



GO ECO | WAIKATO ENVIRONMENT CENTRE
Healthy environments supported by thriving communities

The Waikato Kai Challenge: A Regional Impact Report

January 2025 – June 2026



A pōwhiri opens a Kai Challenge hui on a Waikato marae.

Introduction

This report accounts for the Waikato Kai Challenge, a regional contract held by Go Eco from January 2025 to June 2026. It sets out what was learned in eighteen months of working alongside growers, hunters, knowledge holders, whānau, hāpori and hapū across Waikato on the question of kai motuhake as a relationship and a system to be navigated. It makes the case, with evidence drawn from that work, for the value of whānau Māori engagement done on their terms; for the limits of macro indicators in describing food security; and for the leverageability of community organisations that are trusted to carry a piece of work forward and grow it.

The Kai Challenge existed because Harvey Brookes took a risk. Regional contracts of this kind are more commonly awarded against a defined output schedule, delivered by an organisation with prior sector credentials in that exact space. This was different: it was a decision to trust Go Eco to navigate kai as both relationship and system, without pre-determining what that navigation would produce. That trust is itself part of the outcome this report describes, because what follows would not have been possible inside a narrower brief.

Context and Purpose of the Contract

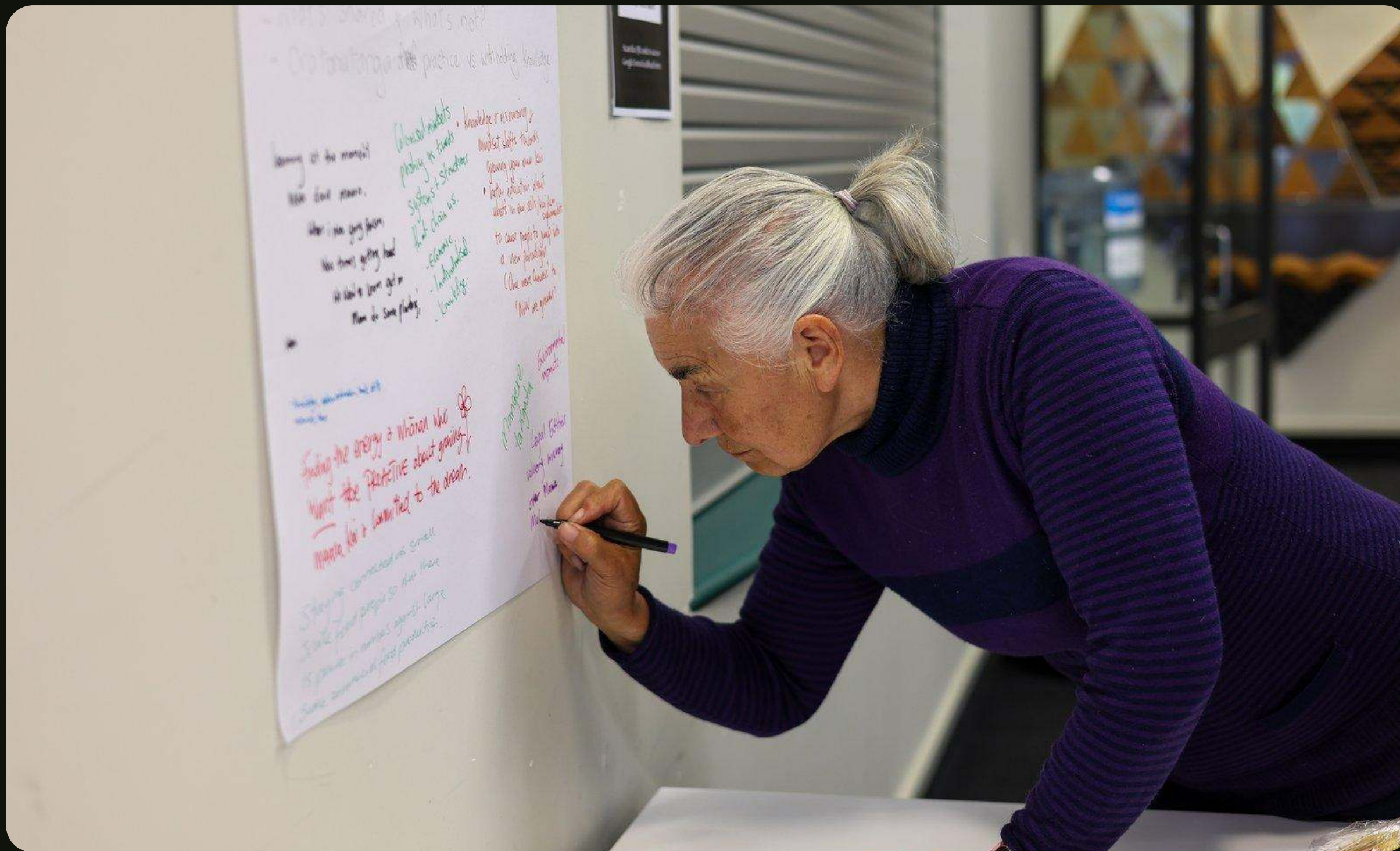
The collaboration employed a Kai Challenge Lead at Go Eco to sit within Go Eco's Pou Kai me te Wai mahi, restructuring the mahi and extending it from programme delivery into regional relationship-building and system navigation. The Lead, Hera Denton, began development of the Pā Harakeke framework structures and the narratives that would describe Go Eco's kai motuhake programming. The Kai Challenge asked a different question of the region: what does kai sovereignty look like when it is not being delivered by an organisation, but is already present in whānau, hapū, gatherer and grower practice, waiting to be recognised, connected and resourced.

