

Vigilance required when unlocking fisheries potential

With all the hype about New Zealand's clean, green image and world-leading quota management system it is easy for us to think that we practice sustainable fishing which ensures a healthy marine environment, when the opposite is true.

Our fisheries are under pressure, and the ongoing use of damaging harvesting methods has severely altered aquatic biodiversity. This is detrimental to the interests of current and future generations of Kiwis who fish and aspire to having access to an abundant and thriving marine environment.

Non-commercial fishers, customary, traditional and amateurs have for many years suffered from a loss of access to once-abundant fisheries. This depletion has occurred in places we normally fish.

Kiwis are being denied the opportunity to successfully fish and exercise their right to provide for their social, economic, and cultural well-being.

Shifting baselines

Long-term divers know that, despite an abundance of fish in certain areas, the trend for many species is downwards.

“Shifting baselines” is the term used to describe people's perception that life is abundant and our seas are healthy because comparisons are made across short time scales. This gradual decline masks the reality of lost benthic species and lower fish numbers.

So when the National Cabinet recently directed the Minister of Fisheries, Phil Heatley, to recommend, by July 2009, actions “*that will enable the fisheries sector to make a significantly greater contribution to the New Zealand economy*” alarm bells started ringing with non-commercial fishing lobby group option4, other environmental groups including Greenpeace, ECO and Forest & Bird, and Maori customary non-commercial fishing interests.

Cabinet's directive was based on a consultants report, commissioned by the Ministry of Fisheries. The November 2008 report is entitled “*Fisheries 2030 - Vision, result areas and action plan. Unlocking the potential of the New Zealand fisheries sector.*”

Is there any potential to be unlocked?

Several questions arise from the Ministry's paper:

- ⇒ What further economic potential is available to be unlocked from our fisheries?
- ⇒ How will this be done, by whom and when?
- ⇒ What further adverse effects are likely to occur in our fisheries and marine environments, and how and when will those adverse impacts be remedied?

Low-cost, industrial methods have been used for many years to extract masses of low value fish for poor returns. Non-selective fishing practices such trawling have enabled commercial fishers to reap monetary rewards from exploiting a national resource, and catch thousands of tonnes of bycatch while targeting a few high value species.

Both inshore and deepwater species have suffered adversely, to the extreme in some fisheries. Orange roughy, hoki, snapper, gurnard and kahawai are recent examples of our natural treasures (taonga) being sacrificed in the pursuit of export dollars.

So it is of serious concern to non-commercial environmental and fishing groups that the Ministry's talk of 'unlocking potential' seems to be based on extracting the fish now left after years of bulk harvesting.

Economic efficiency can be gained from improving the returns on current yield as opposed to the easy, yet unsustainable, way of catching what fish are now left.

Several solutions were discussed during the recent Hokianga Accord (mid north iwi fisheries forum) hui attended by Ngapuhi, Ngati Whatua, Ngati Hine and other iwi, hapu, environmental, commercial and non-commercial fishing interests.

An unprecedented alliance was forged to respond to the Fisheries 2030 proposals and formulate a constructive, alternative strategy. This team was made up of representatives from option4, the Hokianga Accord, the New Zealand Big Game and Recreational Fishing Councils, the NZ Angling and Casting Association, the Guardians of Hawke Bay, the Marlborough Recreational Fishers Association and environmental interest groups ECO, Forest & Bird and Greenpeace.

These organisations share major concerns about the current Fisheries 2030 strategy and its focus on maximising use and economic benefits from the marine environment, to the detriment of our interests.

An alternative strategy

A letter from these joint interest groups outlining the concerns and an alternative strategy was sent to both the Minister and Ministry of Fisheries on June 17th. Full details are online at http://option4.co.nz/Fisheries_Mgmt/2030.htm.

Another document from the fishing organisations was also submitted. '*Sustainable strategies for more fish in the water*' provides several solutions that would improve environmental outcomes, reduce the sustainability risk, potentially decrease the Minister's exposure to litigation and provide abundant fisheries for future generations, while increasing the national wealth made from fishing.

Suggestions included:

- ⇒ Increasing the biomass of depleted, important fisheries;
- ⇒ Providing incentives to encourage innovation;
- ⇒ Improving environmental outcomes;
- ⇒ Reducing conflict between interest groups and fisheries managers; and
- ⇒ Using spatial tools to provide for abundance and people's well-being.

Gains can be made and efficiency improved by reducing fishing-related mortality, increasing the yield per fish and providing incentives to conserve and enhance our fisheries.

A long-term view that protects the marine environment and threatened species is far better than pushing short-term yield to the edge of environmental limits. Achieving this vision through the application of cost-effective solutions makes economic sense.

What does not make sense are proposals within Fisheries 2030 that seek to unlock unspecified potential from fisheries at the expense, it seems, of existing non-commercial fishing rights that belong to all New Zealanders.

Any steps taken by the present government to amend the Fisheries Act to give effect to the Fisheries 2030 proposals is sure to generate intense public debate on all aspects of the Ministry's management of our fisheries.

Recent history has shown the public are increasingly aware that fisheries abundance is a litmus test on the health of our oceans.

So as guardians of our children's interests in a healthy marine environment we all need to remain vigilant to proposals that will affect their future access and rights.