beryl lifted the steak on the line out of the water, a huge eel, about as big around as the calf of her leg, lifted its head out, dancing to-and-fro to keep its body up, not unlike a cobra.

“Oh, my God!” I said.

When she lowered the meat into the water, five or six big eels, their heads five to eight inches across the back, vied for a piece. They grabbed on, making loud sucking sounds as they tried to get an advantage on the steak, rolling their bodies to tear pieces off.

Stella had taken off her flip-flops and was walking barefoot across the grass. She spread one of the cans of dog food near the edge of a pool. With a stick, she pushed some of the meat chunks toward the water. A single big eel came to the rim of the concrete ledge to investigate. It sniffed a few times, then tilted its head and body, propelled itself over the ledge onto the grass, and began taking pieces of the dog food in the side of its mouth. A few smaller eels followed, and soon the grass was wet from eel slime. They had no trouble coming completely out of the water to take the food.

I could see their features clearly: wide mouths, broad lips, and nostrils like tubular horns. These eels were big, but the biggest eels in the pool barely approached the ledge, hanging back in the darker depths of the pool. Once in a while I caught a glimpse of a real monster exposing its head and the front part of its body from the thick mats of watercress, but never its whole body.

Stella squatted on the grass, her long black hair nearly touching the ground, letting the eels glide up between her bare feet, touching one and then another on the top of the head, petting them.

THE MONSTER EEL, *Tuna*—the Maori word for eel, and on some Pacific islands a synonym for the phallus—is a prominent figure in Maori mythology, often found wrestling with Maui, the Pacific Islands’ equivalent of Hercules. In several stories, diverse in their settings and tellings, Maui finds Tuna in bed with his wife, Hine, while she is sleeping. In other stories, a girl is cleaning her clothes in a spring-fed pool and is violated by an eel that was once her beloved pet. A villager captures the eel and cuts its head off, and the girl buries the eel in the sand. The first coconut tree then grows from it. In yet another story, Maui chops Tuna in half, the head becoming all the freshwater eels of the world and the tail all the saltwater eels of the world.

What I’d witnessed on the banks of the spring-fed pool in Kawhia was some strange re-enactment of a Pacific Island myth—at least in terms of the girl and her affection for the eel. The vision of Stella by the spring with the eels compounded my awe of seeing such a large fish feeding out of water. It breathed life into what were otherwise beautiful but, to me, lifeless stories recorded in fragments by colonial ethnographers. Seeing the eels and Stella together, I instantly understood that what I had been getting from books was a very small part of a deep and old relationship. Reading a Polynesian myth and expecting to understand its impact was like trying to know the glow of a flowering plant after it had been uprooted, dried, and pressed. The oral stories had been compromised the minute they were written down, but even more so when they were taken out of the environment in which they were created. Many of these myths had meanings that were specific to a place. They evolved to be heard, and not just anywhere, but in the theater of nature, amid the sublime: in a dark forest, near a booming waterfall. The tales did not transcend their original contexts well.

From a Darwinian point of view, that was the error of the indigenous peoples’ spiritual platform. The survival of the Maori faith (as with the faiths of other indigenous peoples with animal deities) depended on a maintained connection with nature, and on nature remaining intact with all its creatures. When colonists from Britain and elsewhere developed the land, the wilderness became fragmented, and so did the native people. Many of the elder Maori that Stella and I visited believed that colonists ultimately diminished the Maori not with guns, but by cutting the forests, building dams, introducing insecticides and herbicides, and fragmenting the once-contiguous native bush. From the old world the colonists brought their own religion to replace the indigenous one, but they also brought their own familiar species of animals—the trout, the hare, the stag—that in some cases successfully displaced the native creatures, the totems of the Maori.

The imported Anglican faith of the British colonists flourished. Christianity is portable. It does not rely on anything being



intact. It can be practiced and understood in a city or in the country, under a roof, or out in the open, by any people, anywhere. The faith of the Maori is specific to New Zealand. It can’t be packed up and taken anywhere easily. To resurrect a nature-based spiritual society, you need to protect the sources of awe that inspired spirituality in the first place. It seemed that everywhere I went in New Zealand, people had an eel story, and many had a taniwha story—the huge eel that stopped the road expansion through a swamp, the red-eyed eel that was a warning, the roaring creature in the night that frightened them away from some place. What happens to the taniwha if the giant eels that brought that monster to the Maori imagination (where the taniwha is real, even if it is not tangible) become endangered or extinct?

FOR KELLY DAVIS, the longfin eel was more than a fish. “The longfin is my passion, my obsession,” he said to me. “I am a longfin.”

