



Guardian Angels

The Guardians of Fiordland is a little known group which may just have established a blueprint for dealing with divisiveness over the key issues of our times. PETA CAREY goes fishing in the Deep South.

About the same time the 15,000 strong hikoī made its way onto Parliament grounds last month, a dozen or so people seated themselves around a table in Invercargill. Oddly enough, the two delegations had much in common. Both were there for the sake of their marine environment, and both had a heartfelt vision of how best to manage it.

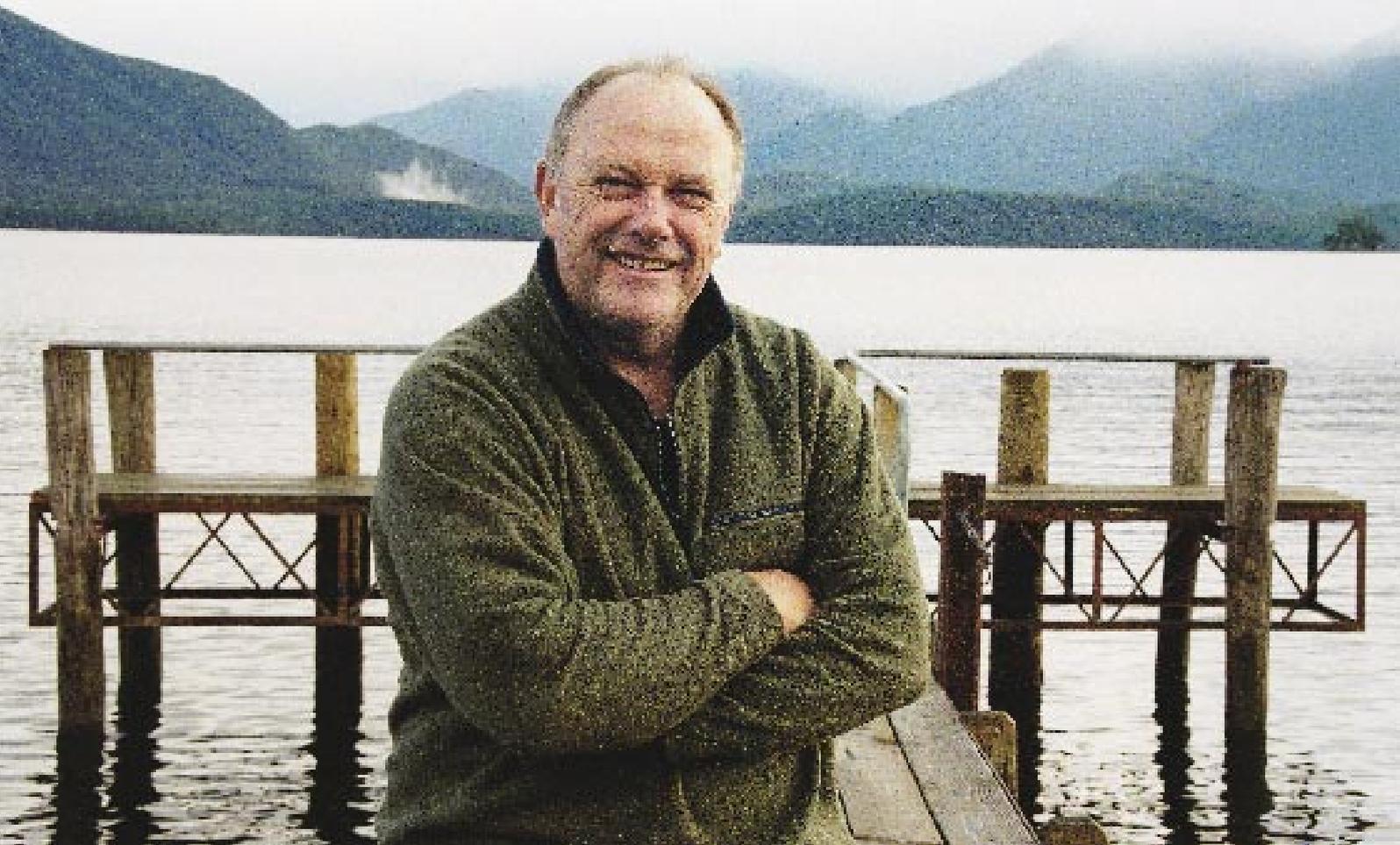
The difference was, however, that the Southerners — both Maori and Pakeha — had already pretty much figured it out. And they'd succeeded by doing nothing more than what Maori have always advocated: sitting down and having a yarn; the sharing of information, expertise and the notion of finding a common goal.

