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Ministry management a disgrace to society

“By God, I intend to be the Minister of Fisheries one day and to fix up and straighten out the ministry! The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries is a disgrace to a democratic society.”

They were the legendary words of Doug Kidd in 1990, prior to the introduction of the Fisheries Amendment Act 1990.

Aside from a name change to Fisheries and several new Ministers nothing much has changed in the last 19 years. In fact, it can be demonstrated that things have got worse for the average fisherman. Gone are the days of popping out to catch a fish for dinner and, if the cat is lucky, a spare tail for him to chew on.

Numbers of fish in many key fisheries are so low that land-based and inshore fishing are exercises in futility for many people.

As numbers decline so too does the range that these fish travel. It is a rare sight these days to see the massive schools of surface-feeding fish, kahawai in particular, that used to feed close to shore. The ‘people’s fish’ have become the preserve of commercial purse seiners and offshore trawlers.

Solution is obvious – realistic management

Very few of our inshore fisheries are managed at anywhere near the level required by the Fisheries Act 1996. Snapper 8, on the west coast of the North Island, is at around half the level required to produce maximum sustainable yield. The east coast stock, Snapper 1, is supposedly closer to this limit, although that is debated in many areas.

A ready solution is to address the unrealistically large quota-management areas. For example, Snapper 8 extends from north of Titahi Bay in Wellington, past Cape Reinga and across to North Cape.

Regional differences in catch rates and the size of fish were highlighted during the 2005 sustainability round. Taranaki-based fishermen, commercial and amateur, were adamant that the commercial catch limit should be maintained (or increased) and that the amateur daily bag limit should be dropped in the north from 15 to 10.

This may seem a reasonable proposition when each fish averages between two and three kilograms, as they do in southern regions. By contrast, snapper from the inner Manukau Harbour are barely 500 grams. So, after a day’s fishing a southern fisherman can take home between 20 and 30 kilos of fish, while his Manukau counterpart is lucky to have five kilos.

Purchasing fish is the other option but retail prices of our most popular species mean that many people are excluded from what was once a traditional dish. Not surprisingly, a recent survey found that 59 percent of New Zealanders would eat more fish and seafood if they were cheaper to buy.

There is increasing evidence of the health benefits of eating fish. There are also social and cultural advantages in families having access to abundant fisheries so they can feed themselves.

option4 is committed to working with the NZ Big Game Fishing Council and the Hokianga Accord to achieve more realistic management of our fisheries so that all New Zealanders can provide for their well-being through fishing.

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