Kelly, in his sixties, lived in a modest one-level home with his wife Evelyn and two foster children. His lawn was a graveyard of fishing equipment—fyke nets that needed mending, an aluminum boat on a trailer, buoys and tangles of ropes. Kelly greeted us at the door in a pair of old sweatpants, flip-flops, and a torn t-shirt. He spoke with a heavy Kiwi drawl and wiped his longish hair away from his warm, likable face.

Kelly’s home stream is the Waihao, but he did most of his eel conservation work on the nearby Waitaki River, one of the largest rivers on the South Island. The Waitaki has eight hydroelectric dams along its length that collectively generate 20 percent of New Zealand’s electricity (75 percent of New Zealand’s electricity comes from hydropower, much higher than the world average of 15 percent, or the U.S.’s 10 percent).

In 1958 construction commenced on Benmore Dam at the top of the Waitaki. It took seven years to complete what would become the largest earthen dam in New Zealand, 110 meters high and over 800 meters long, creating the largest artificial lake

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in New Zealand and effectively cutting off any movement of eels to or from the upper river. Seven more major dams were built on the Waitaki, part of one of the largest hydroelectric power programs ever initiated anywhere. It put what was once a healthy artery of the South Island's circulatory system into cardiac arrest—for the eels, at least.

Kelly says that when a female longfin eel is ready to migrate to the sea in autumn to spawn, she'll circle the lake trying to find a way out, and if she can't, "she'll just keep circling the lake, until the urge goes away." The eels, he says, will just keep living until they have the opportunity to get out. Or they will feel the pull of the water as it runs through the electricity-generating turbines in the dam and, taking the path of least resistance, will try to swim through the turbines and get chopped up or maimed.

The turbines are like giant window fans that spin horizontally as the water goes through, generating electricity. The power companies don't want the eels going through the turbines, as they can damage the equipment. Meridian Energy has tried all kinds of ways to keep eels away from turbines in dams on the Waitaki—screens, high-frequency sounds, lights—to no avail. The



eels feel the pull through the penstock, the tube that funnels water to the turbine. The instinct to conserve energy—by following the strongest current on their long journey—turns out to be deadly.

Kelly hadn't thought about the consequences of the dams until he came home from his service in the Navy in the early 1970s and observed what was happening. "Once the hydrodams went in," he said, "they had no chance of ever returning to the sea to spawn. They were landlocked."

Kelly and some Maori cousins began grassroots efforts to trap the mature eels as they accumulate above the dams during the fall migration and transport them in tank trucks to the sea. This "trap-and-transfer" program was emulated on other rivers, wherever Maori took it upon themselves to help. "It may seem futile to just move a few hundred eels in a season," Kelly said, "but you figure, every big female that has a chance to get to the spawning grounds is carrying about 30 million eggs, so we know it makes a difference. That's a fish that would otherwise never get out there.

"People don't understand what value the eels are for us Maori. The old people knew when the eels ran that it was time to prepare for the cold months—they were like a seasonal indicator, a calendar. I don't know if you've ever seen 'em try to migrate. It's an amazing sight. I've seen 'em roll up in a big ball and just roll straight over, over the beach. They go way up the river and then they come swim furiously down the river, and they just roll, like a big ball, rolling over. And that's usually 'round about the end of April when that happens. At night you can go down there and you can see the eels, trying to work their way through the shingle.

"The glass [young] eels used to come in so thick they looked like an oil slick on top of the water. They come into the river year after year and hide in the stones and the watercress, and disappear like ink in the gravel." When the juvenile eels—elvers—decide it's time to go upstream, after waiting in the lower river for as long as ten years, they go all at once, forming braids with their bodies to surmount vertical walls. "If one goes up the wall, they all want to go up. They're amazing." Kelly described big eels sucking the meat out of freshwater mussels. He told stories of going out on rainy nights in farm fields with a ferret on a leash, hunting eels traveling over land from one body of water to another. Kelly told tale after tale of the physical challenges the eels face and of the importance of the eel for the Maori as a source of sustenance. But there was more to the story, a strain more profound and personal, of the eel's fate interwoven with the Maori's own.

In the 1860s the British settlers in New Zealand established the Acclimatisation Society, meant to help British immigrants acclimate to life in a foreign place. This was accomplished through the introduction of familiar species like red deer, pheasants, quail, ferrets, rabbits, possums, foxes, swans, ducks, and geese. From the sportsman's point of view, one of the more successful

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of these introductions was the brown trout, which arrived as a British import via Tasmania. The cold and clear mountain-fed streams of New Zealand, rich with aquatic insect life, were more than suitable for trout. The speckled fish rapidly established themselves in the streams, rivers, and lakes, attaining weights of five to ten pounds, a trophy trout for any angler. Within decades of the initial introduction, New Zealand was renowned for some of the best trout fishing in the world.