Unlike parliament grounds there was laughter in that room in Invercargill, quiet cajoling across the table and a no nonsense approach to issues needing resolution. After all, these people had known each other through eight years of meetings like this one.

PETA CAREY IS A QUEENSTOWN FREELANCE WRITER AND FILM MAKER.

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Straight-talking southern man and Guardians chairman John Steffens “It’s not rocket science, it’s common sense, finding a common goal, or vision, and then being able to compromise in order to reach it.”

Recreational and commercial fishermen, local iwi, charter boat operators, scientists and environmentalists — all stakeholders were represented, all had come to the table to figure out how to best manage their bit of coast. And their region is by no means insignificant: the unique, utterly wild and savagely beautiful marine environment of Fiordland, touted as one of the most important marine conservation areas in the world.

Over eight years the “Guardians of Fiordland”, as they call themselves, have worked to come up with a vision for the Fiordland marine environment. Entitled the “Fiordland Marine Conservation Strategy”, it was finally presented to the Ministers of Fisheries and for the Environment in September 2003. Its implementation may well demand new legislation, the proposal to be presented to cabinet in July. If and when legislation goes through this time next year, the Guardians of Fiordland will have created history: commercial fishermen voluntarily withdrawing from fishing grounds; recreational fishermen voluntarily, drastically reducing bag limits; the banning of bulk harvesting methods; eight significant areas of fiord set aside as “representative” areas (marine reserves by another name); and iwi voluntarily giving up recreational customary rights. No government agency was in control. This was a process instigated and managed from within the community, voluntarily and amicably. At no time did they reach loggerheads. There were certainly plenty of heated discussions, but ultimately a unanimous decision was always reached.

What this unlikely assembly from the Fiordland wider community has achieved has eluded just about every conservation and fisheries sector of New Zealand. What it embodies, many

argue, are the principles upon which much of New Zealand’s “Oceans Policy” should rest, not least the current controversy over foreshore and seabed.

When the Guardians presented the final strategy to government ministers in Te Anau last year, Mark Solomon, chairman of Ngai Tahu, was there shaking his head in amazement. “If we’d dealt with the seabed and foreshore issue like this we wouldn’t have had a problem,” he said.

The Guardians’ grit and gumption has astonished the government departments involved. The Ministry for the Environment has now launched a study on their process, to tease out why they were so successful, and *how* they got to where they are now. What’s their secret? Can the rest of the country learn from them? Or is Fiordland — its geography, culture, and size of population — so unique their achievement is simply not replicable anywhere else in the country?

KARA MATHESON

“It’s not rocket science,” says John Steffens, ex crayfisherman, straight-talking southern man and Guardians chairman. “It’s common sense, finding a common goal, or vision, and then being able to compromise in order to reach it.

“How it’s always happened before is Big Brother comes down and says, ‘Thou shalt do this’. And Kiwis being Kiwis tell them to go and get stuffed. Then you have to have a whole network of rules and regulations to try and control people to make sure they’re doing what Thou Sayest they should!

“The Guardians’ philosophy is to go to the resource users, the people out there getting wet and dirty. Give them the problem and empower them to come up with a solution.”

The problem, back in 1995 when the Guardians started, was twofold.

First was the realisation that although it seemed the quota management system was keeping a lid, arguably, on commercial fishing (for the most part on the outer coast), the vast increase in boat numbers — recreational and charter boats — was having a major effect on the inner fiords.

