

employed to cater for anglers in these districts approaches \$250 million.

The Turning Point

The turning point in the debate was 17 May 1990. An NZFFA/Forest and Bird deputation (Russell McKendry, Kevin Smith, Mark Bellingham and myself) met with new Agriculture Minister Jim Sutton. At that meeting it quickly became apparent that either Sutton had forgotten his lines or his officials had fed him some incorrect ones. For example he would not accept that he had the authority to order the destruction of the channel catfish without compensation. The relevant clause of the Consent to Importation (signed on 16 June 1989 by his predecessor) was quoted to him.

Officials remained silent throughout that meeting, perhaps realising that the importation was indefensible. Soon the Minister was literally saved by the bell – the division bell summoning MPs to the debating chamber to vote. Calling the meeting to an end, a relieved Sutton lit up a smoke and darted off to vote in favour of the Government's anti-smoking legislation!

By now the efforts of many concerned people writing to their MPs, to newspapers and by signing petitions, were starting to tell.

The meeting with Sutton was followed immediately by a strongly worded letter demanding the destruction of the catfish stocks. A copy was sent to Prime Minister Geoffrey Palmer who was becoming increasingly aware of the procedural impropriety and irregularities surrounding the importation. His own Ministry for the Environment officials ensured he was fully briefed on the issue.

With the national pressure mounting, nervous government MPs raised the issue in caucus in late May. By that time the catfish were at the stage of nearly exceeding the capacity of the MAF quarantine facility. MAF advised they would shift them to an importer-controlled secondary quarantine centre, a move we strongly opposed. Fisheries Minister Ken Shirley, who had by this time been handed responsibility for the fate of the catfish, was reluctant to take any action, preferring to leave the issue over to an incoming government after the October election.

Geoffrey Palmer fortunately won the day, demanding that the importation be properly examined. Shirley appointed an independent review team which several weeks later handed him a report concluding that channel catfish posed an unacceptable risk to the environment, vindicating the stance the Federation of Freshwater Anglers had taken against channel catfish for 20 months.

Other Players

The Department of Conservation and its minister were conspicuously absent from the debate. Philip Woollaston, who was not in Cabinet when Colin Moyle approached it for support in May 1989, was presented with a *fait accompli* when the proposal received Cabinet backing.

The National Opposition took the issue up and raised appropriate questions in Parliament, but they failed to fully exploit the Government's vulnerability to charges that, while it was grandstanding on global environmental issues, it was prepared to place

the local environment at risk by allowing the importation.

Summary

In June 1989 after the channel catfish eggs arrived in New Zealand, I was disappointed at the defeatist attitude of many who had accepted that the decision would not be reversed.

Our success demonstrates that nothing is impossible provided we demonstrate a cast-iron commitment to the values we believe in. The favourable result is a fitting reward to the wide range of people who stood up and weighed in when it finally mattered.

We must continue to be vigilant to ensure that similar episodes to the channel catfish fiasco are never repeated. 🐦



Theo Simeonidis is President of the New Zealand Federation of Freshwater Anglers. A keen angler and conservationist, Theo has been active in the Vote Environment and Action on Resource Management coalitions, both of which Forest and Bird is a member. He received a 1990 Conservation Medal for his services to conservation.

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