

In front of us a large fish seemed to peer through lifeless eyes — a 50-centimetre long silver drummer it was held by fine nylon mesh. Nearby another flapped weakly, near death. On both sides of the drummer, snapper and parore had also succumbed to the invisible wall hanging in midwater.

We swam down to the sea floor to see what was entangled in the lower end of the net where it merged with the ecklonia kelp. Red moki, banded wrasse and scorpionfish, species that are used to pushing their way through the kelp, were also snared.

Most of those fish would be thrown away, some to be devoured by seagulls on the surface. Others would sink out of sight, becoming food for the bottom dwellers, the crabs and shellfish.

The menace of unattended set nets affects almost all the New Zealand coast. Near Coromandel we saw kahawai, trevally, red moki and butterfish floating in the shallows, discarded by the set netters who took only the snapper.

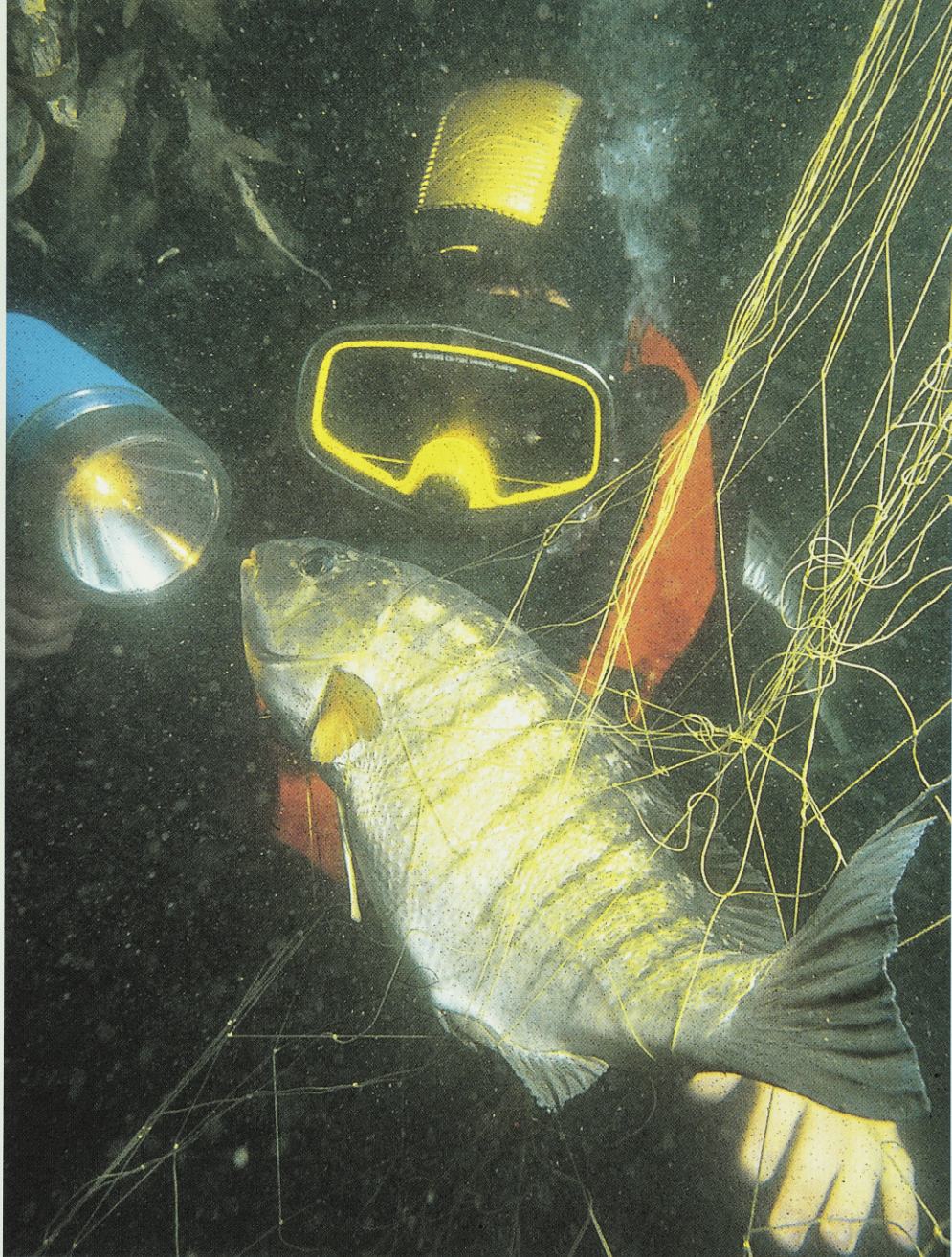
On a dive just outside Tory Channel, where the inter-island ferry enters the Marlborough Sounds, a set net stopped us in our tracks, luckily before we blundered into it. That net held small blue moki, tarakihi, banded wrasse and butterfish. Neither of its floats had any identification.