Steffens: “Commercial fishermen were coming to me and saying, ‘Look, these guys are coming into Dusky Sound with dive parties of 15 people on board’, and they’d go out with 600 to 800 crayfish. But it was legal catch under recreational limits. Dusky and Doubtful Sounds were getting hammered, stocks becoming seriously depleted.”

But when pressed, he admits the overriding motivation behind the Guardians’ initiative was as simple as doing something before it was done to them. When the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature, now known as the World Conservation Union) awarded Fiordland National Park World Heritage Status in 1986, there was also talk of creating a marine park across the whole of Fiordland extending out to the 200-mile limit. Murmuring from marine science and environmental organisations, in particular Forest and Bird, were in essence “shut the place up”.

“We said, well if we’re so smart and we’ve got all the answers, why don’t we take the initiative on this,” says Steffens.

His ally was marine biologist Laurel Teirney, then Ministry of Fisheries southern region manager who for years had believed the key to sound fisheries management was to work from “the bottom up”, getting all the resource users together.

And so the Guardians of Fiordland’s first meeting was held in a Te Anau hotel conference room with Teirney as facilitator. There were 12 people around the table, representing all the various Fiordland stakeholders — recreational and commercial fishers, many of them from different towns who’d never laid eyes on each other.

Teirney remembers it as a defining moment. “They were all looking suspiciously at one another, all nervous wondering if there were things they might have to give up. I introduced them all and simply asked, ‘What do you want for Fiordland’s fisheries for next 20 years?’ And they all said exactly the same thing. And so they were focusing on the actual fishery, not on themselves.”

John Steffens: “We realised we were after the same stuff; it had people looking at each other in quite a different light, they weren’t such bad buggers after all.”

Teirney admits she looks back and wonders now just how they achieved what they did. “It was enormous, it was *Fiordland* — I mean you gotta be joking.”

As far as most New Zealanders are concerned the marine environment of Fiordland stops at Milford Sound. The rest is a wilderness too distant, remote and savage to consider. It’s the playground of a privileged and hardy few.

Road access is limited to either the Milford Road, with its hairpin bends from the Homer Tunnel to

Milford Sound, or via the Lake Manapouri-Wilmot Pass route to Deep Cove in Doubtful Sound. From Bluff it’s a day’s sailing to the southernmost fiord, Preservation Inlet, a voyage taken with due caution and a close eye on the weather. From there, over 1900 kilometres of coastline winds its way to Milford Sound. Like the burrowing of a wood worm, the 14 fiords carve their way into the massif that is the Southern Alps, from sea level almost straight up to well over 3000 metres.

In the path of the Roaring Forties, the outer coast is more often vertical than beached, a frantic scene of precipitous cliffs, staggering rock outcrops, raging white foam and a constant tug of kelp and swell. The few long sweeps of black sand are unceasingly pounded by colossal wave action, no matter how calm the Tasman Sea.

It’s here on the outer coast that 30 per cent of New Zealand’s export of live rock lobster is fished, a significant industry with a history going back almost a century.

Mark Peychers, one of the Guardians, has been a crayfisherman in Fiordland for nearly 30 years. He’s seen the fishery rise, fall, and now begin again on the rebound. Over the last 15 years he’s experienced quota cuts totalling 65 per cent and has seen the commercial fleet cut from 240 boats to the present day fleet of 60.

“There were people forced out, and all they’d ever known was fishing,” he says.

Guardian Mark Peychers is a crayfisherman who survived when the commercial fleet was culled from 240 to 60 boats in 15 years.



PAUL PEYCHERS



Fiordland bounty: giant crayfish and stunning black and red coral.

“It’s no different from any other industry. It’s a finite resource so you can only take so much, and when you take too much you’re going to pay for it.”

Peychers (ironically from the French *pêcheur*) is one of the “survivors”. His boat *Spindrift* is tied up to the wharf at Milford’s fresh water basin for close to 10 months of the year. Such is the health of the present day cray fishery (largely due to quota cuts) that he expects to catch his quota of just over seven tonnes within six weeks. Ten years ago, he reckons, it would have taken him six months.

