A million dollar-plus research programme promoting innovation and growth in the seafood sector, with particular emphasis on Māori, is making impressive progress, says project co-leader Dr Manuka Henare, Associate Dean for Māori and Pacific Development, and Director of the Mira Szászy Research Centre, at The University of Auckland Business School.

The seafood sector is a vital part of New Zealand’s economy. In the past 20 years seafood exports have tripled from around $500 million a year to $1.4 billion, with the industry forecasting growth to reach $2 billion by 2010. The industry also supports more than 26,000 jobs throughout the country.

“This growth is a remarkable achievement considering the industry has faced harvest limits for most commercial fisheries,” says Dr Henare. “Much of the increase in value has come from innovation to create new value-added products and processes, as well as the development and rapid expansion of new aquaculture activities. Māori, as major stakeholders in the industry, are significant beneficiaries of this growth.”

Against this background, the Business School joined forces in 2003 with the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research (NIWA). The two parties embarked on a four-year programme aimed at promoting growth and innovation in the seafood sector, looking especially at its importance to Māori.

The $1.4 million programme, funded by the Government’s Foundation for Research Science & Technology (FoRST), is co-led by Dr Henare and NIWA General Manager Aquaculture and Marine Biology Dr Andrew Jeffs.

Dr Henare says the programme provides a wonderful opportunity for the country’s leading research university to work with the fishing industry to the benefit of both parties.

“Understanding the role Māori have played in seafood sector growth – and the role they will continue to play – will be crucial, not only to the chances of future innovation in the industry but also to growth opportunities in the wider economy.”

Dr Henare says the programme has already accomplished much.

Two highly successful special courses on fisheries economics with a focus on innovation and growth, and on working with Māori communities, have been held at the Business School.

The impacts of technical change and growth in the sector have been studied and associated papers on efficiency in the industry, fish quota management and lessons have been presented internationally.

Research into aquaculture has identified excessive bureaucracy as an obstacle to the industry’s progress, and concluded that greater government support would help alleviate this problem and the poor industry/science linkages which have resulted in too heavy a reliance on in-house innovation.

An internet-based network has been designed and is ready to be rolled out to the seafood industry. The network provides access to a dedicated fishing library linked to The University of Auckland Library.

The programme’s research activities also include two-way participation in high profile North American Indian economic development programmes associated with Harvard University and the University of Arizona.

More information about the seafood project including publications, reports and case studies can be viewed on The University of Auckland Business School’s seafood website: www.business.auckland.ac.nz/seafood