



**Catch your own:** Kiwi kids must not lose the opportunity to experience the thrill of catching their own kahawai.

Photo: SUPPLIED

# Minister not helping to save the 'people's fish'

Fisheries Minister Phil Heatley and his ministry are indifferent to the overfishing of kahawai, says **Tony Orman**.

**M**arlborough recreational fishers are appalled and angry at rampant overfishing of kahawai – a fish often termed the public's food and sport fish.

Despite this, Minister of Fisheries Phil Heatley – by retaining the commercial quota for Kahawai 3, the area Marlborough fits into – recently failed to address the excessive exploitation.

The reality is that the kahawai fishery is in dire straits, and the minister and his ministry seem oblivious to the situation.

Kahawai catches at local river mouths have declined to a very low level. Reports from local fishers indicate shockingly low catch rates for recreational fishers, with kahawai numbers a small fraction of the numbers of 20 years ago.

Marlborough once had large stocks of kahawai – visible shoals, accompanied by feeding gulls, were common in the Marlborough Sounds, Cloudy Bay and Cook Strait. Now they are seen only rarely, if at all.

The minister's failure to reduce the commercial quota in the face of a depleted fishery is irresponsible.

Blame for the overfishing lies not with local commercial fishers but with corporate purse seiners. In recent years, kahawai have been pursued by commercial fishers using spotter planes and purse seine vessels that catch entire schools in a single shot. The commercial kahawai fishery is of very low value, with fish

being exported to Australia for crayfish bait, pet food and fish meal at reportedly less than 50 cents a kilogram.

The Ministry of Fisheries has failed to acknowledge the importance of the kahawai fishery to the people of New Zealand.

Furthermore, it has failed to manage the kahawai fishery in the interests of all New Zealanders.

Recreational fishers have warned of a decline in kahawai numbers since the late 1980s, and recreational groups even went to the High Court to ensure more fish were left in the sea.

Kahawai are worth much more to the economy as a recreational and tourist species than as a corporate commercial fish species. Constant calls for commercial catch levels to be reduced to "unavoidable bycatch only" have been made, but to no avail.

However, Mr Heatley has been quoted as saying that "at current catch levels, kahawai numbers were set to continue growing" – head-in-the-sand stuff.

The minister's decision on the quota allocations showed disregard for the concerns of recreational fishers, which were expressed in more than 1000 submissions.

The continued plunder is destroying the common-law right of families to fish to put food on the table. Mr Heatley and his ministry also endanger the future opportunity for Kiwi kids to experience the thrill of catching their own kahawai at river mouths.

Instead, the minister has basically said "continue the plunder" and let whole schools of kahawai continue to be scooped from the water in nets, processed into crayfish bait and pet food and exported at low value.

Overfishing of one species often has dramatic effects on related species in the food chain. Declining kahawai numbers have had a detrimental impact on other dependent species such as kingfish, whose staple diet is kahawai, and birds such as terns and shearwaters that join surface feeding melees of kahawai.

Now those feeding frenzies are a thing of the past, or much reduced in number and size, because the kahawai have been decimated.

The value of kahawai to the million-plus non-commercial fishers is far higher than the low value generated from most commercial catches.

Some have advocated that kahawai are of such importance to New Zealanders who fish that the species should be "non-commercial" only, ie a "recreational only" species.

The purse seine catch history was undeniably responsible for the current dismal state of kahawai stocks.

Recreational fishers accept the unavoidable bycatch of kahawai when other species are being targeted, and a reasonable allocation should be made to cover this activity.

The Marlborough Recreational Fishers Association has written to Mr Heatley but received a weak reply attempting to justify overfishing of the "people's fish".

■ Tony Orman is president of the Marlborough Recreational Fishers Association.