

Paua to the people

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5:30 AM Monday Apr 22, 2013

http://www.nzherald.co.nz/opinion/news/article.cfm?c_id=466&objectid=10878956

One of my favourite things to do is catch a few paua and cook them up in garlic and butter.

Like many people in New Zealand, I see it as an important right that I am able to go for a swim and catch some kaimoana. It is crucial that our world-leading (but far from perfect) quota management system continues to protect this resource.

I love freediving. It not only helps to keep me fit, but it puts food on the table for my small family, has provided me a job in the past (harvesting kina off the coast of Northland) and is one of the key reasons why I love the coastline and have dedicated my life to looking after it.

The area around Otago where I learned how to freedive is currently an excellent place to catch a feed of paua. But the Ministry for Primary Industries is now considering opening up certain areas of that coastline to commercial harvesting, which will change everything.

Instead of the general public being able to eat this beautiful shellfish every now and then, a small group of super-rich commercial fishermen will pillage everything they can and send it all away overseas.

I have freedived extensively in all regions of New Zealand and every time I go, I search for paua, which I view as a delicacy.

Such diving has occurred by land and by boat in many areas - both commercially open to paua harvesting and closed.

My experience has shown that in areas that are open to commercial paua harvesting, it is very difficult to find a healthy population of legal-sized paua. And I know how to find them. Conversely, in areas that are closed to commercial harvesting (like some areas near Dunedin and Wellington where I dive a lot) there is a healthy population from which recreational divers can sustainably take a few, leaving the rest to continue to survive.

Previous colleagues of mine who work professionally freediving have told me that when they harvest a patch they take every single specimen that is over the prescribed limit. Because of the way paua reproduce, this means that such areas are essentially wiped out after a commercial team has been through. The same guys told me that even years later, they never dive the same rocks twice, because they know they won't grow again.

Within the closed areas paua exist in their original state, large groups of big ones clustered together. Being broadcast spawners, reliable reproduction of paua is dependent on these aggregations of mature animals. Disruption of these groups ruins the species. Indeed, various abalone fisheries have collapsed around the world as the result of the boom and bust fishing practices that commercial paua harvesting employs here.

Most people who catch paua are very passionate about looking after the fishery and if given the opportunity to voice their concerns about something like this, they would be downtown waving placards, but they haven't. The Ministry for Primary Industries never notified the public about this proposal.

It smells of industry trying to slip a change under the door because they know that people won't like it.

Commercial paua harvesting is an ecological disaster and commercial fishermen know it but the money is too good for them to stop.

Even the Ministry has said that "The most recent assessment for PAU 5D (the area where changes are proposed) was done in 2006. It indicated that the stock was depleted with a high exploitation rate, and that catch rates were not sustainable." (2006 Stock Assessment?_id for PAU 5D).

Do you think that we should all have a right to catch paua rather than have this threatened by money hungry commercial fishing interests?

I for one want there to still be a few around for when my baby daughter grows up so that she can catch a couple and be inspired by the ocean like I have been.