Go Eco's role was not to introduce kai motuhake to the Waikato. It was to move through the region as a trusted connector, attending growers hui, wānanga, and conferences; hosting two Kai Symposiums; and holding many hāpori conversations, in order to surface what was already working, understand where the gaps genuinely sat, and carry that understanding into a form that funders, councils and the sector could act on.

Go Eco as Regional Capability and Capacity Builder

The Kai Challenge demonstrates something specific about the value of contracting a place-based, Tiriti-centred organisation for regional capability building, rather than commissioning a report or a short-term project from an external provider. Go Eco's existing relationships with catchment groups, growers, mana whenua partners and community food networks built through Pou Kai and Para Kore meant the Kai Challenge began from trust already in place, rather than trust that had to be built from a standing start.

This is the distinction between capability building and service delivery. A service delivery contract produces an output and ends. A capability building contract leaves the region more able to do the work itself – more connected, more resourced, more articulate about what it needs regardless of who holds the next contract. Over eighteen months, Go Eco's role shifted from convenor to connector to advocate, as growers and hāpori groups increasingly used Go Eco's relationships and platform to reach funders, councils and each other directly.



Kōrero captured on the wall during a wānanga — mātauranga surfacing in real time.

Engaging Whānau Māori

Engagement was built through whakawhanaungatanga; investing time in relationships before projects, recognising that trust, reciprocity and shared purpose are necessary for lasting systems change. Growers hui, marae-based wānanga, hapū hui and one-to-one hāpori conversations became sites of listening before they were sites of programme design. What surfaced repeatedly was that whānau and hapū food practice — māra, mahinga kai, harvesting, sharing — was already a functioning system, and that the deficit was not in whānau capability but in the visibility of that capability to funders, councils and researchers.

This matters for how success is measured. Engagement that is genuinely effective with whānau Māori does not produce a participation count; it produces a shift in whose knowledge is treated as evidence. Across the growers hui, wānanga and hāpori conversations held under the Kai Challenge, that shift became visible in who was invited to speak at the two Kai Symposiums, and in whose language — kai motuhake, not food security — increasingly framed the regional conversation.



Whanaungatanga in practice — relationships built well beyond the hui itself.