But there was an odd predator in the water that British anglers were unaccustomed to seeing. Occasionally while a trout was on the line, a shadowy form would emerge from the depths and take the fish. A four- to five-pound trout was no match for a five- to six-foot-long eel. Once the British settlers recognized that the giant longfin eels were major predators of their coveted game fish—not to mention the young of introduced waterfowl—members of the Society set out to eradicate them. The Society pinned up "wanted" posters in bait shops, offering to pay two pence for each tail clipping that verified a kill. Huge longfins were caught and left on dry riverbanks to die.

"It was a wholesale eradication effort," Kelly said. "The Acclimatisation Society took as many big longfins out of the river as they could. My dad and me, we used to go behind the men and kick them big eels back into the water. This was in the mid-late '50s. It wasn't until they found a market for them overseas that they stopped killing them willy-nilly.

"The slaughter of eels by the Society," Kelly said, "was akin to what the Europeans did to the buffalo in North America. Like the Great Plains Indians relied on the buffalo, Maori relied on the eels for sustenance and for our faith. I'm not sure the Acclimatisation Society didn't know what they were doing."

Kelly believes that the separation of his people from elements of the natural world, things like giant eels that once inspired fear and awe, has caused a tragic unraveling of spirit. In the fragmentation of his culture by colonization, he sees a parallel to the longfin eels' journey being fragmented by dams. He has spent a life trying to put the pieces of himself and other Maori back together, reconnecting his people with their faith, empowering them with local knowledge, like how to feed their families, which in turn gives them confidence.

In the kitchen of the *marae*, a nondescript structure consisting of a central meeting room with chairs, couches, and tables, a kitchen, and several guest rooms for members visiting from out of town, Kelly showed me a large longfin eel he was cleaning. It

had been killed on its downstream migration by the screens in front of the turbines at one of the dams on the Waitaki. He cut the eel into steaks. Sliced in cross section, each piece was four to five inches in diameter.

"This eel," Kelly said, "is from the Waitaki dam. The dam was built sixty years ago, so this eel is over sixty years old, and we're going to eat it." Kelly slathered each steak in crushed garlic and onion powder. He put a little olive oil in a skillet, and when the oil was hot he laid each piece of eel in, pushing them about as their fat was rendered. "I consider myself a *tiaki tangata*, a kind of watchman, of the Waihao River," he said. "It's about having the expertise to look after the fishes. Our knowledge is different from Western knowledge, it's lived knowledge. People who are scientists live in a Eurocentric world. Western science," he continued, flipping the steaks, "is observation and recording. Whereas indigenous is oral. It's not one man's lifetime of knowledge, it's a continuum."

Kelly turned off the stove and we sat down. Each steak was golden brown, sweet, and tasty. We ate them with lettuce, a slice of tomato, salt, and pepper on a piece of wheat toast. As amazing as it tasted, I couldn't help thinking it was probably the oldest living thing I'd ever eaten.

THE ROAD WAS DAMP with rain. Through the mist Stella and I eventually saw the outline of Lake Aniwhenua, and moorhens striding long-legged over the water lilies. The lake itself was a reservoir, one of three on the Rangitaiki River, formed by hydroelectric dams that had changed Bill Kerrison's life. According to Stella, Bill was the North Island's equivalent of Kelly Davis.

Beyond the lake and a forest of cultivated pines, we arrived at a modest farmhouse perched atop a hill. Bill greeted us in his driveway, a man in his early seventies with a golden complexion—his father had been Norwegian, his mother Maori. He took us into his office; above his desk were skin mounts of two gigantic eels. Both were casualties of the Aniwhenua dam.

"It happened by accident," Bill said of his involvement with eels. "I was down by the dam at Lake Aniwhenua and I saw these massive eels drying on the concrete. They got stuck against the screens in front of the penstocks, and the power company had removed them. For twenty years they were burying these huge eels. Just burying them!" Bill showed us photos of huge eels laid out in the grass by power-company employees. The waffle pattern of the metal screens was clearly embossed on their bodies. At other dams the mesh on the screens is large enough to let eels through, in which

case they are mutilated by the turbines. “When you hear a big eel go through the turbines,” Bill said, “it’s a loud, horrible sound.”

