



Marlborough Recreational Fishers' Association

Marlborough Blue Cod Fishery a Shambles

The history of the controversial ban on blue cod fishing in the Marlborough Sounds shows that it was ushered in by the previous government (Labour) in a most unusual fashion. The first proposal was to ban all recreational line fishing throughout the Sounds, which was naturally, strongly rejected by the public. That proposal was then altered to ban all blue cod fishing in the Marlborough Sounds. The Marlborough Recreational Fishers' Association (MRFA), not convinced of the justification, held two public meetings one in Picton and the other at Waikawa, near Picton. Both were extremely well attended and both of which rejected the ban, unanimously at one and by the vast majority in the other.

Fishing was improving and stocks were stable.

But the Ministry claimed blue cod stocks had been decimated by recreational fishing. Their solution? Ban all recreational hook and line fishing for the species. As Scott Williamson of Ministry of Fisheries, Nelson, put it the "best science available shows that this (blue cod) fishery is "in serious decline."

But what was the "best science available"?

The NIWA study, oft referred to by the Ministry, in fact showed a contrary view to what the Ministry claims. It said there had been increases in a number of the outer Sounds zones while in the inner Sounds, there had been no significant changes in blue cod number. In other words the fishery was stable.

Dr Ian Henderson, a fisheries analysis scientist, questioned the ministry's assumptions.

The MRFA's committee formulated its own blue print for opening the fishery. On the committee or co-opted/consulted, were experienced recreational fishers, one member of the BCMG and very respected individuals like Dave Fishburn with a wealth of fishing experience encompassing commercial, charter and recreational.

But the Minister of Fisheries Phil Heatley reopened the fishery on April 1, this year with a series of rules that were impractical and even damaging to the fishery. A slot rule of being only able to keep cod 30-35 cms has been a disaster with anglers having to return many fish before getting any in the slot. Estimates vary, but one charter in catching 20 keepable cod, had to return 300 of which 80% were over 35 cms. Shags and barracoutta have had a field day waiting for released fish.

Tony Orman, immediate past president of MRFA said the minister has caused the deaths of many cod, which have been wasted. Even if a fish is visibly damaged in catching (e.g. blood from gills) it has to go back.

Other rules have been farcical. The minister has closed the fishery Aug 31 to December 20 on pretext of allowing spawning. But experienced local commercial fishers say most cod don't spawn in the Sounds but down Marlborough's east coast and they spawn mainly August to September. So the minister has left out August and included non-spawning months November and December.

In addition he has reduced the recreational bag take from 3 to 2 but has not reduced commercial or customary takes who were never subject to the ban.

"It's been discriminatory against the recreational public," said Shane Boese, president MRFA.

Other rules prevent a fisherman going out into Cook Strait beyond the Sounds and then returning with his legal 10 blue cod.

"Frankly it's a shambles," said Tony Orman. "A giant bureaucratic cock-up with the recreational public being picked upon for no sound reasons. It's an imagined blue cod crisis; a fantasy by the minister and ministry. And it's unfair in that only recreational have been made to pay."

Ends.
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