

# One River

By Jim Robinson

*The Rangitaiki paddle marathon was a great race. More than that, it was a celebration of the people and history of the river.*

**Crack and slurp. While a bunch of keen kayakers raced 42 km down the Eastern Bay of Plenty's Rangitaiki river - an exuberant finish line crowd slugged back mouthfuls of butter-tasting kina.**

Crack and slurp, crack and slurp. This was the "World Kina Eating Championships" and the prickly little sea urchins were going down a treat. The winning kina-eaters guzzled down their allocation of the Eastern Bay of Plenty delicacy faster than any other - which probably left their stomachs aching as much as the paddlers' arms.

All part of the fun. The kina championships were just one of the features of the inaugural Rangitaiki River Festival, held near Whakatane in late March. Highlight on the water was the Rangitaiki paddle marathon, a 42 km effort from Lake Matahina down to Thornton Beach. That included three boat portages, the first a difficult 1.2 km slog down the Matahina dam.

Olympic Games kayakers Mike Walker and Dene Simpson were the mens and womens winners, both leading from early on. Walker was fifth in the K2 1000 m at the 2008 Olympic Games and he's currently building up for a K4 bid for the London Games in 2012 so no surprise, 42 km was well within his comfort zone. Walker clocked 3 hrs 25 min and collected the title of North Island mens marathon paddling champion, plus a handy \$700.

"It was fun. It's a great race," the winner said. "It's a good concept, paddling the river to the sea. It's unique with the portages and tying in the history of the river."

Simpson, who paddled the K1 and K2 500 m for South Africa at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, was equally impressive. The 52 year-old clocked 3 hrs 49 min to finish fourth individual overall.

"Such a well rounded day," Simpson reckoned. "The hard work paddling down the river was no surprise, but the rest of the day was. There was the soulful start, a great race design and course, cheerful and conscientious support all along the way, an inviting finish, and substantial and welcome prizes. [You] can't get better than that."

That "soulful start" was a welcome from local iwi representatives to the



*This wasn't your usual kayak marathon which included portages and all kinds of craft.*

lake. As the sun rose above the rippling waters they spoke of the river's significance and then sang, calling for a safe journey for the individual and teams paddlers.

And so it proved. While the Rangitaiki has a good flow, there's only one rapid, a short spell of churn across the fault line of the 1987 Edgecumbe earthquake. Other than that, the only river hazards are ancient tree trunks which rise high out of the river near Edgecumbe. They're easy to avoid: part of the character of the river.

The conclusion of the Festival saw stones from other regions on the river being dropped into the river mouth as a symbol of unity. Simpson reckoned that was a special gesture: "A race is just a race after all. But life before and beyond that is real."

Results: [www.whakatane.com](http://www.whakatane.com)

*New Zealand kayaking Olympian Mike Walker completed the paddle marathon in 3 hrs 35 min and gained the title of North Island mens marathon paddling champion.*

