

NZSFC Fisheries Management Update 34

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Abundance means fish for all

In the eight months since Nathan Guy's Snapper 1 decision there have been no material improvements to reducing the mortality rate in the northeastern fishery. If anything, things are worse. We still have masses of juvenile and adult fish being killed by trawlers inshore. We also have increased mortality caused by recreational fishers returning fish they would have otherwise taken home for a feed, and then continuing to fish longer than what they would have a year ago.

If you are struggling to find fish above 30cm please move to another location, use bigger hooks, circle hooks, and learn ways to mitigate damage to these small fish. Releasing fish while they are still in the water improves their survival chances.

These young fish are our future fishery. The extra fish will be required to sustain the expected population growth. They need to be left to do what they do well - grow and breed.

A positive aspect that has arisen from the snapper debate is the willingness of recreational fishers to conserve fish for the future. Not for export. But for our kids and grandchildren.

Conservation leads to what we need more of – abundance.

Fishing smarter

While our quota system is trumpeted as “world leading” it is far from it. Poor implementation and a laissez faire approach to applying the Fisheries Act has meant that we are still using old world technology to catch 21st century fish.

We have to fish smarter.

International best practice is to manage fisheries such as snapper at or above 40% of their estimated unfished stock size. That's B40.

Currently, the only fisheries being managed to that level of abundance is our deepwater species.

As we move inshore the target levels are 25% or below, because many fisheries of importance to us have not been reviewed since the quota management system was introduced in 1986!

Of major concern is the Bay of Plenty snapper sub-stock, which is estimated to be below 10% of its original stock size. Even after last year's review there are no specific measures to address this depletion.

If we managed our fisheries at or above this 40% level, B40, there would be enough fish for all sectors, and plenty for the future.

The good news is that B40 is specified as the default management target for a fishery such as snapper in the Ministry's own Harvest Strategy Standard.

Snapper are a hardy species and have survived a hammering for more than 50 years. Overall the snapper 1 stock on the northeast coast is estimated to be around 20% of its virgin stock size. Other species that live in the same environment have not fared so well.

Due to a lack of data we can only guess at how depleted our gurnard, trevally, tarakihi and john dory fisheries are compared to their original size. Instead of focusing on snapper our real measure of success is the abundance of these and other associated species.

Right now, even with the limited information available, these important and tasty specimens are disappearing from our lives and our plates.

It is time to manage for abundance. That is B40.