Where Macro Indicators Miss the Lived Experience

Regional and national food security indicators are built to measure scarcity: food bank use, deprivation index scores, self-reported food insecurity. They are necessary, and they are also structurally unable to capture what the Kai Challenge kept encountering in hāpori kōrero – the enoughness that exists in whānau who live without a supermarket or a food bank, sustained instead by māra, mahinga kai, whanaungatanga and reciprocity.

Enoughness, as it surfaced in this work, is not the absence of hardship. It is the presence of a functioning relational system – whakapapa to land and water, obligation and exchange between whānau – that a deprivation score has no field for.

This is not an argument that hardship is absent in the communities the Kai Challenge engaged with. It is an argument that macro indicators, built around the presence or absence of formal market and charitable food access, miss the systems that already exist alongside or instead of that market and therefore miss both the strength already present and the specific, non-obvious support that would strengthen it further. A whānau growing and sharing kai from their own whenua may register as food insecure on an indicator built around supermarket spend, while experiencing a level of food dignity and connection that the same indicator has no way to record.

The practical consequence is that funding and policy built solely from macro indicators will continue to default to charitable redistribution as the visible, measurable response because it is what the indicators are built to see, even where the more durable and more dignified investment is in the infrastructure of localised kai systems that already exist in the region.

The regional data makes the paradox explicit rather than anecdotal. Norgrove and Johnson's 2024 report for the Waikato Wellbeing Project, *Want Amongst Plenty*, estimates that 9 to 10 per cent of Waikato households face food insecurity at least once a year, and that 10 to 12 per cent of Waikato children live in those households. Their own title names the paradox this report is built on: *want amongst plenty*. A region that produces food at the scale set out below, with close to a tenth of its households going without at some point in the year, is not a data anomaly to be explained away. It is the clearest possible evidence that abundance measured at the regional, export-oriented level and enoughness experienced at the household and whānau level are not the same thing, and that closing the gap requires attention to distribution, land control and access, not simply to production volume.

Colonial History and the Present System

None of this can be separated from how the region's food system came to be shaped the way it is. Te Takiwā o Waitomo and the wider Waikato are, in living memory and in the documentary record, places of kai abundance: extensive māra kai recorded in an 1899 map held by descendants, the 'Kai Road' that once carried inland and coastal whānau to exchange kai moana and produce under reciprocal obligation, and a planting calendar read from the stars. That abundance was not marginal or subsistence-level; it was systemic, reciprocal and intergenerational, and it existed before the current productivist system was imposed on the same whenua.

Land alienation, the confiscations and purchases that followed colonisation, and the conversion of diverse whenua into pastoral and dairy export production did not simply change what was grown. It severed whakapapa relationships between whānau and the specific whenua, awa and repo that had fed them, and it replaced a reciprocal, locally-provisioning system with one oriented outward, toward export markets and national accounts. The current shape of the Waikato's food economy — a region that, as the following section sets out, produces several times more food than it consumes while a meaningful share of its own households experience food insecurity — is a direct continuation of that history, not a separate or accidental outcome. Naming this is not a rejection of dairy or export agriculture; it is a recognition that the system now treated as the region's economic identity was built over, and in place of, an existing and functioning kai system.

Food Security and the Policy Trap

National and regional food security policy is tethered to a productivist logic: how much is grown, how much is exported, how much is consumed. By that logic Waikato is a triumph. The Waikato Regional Foodshed Analysis 2024, published by the Waikato Wellbeing Project, estimates the region needs around 300,000 tonnes of food a year to feed its 522,600 residents on a healthy diet, and produces around 7 million tonnes; more than 20 times local demand. Food sector GDP sits near \$5 billion, about 14 per cent of the region's total.

