

NZSFC Fisheries Management Update 6

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Marlin Management in the Spotlight

A meeting to discuss the current and future management of marlin catch in New Zealand will be held in March next year. The New Zealand Sport Fishing Council (NZSFC) has spent three years working through the process of developing a Fisheries Plan for Highly Migratory Species with the Ministry of Fisheries, Maori representatives and other stakeholders.

Two of the contentious issues, yet to be resolved, are marlin management and purse seine fishing for skipjack in the Bay of Plenty during gamefish tournaments.

More recently attention has been raised about the shocking by-catch of whole communities of life, including juvenile yellowfin, attracted to Fish Aggregation Devices (FADs)

Highly migratory fish are a defined list species which include billfish, oceanic sharks and tuna that move beyond NZ's economic zone into international waters or the territories of other countries. In most cases the movement is not random, but deliberate seasonal migrations with a portion of those fish returning to New Zealand every year.

It is difficult for one country to effectively manage migratory stocks so international agreement is sought through regional fisheries management organisations. One of the newest and most active of these is the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission.

However, countries can also have their own rules. Marlin, shortbilled spearfish and sailfish (if we ever see some) are all recreational-only species in New Zealand. The Billfish Moratorium was a hard fought concession gained by the NZSFC and supporting clubs just before the 1987 general election, with the support of Colin Moyle the then Minister of Fisheries.

Back then there was general support for the rules from local commercial tuna fishers as it limited access for the large fleet of Japanese and Korean vessels longlining for tuna and billfish in New Zealand under licence.

Over time the licences for foreign vessels were stopped and locals, with less interest in the Moratorium, moved into longlining for southern bluefin and bigeye tuna.

Gamefish club records, some going back to the 1920s, help demonstrate how catches and average weights of marlin have decreased as tuna longline effort came to the South Pacific.

Even so, New Zealand still has the largest striped marlin with 20 of the 22 current IGFA world line class records held here. It truly is a world class fishery that NZSFC is determined to protect from commercial fishers who insist they should be able to keep some marlin by-catch, especially the dead ones.

The experience with broadbill swordfish here and striped marlin in eastern Australia is that once a concession is made it is only a matter of time before catches increase or target fishing starts.

NZSFC is proposing the ban on commercial landing of marlin should be extended to New Zealand vessels fishing outside our EEZ.

A project funded by NZSFC and the NZ Marine Research Foundation found that the economic contribution of the billfish fishery to regional economies in 2001 (a poor weather year) generated \$17 million in gross output, 151 full time equivalent jobs and a further \$8.4 million in value added. About 20% of expenditure came from overseas tourists.

In the absence of yellowfin tuna the striped marlin fishery is even more vital to maintaining our high value blue water fishery in northern New Zealand.

In March 2012 pressure will go on managers to loosen controls on marlin capture. The NZSFC is determined to uphold existing restrictions and broaden some on commercial landings. Because having healthy marlin stocks benefits our fisheries, local communities and our national economy.