

Albatross in trouble

by Forest and Bird conservation officer Alan Tennyson

In the November 1990 issue of Forest & Bird conservation officer Alan Tennyson revealed that thousands of albatrosses were being killed in the southern ocean each year by fishing practices. The fishing industry accused the Society of alarmist and unfounded reports.

Now an independent report has documented the extent of the seabird mortality. Its findings? Unfortunately, just as serious as predicted.

SEABIRD EXPERT Sandy Bartle paints a grim picture for the future of albatrosses affected by fishing. In a report (in preparation at the time of writing) he predicts a dramatic decline in the population of the white-capped albatross – one of New Zealand's most striking endemic birds – due to trawling around the Auckland Islands.

Using data from MAF observers collected during the 1989-1990 Auckland Islands squid fishing season, the National Museum scientist's report shows an alarming number of birds killed.

Based on the average number of birds caught per boat per day, a minimum estimate of 1,700 white-capped albatrosses were killed last season. However, the report states this estimate should be "doubled to allow for corpses lost from the net and for birds which subsequently die as a result of injuries but are not entangled in trawl gear and recovered." It seems at least 3,400 birds died last season.

Highest mortality

The worst incident on record was when 231 white-capped albatrosses were killed by one trawler during one month of fishing. Up to 17 albatrosses have been killed during a single

net retrieval. Typically, about 10,000 trawl tows are made in this fishery each season. However, only half this number were carried out last season because of poor squid catches. Twice as many birds probably die in normal fishing years.

The white-capped albatross (or molly-mawk, a term used for several of the smaller albatrosses) found at the Auckland Islands, has an estimated population of 64,000 pairs. It is a separate race from the only other white-capped albatross population, known from islands off Tasmania where there are about 3,500 pairs.

Albatrosses have high adult survival rates, at greater than 90 percent per year, and low reproductive rates, raising a maximum of one chick each year. Their populations are very sensitive to changes in mortality rates and an increase in adult mortality can have serious consequences. For wandering albatrosses, an increase in mean adult mortality of only 2-4 percent has been enough to cause worldwide population declines of up to 50 percent during the last 20 years.

The report states that the accelerated mortality caused by the fishery will result in a serious population decline.

The white-capped albatross is the main victim of the fishery, because of its abundance on the Auckland Islands' shelf. Flocks of 2-3,000 are commonly seen following the fishing fleet.

About 50 squid trawlers ply the waters around the subantarctic Auckland Islands between January and May. Half the fleet are Soviet boats but nearly all foreign licensed boats are chartered by New Zealand companies. The fleet is well known for its annual kill of Hooker's sea lions but the bird deaths are just as serious.

Soviet trawlers cause nearly all of the albatross deaths. These boats have a monitor cable running from the ship to the net which the more modern vessels in the fleet do not have.

A gruesome death

The report graphically illustrates how birds meet a gruesome death.

"...Most birds died as a result of collision with the headline netsonde monitor wire, which extends from the top of the aft gantry (near the boat's stern) to up to 20 m behind the boat. The wire is 7 mm in diameter and very stiff, so that it whips up and down as the boat pitches in the swell. It is grey, and very hard to see on overcast days and in twilight.

Albatrosses feeding behind trawlers have their eyes set on offal ... they fail to see the monitor wire and crash into it."

"...Albatrosses which are killed by the monitor wire are generally wrapped around it with a broken or even torn off wing. They also get snagged on stiff broken strands which are common on worn parts of the monitor cable."

"Albatross carcasses which do not get snagged slide down the stiff monitor wire like oceanographic messenger weights, accumulating in clumps at a joint just above the headline monitor itself. Others drop back into the bellylines when the net is hauled ... further corpses drop off the wire earlier ... and yet more are seen falling from the monitor wire as it passes over the gantry during hauling."

Autopsies revealed that the "cause of death appeared to have been drowning, mostly associated with fresh serious injuries (broken wings, legs, bills, etc) in conformity with having collided with and becoming entangled in trawl gear."



Sandy Bartle, curator of birds at the National Museum, with a white-capped albatross killed in the Auckland Islands squid fishery.

Photo: Gerard Hutching

