

option4 Update #118

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Amateur fishing zones – panacea or pitfall?

Government intends to exclude commercial fishing from some inshore areas as a means of recognising recreational fishing needs. option4 continues to explore the purpose of these exclusion zones and their prospects of success.

The proposition has a parallel in deer hunting where the government offered recreational areas as a panacea for the hunting public who were suffering from shortsighted, heavy commercial exploitation of deer herds, largely by helicopter gunships.

Several recreational hunting areas were established and an advisory committee formed. Then reality struck.

Firstly, the advisory committee was gagged and members forbidden to publicly comment. As for the resource, helicopters continued to plunder the overall deer herd and poach in recreational areas, almost at will, while government departments turned a blind eye.

These factors are relevant when considering the realism of having non-commercial fishing zones and how they can be established and administered.

In short, what is needed is sound management of the total resource because fish do not recognise lines on a map or on the water.

Similar to marine reserves, once fish swim over the boundary line they are vulnerable to plundering.

Fish migrate to areas where environmental conditions suit their needs, with many following seasonal patterns. Food and sex dominate choice of habitat for most species. Highly migratory species, kingfish, kahawai, snapper and others can travel long distances and disperse over a wide area, so unless these zones are large and well-sited they will not be a useful fisheries management tool.

Declining abundance

Any proposal that claims to improve non-commercial catch rates will need to address the causes of inshore depletion and significantly increase abundance, because having access to healthy fish populations is the key to non-commercial fishing success.

Declines in abundance are an inevitable consequence of fishing.

Current fisheries management targets a stock level at about the level required to produce maximum sustainable yield, although, this is a rather meaningless measure as it can be defined as anything between 10 and 50 percent of the original stock size, but is the law.

For nearly all species of importance to non-commercial fishers, the commercial catch dwarfs the combined customary and amateur catch.

For any commercial exclusion zone to deliver benefits there must be commercial activity in that area that is suppressing abundance, and if that activity is stopped then numbers and availability will improve.

However, any commercial effort displaced from a non-commercial zone would likely move to just outside the boundary. If so, can we reasonably assume that abundance in a small exclusion zone will be maintained many times higher than in the adjacent area?

A seasonal commercial exclusion zone has been in effect for a decade in the inner Hauraki Gulf. What studies have been done to establish a time series of data to measure if any there has been an increase in abundance? Or, if there has been a change in satisfaction levels, is it more fisher contentment from avoiding the need to fish amongst bulk-harvesting commercial vessels? This data would be very useful as we explore possible solutions.

Exclusive fishing zones seem very desirable, particularly when it is imagined the government will provide them free of charge. In reality commercial fishers will not forego historical access without exacting a return.

Are amateur fishing zones the bait that will finally tempt non-commercial fishing interests into accepting a defined proportion of the allowable catch as a Total Allowable Recreational Catch?

Without being in possession of the answers to these and other questions non-commercial fishing interests would be taking a risk in accepting these zones. A risk the commercial lobby never would. It risks buying a reform package without knowing the price.

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