Peychers argues that the outer coast is in good health, the rock lobster fishery protected by the Quota Management System. The inner fiords, on the other hand, are not in such good shape.

Turn in from the Tasman Sea and the fiords offer a respite from the fury of the prevailing westerly. Like carved *tangiwai* (the bowenite greenstone endemic to Fiordland) the green of the podocarp forest clings to sheer rock walls, the vertical aspect of the granite mountains continuing to plunge directly down another 130 metres to the fiord’s seafloor.

John Steffens suggests it’s down there that the life of the fiord is at its most fascinating. “Personally, putting a dive bottle on and jumping over the side probably did as much as anything to change my view of Fiordland. To see what’s down there and to see the beauty of it.”

What makes the Fiordland marine environment unique in the world is a combination of topography, vegetation and climate. When the rain falls, which it does with alarming frequency and force, it washes the masses of forest debris directly down the vertical sides of the mountains into the fiords. The result: a surface layer of fresh water the colour of well-brewed tea. Often up to several metres deep this fresh water “lens” blocks much of the light from penetrating into the rest of the salt water below. All that survives, therefore, is well adapted to low light levels. What would otherwise be found anywhere else in the world at huge depths thrives at the diveable limit of only 20 to 30 metres, the most renowned being the massive tree-like colonies of black coral.

Throughout Fiordland are these delicate areas of black and red corals, many over 400 years old. The term “china shop” was coined by marine biologist and underwater cameraman Andrew Penniket in 1992, a term now adopted by the Guardians to specify “areas of special significance” where no fishing or anchoring will be permitted.

Fiordland’s underworld presents a range of extremes: from the dark, deep recesses of the inner fiord with the fragility of the china shops to the savage and relentless power of the Tasman sea on the outer coast.

The range of stakeholders is almost as diverse. The commercial fishers and paua divers ply both the inner fiord and the outer coast, while largely confined to the sheltered waters are the recreational fishermen and the charter boats. Ngai Tahu interests are represented within both commercial and recreational activity. Then there are those for whom environmental considerations are paramount: dive clubs, scientists and eco tourists all clamouring to find the pristine wilderness Fiordland is famous for.

This was Laurel Teirney’s daunting challenge — negotiating a path through a morass of individual stakeholders’ interests and keeping everyone happy.

Except that not *everyone* was invited. Or at least, not at first. As much as the Guardians claim to have consulted all interest

ANDY BELCHER

GARETH EYRES



Marine biologist and Guardians facilitator Laurel Teirney looks back over eight years and wonders just how they achieved it. “It was Fiordland — I mean you gotta be joking.”

groups in Fiordland, there was one voice expressly excluded in the first few years of discussions, that of Forest and Bird.

John Steffens admits they were simply not invited. “Personally I felt that from the behaviour I’ve noticed in other groups I’d been involved with, that if Forest and Bird had sat around the table with the Guardians they would have tipped the group over. People would have given up in disgust and walked away.”

The key to the Guardians, both Teirney and Steffens insist, was that everyone left their personal agendas at the door, no one gave ultimatums, no one drew a line in the sand. The suggestion was that anyone from Forest and Bird would present an intransigent position, and would therefore bring the process to a halt.

“Right at the start we had a philosophical problem with including someone *environmental* on the group,” says Steffens. “After sharing a vision of a future Fiordland we realised we were all conservationists anyway. We were there to bring about a victory to conservation. So when people said you haven’t got any conservationists on the group we found that quite offensive.”

A few years later, however, that would change. The then Minister of Fisheries, Pete Hodgson, had a visit from two prominent Forest and Bird members, one of whom was Professor Alan Mark (alpine botanist renowned for leading the charge in the “Save Manapouri” campaign). According to Hodgson they were there “to put a stop to this”, i.e. the Guardians. Whereupon, Hodgson, already enamoured with what the Guardians were achieving, responded, “Bullshit, you’re going to join them”.

