

Hokianga Accord Update #17

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An initiative to achieve more fish in the Bay of Islands is being thwarted by a mischief-making campaign.

Most of the comments undermining Te Puna Mātaitai proposal are being directed towards the applicants even though the Ministry of Fisheries has prescribed and is managing the process.

Fourteen hapū from the northern Bay area have asked the fisheries Minister to approve the Mātaitai encompassing around 7.6 square nautical miles, from Te Puna Inlet into the Bay and north one mile past the Ninepin.

Co-chairman of the Hokianga Accord and hapū leader, Judah Heihei, is disappointed with the latest developments.

“There was enthusiastic support at an early October public discussion meeting. Since receiving the first submissions we have continued to promote our strategies to increase fish numbers and improve water quality, while giving effect to our customary right to manage areas of traditional importance.”

Their committee, Te Rōpū Kaitiaki Whakature I Ngā Taonga o Tangaroa, has spent over ten years researching the options. Meetings have been held with local fishermen, landowners and marine interest groups.

MFish and the Minister are now considering the application’s merits following a November meeting and subsequent submission process.

Inflaming the debate are suggestions that the applicants do not have historical links to the area and could prevent people from diving, anchoring or accessing the area.

Local hapū chairman, Hugh Rīhari, denies these claims and emphasises that only commercial fishing will be automatically banned from the Mātaitai.

“It is our customary obligation to manage the area for the benefit of all people who want to use the Bay. A Mātaitai is not like a Department of Conservation no-take-forever marine reserve, so there will be no confiscation.”

A management plan is under development by the committee. New fishing by-laws can be considered but any proposals will need to be publicly advertised, consulted, then approved by the Minister through a separate process.

Mr Rīhari continues, “our hapū have genuine concerns for the fish and want to be given the opportunity to practice our tikanga and help restore the fisheries. It is not in our collective interest to exercise customary rights to the detriment of the local community because most of our sustenance fishing is under the amateur regulations not the customary rules.”

Sonny Tau, Chairman of Te Runanga-Iwi-O-Ngāpuhi and Accord co-chair, attended the last consultation hui, where there was only one objector amongst fifty people. The commercial cray fisherman suggested shifting the Mātaitai boundaries to accommodate his business however, his available fishing area dwarfs the 7.6 sq nm proposal. Crayfish 1 stretches from the Hokianga Harbour on the west coast, east past Cape Reinga and south to Whangarei.

Mr Tau confirms non-commercial fishing will continue. Prohibitions will only apply to commercial fishers and this will hopefully take the pressure off the inshore fisheries so that people can land crayfish again.

“Officials estimate the national annual harvest by customary and amateur fishers is around 25,000 tonnes of fish. Comparably, commercial extraction is over 570,000 tonnes.

“Te Rōpū Kaitiaki believe the proposed Mātaitai will help overcome the frustration of having Wellington-based bureaucrats poorly managing local fisheries instead of people who have a genuine interest in the area.”