

NZSFC Fisheries Management Update 10

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Will our Yellowfin come back?

It has been another very poor yellowfin tuna season in New Zealand. Last year NZ Sport Fishing Council clubs reported a mere 20 yellowfin landed or tagged and released. It couldn't get much worse and hasn't got any better this year. So what has caused their demise, and what can be done to bring back our yellowfin?

Firstly, it is not commercial vessels catching yellowfin in NZ waters that have depleted the stock. Yellowfin was a minor part of the longline and purse seine catch in NZ and has suffered an identical decline to the recreational fishery. Last season the total commercial catch in NZ was 3 tonne, from a quota capped at 263t.

Beyond NZ the increased yellowfin catch is attributed to purse seine fishing. Increasing effort in the much larger skipjack tuna fishery is also having an effect.

Most of the tuna "super (purse) seiners" set dozens of fish aggregation devices (FADs) to attract schooling tuna. These can be as simple as a bamboo raft and piece of old net or more sophisticated steel buoys with sonar, GPS and transmitters.

But FADs attract more than just skipjack.

Schools of small (30 cm) yellowfin and bigeye tuna are attracted to these devices and encircled by the huge seine nets set around these FADs. By the time the catch is sorted they are dead.

Purse seiners catching juveniles or longliners snaring larger fish to the north of New Zealand seem to be having the most impact on yellowfin productivity in our region and tuna that used to come to our shores.

Conservative management or a scary outcome?

The NZ Sport Fishing Council has been monitoring international catch and assessment reports to the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, the organisation charged with the long-term conservation and sustainable use of highly migratory fish stocks like tuna and billfish.

Pacific nations, including New Zealand, are supporting a more conservative management approach for tuna. The Commission has asked members to consider:

- A prohibition on setting FADs between 1 July to 31 October each year for all purse seine vessels;
- No purse seine night-setting during any FAD prohibition season;
- The two largest pockets of international waters (surrounded by the 200 mile economic zones) will remain closed;
- Catch of all tuna species taken in purse seines shall be retained, recorded in vessel logbooks and reported to the Commission;
- An approved observer must be on board during all purse seine vessel fishing operations;
- Longline catches must be below the average 2001 to 2004 catch level.

The NZSFC also supports tougher measures proposed by Greenpeace, including:

- Permanent closure of the four high seas pockets to all fishing;
- A total ban on the use of FADs with purse seine fishing; and
- Immediate implementation of a precautionary 50% cut in the fishing mortality for bigeye tuna.

We must avert the scary potential that if the yellowfin stop coming here for long enough the behaviour of future generations may change and tuna may never return to Aotearoa.

Southern Bluefin tuna

In our view the Minister has failed to act in a precautionary manner in his recent decision to allow a 90% in-season increase the southern bluefin commercial catch. In November 2011 the NZSFC submitted that it was irresponsible to increase the NZ catch by 374t when the spawning stock was still declining.

Crayfish

A management decision for several Crayfish stocks is expected before the end of month.

LegaSea

Tuna and Crayfish are just two of the many issues that would benefit from more resources. You can make a contribution at www.LegaSea.co.nz, funding 'more fish in the water & a healthy marine environment'.