And Professor Alan Mark was put in the hot seat — invited to join the Guardians.

“Forest and Bird would rather have had one of their staff on it than me,” Mark explains. “But I was marginally acceptable to Forest and Bird, and marginally acceptable to the Guardians.”

Guardians chairman John Steffens was surprised by Alan Mark. “He fits with the group. He’s able to take on information and meld, accordingly. Some of the other people from Forest and Bird simply can’t do that.”

However conciliatory, Mark was there to represent the view of his organisation, the over-arching policy of Forest and Bird being that the bulk of Fiordland’s marine environment be put aside as a marine reserve.

“Having come in late, and at stage when a plan was out for public submission, it was quite clear that the Guardians were strongly opposed to any suggestion of any extension of Fiordland National Park beyond the high tide mark,” Alan Mark says. “A suggestion of a marine park of any nature was anathema.”

He concedes little may have changed had he been there from the outset, and he is quick to congratulate the various group representatives who had their “heart in the right place”.

“It’s the most difficult part of the country to have surveillance over, so you need co-operation,” Professor Mark explains. “The major stakeholders are the only ones who are going to succeed in putting this thing into practice.”

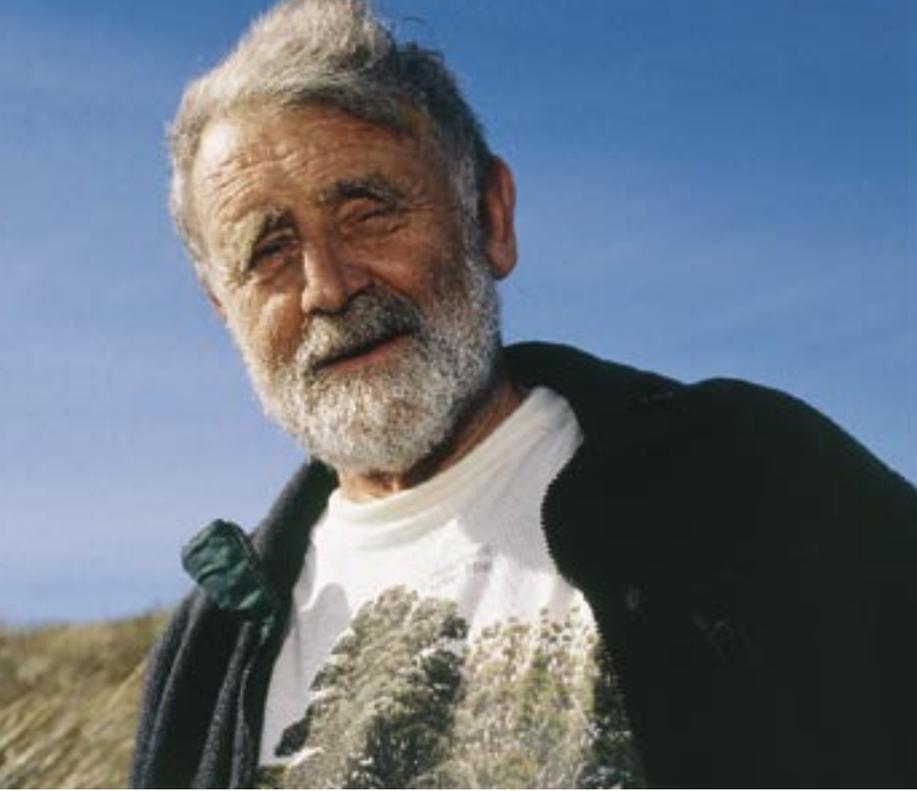
The major stakeholders also had a wealth of information to contribute — 250 years of collective experience in Fiordland sat around the table. To that they added another four years of information gathering — scientific and statistical surveys — something Teirney suggests was one of the most important steps in the eight-year process. “When it came time to argue over who’d get what they’d all be coming from the same data base.”

