

CHANNEL CATFISH

a matter of import

by Theo Simeonidis

The destruction of 2200 channel catfish in September 1990 was an historic event. But will it mark the beginning of a new awareness over the perils of ill considered importations of exotic species?

WHEN THE CHANNEL CATFISH, imported for an aquaculture venture in Northland, were destroyed at a Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries quarantine centre in Upper Hutt, a long and involved saga ended. However, questions remain as to how a species posing an enormous threat to New Zealand's freshwater animals came close to being introduced into the country.

On several counts the catfish decision was highly significant: it was the first time in recorded memory that a newly imported species was destroyed; and it was probably the first time a species was destroyed on ecological grounds. As such the decision may mark a turning point in attitudes towards the importation of exotic species. It is to be hoped that no future Government will display such a cavalier attitude towards imports of potential pest species.

New Zealand's history is littered with the legacy of poorly researched and ill-advised animal and plant introductions which have had disastrous economic and environmental impacts. Plagues of possums and rabbits respectively exact a high toll on our native forests and high country grasslands. Introduced predators such as stoats prey heavily on birds.

It was against a background of increasing public concern over the damage to New Zealand's environment by pests such as possums that conservationists and anglers decided to draw the line on the channel catfish importation. The New Zealand Federation of Freshwater Anglers (NZFFA) researched and publicised the case and together with Forest and Bird's advocacy the Government was convinced the importation would be a serious mistake.



One of the 2200 channel catfish destroyed by MAF veterinarian Colin Anderson. Voracious predators, the fish grow as heavy as 27 kg. Photo: NZ Herald

MAF – Judge and Jury

Dissatisfaction with the performance of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) over animal imports has been growing, especially over controversial decisions to allow the South American rodent chinchilla and the West Australian marron crayfish into the country. In 1986 the Ombudsman chastised the Ministry for its importing procedures and in June 1988 the MAF bureaucracy was taken to task by Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment Helen Hughes over its handling of the proposal to import marron crayfish from Australia.

The Commissioner was critical of the inadequacy of MAF's approval procedures for considering importation applications. She criticised the manner in which marron was allowed into the country, the confused and often contradictory decision making process within MAF under which the application was considered, and most importantly, the very real concerns over the potential impact of marron on our freshwater ecosystems.

Less than 12 months later, MAF and its former minister Colin Moyle went down exactly the same path with channel catfish. The importation did not follow an acceptable due process and was fast-tracked by backdoor

means through the statutory process. Consider the following points.

- The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) prepared by MAF Fisheries was inadequate, raising more questions than it answered, and was not a sound basis on which to judge the merits of importation. Overseas research on channel catfish was either ignored or simply not located. Yet a voluntary organisation, the NZFFA, discovered more than 10 major studies highlighting the predatory and competitive behaviour of the catfish in areas of the United States where the species had been liberated outside its natural range. It also obtained expert opinion from respected US fisheries authorities who attested to the ecological dangers of the importation.
- The Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment stated in her August 1989 newsletter that the EIA was inadequate.
- The distribution of the EIA to interested parties was restricted. Neither the Federation nor Forest and Bird received copies; it was never publicly released or advertised. MAF belatedly distributed the EIA to about 35 iwi and asked for comments. As the document was never explained to the Maori community, the possible impact of catfish on native