

THOUGHTS ON FISHING

Text of an address to the ECO Conference 4 August 1984, prepared by The NZ Federation of Commercial Fishermen (Inc.) and presented on its behalf by John Henderson, spokesman for the Recreational Fishing Council.

Before indicating the Federation's policy on in-shore fishing, I believe it is important to clarify one or two factors that are fundamental to any management philosophy. The first factor being who manages the fishery? And naturally, the first answer that springs to most people's minds is the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, or an amalgam of such agencies. But that, I believe, is untrue, and highly challengeable. I would contend that instead, the least thought of or considered management agency actually carries out the role of fisheries management. That agency is known to all of us as mother nature. Mother nature manages our marine environment. All that man or agencies of man can do is manage people. Man can alter, destroy and affect the biology and ecology of the fishery, but he cannot in any way allude or claim to be the manager of it. We can at best, only manage the manner in which we treat it.

If we accept the fact that we merely manage the people involved in it, it follows that we in fact are attempting more or less to manage greed and similar elements inherent in the nature of man. The ruination of a vast proportion of the world's fisheries and the very rare incidence of successful fisheries, bears testament to the fact that greed is coming out the victor. This is further compounded by the injection of the word "Maximisation" when used as a guideline or principle by those charged with the stewardship of fisheries.

The dictionary meaning of "Maximisation" is quite clear - increase or enhance to the utmost to reach the highest possible level - and we cannot argue with that interpretation. The problem arises when we apply the interpretation as a principle of the management of a living resource such as a fishery - and then what does "Maximisation" really mean in terms of how we carry out this so-called management? In the eyes of some, it would mean maximisation of employment opportunity, or perhaps financial income, either for fishermen or for the country as a whole. It could mean maximisation of immediate short-term fiscal benefits, or conversely, the preservation of a long-term life-style. The interpretation as seen by a small but nevertheless efficient long line operator bears no relationship to the interpretation put on it by the Managing Director of a large capital intensive company.

If each and every one of you seated here today, were asked to write out your individual interpretation of what maximisation of a natural resource means, I doubt if there would be any two answers the same. To talk about maximisation without clarifying a time frame in regard to goals, aims and objectives is a dangerous business indeed, and is made even more hazardous when we consider we are dealing with a living resource that we know so little about.

We can count exactly, the number of trees in a forest, or the number of animals on the land. Virtually at the 'drop of a hat' we can increase or decrease the number of trees or animals at will. We can build the exact number of sawmills or freezing works to cope with a planned identifiable harvest from all aspects of forestry or farming or the like, and certainly these things of the land are living resources just as are the fish in the sea - but there the semblance ends.

We cannot as we are able to on land, manipulate the living resource of the sea at will. The only thing we can bring about with a great degree of surety is the destruction of it. As long as we apply the rules that can or should work relatively well on land, to the marine resource, we will have problems in its administration. It is unique in its form and should not in any way be identified with the ecology of the land. We must recognize that at best, we can only manage the harvesters of the resource; and we are totally beholden to mother nature as the ultimate manager of the resource.

The organisation and administration of a fishery such as ours is a very complex and complicated task. This is further exacerbated in New Zealand's case where we have for too long travelled the wrong path. A continuation of the applied philosophy of fisheries management of the last 20 years will prove the truth of the saying that "an open access policy applied as a management philosophy of natural living resource will ultimately reduce every participant to the lowest common denominator". The public, commercial harvesters and recreational user groups must be embraced in that adage.

BIOLOGICAL INSURANCE

I believe that maximisation as a philosophical concept in the management of fisheries is quite frankly a dirty word, and so indeterminable in its application that it should be disregarded as a principle or objective.

Instead we should be looking to create or build-in Biological Insurance. Biological insurance in simple terms is the state or situation whereby we can be assured that users of the resource cannot depreciate it at a greater rate than its annual interest return.

For many of our species, we have not only reaped the annual interest, we have also consumed vast quantities of the working capital. This factor has naturally brought about a reduction of available product for wise use by all user groups, not to mention the ecological imbalances thus created. If we choose to ignore and disrespect the provisions of nature, how can we expect nature not to reciprocate.

I believe that in dealing with the marine resource, there is such a thing as a fair go. There is a point of no return, a point at which nature may well say I have had enough. We cannot claim not to have been given ample warning and evidence of a changing ecology. A recognition and acceptance of the need and benefits of biological insurance is long overdue. So what if there are slightly more fish in the sea than we can harvest. So what if we prevent the taking of a certain percentage so as to provide a biological insurance; it is surely a small premium to pay in order to ensure the long-term viability of something that we do not own but have merely borrowed from our children.