An important part of that database was historical anecdote. “I’ve always felt that to move forward you have to go back,” says Teirney. “We had to talk to the old codgers.”

“Old codgers” like Rex Bradshaw tell stories of a crayfishery that will never be seen again.

“When we first started fishing in Fiordland in the early 1950s, if you had more than 10 pots you were being ridiculous. We used to fill our boats up till they were overflowing. We’d just go round and round 10 pots — pull them by hand I might say. We didn’t know what winches were, and then we’d fill the boat up so you couldn’t get any more in. They’d be flopping over the side.”

Outside his home near Bluff, the woodstove filling the room



Alpine botanist Professor Alan Mark initially wanted to put a stop to the Guardians. The fisheries minister told him “Bullshit you’re going to join them”.

with warmth, the Fiordland and Foveaux Strait weather is beginning to strike. The wind is at gale force, the rain horizontal. A day like today any fisherman would want to be in port at the pub, or anchored well inside a sheltered fiord.

It must be the years moving on, the mellowing of an old salt, but Rex Bradshaw admits his guilt at contributing to a serious depletion in fish stocks. In less than three years in the early 1950s, he estimates they’d slashed the original stock by a half. A decade on they were catching 70 per cent less than when they’d started. It continued through the 1960s with the advent of freezer storage, and then with the threat of quota being introduced in the late 80s it was every man for himself. By the time quota was introduced in the late 1990, no one could catch their limit.

“They tell me the resource is recovering,” laments Bradshaw, “but they don’t know what recovered is. And they don’t believe you if you tell ’em what it used to be like.”

Many of the present day fishermen, like Mark Psychers, acknowledge that loss. He insists, however, that a return to those days of a virgin biomass in unrealistic. All they can do is work to reverse the trend of degradation.

And so the work continued around the table in Te Anau. A database complete, the negotiations began. Teirney’s secret weapon at this crucial stage of the discussions was a philosophy she called “Gifts and Gains”. What one group offers as a gift — a withdrawal from habitat, or from customary fishing rights — is a gain to another, or to the wider Fiordland environment.

In this predominantly male domain, Laurel Teirney had to tread carefully. If ever they seemed to reach an impasse, or the atmosphere become too tense, she’d diplomatically postpone further discussion until a subsequent meeting. That way they all had a few weeks to think about it.

“I remember people leaving the room at the end of a meeting, and a number of them would be sharing vehicles and I’d hear reports later that the air would be blue all the way home.”

The most contentious issue? Between the commercial and the recreational fishers.

“The commercial guys tried to get the rec fishers to reduce their bag limits, but the rec guys and charter guys are saying, ‘Well, who’s taking the most fish out of there?’ So eventually the commercial guys said they’d go outside the habitat line, to the outer coast only.”

This was historic — commercial fishermen voluntarily withdrawing from fishing in the inner fiords. They’d made the offer in an effort to reduce fishing pressure inside the fiord, and by so doing had also presented the recreational fishers with a gift: they could then fish in the calm waters of the inner fiord unperturbed, without any pressure from commercial activity.

Teirney continues: “So then the recreational guys said, ‘Well okay, in that case we’ll lower the bag limits.’”

In fact, the recreational lobby *slashed* the bag limits in the inner fiord. From 30 blue cod per fisherman, the inner fiord limit will be three, with no accumulation. Filling the fish bin for the family back home will be a thing of the past. Forget the freezer, it’s fish for a feed. You take out only what you catch that day.

Alan Key was the man upon whose shoulders the responsibility fell to break the news to the troops back home — the recreational fishing lobby, a task he says that was “near enough to impossible”.

Laurel Teirney credits Key with accomplishing the most difficult job, convincing some of the most redneck elements of southern New Zealand of the benefits of taking less fish.

“The easiest way to explain it,” Key says, “is that I’ve spent mega hours on a one to one basis. Whether it’s been in the pub, or on a boat, or in a car going somewhere — the subject will come up, and once you run through and explain why and how it happened, and how it’s going to work, 99 per cent say they don’t have a problem with it.”