After a bit of tea and a plate of fish that he had caught that morning, Bill took us to the eel transfer station he’d assembled at Matahina dam, the largest earthen dam on the North Island and the last of three hydrodams on the Rangitaiki. Bill drove us over the dam and around a road to the base of it. He opened a padlocked gate in the chainlink fence and led us on foot down a moist, wooded path to a spot near the base of the dam where a small creek came into the river. The creek water had been mostly diverted into a large fiberglass tank and then out again, via a ramp. The idea was that young eels trying to get up above the dam would try this small creek and swim directly into the holding tank. Every few days, Bill would empty the contents of the tank into the lake above the dam, helping the elvers get into habitat that they never would have been able to otherwise.

“We built this elver pass all right here. We pulled all the rocks out, we set the beds up, we changed the warming waters, we did everything, and we did it all in two days. It cost me \$1,500, against the \$200,000 that the scientists at NIWA [National Institute of Water & Atmospheric Research] spent to build ladders to get the elvers up and over the dams, and they don’t even work. The eels won’t use them.”

We were in the last week of the elver run. So far that season Bill recorded catching and transferring fifteen hundred kilos of elvers, nearly a million young eels. “I call it the ‘eels on wheels’ service.”

There is no other way for an eel to get over Matahina dam. If Bill hadn’t been performing this duty, there would eventually be no eels in the upper river. Still, the downstream dangers for eels were obvious. Bill scanned the churned-up water below the dam’s massive spillways.

“See that one there?” he said, pointing to something that looked like a floating log. “She got stuck in the turbines.” It was a large eel, floating dead. A small, short fish had a decent chance of slipping though the turbines unharmed, but a four- or five-foot eel had almost no chance against the spinning fans.

Bill opened a valve in the bottom of the tank and drained the water, with the young eels, through a net. The elvers were beautiful, dark creatures about the size of a new pencil, but thinner, and sinuous. He dropped them from the net into a bucket of water, and they massed in a tight black ball.

“They’re the most hardy fish of the lot,” he said of the eels. “I love ’em!”

Bill told me a story about a huge white eel living in Lake Aniwhenua that people said was a taniwha. Local Maori who had seen it came to Bill to ask what to do. “My marae, in Murupara, is based around the tuna, the eel. ‘You best leave it alone,’ I told them.” Bill laughed. “I’ve worked with these giant eels my whole

life and I’ve never felt frightened. But I’ve always had respect for the resources.”

In New Zealand I gathered stories like this—stories that many Maori were reluctant to share (and wouldn’t have shared without Stella’s presence). They were about things unexplainable by modern science, like taniwha, and about the value of unknowing, like preserving the mystery of where the New Zealand longfin spawned. For me, the truth of the indigenous stories is of no importance. The fact that they exist is. And if they exist in myriad cultures, that speaks to something essential. Preserving the diversity of fishes, or any creature, is about preserving the sources of our awe and inspiration. If we lose the creatures that form the foundation of our spiritual systems, if we lose those things that inspire us to be spiritual at all, then we will be lost.

AT 5:30 A.M., somewhere south of Lake Taupo on the North Island, I heard Daniel Joe rattling pots in the kitchen of the guesthouse, boiling water for coffee. We had to pull the *hinaki* at first light. D.J. maintained that if you pulled the eel pot after the sun was up, the eels would escape the same way they came in.

A Maori bush guide who resembles a cross between a cowboy and an Indian, D.J. is tall and lean, with a long nose and a casual swagger. He wears a silver pocket watch in a leather pouch and a pig-hunting knife in its sheath, side by side on his belt. Besides whitewater rafting and fly-fishing, D.J. guides people on pig hunts.

I could still see the odd star. I followed D.J. down the horse trail to the riverbank, through the blackberry brambles where we’d gorged on fruit the night before. Searching in early platinum light, D.J. found the rope that attached the hinaki to a tree on shore, untied it, and hoisted the trap out of the river. It had four eels in it, and one of them was big.

“It’s a good haul,” D.J. said. “It’s all of five kilos that one, eh.” In my eyes it was a monster eel. I looked at it hard to make sure it didn’t have any red eyes or stripes—the marks of a taniwha. It was all dark brown, dark eyes, a fish of the night, mysterious, moving its muscular body forward and backward with equal facility.

Once we were back to the horse corral and his home, which he refers to as Double Crossing, D.J. began the process of cleaning the eels by putting them in an old sugar bag with ashes from the fire pit. Stella joined us for lamb chops and a can of spaghetti with toast. Then D.J. and I went out under a grove of giant macrokara trees and overturned the sugar bags, spilling the ash-covered eels out. The biggest one started moving through the grass, white ash glued to its skin. D.J. took his pig dagger out of its sheath and handed it to me.

