

Fishing boom...fishing bust...a cautionary tale

by Mark Feldman



Mangonui Harbour. Photo: Terry Fitzgibbon.

IT WAS 1973 and a young American tourist was hitch-hiking around the Far North. On a fateful day in March the young man got out of a car in Mangonui, thanked the driver for the ride, and headed for the youth hostel at the "Old Oak". After checking in at the hostel he took a fishing rod, a reel, and a small box of lures from his pack. The fishing gear was well worn because it had been heavily used. Though only in his twenties the hitch-hiker was an experienced fisherman. He had used his little rod to catch fish for his meals all over the world.

As he walked around the harbour towards the Mangonui wharf he watched the water with care. His experienced eyes examined the terns diving into the water to capture tiny anchovy forced up by the fish feeding below. By watching the splashes in the water he could see that the feeding fish were probably less than 30cm long but were fast moving carnivores. He picked a lure that could imitate the anchovy he saw in the tern's beaks and cast it out into the area of the disturbed water. Within seconds he hooked one of the fast moving hunters and quickly discovered that these fish were hard fighters which jumped often and did not give up until totally exhausted. He was impressed by the fish but saw that it was quite small so released it and cast out again. He caught and released several of the fish before he began to see that they were all about the same size.

Since the water was shallow he concluded that the fish were young and there must be bigger ones about, perhaps in other schools outside the harbour. A local passing by told him that the fish he was catching were called "kahawai" and did, indeed, grow much bigger. The tourist continued on his way to the wharf to see what could be observed from a higher vantage point. Though no novice to fishing the young American was amazed by what he saw from the wharf. In the water below he could see small mullet and mackerel swimming in the tidal flows. The schools were bunched tightly, as if to protect them-

selves from attack by predators. The little fish were nervous and moved evasively every time a gull's shadow passed over.

Shimmering Geysers

But the show really started when the schooling mullet were attacked from the water underneath them. The young fish erupted from the water like living, shimmering geysers as they desperately tried to escape from the marauding fish below. The American gazed in awe as he watched the schools of kingfish slash through the hapless mullet, picking out the weak and unwary for their next meal.



Author Mark Feldman: Better fishing around most American cities than in Northland.

The kingfish were big. The ones travelling in schools ranged from 10 to 15 kgs. These were the fish that were hunting together to improve their chances of success. There were other, bigger kingfish which seemed to be travelling alone. They were much more experienced hunters and seemed to be able to feed on their own successfully. These solitary kingfish were much larger, some running up to 30 or 40 kgs in size. They were easily seen as they attacked the surface-feeding kahawai which the American had been catching with his lures.

The scene on the wharf made an indelible

impression on the tourist from America. Not even Alaska or the Great Barrier Reef had ever produced such a display of sea life so close to shore. New Zealand had a resource of great value here. He could easily imagine sport fishermen coming from all over the world to pursue such large and powerful predators. But the next morning the hitch-hiker would see something even more impressive, something that would change his life forever.

At dawn he got up, grabbed his fishing gear and binoculars, and walked to the top of the Pa that looked out over Mangonui Harbour and all of Doubtless Bay. By the time he made his way to the top the sun was well up, shimmering in the early morning light. As he scanned the seemingly calm water he began to realize that there were flocks of birds everywhere. With his binoculars he saw that the whole inner bay was alive with fish. As far as he could see there were schools of kahawai feeding on the surface with flocks of gulls, terns and shearwaters filling the sky above them. The American was exhilarated by the tremendous concentration of living things within his view. Wouldn't it be wonderful, he thought, to be able to live in a place like this, that was so full of life and beauty.

Cries Unheeded

The years passed and the young man returned to America to resume his career. While he was away the New Zealand Government continued to encourage the commercial development of fishing. Because of cheap Government loans and tax incentives, both individuals and large companies took to the sea. By the late 1970s insightful scientists and fishermen were beginning to warn the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) that the fishery was in rapid decline and needed to be protected, but their cries went unheeded.

Unfortunately, MAF's role had always been to accelerate the exploitation of New Zealand's limited supply of fish. With a mini-