

MARINE RESERVES

a tale of lost opportunities

by Marine consultant Lewis Ritchie



Poor Knights Island, north-east of Whangarei, one of our two marine reserves. Even this, a prime candidate for reserve status, took a decade to achieve.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, as administering body for marine reserves, does not have a happy record of achievement in the field. Quite simply, there has been neither political nor bureaucratic will invested in them — somehow marine reserves always find themselves at the bottom of the heap in job priority, resource allocation, directorate importance and on the legislative order paper.

Marine reserve legislation received its initial impetus from Auckland University academics Professor Val Chapman and Dr Bill Ballantine, during the mid to late-1960s. The resulting Marine Reserves Act 1971 was designated to allow establishment of small, non-extractive marine reserves for scientific purposes. It especially suited reserve creation adjacent to marine research facilities and specifically the Cape Rodney – Okakari Point Marine Reserve adjoining the Auckland University marine laboratory. This reserve, with its huge

array of habitats including sand, gravel and boulder beaches and seafloors, cliffs, rock platfdrms, ravines, surge channels, sand and sponge gardens and lusuriant algal forest is all part of the first truly oceanic coastal ecosystem north of the Hauraki Gulf, and it is also one of the best mapped, studied and understood areas of coastal sea in New Zealand. The reserve, our first, became a reality on 7 November 1975 although political wrangling over representation delayed management committee formation for over a year.

Concurrently attempts were being made to establish a marine reserve around the Poor Knights Islands, some 50 miles to the north. These islands, national and international Mecca to divers, fishermen and sightseers, are one of the biologically richest, least man-modified, accessible, warm-temperate island ecosystems in the world. This biological richness and diversity is increased by regular enrichment from currents and lifeforms of subtropical origins.

A decade of inaction and frustration over establishment of this reserve resulted from a vociferous, mainly local clamour demanding that fishing be allowed. The narrowness of the 1971 Act further slowed progress. Even after compromises were

reached with user groups (limited fishing for a few species around most, but not all, of the islands), progress was extremely slow because neither the legislation was available nor the political and bureaucratic will sufficiently strong.

Some claim that these two, created under the Marine Reserves Act, are our only marine reserves. Others allow that the

Tawharanui Marine Park and the Mimiwhangata Coastal Park, both established using Harbours and Fisheries legislation, also qualify. The one feature they share is prohibition or strict control of fishing. If this limitation is accepted as essential for reserve status, New Zealand has scores of 'marine reserves' created by fisheries regulations, for example around Separation Point, Tasman/Golden Bays, where trawling, power seining and dredging are prohibited, and the 'Wairoa Hard', northern Hawke Bay, where all commercial finfishing and recreational set netting are banned. Also, of course, harbours have general prohibitions on power fishing and limits on other methods such as drag netting.

Though the end result (that is, limits to fishing) — using either fisheries or marine reserve legislation — may be the same, there are critical fundamental differences. Fisheries legislation is exploitation-orientated and regulations are fisheries management tools solely controlled by MAF, are temporary, and can be changed at the whim of a regional fisheries controller. Marine reserves legislation is conservation-orientated, ensures through the requirement of an Order in Council for each reserve as much permanence as is possible, and requires administration by a committee representing several different interest groups. Also the reasons for creating reserves are as wide as the reasons for creating land reserves; for example, to protect and enhance special, unique, endangered and representative organisms, communities, habitats and ecosystems for conservation, cultural, historical, recreational, educational, tourism, fisheries and scientific purposes. The new Act, long in preparation, and the several marine reserve plans prepared by MAF, attempt to

accommodate all these ideals.

Problems such as inadequate legislation, suspicion and mistrust by fishermen, scant baseline data, enormous problems in fisheries, and threatened takeovers by other departments have compounded and confounded the issue. Over and above all this, however, there are just no votes nor money in marine reserves. Commercial fishery problems — overfishing, ITQs, buy-back schemes, the EEZ, resource allocation to foreign interests, are all considered much more important.

It appears as if MAF has lost marine reserves under the present government department reshuffle — a sort of 'death by neglect', and few will mourn. The tragedy of the loss to MAF and New Zealand is one of lost opportunities. With MAF's marine biological expertise, regional knowledge and the established marine user-group liaison network, this country could already have established a national web of marine reserves catering to every need and as much the envy of the world as our National Park network.

A second tragedy is that when the new organisation (presumably the Department of Conservation), takes over it will be faced with a great vacuum of resources and skills. These can, of course, be purchased but it will undoubtedly take enormous dedication and will to convince the purse string holders of this need — undoubtedly seen as esoteric by accountants and the ill- or uninformed — amidst a clamouring array competing for available public funds. In a nutshell a change from MAF to DOC may mean a gain in energy and enthusiasm but a loss of structure. 🐦

Forest and Bird does not share the pessimism of Lewis Ritchie's final paragraph. The transfer of control of harbours and foreshores to DOC should give a new direction and impetus to the creation of marine reserves. It should also make more possible the reservation of contiguous areas of land and water. Of course, DOC has to compete for funding; conservation groups and the department itself must work hard to see it gets priority treatment.