

LAKE MAHINĀPUA



Inanga

Giant kōkopu

Lake Mahināpua

Lake Mahināpua lies between a rocky wall left by the retreating Hokitika glacier (called a moraine) and sand dunes deposited by the Tasman Sea. The lake was once a coastal lagoon fed by the Hokitika River, but as the river changed course the shallow lake was left behind.

Lake Mahināpua and many local streams have noticeably brown water. This is a natural phenomenon due to high levels of compounds that have dissolved and leached into the waterways from the soils and leaf litter of the rainforest.

The brown waters are home to native fishes, such as eels or tuna, inanga, and the spectacular giant kōkopu. Giant kōkopu and inanga belong to the family Galaxiidae, the largest family of freshwater fishes in New Zealand.

The name Galaxiidae comes from the silvery-golden rings, blotches and crescents on the skin of these fish, which are said to look like a galaxy of stars. The Galaxiids come in many shapes and sizes, but most are usually 15 cm or less in length. Giant kōkopu, however, can grow to over 40 cm in length and weigh more than 1 kilogram.

History of the lake

Long before State Highway 6 was built along the West Coast, early settlers used the inland waterways for transport. People could travel from Hokitika to Ross, by paddling up Mahināpua Creek and across Lake Mahināpua to connect with Tōtara Lagoon.

Historically, the lake was also a popular recreational area for the gold diggers, who enjoyed its scenic beauty. The lake remains a popular destination today, with recreationists launching yachts, canoes and model boats from the jetty and lake shores.



Whitebaiters en route to the river mouth.

Whitebait – a New Zealand delicacy!

In spring, 'whitebaiters' line the edges of many West Coast waterways with their nets and scoops, to catch the local delicacy of whitebait.

Whitebait is the juvenile stage of five native fish species: inanga, giant kōkopu, banded kōkopu, shortjaw kōkopu and kōaro. These fish spend the first months of their lives in the ocean before returning to the rivers and streams to live, grow and reproduce.

Deteriorating water quality and habitat of many of New Zealand's waterways means that whitebait species are at risk of extinction. Lake Mahināpua and its tributaries have been set aside as a reserve and whitebaiting is prohibited in these waterways.



The catch being cooked.



The final product - whitebait patties.



Natural and pure tea / tannin stained waters of tributary streams and lake.



Row boat on Mahināpua Creek: Dan Greaney, Vida Vroblfski, Olive Chesterman, Alex McGlasson, Thora Sweney, Bill Sweney, 1934.