

Inequitable trade off in fisheries carve-up

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By Trish Rea

In the 21st century you would expect a billion dollar industry, dependent on natural resources, to deploy environmentally sound practices, but not in trawl fishing, and not in New Zealand.

The real irony is the expectation that long-term sustainability can be achieved while using a fishing method – trawling - that repeatedly degrades the habitat that fish rely upon for their survival.

So the fishing industry and Ministry of Fisheries have major work to do if they are to successfully convince the public and our trading partners that New Zealand is truly at the forefront of international sustainable fisheries management.

It is worth noting that any comparison with overseas regimes just highlights how poorly fisheries are managed elsewhere.

After 24 years of quota management system it is obvious that privatising our fisheries has enabled corporate investors to reap handsome rewards while exploiting our coastline.

Karli Thomas, Greenpeace's Oceans Campaigner, is appalled at industry claims that bottom trawling is an acceptable part of the environmental trade-off equation because of the potential earnings and jobs created.

“Bottom trawling is like clear felling the seafloor, with scant regard to the sensitive corals and other marine life inhabiting it. Just because this damage occurs underwater doesn't make it any more acceptable than if there were swathes being cut through our native forests.

“For most species there are alternatives to bottom trawling, and those fish that cannot be caught in other ways tend to be slow growing deep sea creatures for which industrial fishing is likely to spell disaster. The Ministry should be investing in real damage control – researching less harmful fishing methods - not in public relations damage control for the deep sea trawl fleet”, said Ms. Thomas.

Instead, the public are fed an endless stream of platitudes and propaganda about how robust the quota management system is.

Despite these assurances the public has slowly been disenfranchised from its own fisheries because there are not enough fish available in many coastal areas.

A positive outcome has been the formation of the Hokianga Accord, an alliance of customary, recreational and environmental interests.

In 2005 Ngapuhi and Ngati Whatua leaders invited recreational fishing representatives to venture north and spend a couple of days on a marae to discuss matters of mutual concern.

Five years and fourteen overnight hui later representatives of Ngapuhi, Ngati Whatua, NZ Sport Fishing, option4, Greenpeace, Forest & Bird, ECO and others are now enjoying the benefits of a deep understanding of one another's perspectives, priorities and needs.

George Riley, the Accord's chairman has a long-term view, “We only need to stop and consider what our grandfathers left us, and compare that with the fisheries we have to pass onto our mokopuna [grandchildren] to realise the extent of the damage done to our marine resources”.

Earlier this year John McKoy, the chief fisheries scientist at NIWA, our lead research agency, conceded there were significant gaps in knowledge about fish populations and sustainable catch levels.

These shortcomings were due to the lack of funding, the dynamic nature of the marine environment and industry pressure to drive down research costs.

“We don’t know very much at all, in other words you have to guess,” said McKoy. But, “The uncertainty that exists is quite a handy tool to maintain if you don’t want change”.

New Zealand’s quota system is based on measuring landed catch, but very little is known about what and how many non-target organisms are shovelled over the side before a vessel docks.

During a 2009 study, ‘Defining and Estimating Global Marine Fisheries Bycatch’, researchers were limited by a lack of data so they applied Australia’s bycatch rate of 24.6 percent to New Zealand’s fisheries.

“Using the annual average 497,000 tonnes of marine catch per year, we get an estimated 122,262 tonnes of bycatch for the 2000 – 2003 period.”

Richard Baker, President of the New Zealand Sport Fishing Council, is worried about the long-term impacts of this mortality rate.

“How many fish does this tonnage represent, because it takes many more juveniles than adults to make up a tonne of fish?”

As fisheries are exploited older animals are removed faster than they can be replaced, leaving young fish as the population mainstay. The maximum sustainable yield theory is that these juveniles are fast growing and more productive. However, undersize fish are more vulnerable to predation, environmental changes and most likely less tolerant of being manhandled.

ECO’s Barry Weeber is concerned, “Instead of treating each juvenile fish as a triumph of nature to be treasured and nurtured to adulthood, they are unceremoniously discarded without record”.

It is no wonder that many inshore fisheries are not sufficiently abundant to satisfy the public’s social, economic and cultural well-being.

Adding to the ignominy is that when fisheries are eventually reviewed the public are expected to bear the brunt of catch limits cuts. Recently the recreational and customary allowances were slashed in the northern kahawai fishery by 48 and 60 percent respectively.

Corporate interests are now the majority stakeholder in kahawai, free to use purse seiners to annihilate surface schools and sell the remnants as crayfish bait and petfood, all for 23 cents per kilo.

Unless you are a corporate quota holder our fisheries management system is not working.

Exchanging our marine biodiversity and future productivity for short-term corporate profits is not an acceptable trade-off for the majority of New Zealanders, certainly not without asking us first.

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Trish Rea is an advocate for non-commercial fishing interests, works with a number of Maori and environmental representative organisations and has been involved in fisheries management issues since 2000.