



## **Marlin are ours, but for how much longer?**

Striped marlin has been a recreational-only fishery since 1988, when Japanese tuna long-line vessels were banned from fishing in northern New Zealand. Domestic commercial long-liners are now campaigning for a regulation change to allow them to keep and sell marlin.

The New Zealand Sport Fishing Council continues to oppose any relaxation of the rules protecting marlin from private profiteers, preferring instead to promote the national interest by maintaining recreational access to marlin.

Recreational fishing contributes to a healthy national economy and sustains many coastal communities, providing important jobs, services, charter and club facilities. Many of these operations have struggled in recent years with the absence of yellowfin tuna, lower marlin catch rates, and visitors.

### **Declining catches**

More than 50 years of Council records demonstrate a significant decline in numbers and average weight of marlin caught by members, since surface long-lining started in the southwestern Pacific in the 1950s.

Last year the southwest Pacific striped marlin stock was assessed as overfished, yet effort is still increasing as more vessels start fishing the region.

Being at the southern edge of the marlin's natural range, the risk of a collapse in the New Zealand fishery, as seen with yellowfin, is real.

Marlin attract overseas and domestic tourists, many of whom tag and release their catch, contributing to science monitoring and enabling another fishing opportunity for someone else. Electronic tagging shows that released striped marlin survive and soon resume normal behaviour.

### **Commercial catch**

Long-liners say they only want to keep those fish that come to the boat that are unlikely to survive, around 25%. Official observers report around three quarters of long-line caught marlin are released alive.

Existing regulations mean there is a small amount of waste. However, as we have witnessed with swordfish and shark fins, relaxing the rules leads some operators to exploit the opportunity irrespective of the state of the fish.

Currently there is little overlap between the commercial longline fishery for bigeye and southern bluefin tuna, and the summer recreational marlin fishery. This could quickly change if commercial fishers were able to sell marlin, resulting in more sector conflict not less.

The marlin management review meeting in May is expected to generate strong debate, but the Council is clear –

- Marlin need more protection, not less.
- The importation and sale of marlin in New Zealand ought to be prohibited.
- Existing law supports marlin as a recreational-only species.

Our marlin are not for sale.

### **Yellowfin tuna**

National catch records collected by the Council show that yellowfin tuna catch in New Zealand has collapsed. The last reasonable season was in 2005, when 1300 yellowfin were landed or tagged. This compares with a paltry 10 fish in the 2011/12 fishing year, with none tagged.

Whakatane was for a long time considered the tuna capital of New Zealand, but not any more. Catch rates have declined so much their annual tuna fishing tournament had to be renamed because there was none available for the 400-odd anglers. Sponsorship deals for tuna-based catch disappeared along with the fish themselves.

The New Zealand Sport Fishing Council acknowledges and appreciates Greenpeace's ongoing effort to expose, to the wider public, the high level of illegal fishing in the Pacific, the use of destructive fishing methods and the parlous state of some pelagic species.

Undoubtedly there are complex issues associated with managing fisheries like marlin and yellowfin tuna on a Pacific-wide basis. However, you have to wonder about the definition of "management" when here in New Zealand there are so few yellowfin that only 1% of the quota is being caught.

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