

Buller's Mollymawk

Buller's mollymawks nest only in New Zealand at the Chatham, Solander and Snares Islands. With an estimated 36,000 pairs, the total population is likely to be about 150,000. Many immatures are thought to spend their first years in waters off Peru and all reported drownings on longlines are of adults.

There are no accurate figures, but Buller's

mollymawks appear to suffer some of the heaviest mortality of any birds on the bluefin tuna longlines in New Zealand waters. Longliners concentrate in areas such as the Solander Trench off Fiordland, which is adjacent to the large Solander Island breeding colony. Effects on the mollymawk population are unknown.

Buller's mollymawk on the Snares Islands. This is one of the most commonly drowned species on longlines in New Zealand waters.

Photo: Alan Tennyson.



dering albatross. The French and British have been intensively monitoring albatross populations in the Indian Ocean and at South Georgia for 20 – 30 years. New Zealand is a long way behind in its responsibilities to monitor its internationally important seabird fauna.

There is no Government scheme to map seabirds at sea, where their numbers should also be monitored.

The increasing threat

As human populations grow and fishing technology improves, seabirds come under increasing threat from fisheries. The more fishing vessels in the oceans, the greater the by-catch problem and pressure on bird's food supplies. In Britain, overfishing of sandeels has led to catastrophic failure in seabird breeding. Puffins, kittiwakes, arctic skuas and terns are unable to feed their young because of depleted fish stocks. Tens of thousands of

arctic terns may only produce one hundred young in a season as a result. Local populations face rapid extinction.

In New Zealand, MAF commercial quotas take no account of secondary effects of fishing. They are based purely on the sustainability of the target fish population. A bird population's entire food supply could be harvested under current regulations. The intricacy of marine ecosystems needs to be recognised in the quotas. MAF is charged with the conservation of fishery resources, which includes "fish habitat and aquatic life," but specifically excludes birds. Our seabirds face a bleak future unless the marine ecosystem is considered as a whole.

Information on fisheries seabird by-catch is scant. We need compulsory reporting by skippers onboard vessels within our economic zone. In August 1990 Forest and Bird pressed the Minister of Conservation to institute compulsory reporting. DoC is now considering

two options: whether to ask skippers to include seabird by-catch figures with their monthly fish returns; or simply to require skippers to advise DoC of all seabird deaths.

Solutions to the problem

Three fishing methods are wrecking havoc on seabirds: driftnetting, trawling and longlining. Drift netting has been described as an ecological disaster; nations practising it are being forced out of the South Pacific, but they continue to plunder other oceans, especially the North Pacific. The only solution is a world-wide ban on this destructive fishing method.

Trawling, while more selective, is also damaging to seabirds. Soviet boats, identified as the major cause of bird deaths, must be made to upgrade their antiquated equipment.

Nigel Brothers, a seabird expert working for the Tasmanian Department of Parks, Wildlife and Heritage, says several simple measures could drastically reduce the seabird longline