

option4 Update #117

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Prospects of amateur fishing zones

Amateur fishing zones have been floated as a possibility to recognise recreational fishing needs, by Fisheries Minister Phil Heatley and various fishing forums. The prospect of exclusive fishing areas is seductive, particularly when it is imagined the government will provide these free of charge. Even if some payment is accepted, it is unclear what is being asked in exchange for excluding commercial fishing. Recent suggestions include additional management controls, catch reporting and lower daily bag limits.

In the first of a series of articles, option4 explores what principles might underpin the establishment of these zones and considers their intended purpose, because often there is intense debate over a solution without properly defining the problem.

Commercial fishing exclusion zones are being offered as the solution, so what is the real problem with shared space?

Spatial interests

There is intense competition for marine space from quota holders, aquaculture interests, Maori customary, environmental and amateur fishing interests. Residents, local and regional authorities also have an interest in marine use.

Each interest groups seeks to establish a right to marine space to achieve their outcomes. The Minister's preference is for a negotiation process to establish these zones, as this is most likely to induce trade-offs between sectors. However, legitimate trading can only occur between parties who have the mandate to negotiate spatial issues.

Any policy aimed at improving non-commercial fishing for today's generation must occur within the overarching obligation to provide healthy, abundant fish stocks for use by future generations. There is an inevitable tendency to rationalise current demands, and overlook our responsibilities to those who follow.

It is imperative the long-term public interest remains firmly in focus as responses are fashioned to the call for segregated fishing zones.

Purpose and principles

If the purpose of these areas is to increase non-commercial fishing success the government has few options left.

The quota management system has a legacy of depleted inshore fisheries with consequential calls from non-commercial interests of biased government policy benefiting only monopolistic rent-seeking practices.

The area rights afforded quota owners will not be lightly relinquished, so any meaningful areas that exclude commercial fishing will need agreement from quota owners.

Excluding commercial fishing from some areas maybe one possibility to improve amateur fishing for some species. However, there are no details as to how large these areas need to be, nor what principles will be used to establish them.

Another possible purpose is to grant exclusive area rights to each group and then allow them to use this as common currency to trade amongst themselves. This, theoretically, allows the economic notion of 'highest value' to be extracted, as those who value area and catch the highest will acquire the rights.

Fish abundance

The two most common complaints from non-commercial fishers are: inshore fish populations have become so depleted that their catch rates are continually declining; and, only small fish are left in the areas where they traditionally fish. Any measures designed to improve non-commercial fishing success will need to address these two issues.

Defining the purpose, principles, weighing the costs and likely benefits of implementing amateur fishing zones are aspects that need to be considered more thoroughly. Discussion will continue in next month's option4 Update.

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