

The California example

NEW ZEALAND IS NOT the first country in the world to have to face the gill net issue. New York State banned gill netting in their part of the Great Lakes years ago; the other States and Canada followed later. Florida, the vacation centre of America, eliminated all gill nets from the coastline around the Everglades and severely restricted their use elsewhere. British Columbia is well on the road towards eliminating gill nets completely. Even Australia (except Tasmania) has banned amateur gill net fishing.

But California, with its many similarities to New Zealand, can teach us the most. In 1983 gill nets were banned from many areas because of the disastrous killing of scores of harbour porpoises and over 30,000 common murres, a Pacific seabird. Later the nets were banned from the migratory paths of the grey whales in Northern California because the whales were becoming entangled.

Despite these restrictions the use of gill nets in California continued to grow. From 1981 to 1985 the number of commercial gill net permits rose from 340 to over 1,000! The reason was simple; gill nets are

a cheap way of catching fish. The fact that they catch unwanted fish, sharks, seabirds and mammals was of no concern to the commercial lobby that had powerful financial ties with the California State Assembly. And as long as the commercial fishing lobby supported the financial needs of select California Assemblymen the carnage was allowed to continue.

But rebellion was growing among the people of California. The recreational fishermen had seen the gill nets destroy the sports fishery. Rock cod, halibut and California yellowtail were virtually gone and, by the end of the 1980s, the gill netters were killing the sharks and rays off while they targeted the last of the swordfish. In early 1990 the latest Bill to eliminate gill nets was buried by the Wildlife Committee of the Assembly as a result of the commercial lobby's organization and financial clout.

Finally the people acted. Assemblywoman Doris Allen joined forces with the Committee to Ban Gill Nets and raised \$400,000 in four months. In the same period of time they also got a staggering one million signatures on a petition to

ban the dreaded nets.

In America such petitions have great power. They are the key mechanism to overcome the laxity of easily influenced State politicians. If enough signatures are obtained on a petition, then that petition appears on the ballot at the next election. If the people approve it, the petition becomes law.

You can guess the rest of the story. On November 6, 1990, the people of California voted on the wisdom of eliminating gill nets from their waters. Their judgement was clear and final. The gill nets were banned and for the first time in many years there's hope that the fish will return.

Perhaps New Zealand can learn something from the people of California. The Americans waited until their fishery was almost destroyed before they finally acted. It took them a full decade to realise there's no way to police gill nets nor is it possible to protect the creatures of the sea while gill nets are in the water.

Maybe, this time, the people of New Zealand can profit from others' mistakes WITHOUT repeating them. 🐟

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