

CHURNING UP THE SEABED

– PHOSPHATE MINING CHATHAM RISE

BY GEORGE CLEMENT

A plan to mine the Chatham Rise seabed for phosphate makes a mockery of efforts to protect New Zealand's fisheries. The industry is worth over \$1.6 billion to the New Zealand economy annually and generates about 25,000 full time jobs. We have some of the most sustainable fisheries in the world, as certified by the Marine Stewardship Council and recognised as such in our markets.

I'm not anti-mining, but it makes no sense to risk this golden goose with an untested, job-light mining project that could create an environmental catastrophe at sea.

The company that wants to do this, Chatham Rock Phosphate, is about to lodge a proposal with the Environment Protection Authority to mine the seabed on the Chatham Rise.

It plans to mine for phosphate by vacuuming up large tracts of the Chatham Rise seabed, extract the phosphate for use in fertilisers and then drop all of the debris back into the sea, into what is our most productive area of ocean for deep sea fisheries – our CBD for hoki fishing.

The process has never been done before at these depths. We don't know, and neither does Chatham Rock Phosphate, the effects it will have on deep sea marine life. Everything in the direct line of the "vacuum" will be killed. The plume of debris, with its fine sediment, is likely to extend for miles across the seabed, smothering all in its path.

The company has said publicly that it has completed environmental impact assessments and that there is no risk. We'd like to see that data and an up-to-date description of the project proposal, because what we do know is that the Chatham Rise is home to New Zealand's only known juvenile hoki nursery ground.

Young hoki migrate to the Chatham Rise from their main spawning grounds along the West Coast of the South Island, in the Cook Strait and the Pegasus Canyon. Once the hoki are larger they again migrate to other areas. Destroying this nursery ground on the Chatham Rise could devastate the entire hoki industry.

That's why in 2007 we sat down with the Government and



made a tough decision to fence off the seabed in the Chatham Rise to any bottom trawling or dredging by fishing boats.

We did the same for other areas across New Zealand's Exclusive Economic Zone.

Today there are 17 underwater "national parks" or Benthic Protection Areas, plus 19 protected seamounts. We saw it as the only way to look after unique seabed habitats that support New Zealand's marine life. It meant denying our own boats access to these areas but in doing so we can ensure healthy ecosystems that will in turn support healthy fisheries.

Thirty percent of New Zealand's EEZ, or 1.1 million square kilometres of our seabed is now protected by law from dredging and trawling.

It would make a mockery of these legislated "national parks" if a mining company could now excavate the seabed, destroying all of the animals that get caught in its path. However, the present law does not protect these ecosystems from mining, only fishing.

It's not even clear that any short term economic benefits from the mining will stay in New Zealand. We simply don't have any information on which to assess CRP's claims of economic and employment benefits.

They need to make that information available.

It makes no sense to risk a fishing industry that will still be around for generations to come for the sake of a 15-year mining project with debatable benefits and very real risks. The Chatham Rise ecosystem supports \$167 million of New Zealand's \$1.6 billion annual returns from New Zealand seafood. This equates to \$2.5 billion over the first 15 years of the mining proposal – and over that time CRP purports to add only \$900 million to New Zealand's economy.

At the end of the mining the company will walk away, leaving behind a mine site seven times the size of Wellington Harbour, 250 times bigger than the proposed new open cast coal mine on the Denniston Plateau, and with tailings of fine sediment that could potentially smother sea life over thousands of square kilometres of the seabed.

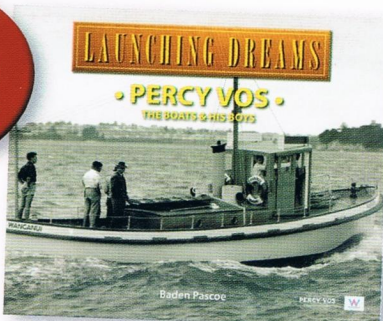
And the hoki may be gone forever.



The author is the chief executive of the Deepwater Group, a not-for-profit group representing deep sea fishing companies.

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Email
Baden Pascoe
badenhp@xtra.co.nz
Phone 09-5758468

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