

Protecting the Coasts of Golden and Tasman Bays

Marine farmers have targeted the shallow, sheltered waters of Golden and Tasman bays near Nelson, as a prime site for a major expansion of the aquaculture industry. The provision of coastal space for spat-catching and marine farming has become a major issue in the evolution of the regional coastal plan for the Tasman District.

At the northwest corner of the South Island, Golden and Tasman bays provide rare examples of north-facing bays, protected from the effects of oceanic currents and swells. A magnificent coastline of sandy beaches, barrier-enclosed estuaries and large expanses of tidal flats and open foreshore, has evolved. In Golden Bay this striking coastline is further enhanced by the encircling ranges of Kahurangi and Abel Tasman national parks, and by the protective arm of Farewell Spit, a landform and wildlife habitat of international importance.

At present there are less than 100 hectares of mussel farms in Golden Bay and no permanent

aquaculture structures in Tasman Bay. A 'gold rush' of recent applications, however, seeks to have more than 10,000 hectares in these two bays allocated to seasonal spat-catching and the installation of permanent mussel farms.

Alarmed at this avalanche of applications, local residents and conservation groups have mounted a major campaign to protect the natural character of the coast.

Currently, the Tasman District Council's regional coastal plan provides for an 'aquaculture exclusion zone' throughout Golden and Tasman bays. This generally extends three nautical miles off the coast and six nautical miles around the coast of Abel Tasman National Park but there are exceptions for existing farms and some small extensions to these.

The Challenger Scallop Enhancement Company, along with the New Zealand Marine Farming Association and several groups of marine farmers, has appealed the plan provisions to the Environment Court. The court hearing began



ANDY DENNIS

Extensive inter-tidal sandflats, as here in Wainui Bay close to Abel Tasman National Park, are an important natural feature of Golden and Tasman bays. The Tasman District coastal plan currently protects estuarine areas from oyster racks and other marine farming structures, but not from mechanised diggers taking cockles.

last November in Nelson and was continuing in March.


Forest and Bird is one of 24 separate parties involved in the case, represented by a Society field officer, Eugenie Sage, with considerable help from Golden Bay, Nelson and Tasman branches. Generally, Forest and Bird along with Department of Conservation, the Friends of Golden Bay, and Friends of Nelson Haven, supports the Council's aquaculture exclusion zone as 'the minimum required to protect important ecological,


landscape and amenity values'. Sections of the aquaculture industry are strongly opposed to it.

There are also major conflicts between different sectors of the aquaculture industry. In particular, there is conflict between mussel farming interests and the Challenger Scallop Enhancement Company whose current programme of collecting scallop spat, rotationally seeding and then dredging, uses virtually all of the area sought for mussel farming

Forest and Bird sees this as a landmark case about protection and sustainable use of the coastal environment. It is one of the more complex, difficult and interesting cases the Environment Court has dealt with, involving more than 50 witnesses. It raises major legal issues about the relationship between the Fisheries Act and Resource Management Act (RMA) as well as about the way in which the purposes and principles in Part II of the RMA relate to the coastal environment. It also raises questions about the adequacy of information about a number of key aspects of the coastal and marine environment, and the extent to which a 'precautionary approach' needs to be adopted until this information becomes available.

— Contributed






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