

#### **option4 Update #120**

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#### **How much fish do we actually catch?**

Since 1986 the quota management system has been heralded as a world-leading regime that controls commercial fishing, maintains fisheries at sustainable levels and provides for people's needs. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Mass, unconstrained commercial exploitation continues in many of our inshore fisheries despite the introduction of the QMS.

Theoretically, sustainable fishing would be achieved by regular stock assessments so sensible catch levels could be set. Unfortunately, many fish stocks levels have not been reviewed since 1986 and over-inflated commercial catch levels have prevented a rebuild in many of our important, depleted fisheries.

As competition for fishing access heats up the calls for more information on amateur and customary catch have become louder, from both commercial fishers and the Ministry of Fisheries. This is a specious attempt to shift the responsibility for mismanagement onto public fishers, who merely seek to feed their families.

It also ignores the loss of productivity in our fisheries due to the often indiscriminate, bulk-harvesting methods used to scoop up as much fish as possible in the shortest timeframe.

Assumptions are also made that the total commercial catch has been quantified and the only missing element is non-commercial catch. Whilst improved information on non-commercial catch maybe useful, it is very expensive to get an estimate of recreational catch for each species, every year.

The vital missing ingredient for stock assessments is not non-commercial catch but a reliable time-series of commercial catch rates that can track changes in fish stocks.

It is much more important, and cost effective, to know whether fish size and numbers are increasing or decreasing.

#### **Non-commercial catch**

A reform of the customary regulations has resulted in more detailed reporting to MFish of permitted catch.

Several million dollars has been spent on national surveys to calculate amateur harvest of specific species from different areas, and how much time and effort was involved.

Individual amateur fishers were recruited to record their catch and effort in a diary. As of 2004 the MFish database contained:

- ⇒ 125,938 fishing trips;
- ⇒ 496,006 hours of fishing effort; and
- ⇒ total catch of 985,217 fish and shellfish.

Boat ramps surveys have been used over 14 years to measure the size of fish caught and catch rates per fisher. Information was collected from 9,196 surveys covering 164 ramps nationwide. These figures are multiplied by the percentage of the population who fish to calculate a harvest estimate.

There is ongoing debate about the overall harvest of fish caught by amateur fishers. MFish estimate our catch is around 25,000 tonne per annum. A more realistic estimate maybe around 15,000 tonnes.

Regardless of which recreational harvest estimate is used, overall non-commercial catch represents less than five percent of the allowable commercial catch limit of 573,000 tonnes.

Most amateur fishers measure their success and the health of the fishery by what they catch. A check of your local boat ramp will reveal many empty chilly bins over the course of a day.

Fisheries management priorities are questionable when you consider that New Zealanders are going home empty-handed at the same time we are exporting 92 percent of commercial catch to feed the world.

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