Look at what that abundance is made of and the trap becomes visible. Milk is 93 per cent of everything the region produces by weight. Only 4 per cent of Waikato's dairy output is needed to meet local demand, only 7 per cent of red meat production is needed locally. Meanwhile the region does not produce enough grain, legumes, nuts, fruit, pork or aquaculture to meet its own residents' needs; the exact foods a healthy, balanced local diet depends on. Less than half a per cent of food-producing land grows fruit, vegetables, nuts and legumes; 46 per cent is dairy and 51 per cent is red meat. A region can be a food bowl for the world and a thin, precarious pantry for its own people at the same time. Waikato is currently both.

This is where household income and welfare, and export markets and trade, need to be held in the same frame rather than treated as alternatives. Regional food sovereignty and the dominance of market-based production sit in that same frame as household lived experience: income adequacy, the cost of a healthy diet, hardship grants, food bank volumes and at-risk households. This means the production side of the ledger — what the region's land and water are actually used to grow, for whom, and under what trade and export settings — is under-examined and misunderstood. Free trade agreements and export-oriented land use planning shape what a food-abundant region grows long before a household ever reaches the supermarket shelf, yet they rarely appear in food security policy at all.

This is not an argument against trade. A region producing more than 20 times what it eats has room, in principle, to do both: remain an exporting food bowl and feed its own people first. Treating these as a forced choice is itself part of the trap. The argument is that a region whose identity rests on how much food it produces should also be known, and hold itself accountable, for how well it feeds its own people and cares for its own environment before it feeds anyone else's. That procurement preference, land use planning, water and seed rights, and support for community and hapū-led growing belong in that regional and national accountability, not on the margins of it.



Go Eco's food rescue truck — one strand of the wider kai mahi the Kai Challenge builds on.

What Was Undertaken

Over the eighteen months of the contract, Go Eco:

- Attended growers hui across the region, building and deepening relationships with commercial and community growers
- Delivered wānanga grounded in mātauranga Māori and te ao Māori understandings of kai
- Attended relevant conferences to connect Waikato kai motuhake mahi to national kōrero and networks
- Hosted two Kai Symposiums, bringing growers, whānau, hapū, funders, council and sector representatives into shared rooms
- Held numerous hāpori conversations, one-to-one and in small groups, that did not always sit inside a formal event
- Supported kaupapa Māori organisations to connect with regional partners, funders and decision-makers.
- Facilitated whakawhanaungatanga between growers, marae, hapū and community organisations across the region.
- Created opportunities for lived experience and mātauranga Māori to influence regional kai conversations.



Growers, whānau, funders and sector representatives at a Kai Challenge hui.

What Was Undertaken

Over the eighteen months of the contract, Go Eco:

Phase	Focus	What it demonstrated
Jan–Jun 2025	Relationship-building: growers hui, wānanga, hāpori kōrero across the region	Kai motuhake is already present in the region as practice, not a concept to be introduced
Jul–Dec 2025	First Kai Symposium; conference attendance; deepening of grower and hāpori networks	Naming and validating lived narratives of enoughness, connection, and food dignity
Jan–Jun 2026	Second Kai Symposium; consolidation of learnings; transition planning	A regional shift in the kai kōrero from redistribution to localised systems, carried forward on philanthropic funding



Kai prepared for a hui – much of the Kai Challenge's hāpori kōrero happened around food, not in meeting rooms.

Te Takiwā o Waitomo | Case Study: Working Toward Kai Motuhake

The clearest example of what growers hui and hāpori conversations produced under the Kai Challenge is the partnership with Ngāti Maniapoto Marae PACT Trust in Te Takiwā o Waitomo, undertaken in June 2025 as part of the Waikato Wellbeing Project's Kai Challenge workstream and supported by the MAS Foundation.