Why do people use set sets, often referred to as gill nets? The easy answer is that they are cheap and catch a lot of fish without much effort. In the early 1970s an increase in fish prices saw a huge increase in the use of set nets. The Quota Management System, introduced in 1986 went some way to control the commercial use of set nets although they are still in common use.

Commercial netters have a financial interest in ensuring that the net is cleared quickly and nothing is wasted. Amateur set nets can be left out for days if the weather is bad or some other activity takes priority.

The Ministry of Fisheries has set net regulations covering mesh size, the number of nets per person or boat, and where they can be laid. Netters must also have the net floats marked with their name and contact details.

*Left: A commercial set net snagged on Laison Reef near White Island in the Bay of Plenty continued to catch fish up to 70 metres underwater. Fortunately, diving enthusiasts and fisheries officers were able to remove it.*

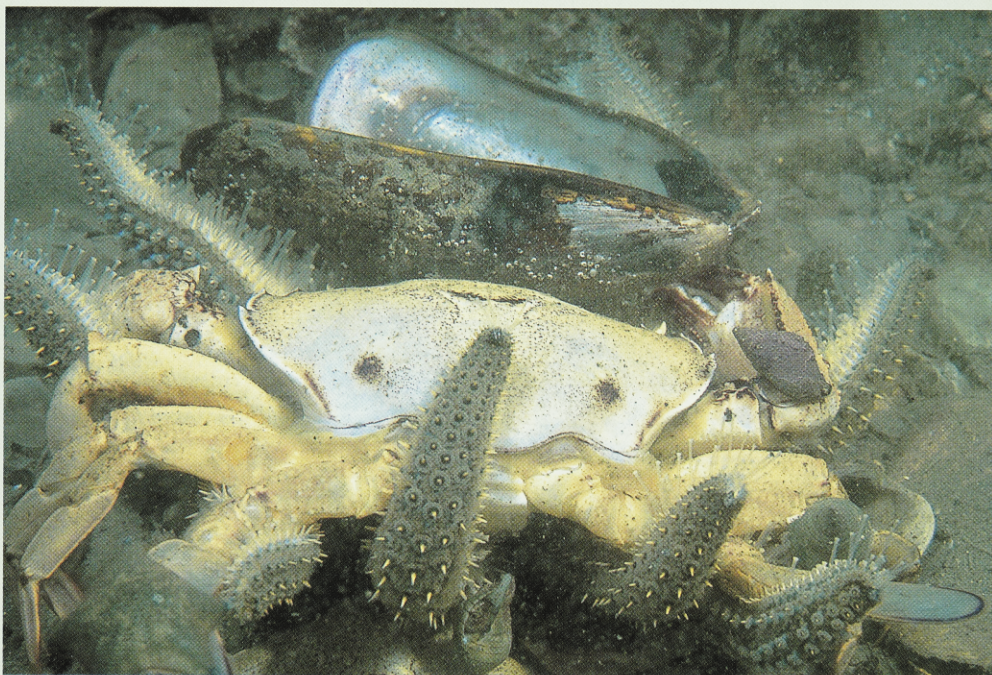


ROGER GRACE

*Parore are often caught in nets set for schnapper, but are thrown away and wasted.*

In spite of this some people still ignore the regulations. The bycatch is used as an excuse by some as a way of getting a few fish as bait for a crayfish pot.

How many fish succumb to these unattended walls of death is unknown. Yet the use of set nets continues pillaging fish to the detriment of sightseers and genuine



TONY & JENNY ENDERBY

*Set nets take species set netters don't want. Here a discarded paddle crab is eaten by a spiny sea star.*