

plentiful fish. Dame Cath Tizard in a visit there earlier this year saw them as “suicidal”, so easy were they to catch.

Scallops, which used to be plentiful, have also been easy targets for divers and are now becoming increasingly difficult to find. Islanders tend to blame the decline on mainlanders and charter boat operators who bring scores of divers to the prime sites.

Paua, according to one diver, used to be like “stones on the bottom” but not now. Crays too used to be so common that in the evening you could go out and see them covering the sand in one of the bays. Now the large crays here are almost gone.

Margaret Hopkins, a local member of the Southland Conservation Board, says the inlet is a special place for recreation and inspiration for most Stewart Island residents and visitors. “Even on days when gales funnel down the inlet and the wild windswept waters set the heart racing, a boat can nearly always be found sheltering in a quiet bay somewhere,” she says.

But the inlet’s fish and shellfish are coming under increasing pressure. Too many people, and the inevitable greedy few, are taking a toll on the inlet’s marine life.

It is this concern which has prompted the community to respond to the call by the Department of Conservation (DoC) for a public meeting to discuss ways of protecting the inlet.

PROTECTION for Paterson Inlet is not a new idea. It first arose in the mid-1980s when the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) put out a discussion paper on marine reserves for the whole southern region and identified the inlet as a potential marine park.

But fears that the whole inlet may be turned into a reserve galvanised the community against it, and the idea was dropped.

Now DoC is trying again, and to kick the process off they have organised two public meetings.

When I arrived, the small town of Oban, with its resident population of about 400, was abuzz with the prospect of a fiery debate. Bets were laid as to how many people would turn up.

DoC’s tiny visitor centre was crammed full and more chairs had to be found. Various faces were pointed out to me as belonging to paua divers, commercial fishers, recreational fishers, ratepayers, plus a smattering of Forest and Bird members.

DoC’s Geoff McAlpine opened the meeting by describing marine reserves as places where people can enjoy marine life

in a protected environment. According to Geoff, New Zealand needs marine reserves for research, so we can look at how a marine community functions without exploitation, and also for insurance purposes. A marine reserve could provide the stock to re-stock areas in the event of a collapse in fisheries. Marine reserves would be useful for nature tourism. “Just look at Leigh on a mid-summer weekend,” he said. “The area is

The blue cod is an underwater entertainer known to steal pencils from marine surveyors. It is also the main target for recreational fishers and fishing pressure means that the numbers of this inquisitive species have declined.

DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION



The wide mudflats of Freshwater River at the head of the inlet are nursery areas for many fish species and important feeding grounds for migrant waders and other native birds. Eel grass, which is exposed at low tide, can be seen on the mud beds. These are some of the least spoilt estuarine areas of New Zealand.

SUE MATURIN



Looking west across the maze of twisted arms and coves of the inlet. The mudflats of Freshwater are in the background.

packed.”

“That’s what we’re worried about,” calls one islander. “We came here to live in peace and quiet.”

“We don’t want the whole of Paterson Inlet locked up,” calls another.

“No-one is saying the whole of Paterson Inlet should be reserved,” explains Greg Lind, DoC’s Stewart Island Field Centre Manager. “We’re here to get the community’s response, to find out what this community wants,” he reassures some of the critics.

Then it was MAF’s turn for some stick.

“The limit on fish and shell fish is far too high. Take, for example, some of the charter boats – they can have, say, ten divers who come in here for a few days and they each take ten scallops every day they’re here. That means they go home with heaps of scallops which they sell to pay for the trip. You MAF guys know about it but you don’t do anything to stop it.”

MAF’s Anthony Brett replies that the bag limits are under review.

Then Phil Clarke from the Fisherman’s Association speaks up. He thinks