His greatest sense of achievement came when he and fellow Guardians Mark Psychers, John Steffens and Ngai Tahu representative Stewart Bull presented the draft strategy to a group of commercial fishermen.

“We started the intro and this joker stood up and said, ‘Well I may as well sell my bloody fishing boat. You bastards are going to stuff my business.’”

And this other fisherman stood up and said, ‘You shut up and listen till he’s finished’. So he shut up. And we did the whole presentation, and it came to question time and after we answered a few questions this joker turned to the other one and said, ‘Now what are you going to say?’ And he said, ‘Can I join the group?’”

In 2002 the draft strategy was completed including all Gifts and Gains negotiated thus far. It was then presented to the public for scrutiny and submissions.

And they flooded in — there’s nothing like fishing to divide a community.

At one extreme came submissions from a group of recreational fishermen who call themselves “Option4” and whose mantra gives every man the right to take as many fish as he can catch. At the other end of the scale was Forest and Bird, which strongly argued for a much more conservative approach, putting aside far greater areas of marine reserves.

BILL NICHOL

It was at this point that Professor Alan Mark felt strongly compromised: “I was aware that all submissions mentioning Forest and Bird or marine reserves were sidelined as extreme views of Forest and Bird and allies.”

The implication was that many of those views — much of them based on extensive scientific research — were then dismissed.

John Steffens disagrees. He insists all submissions were carefully examined, but that they “had to hit the middle ground; we wanted a plan that would satisfy the maximum number of people”. Option4 was at one end of the scale, Forest and Bird the other. In effect, they cancelled each other out.

“We’ve hit it bang on,” he insists. “What we’ve come up with is right for Fiordland.”

At the heart of the debate is a fundamental schism between the fishermen and the environmentalists (for want of a better word) of the value of marine reserves. One of the major criticisms levelled at the Guardians is that although they’ve proposed eight significant areas of inner fiord, *no* fiord entrance nor outer coast — the most productive marine areas — have been put aside. Scientists argue that if one entire system, i.e. from the inner fiord out to the open coast, were restored, it might then provide “baseline” information critical to the well-being of the fishery as a whole.

Professor Alan Mark questions just how much the commercial fishermen have really given up, just how significant their gift of the withdrawal from the inner fiord really is.

“It’s human nature, I think, to offer for protection areas that aren’t critical for your own livelihood. In that respect I think we could have done better in terms of adequate representation in Fiordland.”

“It was a huge gift,” John Steffens argues, estimating the inner fiord to be 15 per cent of the commercial rock lobster fishery, and the one area where guys “starting out in the business” would head.

At the suggestion that sections of the outer coast be put aside as marine reserve, cray fisherman Mark Peychers’ eyes begin to glaze over.

“Why? Show me the threat. Have you seen that coast when a good storm comes in? You’ve got seas with six-metre swells, waves crashing hundreds of feet up the cliff, and boulders the size of buses crashing down. What we do to that outer coast is insignificant to what nature does.”

He’s on a roll now, well practised at this argument.

“And why do they want to take good productive areas away from us? Asking us to gift the outer coast would be like asking farmers on the Canterbury Plains to hand over their land.”

Ask Peychers if he’s tired of having to defend



PAUL PEYCHERS

PAUL PEYCHERS

NEW ZEALAND GEOGRAPHIC/DENNIS BRETT

himself against the tired old accusation that every commercial fisherman is “an exploitative ratbag” and he insists, “I got over that long ago”.

For there’s the rub. For despite the criticism levelled at the final strategy there is no denying the level of commitment towards the conservation of Fiordland’s marine environment by those involved. Quite simply, they love the place.

John Steffens: “What I’ve found with Fiordland — well, it does something to people eh, and they want to look after it. Had a lot of fun there too. It’s just something that you do.”

Laurel Teirney suggests, with a wry smile, that after a few beers they’ll all talk of the place with a tone of absolute poetry, and often a tear or two in the eye. “It really is a passion for those guys. The reason they’re round the table giving up things is because they love it so much.”

