

option4 Update #90

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Are fishermen at risk of extinction?

The latest threat to every New Zealander's ability to go down to the sea and catch a fish comes in the form of the Marine Protected Areas (MPA) policy. This policy has been developed by a panel of "experts" who are making some major assumptions about how our marine environment is managed and how it should be protected from threats such as fishing.

The latest document issued by the Ministry of Fisheries (MFish) and Department of Conservation (DoC), the Classification and Standards draft, is so complex it has even the best 'experts' available to amateur fishers scratching their heads.

The general thrust is that marine reserves qualify as MPAs and other areas such as cable zones and Mātaitai might, if they meet the prescribed standards. The policy calls for protection of a full range of marine habitats and ecosystems with a preference for large protected areas covering multiple habitats. For example, different bottom types and depths, much like the mega-reserve proposed at Great Barrier that extends out to the 12-mile limit.

To top it off, the deadline for responses is limited. Final submissions are due by 30th September.

option4 is developing a submission, in conjunction with the NZ Big Game Fishing Council and the Hokianga Accord, the mid north iwi fisheries forum. The draft submission is online; to add your comments please visit http://www.option4.co.nz/Marine_Protection/mpas.htm

Not many of us would argue with the ambition of greater protection of our marine environment, it is how we achieve the goal that is at issue. We currently have the Fisheries Act, Marine Reserves Act and customary management tools, the very same mechanisms that the MPA policy is promoting as being the answers to our current demise.

Why aren't these tools being used now?

Instead of spending millions developing more policy you would have to question why government agencies aren't utilising the tools currently at their disposal. Is it because they do not want to let go of the totalitarian control they have over both the marine environment and those who have rights to fish our coastal waters?

Without being given the opportunity to maximise the potential that already exists, this process seems to be running roughshod over the top of tangata whenua and local communities who have already made an effort to implement measures that suit their needs. Many of these groups are struggling to resource themselves and could do with some of the millions being spent by bureaucrats deep in the bowels of Wellington.

While the government will argue this process is about protecting biodiversity, why is fishing being targeted? Line fishing for mobile species can have little effect on local populations or the environment.

As the High Court ruled earlier this year, every New Zealander's well settled common law right to fish has a particular value because of our proximity to the sea and temperate climate. If we as a fishing community do not make a stand on this latest policy proposal we will be next on the endangered species list.