

Diary of a Tragedy

Hundreds of seals need never have died in trawling nets this winter. Government inaction, however, ensured they would. The following diary of events chronicles a sorry saga of department indifference and Government inaction.

July 20: The *Dominion* breaks the story that 97 fur seals have been reported dead in two weeks off the eight hoki boats in the West Coast hoki fleet carrying MAF observers. News of the deaths was given to the newspaper by way of an anonymous phone call, presumably from an official upset at the scale of the deaths. Forest and Bird responds by demanding that the Government takes urgent action to stop decimation of the West Coast fur seal population.

July 21: Forest and Bird writes to the Minister of Fisheries, Colin Moyle, asking him to act immediately over the deaths. He responds on August 11. Meanwhile in the *Christchurch Star* Conservation Minister Philip Woollaston says he is disturbed by the seal deaths, but his departmental officials claim more research is needed on the cause of the deaths before action can be taken.

DoC's principal officer for marine mammals, Mike Donoghue, agrees that Forest and Bird's estimate that up to 450 seals may have been killed is "not unreasonable" as the 35 hoki boats without observers are not reporting any seal deaths. Donoghue believes the rise in seal deaths over previous years is probably due to the influx of huge 7,000 tonne surimi trawlers into the fishery.

July 22: Fishing industry representatives claim the West Coast fur seal population is growing and threatening fish stocks. "We're not talking about white rhinos or black robins here," says Federation of Commercial Fishermen executive secretary Peter Stevens. Fishing Industry Association vice-president Peter Talley blames "kamikaze" seals and claims there are probably ten times more in the West Coast population than the 4500 estimated by the Department of Conservation.

July 24: Forest and Bird says that New Zealand's international credibility in the campaign against driftnetting will nosedive unless action is taken on the alarmingly high seal deaths. West Coast fishing representatives advise the Society to stick to what it does best – saving forests – and not get involved in contentious fishing matters. Several weeks later the West Coast attitude will change and Forest and Bird will be seen as an ally.



Actress Miranda Harcourt helped highlight the fur seal issue when she addressed Forest and Bird's "Save Our Seals" rally in late August.

Photo: Gerard Hutching

July 26: The Department of Conservation is criticised by Forest and Bird Conservation Director Kevin Smith for apparently accepting the fur seal deaths. Still no action is taken by DoC to go out to the fishery and monitor the boats to see why they are killing seals.

August 2: The Society launches its coastal appeal with the help of Environment Minister Geoffrey Palmer. Pupils from the Worser Bay school stage a "beach theatre" play for the soon-to-be-Prime Minister, illustrating the plight of seals caught in fishing nets.

August 11: West Coast fishers head for Cook Strait to fish for hoki rather than tangle with big joint venture and foreign vessels. They dub the big joint-venture trawlers "the bulldozers of the sea" and complain that congestion on the West Coast hoki grounds is making fishing "really dangerous".

August 13: New figures supplied by MAF show that 146 seals have been killed. A report gives the names of the boats with observers and the kill for each boat. Two Soviet vessels – the *Aragonit* and *Klimovo* – have killed 44 and 42 of the seals respectively. Forest and Bird again asks the Government to do something to stop the deaths.

August 14: West Coast fishermen express doubts that Government will take action against the big trawlers that are killing most of the seals. "The bigger boats bring in too much revenue".

August 15: Following a letter from Philip Woollaston in which the Minister promises to investigate what could be done to stop the fur seal deaths next season, Forest and Bird respond that the Government has condemned hundreds more seals to death by doing nothing in 1989. "Plainly Government ministers are more concerned about the export dollars coming from the hoki fishery than fur seal deaths or the future of the fishery itself," the Society says.

August 16: A meeting between Kevin Smith and Philip Woollaston ends with no commitment by the Government to try and end the seal deaths this year. Forest and Bird asks for observers on all hoki boats, for senior MAF and DoC officials to inspect the fishery, and for an immediate halt to fishing by the big trawlers killing most of the seals. Colin Moyle who has earlier said that the West Coast fishery is a little like "Queen St on a Friday night", says that hundreds of deaths occur on New Zealand roads every year but the roads are not therefore closed.

August 18: Grey County councillors call for a commission of inquiry to look into the "rape" of West Coast fish resources. "We should put all the politicians on the foreign ships and send them away," is one comment.

August 23: In a *Good Morning New Zealand* radio interview, Philip Woollaston is asked why he does not intervene immediately to stop the deaths. He replies that the Government needs to analyse its data and "this season has actually come to an end." In fact the season is not due to end until early September.

August 25: Forest and Bird organises a novel SOS – "Save Our Seals" rally. 400 paper bag "seals" complete with whiskers and flippers are piled high on Parliament's steps. Executive member Joe Crandle, Opposition conservation spokesperson Denis Marshall and Miranda Harcourt from *Gloss* address the rally. That same day Colin Moyle and Philip Woollaston