“You do it, James.”

“Stab them through the skull?”

D.J. nodded.

I did so, as I’d seen eel fishermen do in Europe, sticking them in the top of the head with the point of the knife. I stuck the three smaller ones. When I got to the big one I turned away.

“I can’t, D.J. You do it.”

“No, James. I think you ought to,” he said, and looked at me. I felt a shiver of vulnerability, even though I was the one holding the knife. The big eel made its way across the grass, covered in leaves and dust and ash.

“I can’t, D.J.,” I said, turning the knife, extending the handle to him. He wouldn’t take it.

“No, James, you’ve got to do it all yourself, mate.”

“But why won’t you do it?”

D.J. laughed. I felt like I was still asleep and dreaming.

“Why?” I asked D.J. again. “Have you ever killed such a big eel?”

“I’ve killed them bigger than that.”

“Then why won’t you do it?”

He looked at me again and smiled his sparsely toothed smile. But it wasn’t a friendly smile.

“I reckon it’s all yours, mate.” He looked at the ground.

I walked across the ground and took the eel in my left hand. My thumb and forefinger went only halfway around its girth. I grabbed it right behind the pectoral fins, pinned it to the ground as it did its best to squirm away, took the pig sticker in my right hand, and stabbed the eel between the domes of its fat head. I handed D.J. the dagger. He wiped the blade on the grass.

The eel continued to crawl across the ground.

“I reckon you should stick it again,” he said, “but further up the head.”

I took the knife and plunged it in again, but it met with resistance. I pushed the knife deeper through the top of the eel’s head, heard it crack through, and felt the blade scraping in the sandy soil beneath.

“The rest is just nerves,” D.J. said.

Stella came down from the guesthouse and we walked the big eel over to D.J.’s house where he had a scale to weigh it. We hung the eel on the hook. Seven kilos.

“How old you reckon that eel is, Stella?” D.J. asked.

“About sixty years.”

It made me feel bad. Knowing it must have been old was the reason I hadn’t wanted to kill it—that, and an intense and unmentionable superstition. D.J. patted me on the back. “It’s okay,” he said. “It’s food, James. I’m going to give it to the old people, who are too old to set their own hinaki.”

I looked at the hanging eel, and with a piece of newspaper pulled the slime and ash from her. I had never killed anything older than I was. But, having done it, I felt unofficially part of the Maori awareness. And I swear I felt a certain clarity. I don’t know how else to describe it except that I felt enlightened.

D.J. cut its tail to bleed it out. Blood dripped into the pit he’d dug around his house, a kind of moat. D.J. said he intended to divert water from a nearby spring to fill it up, so that it would be like a pool in a creek you might see in the bush, with ferns overhanging the pool. As he dug the pit he thought of the trout he’d put in the pool, and then he’d drop in a big eel “that would stalk and eventually kill the trout.”

“When the Europeans came, they introduced the trout,” said D.J. “Then what happened is, the trout ate all the small native fish, the *kokopu* and the bullies. They thought to themselves, ‘Right, we own it now, we’re kings of the pool.’ And then, from out of the depths, from the darkness, came the cultural factor, the old Tuna—the giant eel. He’s an old fish, and he’s absolutely relentless, and he relentlessly stalks the trout.” D.J. paused. “The eel is *morehu*, the survivor. I think they’ll be there till dot. Till the end of the world as we know it.” 🐸

Visit orionmagazine.org for James Prosek’s narrated multimedia presentation on a New York State eel fisherman.

The Frogs

He loved frogs, so he spent his afternoons wading in the tall grass, or standing in the leafy water where the stream turned. Charmed by their stories of woods and muck, he practiced singing with them at dusk at the edge of that pond, while his mother and father sat talking, with their cocktails, on the porch. As dark fell his parents called him, most evenings, for dinner, but sometimes they let him stay down there until the frogs were hushed by the cicadas, whose conversations startled him back to himself. Then he walked up to the house, through the tall grass, through the dark, still singing in his own language. Don’t think of him now, drinking in a city bar, talking to strangers who ignore him. Don’t think of him walking out into the empty street, slightly drunk. He’ll be fine. Think instead of that walk through the dark wet grass, the sound of a child’s body moving through the grass; think instead of those frogs falling silent, of that forest, of mushrooms that push up overnight like elbows in the moon-drenched mind of the woods.

—Michael Hettich