

option4 Update #134

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New Zealand's fisheries are well managed – Yeah Right!

Ministry of Fisheries officials continue to claim that all New Zealand's fisheries in the quota management system are sustainable and well managed. The evidence, both scientific and anecdotal, proves this is untrue. Unless we stop kidding ourselves the public will continue to question the validity of the quota system, the Ministry's credibility and little effort will be applied to rectify the serious issues that exist in our coastal fisheries.

Originally the quota management system was introduced to constrain commercial fishing and rebuild severely depleted inshore fisheries. While some decimated fisheries have recovered, there are many stocks still at unacceptably low levels and not protected by an effective catch limit.

Since 1986 around 628 individual fish stocks have been introduced into the quota management system. In 24 years there has been no review of total allowable commercial catch limits for over 60 percent of those stocks.

Snapper study

Even information-rich stocks like Snapper are falling through the cracks. MFish no longer consider commercial catch rates are useful for monitoring abundance and have stopped sampling the size and age of landed Snapper.

The recent stock assessment of Snapper in Area Two (SNA2), between East Cape and Wellington, failed because the mathematical model could not reproduce the trends seen in catch rate or the age structure.

MFish now acknowledge the conclusions of the previous SNA2 assessment were unreliable. That model predicted a rebuilding stock and in 2002 MFish advised their Minister to increase annual commercial catch, which he did by 25 percent!

How can our fisheries be managed if the collected data cannot be used to monitor population trends?

It is a management convenience to claim sustainability and world recognition of the quota system when in reality there are few stocks being well monitored or "actively" managed.

Scientific reports

In 2008 a United Nation's panel of international experts reviewed fisheries management in 53 countries. Their report, *Safe Conduct? Twelve years fishing under the UN Code*, rated New Zealand at 8/53, below South Africa and above Japan, but not world-leading by any stretch.

The report argues that New Zealand, like many countries, is not meeting its obligations to comply with the UN's Code of Responsible Fishing, only rating around 50 percent.

This panel noted that most countries have taken almost no concerted or effective action on irresponsible fishing in terms of discards, juvenile mortality, bycatch and environmentally harmful fishing methods. They were surprised that New Zealand appears to have no published estimates of discards.

A 2009 Marine Policy report conservatively estimated New Zealand's bycatch rate, including discards, at 24.6 percent of total catch – 122,262 tonnes of bycatch from an average annual catch of 497,000t between 2000 and 2003.

MFish can crow about various publications that rank their property rights-based quota management system better than other, poorly-performing regimes worldwide, but the Ministry's failure to recognise these authoritative reports is an example of spin doctoring - only feeding the public information that makes MFish look good.

While this twisted strategy may be successful in the short-term, all New Zealanders and our fisheries deserve more honesty and effective management.

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