SUBSIDIES

Subsidies take many and varied forms, and it is absolutely impossible to cover the subject in a short speech. However, as a generalisation it can be said that a healthy fishery needs no subsidy whatsoever. There could be a case for some forms of development subsidy, but these must be specific, objective and well planned. However, they rarely are.

We now have a situation where certain species recently were subject to suspensory loans for the catching of.

A very direct and positive subsidy.

The tragedy now occurs whereby some of those species are almost commercially extinct, or under severe pressure, and all of them under or about to become the subject of quota constraints. Unfortunately, much of this action occurring far too late. Meanwhile, the capital injected into the Catching Sector by way of vessels made possible by these suspensory loans, is a serious problem. Fishermen who argued against this form of subsidised expansion are now being forced to suffer the consequences of what amounts to extremely poor opportunity choices.

Many aspects of the commercial sector are not alone in suffering this burden as it flows on to affect all other users such as recreational fishermen and the public at large. We continually make third and fourth best opportunity choices and in doing so reduce or annihilate the chances of making first opportunity choices. Subsidies or favourable economic provisions for the development of the New Zealand Squid Industry would have considerable merit and value to New Zealand. But instead, what do we have - squandered state resources via a low grade opportunity choice that has depreciated parts of our in-shore fishery that could not stand, nor needed, subsidised expansion.

The severe economic problem facing many of the historical commercial fishermen in the in-shore fishery has very little to do with increased costs. The problem is rather one of decreased fish stocks. We have reached a very predictable situation whereby hundreds of honest, concerned fishermen are locked into a tragic situation not of their making. There is a voice that was disregarded in the past in warning of today's problems, and is now a voice that is ignored in its call for moral redress.

If encouragement subsidies are granted across the board, and are not specific and planned, the result is inevitable. The nature of man will always ensure that open access and unbridled expansion will always exceed the provisions of nature.

FEDERATION POLICY

Federation's policy in general terms is quite clear. However, there are aspects of it that must be altered from time to time in reaction to events natural and man-made that are growing with ever increasing rapidity. As the need for urgency increases, so the need to create or adapt policy to cope increases accordingly. The creation of a new Fisheries Bill which commenced in 1979 is the direct result of Federation pressure and concern that the existing Bill was totally inadequate in its provision for better and more effective administration of Fisheries.

This was not done in order to make things easier for Federation members or improve their immediate fiscal return, but out of sheer concern for the state of the resource and the management of it. The various moratoriums and creation of controlled fisheries, pressed for and won by the Federation, was born out of concern for the state of the living resource and its future. The creation of the Regional Management philosophy and forums such as Port and/or Regional Liaison Committees with involvement from all user groups was the culmination of Federation pressure.

Once again out of concern for the wise, long-term administration of our fisheries,---many of these impositions have affected our members in a fiscal sense. They have lived with this in the realisation that a subsidised rape will spell ultimate disaster for all New Zealanders. This road has not been easy and many times in the past, Federation has been very much a lone voice.

However, it must be said, and gratifyingly so, that organisations such as the Fishing Industry Board and some Government personnel are fully appreciative of the situation and are becoming far more vocal in expression of their concerns.

Through the various Liaison Committees and other venues, Federation has enjoyed a developing rapport with many non-commercial marine user groups, and is committed, wherever possible, to extend that communication.

A testimony to that commitment is the fact that a spokesman from the Recreational Fishing Council stands before you today to deliver material from the commercial sector - The Federation represents a large element of the commercial sector that is determined to see the implementation of a Fisheries Management Regime that respects the fishery in all of its complexities and fragilities.

The implementation of a regime where this part of our heritage is not sold off to the highest bidder or those with the biggest bank roll, but managed wisely and well with justice and care.

There are those who would drive wedges between organisations such as yours and ours. You can be assured that the Federation will always reject such tactics and opt for the informed forum of co-operation and consultation. Indeed the Federation representatives welcome any opportunity to discuss fishery matters and problems with any of the varied groups represented by yourselves.

Federation members - whilst not responsible for the present sorry state of much of our inshore fishery, are, however, prepared to act very responsibly in doing something about it.

A government that embraces the philosophy of short term gains at any cost, has to date, reneged on it's responsibility. In terms of Fisheries Management philosophy we have all been carried along on an ebb tide of low grade opportunity choices. The Federation asks for all concerned parties to join with it and turn the tide of decision to a flood of first rate opportunity choices.

In all finality, the largest living resource about us has for too long lacked the most important management factor that we can offer - our respect.

P. Stevens

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