What came back from those hui was a fully-formed, intergenerational way of thinking about kai that the Trust and its whānau were already living. The Trust's own Wai to Kai vision — to take whānau from the supermarket back to the whenua — sits inside a 100-year self-sustainability plan now 45 years in, built on manaakitanga, kaitiakitanga, kotahitanga and rangatiratanga. The Maara Kai Roopu, started in response to COVID's impact on whānau, now runs on companion planting, locally-adapted growing rules of thumb, and a volunteer roster spanning schoolchildren to people on release from correctional facilities. The whānau at the third hui are rebuilding a market garden their tupuna once ran as a thriving community enterprise, guided by a mama of young tamariki reacquiring growing knowledge her own nan is passing on.



hāpori kōrero on the marae grounds – growers, whānau and hapū voices in open conversation.



EAT NZ National Conference 2025

This work also surfaced a framework through which the Trust and its whānau describe their journey toward kai motuhake: whakapapa, mātauranga and anamata (the future), operating across hapū, hāpori and whānau levels of scale simultaneously. Kai motuhake is not a model that Go Eco or any single organisation introduced to a region. It is already present in mātauranga Māori, and the role of an organisation like Go Eco is to recognise it, resource it, and help it connect across hāpori.

The Kai Symposiums

The two Kai Symposiums hosted under the Kai Challenge brought this same pattern to a regional stage: growers, whānau and hapū representatives sharing a room with council, funders and researchers, with the intention of shifting whose knowledge counts as evidence in regional food policy. The Waikato Wellbeing Project's published analysis, the 2024 'Want Amongst Plenty' framing report and the 2025 Waikato Regional Foodshed Analysis, gave the symposiums a shared, credible evidence base to work from, while the hāpori kōrero gathered through the Kai Challenge gave that evidence the lived texture and specificity it otherwise lacks.

Asked what kai motuhake meant to them, participants wrote about growing food for their own restaurant in a regenerative way, with surplus to share or sell; about wanting the freedom that comes from seed to plate, from growing to selling; about having the choices that work for them to access kai; and, simply, about wanting to nourish their tinana, mauri and whānau. These are not abstractions. They are the region's own definition of kai motuhake, in its own handwriting.



What does Kai Motuhake
growing all food for
restaurant in a re-gen way
having surplus to share & sell
You!
To have the food

from seed to plate ... (still processing my
supply!
Have the choices
that work for me
to access the Kai
I want to Nourish
my tinana, mauhi + whānau
It's a
to grow
From
A Sh
pake

*Growers, whānau, funders and researchers gathered for the 2026 Kai Symposium.
Symposium participants' own words on what kai motuhake means to them.*

Shifting the Regional Conversation

The clearest system-level outcome of the Kai Challenge is a change in the terms of the regional kai conversation. It began, as most food security conversations in Aotearoa do, oriented around the effectiveness and reach of food banking and charitable redistribution; how to get more food to more people through existing charitable channels. Over eighteen months of relationship, wānanga and symposia, that framing has shifted toward localised food systems: what infrastructure already exists in growers, marae, hapū and community networks; what infrastructure could exist with modest and well-placed investment; and what the actual determinants of a thriving domestic kai market are, as distinct from the determinants of an effective food bank.

This is a structural reframe that moves attention from managing the symptoms of a broken food system through charity toward investing in the system that makes charity unnecessary. Acts of care, including food banking, are not a substitute for the systems change that removes the need for that care. The Kai Challenge gave that principle a regional platform and a body of lived narrative to stand on.



Kai is critical for prevention, kai is critical for treatment — Moko Morris addresses the health case for food security.

Continuation Through Philanthropic Funding

The end of the Kai Challenge contract in June 2026 is not the end of the mahi. Kai motuhake work initiated under the contract is continuing on philanthropic funding, which is itself evidence for the case this report makes: funders who engaged with the Kai Symposiums and the hāpori narratives generated by this work chose to invest further, on the strength of relationship and demonstrated regional trust rather than a renewed competitive procurement process.

This continuation means the relationships built with growers, whānau, hapū and councils through the Kai Challenge are not being allowed to lapse, and it positions Go Eco to keep translating hāpori kōrero into the kind of evidence that regional and national funders are not otherwise generating.



Tara Moala shares kōrero shaping frameworks that shift power toward localised kai systems.

