

option4 Update #147

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We don't know how lucky we are

It is time to celebrate a freedom many expats treasure – a homecoming and a day out on the boat with family and friends catching fish, or rock hopping for kina and mussels. When we compare the constraints on fishing across the Tasman to the freedom and abundance we enjoy in Aotearoa, it is we who live in the 'lucky country'.

This freedom has been hard-fought, is worth celebrating and not to be given away lightly in a race to establish a statutory body intent on licensing Kiwi fishers.

Our freedom of access and rights to fish are largely intact because of two factors:

- Many Kiwis have strongly opposed licensing fishers and privatising our fisheries; and
- The Government is the ultimate agency responsible for ensuring New Zealanders can provide for their social, economic and cultural well-being through fishing.

Recreational advocates

In 1957 five clubs established the New Zealand Big Game Fishing Council. At that time no one envisaged the important role the (now) New Zealand Sport Fishing Council would take in securing a fishing future for all New Zealanders.

In 1976 the Council was instrumental in setting up the New Zealand Recreational Fishing Council, which has evolved to perform many functions on behalf of its members. In the early 1990s the Minister of Fisheries, Doug Kidd, directed the NZRFC to represent all recreational fishers' interests during the review of the Fisheries Act. When the review was completed this mandate was withdrawn. This withdrawal was considered a very cynical move by the Government to use then discard those willing to participate at such a high level of advocacy.

There are now 57 member clubs of the NZ Sport Fishing Council with around 32,000 members. This makes NZSFC the largest organisation representing recreational fishing interest in Aotearoa. Also, the NZSFC is recognised by Sport & Recreation New Zealand (SPARC) as a national body representing recreational fishing.

There are other national and regional groups who continue to advocate for fishing and environmental interests. We applaud their effort because these people make a tangible difference, particularly at flax roots level. They take advantage of generations of local knowledge and their relationships with decision-makers – invaluable advocacy that demands better resourcing, encouragement and promotion.

Government's role in fisheries

When considering what successful public fishing would look like, including free access to abundant and diverse marine ecosystems, New Zealand is closer to that objective than most other jurisdictions.

Undoubtedly there are management failures in our fisheries, but the many rebuilds required to move coastal stocks to more secure levels (some need to double in size) can be achieved within a generation.

It is in the interests of all Kiwis and the Government to find the least painful pathways to rebuild these stocks. However, the resolve to rebuild stocks must come from the Government, to ensure both value and sustainability outcomes are achieved.

Exercising your rights and freedom

There are many challenges ahead that will test the skill and resolve of those advocating on behalf of the public interest. But we should take a moment to celebrate the current rights of the public to fish at any time,

any place and without prior permission.

Exercise and enjoy those rights and the bounty of the sea, with an attitude that appreciates and respects the unique place the ocean, and fisheries, plays in the lives of small island nations like our own.

As long as the Government retains the role of representing the public, and is accountable through the ballot box, the public will retain the ability to influence policy. This influence will be lost if the role of representing the public migrates to a statutory organisation.

Over the years some Fisheries Ministers have been noticeably more responsive than others to public demands, this is likely to continue into the future. For example, in 2002 Labour's Pete Hodgson defied his own Ministry's advice in an effort to allow for public fishing in the southeastern snapper fishery.

Politicians love to use nice sounding phrases and comforting words, but when examined these often have no precise meaning.

Each of us needs to make a point of asking political aspirants their views on public fishing.

Encourage your candidate to make firm statements about the protection and provision of public fishing as a core role of Government.

Do not be fooled by the rhetoric espousing the need to reform our rights and establish statutory authority over recreational fishing, because the current system has demonstrably protected public access, even if it is not perfect.

Ultimately, management would be more effective if we all took responsibility for applying pressure where it counts, particularly in this election year.

And please, seriously consider contributing to help resource those who advocate for public fishing rights and 'more fish in the water'.

The option4 team strongly supports the voluntary advocacy model developed by NZ Sport Fishing Council over recent years. They have earned our unconditional support and commitment.

Encouragingly, various marine recreational users, tangata whenua and environmental interests are similarly committed to ensuring a successful voluntary advocacy model exists in the future.

In the 1800s Thomas Jefferson said, "The price of freedom is eternal vigilance" – this still rings true today.

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