

The Poor Knights Islands Marine Reserve is a haven for marine life. Here blue demoiselle and pink maomao gather at 40 metres depth over a reef of yellow and orange golf ball sponges, gorgonian sea fans and a yellow finger sponge.

Photo: Kim Westerskov

not impossible, to find a commercial fisher around Leigh who objected to the reserve now, he says. Many claim fishing has actually improved since it was set up.

Dr Ballantine sees the reserves as potential nurseries and "stud farms" for future commercial harvests. Snapper serve as his example.

"In Leigh reserve large snapper are now common. These big fish are home ranging and they don't move round much, so they don't waste energy that way. They don't grow very fast at this stage and they've got big heads and jaws so they can easily munch up high protein foods like kina – so where does all this high grade energy go to? Into reproduction.

"This relatively small number of large fish, putting all their energy into reproduction, will be producing a disproportionately large number of the next generation – at least they would if they were allowed to exist.

"But these fish, because they are close to shore and home ranging, are the easiest to catch and the first to go," he says.

In a country internationally renowned for its first class land reserves, Dr Ballantine finds



Leigh Marine Reserve: good for marine life, good for people. Photo: Bill Ballantine

it hard to understand why this can happen, why it has taken so long to extend the reserves concept to our coastal waters.

"Our birds are protected, including the marine birds, when they come in to shore. We have legislation to protect their nests but we don't move to provide them with food. In the sea they take their chances along with everyone else.

"We have totally protected our marine mammals – but only against deliberate killing. Hector's dolphin, which schools off Banks Peninsula amongst other places, was last year estimated to have a population of about 600 in that region. In the past four years 200 have been accidentally caught and drowned in set nets – they don't breed as fast as that," he says.

Strict Limitations

On the land we have strict limitations on hunting and killing but in our coastal waters people are free to do as they like. Only at Leigh has this full protection been extended below the high tide mark. At the Poor Knights Islands, New Zealand's second marine reserve, big game fishing has been allowed to



At Leigh there are 20 times the crayfish in the reserve than in other stretches of our coastline.