The Leverageability of Community Organisations

The Kai Challenge is a working example of a broader point about how community-led regional work should be resourced. A community organisation already holding trust, relationships and institutional memory in a region is able to carry a body of work forward and use it as leverage for further investment in a way that a short-term, externally contracted project cannot. The two Kai Symposiums, the growers hui, the wānanga and the hāpori conversations are not simply activities delivered against a contract; they are the relational infrastructure that made the subsequent philanthropic investment possible.

This is the argument for contracting capability and trust because the return on the Kai Challenge investment is not fully captured in what was delivered between January 2025 and June 2026. It is also captured in continued philanthropic funding, a regional conversation now oriented toward localised systems, and a set of relationships that Go Eco, as a standing regional organisation, is positioned to keep building rather than having to rebuild from scratch under a future contract.

Marae-Based Food Projects: The Path Forward

The Kai Challenge is a working example of a broader point about how community-led regional work should be resourced. A community organisation already holding trust, relationships and institutional memory in a region is able to carry a body of work forward and use it as leverage for further investment in a way that a short-term, externally contracted project cannot. The two Kai Symposiums, the growers hui, the wānanga and the hāpori conversations are not simply activities delivered against a contract; they are the relational infrastructure that made the subsequent philanthropic investment possible.

This is the argument for contracting capability and trust because the return on the Kai Challenge investment is not fully captured in what was delivered between January 2025 and June 2026. It is also captured in continued philanthropic funding, a regional conversation now oriented toward localised systems, and a set of relationships that Go Eco, as a standing regional organisation, is positioned to keep building rather than having to rebuild from scratch under a future contract.

Kupu Māori | Glossary

- Anamata – the future
- hāpori – the wider community
- Hapū – sub-tribe; the collective level between whānau and iwi
- Hauora – health and wellbeing
- Kai – food
- Kai motuhake – food sovereignty; kai that whānau control and provide for themselves
- Kaitiakitanga – guardianship, particularly of land, water and natural resources
- Kaiwhakakaha – Chief Executive
- Kaupapa – purpose, plan or cause
- Kōrero – talk, discussion, narrative
- Kotahitanga – unity, collective action
- Mana – authority, prestige, standing
- Manaakitanga – hospitality, care and generosity toward others
- Marae – a communal and sacred meeting complex, the focal point of hapū and iwi life
- Mātauranga – knowledge, particularly Māori knowledge systems
- Mauri – life force
- Mokopuna – grandchildren, descendants
- Pā Harakeke – hāpori-based programme framework
- Pōwhiri – formal ceremony of welcome onto a marae
- Rangatiratanga – self-determination, chieftainship, the right to exercise authority
- Taiao – the natural world, environment
- Tangata Tiriti – people in Aotearoa through Te Tiriti o Waitangi, i.e. non-Māori
- Tangata whenua – people of the land; Māori as indigenous people of a particular place
- Te Ao Māori – the Māori worldview
- Te Tiriti o Waitangi – the Treaty of Waitangi
- Tikanga – customary practice and protocol
- Tinana – the physical body
- Tupuna – ancestors
- Wānanga – a forum for learning and knowledge-sharing, often held over an extended period
- Whānau – extended family
- Whanaungatanga – relationships, kinship, a sense of connection
- Whakapapa – genealogy; layered lines of descent connecting people, land and other beings
- Whenua – land

Conclusion

Harvey Brookes's decision to trust Go Eco with the Kai Challenge, without narrowing that trust to a fixed output schedule, produced a body of work that a more conventional contract structure would not have reached: a regional shift in how kai motuhake is talked about, a set of hāpori narratives that macro indicators cannot generate on their own, and a continuing programme of work now carried on philanthropic funding. It also produced a demonstrable case for a particular way of resourcing regional food system change through community organisations already holding relationship and trust, contracted for capability rather than only for deliverables, and given room to navigate kai as the relationship and the system that it is.



