

We need more fish in the Sea

By Jeff Romeril
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If you read this magazine there is a very good chance that you like to fish at least occasionally and expect to have some chance of catching a fish to take home and eat. In this magazine there are plenty of articles about equipment, 'How To' techniques and hot locations that will maximize your chances when you do decide to go fishing. Plus there are ample exciting tales of great fishing trips that leave us green with envy and a little disbelieving that such fishing is possible. Then to cap it off there are advice sections on the many delicious ways we can cook and enjoy our catch. All of which motivates us to try our own luck because if we believe just a fraction of all the many magazine articles and TV shows about fishing in NZ there are fish galore and all you have to do is soak a line following the advice given and you will soon have fish for dinner. The reality though is often a different story, which nobody writes about or portrays on fishing shows - the fish caught were undersized and returned or we caught no fish at all!

Recreational fishermen must be the most optimistic people I know because they are easily motivated to give it another go when their own track record of catching fish is abysmal. They invent sayings to justify failure "a day fishing with no fish is better than a day at work" and "it was a great day to be out on the water". They buy the latest tackle and electronic wizardry, spend a fortune on bait and fuel and prepare to do it all again because last time "the fish just weren't biting" but maybe today? You know there are fish out there because at the boat ramp some show off was proudly holding up his decent size prized catch to his mates. So the question that naturally follows, is the fishing as plentiful as the various magazines and TV shows would have us believe or is this an illusion only to be repeated by those skillful and knowledgeable enough to regularly catch good fish?

I am reminded of a TV advert where a young girl and her father are fishing together on a wharf and she asks her dad how many fish are there in the sea? He replies hundred's of thousands to which she quickly follows with "then how come we can't catch one?" The question asked is a complex issue and mixture of fishing talent, fish behavior, fisheries stock management with a goal of more fish in the water and most importantly having someone looking after your fishing rights to access and take fish. I will briefly deal with each of these issues and then discuss with you some myths, perceptions and facts that you should know on representation of your fishing rights and achieving more fish in the sea.

Good fishermen with talent are a fact and the adage that 20% of fishermen catch 80% of the catch is a reportable statistic through surveys. Those with talent will always out fish the rest, no matter how abundant or scarce the fish are. The good news is, you can acquire the skill with plenty of practice and applying the knowledge you learn. Understanding fish behavior is a major advantage to your success, to know where they are likely to be found, feeding patterns and affects of daily climatic conditions, tide and seasonal migrations on the target species. Plenty of reading will assist and tapping into the knowledge of proven fishermen who have undoubtedly done their homework on this factor will greatly help.

Now to fisheries management. This responsibility falls to the Minister of Fisheries who has a substantial ministry (MFish) to advise and administer his decisions. The Minister is required to conform to the Fisheries Act which in turn requires all human interaction with any fishery

to be controlled so that the fishery is harvested at or above a sustainable level. There are a number of competing demands for the fish in the sea. Commercial fishing wants to bulk harvest and sell the resource, recreational anglers want to be able to catch a fish for their own needs, customary fishers have the needs of their Marae and hui, then there is other mortality such as black market fishing, fish killed in the fishing process but not retained and environmental factors such as yearly breeding conditions that can alter the size of future catches. The Minister must determine what can be safely extracted without threatening the sustainable future of the species. Then comes the hard part, he has to allow for each of the competing interests, each with their own demands and justification for a greater share.

To keep it simple the demands of recreational fishers can be satisfied by having more fish in the water. More fish means your chances of catching a fish are higher and that the fish you catch will on average be bigger. This is the opposite to what commercial fishers want, they maximize their return to their shareholders if they can fish down a resource to approximately 20-25% of its original (virgin) biomass. This produces a fishery where there are lots of smaller fast growing fish that are replenished quickly and gives them the greatest yield at a sustainable rate. Nevertheless at 20-25% biomass the total weight of fish in the water is less than a quarter of its original size. I should also add that finding and maintaining that level has eluded the Minister and MFish and most of our important shared fisheries have gone below the critical 20-25%. They know it and so do the commercial fishing companies who lobby for the required rebuild to the minimum level to be spread out over the maximum possible time often 20- 30 years or more. Now have a guess at which competing demand gets the most attention and you will also be able to answer the question on how well we have been served on achieving more fish in the water.