It was also the time they gave up. Both Alan Key and Mark Peychers estimate that the hundreds of days of meetings, toll bills, fuel and lost revenue have cost them over \$70,000 each. But according to recreational fishermen representative Alan Key, it simply couldn’t have happened any other way.

“An agency couldn’t do what I’ve done. When I’m down at Bluff painting a boat, by the time I’ve finished I’ve got four commercial fishers, and three recreational fishers and we’re sitting down having a stubbie talking about Fiordland, and they probably get more in that hour than reading any printed strategy.

“If paid people were there it wouldn’t have happened. They would have been the wrong people. It’s about dedication, about the people who are truly concerned, not people who are there getting the money.”

At the end of the day all critics are deferring quietly to what *has* been achieved rather than what hasn’t.

“It’s quite clear it’s a significant improvement over what’s been there in the past,” explains Alan Mark. “I’ve been a long time in conservation and you really have to be patient. You can’t achieve everything in the first cut. You stay in there and try to achieve it slowly by example.”

While the environmental lobby are quiet in their congratulations, the government is applauding loudly. From the moment the final strategy was presented to Marian Hobbs (Minister for the Environment) and Pete Hodgson (Minister of Fisheries) in 2003, it’s been on a fast track to implementation.

Why so enthusiastic? Because for the last few years the government has been working away on a landmark review of all marine management. Entitled “Oceans Policy”, it aims to come up with a vision of oceans management integrating every possible sector of our marine environment within New Zealand’s jurisdiction. From land-

based effects all the way out to the 200-mile economic zone.

What the Guardians have achieved, according to Laurel Teirney, is a significant contribution towards that policy development. “The government hasn’t been able to produce their Oceans Policy yet. They’ve been struggling away for years and millions of dollars, and with our little strategy we just did it.”

The relevance of the “Fiordland Marine Conservation Strategy” is not lost on fisheries minister Pete Hodgson, one of the six Cabinet ministers overseeing the Oceans Policy development. “What the locals have gone and done is what central government and organisations like Forest and Bird have failed to do. The lesson for all of us, in the technocratic and bureaucratic age, is that it’s entirely possible as a community to get it done.”

Hodgson admits he’s simply “overwhelmed” by the quality of the work. “The least I can do is see it into law.”

Nor has the Guardians’ success escaped the notice of Ngai Tahu chairman Mark Solomon.

“Ngai Tahu promotes the community approach. It’s what Maori do, and it’s exactly what the Guardians have shown.”

He suggests Ngai Tahu will be advocating taking the Guardians model and applying it to the Kaikoura region and fishery, and then onto Marlborough, such is their belief in the process.

But the crucial question is: Can it be replicated elsewhere? Or was the combination of factors — personalities and environment — unique to Fiordland?

Many point to Laurel Teirney’s capability as a facilitator as crucial. Laurel Teirney, in turn, reckons it’s down to the southern blokes. “I do think they’re special,” she laughs (acknowledging there were southern women there as well) then carefully considers. “They haven’t been in the rat race. They’re more innocent, more trusting — down to earth.”

John Steffens is more pragmatic: “Of course you can replicate it elsewhere. It’s something we’ve got to get a bit smarter at, as a country. There are certain people who are very opinionated in their ways, who are just in there for their own ideology. Well you can’t have them sitting in a group and come up with something that’s a consensus, whether it’s foreshore and seabed, or Guardians of Fiordland.”

The rain eased in Wellington that day of the hikoī, about the same time as Foveaux Strait upped the wind force on Invercargill. The Guardians meeting was at an end — hands being shaken, backs slapped and jokes subsiding as each member braced themselves for the drive home — to Gore, Dunedin or Te Anau. Perhaps at the heart of the Guardians’ success is that “southern warmth”, or maybe it’s what a day spent out on the deep, green waters of Fiordland does to you, but here were people who knew, quite simply, how to sit down and have a good yarn. ■

