

Hooker's Sealion: Threatened Too



A young female Hooker's sealion that was lucky enough to return to the sea alive after her ordeal in a trawl net. Many others are less fortunate in their encounters with fishing boats, being crushed to death beneath the weight of tonnes of squid or drowned before they are hoisted aboard in the net. Photo: Mike Donoghue / World Wildlife Fund

Hooker's sealion, the world's rarest sealion with an estimated population of between 6-7,000, is this November converging on the chill waters around the Auckland Islands to breed.

At the same time Japanese, Korean and Soviet trawlers arrive at the islands. Their target, and that of the sealions: squid. Between November and February more than 100 sealions will die, entangled in the trawl nets. Because of the small numbers of this marine mammal, the population loss each year in nets is far more serious than that suffered by the fur seal.

In most cases pregnant females are being caught as they take easy pickings from the flanks of the net being winched toward the boat. When she drowns, three sealions are lost: the mother, her pup which is waiting on shore, and the pup she is carrying from this season's mating.

Forest and Bird believes that the current 12 mile fishing exclusion zone around the Auckland Islands is inadequate in providing realistic protection for the sealions. We are pressing for a marine mammal sanctuary that excludes trawl nets and set nets from the summer feeding grounds of the breeding sealions. The squid could be fished by jigging (as they are in almost every other squid fishery), and sealions will not be caught. 🐟

announce that fishing methods probably account for the seal deaths. This follows a meeting of DoC, MAF and industry representatives five weeks after the first news of seal deaths became public.

In September, at the end of the season, the official seal death tally from the handful of boats with observers exceeds 200. Officials refuse to estimate the likely total kill.

September 4: Geoffrey Palmer writes to Forest and Bird saying he shares our concern about the problem but he is powerless to order changes to fishing practices to protect the seals. He claims there is no evidence to support claims that the hoki resource is being over-fished.

September 10: The *Dominion Sunday Times* editorialises that Prime Minister Geoffrey Palmer's international campaign against the evils of driftnetting will suffer unless New Zealand's own credibility is intact. "New Zealand is inviting international condemnation. Fur seals are protected but the Government's failure to act, despite frequent statements of concern, makes the legislation ineffective."

"It is important that Mr Palmer's driftnetting campaign does not founder on inconsistencies in Government's policies. We must be seen to be doing at least as much as we ask other nations to do."

Officials now suspect the large number of seal deaths are the result of the increased fishing effort required to catch the dwindling hoki stocks. In previous years trawl nets filled on one or two passes across the hoki spawning grounds but now several passes are required with the trawl nets being raised to only about 30 metres below the surface at the end of each run to enable the huge trawlers to turn without wasting time. Seals, attracted to the fishery originally by the dumped waste and huge fish spillage, dive down and are caught in the nets, which are then lowered, drowning the seals.

September 11: A small press item tucked away on newspaper business pages reports that surimi from West Coast hoki has earned the country \$450 million gross in overseas exchange. The true economic benefit to the country from the foreign-dominated hoki fishery is not reported, nor is the cost to the country in allowing boom and bust exploitation of the hoki fishery. The other casualties of the fishery, the fur seals, are not mentioned. 🐟