Time for action, you bet and the Kahawai Legal Challenge (KLC) was a huge step in the right direction. Albeit it is now subject to an appeal by commercial fishers who will fight at all costs to prevent a possible reallocation of resource to achieve more fish in the water for non commercial fishers. The appeal is being contested by the NZBGFC along with our partner's. But the point I want to make is the KLC challenge was a last resort and an expensive option to resolve issues on how we achieve more fish in the water for non commercial fishers. We have been poorly served by successive governments in looking after our interests. The loudest squeaky hinge that got the oil was a very powerful and financial fishing industry. Our own lobby to governments over the last 20 plus years has been a whimper, stifled by lack of clear mandate, financial and manpower resources. We were no threat, the politicians would turn up to a NZ Recreational Fishing Council (NZRFC) Conference, look around at the poor attendance and noted that ministry and government officials outnumbered the delegates. Former Minister of Fisheries Pete Hodgson was honest enough to say to us directly that an organized recreational fishing group was an oxymoron. So we didn't hold much sway.

In hind sight the establishment of the NZRFC of which the NZBGFC was instrumental in forming was a failure. Despite the best efforts of some very well meaning individuals who donated considerable time and in a number of cases substantial personal funding to make the NZRFC work, it hasn't achieved its primary purpose. The NZBGFC has contributed substantially in both finance and man power but didn't achieve the most important factor, that of buy in by the public. The NZRFC exists on a meager \$40,000 per year. Enough to survive but not be effective. The real danger is they still exist and are making important decisions on your behalf without informing or consultation with the group they claim to represent – you the public. Yes they have a newsletter – have you seen one, and they have website – try and find it. To be blunt we only have ourselves to blame in that unless there is a serious issue that got your undivided attention such as licensing, most of the country's 1 million anglers just got on with their lives and left the recreational fishing lobby and aspirations to a few willing club delegates. That will never cut it with the might and power of commercial fishing in NZ and while a few battles may be won, we will get worn down by attrition.

So how do we achieve critical mass in our lobbying? The NZBGFC even with its 32,000 membership and clear structure and lines of communication is not sufficiently broad enough in its aims to take on a role of fully representing the public. In fact we are quite selfish and while our aims may have a benefit for the public such as the kahawai legal campaign our primary aim is seeking outcomes benefiting our membership.

The current Minister of Fisheries Jim Anderton has also correctly identified that the public are poorly served by representation and for the first time by any Minister has offered the possibility of forming a recreational fishing trust with seed money to get it underway. While money from Government always comes with riders on how it's spent (ie so we don't use it to take him to Court) it would be an improvement on what we currently have. It's too early to determine how this will unfold and is subject to intense political maneuvering by politicians, your current NZRFC advocates and commercial fishing companies.

We should though take heart in recent developments of our own making. The KLC was a huge success and subject to repelling the appeal will have a long standing beneficial affect for us on all our shared fisheries, not just kahawai. The last three years has also seen the development of option4 and regional forums such as the Hokianga Accord. They provide a huge boost in support for the public outside of clubs structures and were very influential in the forming of the "people's submission". This submission was a huge piece of work submitted on your behalf to Government on Shared Fisheries and put together by some of the best recreational fishing minds that have the technical knowledge and talent to write such a paper. It is without a doubt the best and most comprehensive submission that I have ever been involved with and squarely states where non commercial fishers have been short changed with the development of the Quota Management System. It also offers what can be realistically redressed by constructive proposals. It is a must read for any new club delegate or member of the public that values their ability to catch a fish for themselves or future family.

So back to my original question "is the fishing as plentiful as the various magazines and TV shows would have us believe or is this an illusion?" The short answer is, it could be better, a lot better, yes we will still get a fish but imagine the possibilities and catch rates if our simple aim of more fish in the water was an active government plan. Pursued and achieved by strong non commercial lobbying merely advocating your rights. For further assistance or info refer www.option4.co.nz and www.nzbgfc.org