

Hokianga Accord Update #37

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Lack of leadership riles northern interests

Mid north iwi are bitterly disappointed with the lack of leadership being demonstrated by the Minister of Fisheries, Phil Heatley and his Ministry when managing kahawai. The recent decision to leave commercial catch limits intact for Kahawai 1, from North to East Cape, will have the most detrimental effect on Ngapuhi, Ngati Whatua, other iwi, hapu and all those associated with the Hokianga Accord.

Kahawai numbers have diminished drastically over the past 30 years and if the decline continues there will be few left for our mokopuna [descendants].

While many fishers are ho hum about kahawai these fantastic fish are highly prized amongst northern Maori, both for their eating quality and their social and cultural value.

Usually fishing at the beach is a whanau event. Kuia kaumatua come along to spend the day with their mokopuna in a safe environment. If kahawai numbers are well down then there are less fish available inshore. Beach and rock fishing becomes a hit-and-miss affair with no kai to take home in the evening.

While it is easy for the Minister to be flippant and say nothing has changed on the water, it already has.

Kahawai used to be our bread and butter fish but it is rapidly becoming a rarity. In some northern harbours it is easier to catch a trevally than a kahawai these days.

After the Ministry released its kahawai proposal papers in late June recreational groups across the country spent months compiling and submitting information on the true state of the fishery. A recent survey of 1000 people found that over 96% wanted commercial catch limits reduced to cover inevitable bycatch only. Bulk harvesting of kahawai by purse seiners was totally rejected.

Kahawai are highly valued for providing sustenance to Maori and coastal communities, they are above all others the 'people's fish' due to their traditional availability inshore, and they are an integral part of the marine ecosystem. Having healthy seas contributes to our national well-being.

The Minister's decision to retain commercial catch limits, but reduce recreational and customary allowances by 48 and 60 percent respectively, is contrary to the interests all New Zealanders. The Hokianga Accord is committed to ensuring kahawai numbers are restored to enable people to provide for their well-being.

At our April hui the Accord spent many hours discussing the MFish Inshore Working Group process and the catch estimates that were being used in the kahawai population models. Robust debate followed a thorough presentation by John Holdsworth, a fisheries scientist and adviser to non-commercial interest groups.

Feedback to MFish was clear. The assumption that recreational harvest of kahawai had remained constant over the past 35 years was not believable. Non-commercial harvest varies with abundance. Many traditional fishing areas are now bereft of kahawai schools.

Our collective input hardly rates a mention in the Ministry's Final Advice Paper to the Minister, but that is no excuse. Phil Heatley has been kept well informed of our concerns for years, even before he became fisheries Minister. So, as his own Ministry proudly claims, ignorance is no excuse.

When uncertain 'science' collides with the real-life experiences of thousands of people we would have expected the Minister to at least err on the cautious side. Instead, Heatley has sought to appease commercial interests, and in doing so has sacrificed a national taonga, our treasured kahawai.

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