

A Fatal Attraction

Fur Seals and Hoki

by Gerard Hutching

In the dark still depths of the Tasman Sea's Hokitika Canyon, millions of hoki fish congregate every winter. Falling water temperatures trigger a mass spawning of hoki at great depths of 400 metres or more. For centuries this extraordinary annual gathering of teeming myriads of hoki has been hidden from the world. It was certainly unknown to the West Coast fur seals as the hoki spawn way beyond their diving depth, but now the seals are tragically linked to the hoki story.

Once this huge biomass of fish was discovered by increasingly desperate local and foreign fishing fleets, the previously unheard of hoki quickly became the country's leading fish stock, eclipsing even orange roughy. Now each winter a fleet of fishing trawlers, some larger than the interisland ferries, follow the hoki to the Hokitika Canyon. Huge nets sweep through the packed schools, dragging them up to the blinding glare of another world. Changes in water pressure kill the hoki before they reach the surface where they are discharged into the bowels of the trawlers and mainly mashed up into surimi – the mincemeat of fish cuisine.

Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries Officers bedazzled by the seemingly boundless riches have in recent years bumped up the total allowable catch of hoki from 60,000 tonnes before 1986 to this year's staggering 250,000 tonnes. While hoki are incredibly abundant, this high catch is definitely not sus-

tainable. Fishermen and conservationists alike are increasingly alarmed that hoki will follow the pattern of snapper, Chatham Island crayfish, Bay of Plenty trevally, Golden Bay scallops, and other boom and bust New Zealand fisheries.

This fishing bonanza has proven to be a fatal attraction for West Coast fur seals. The hoki fishery is located within reach of the major West Coast seal colonies at Westport's Cape Foulwind and South Westland's Greens Beach and Gillespies Beach. Coincidentally, the seals congregate at these colonies during the same months the hoki mass offshore.

Offal discharge and fish spillage from the nets has lured the seals out in growing numbers to this winter feast. The clanking of the trawl gear hauling in over-flowing nets has become the seals' dinner gong. Highly intelligent as they are, the seals have not yet learnt that the dinner gong is also their death knell.

Disturbing statistics of seals killed by entanglement in the hoki nets began to be compiled two years ago by the Department of Conservation. DoC administers the Marine Mammals Protection Act which provides total protection for seals – on paper at least. This season seal deaths rocketed. The plunder of the hoki and related deaths of hundreds of fur seals has now become a major controversy.

The Forest and Bird Society has called for a major reduction in the hoki catch and changes in fishery practices to protect the seals. But, as the following account of the campaign to save the seals shows, officials and politicians are overwhelmed by the enormity of the problem and slow to take the decisive action required. Mounting public concern for their plight is the main hope for both the seals and the hoki.



New Zealand fur seal. Photo: David Comer