

fishermen who sit on boats or on the rocks waiting for a bite. The daily-limit regulations for line fishermen seem irrelevant when a set net can be left overnight or longer. Any fish under the legal size or over the daily limit are easily discarded.

To come home from a day's fishing with a meal or two from the sea is something many New Zealanders enjoy. The majority of fishermen follow the regulations, returning undersized and unwanted catches to the sea. Many line fishermen head back to shore once they have enough for a feed, not needing to catch their legal limit. Those left today are tomorrow's catch and if you don't make it back out tomorrow, there's always the day after.

Others head down onto sandy beaches and drag a net for a feed. Flounder, mullet and kahawai are often caught this way, but as with line fishing the unwanted fish are returned to the sea — alive. For others, yellow-eyed mullet are targeted as bait for the next day's fishing trip. This method of netting ensures that only the target fish are taken and others are released.

New Zealanders complained loudly when the foreign 'wall of death' fishermen began to pillage the South Pacific and Tasman Sea, outside New Zealand's 200-mile limit. These massive nets, some hundreds of kilometres long, caught everything including dolphins, sharks, sunfish and marlin which were thrown back dead into the sea.

Government action in response to public pressure in New Zealand and overseas saw the disappearance of these 'walls of death' and a subsequent increase in the number of game fish caught or tagged and released around our northern coast.

Around Akaroa in the South Island, restrictions on set nets were established to protect Hector's dolphin, the smallest in the world. Research into this endemic dolphin began around Banks Peninsula in 1984. Researchers Steve Dawson and Liz Slooten, found evidence of 230 Hector's dolphin deaths along the coast between Motunau and Timaru. After publication in 1991, these numbers were disputed by officials of the Ministry of Fisheries, but even at half the recorded number of deaths the Hector's dolphin populations were not sustainable.

The Banks Peninsula Marine Mammal Sanctuary was created as a result of those deaths. New recreational fishing guidelines now ban amateur set netting out to four nautical miles, from the Waiau river in the north to the Waitaki river in the south, from October 1-March 31, (with the exception of flounder netting areas in Pigeon Bay, Port Levy and Akaroa, and a reef south of Timaru).



*Crayfish caught in an abandoned set net.*

'The number of dolphins caught in commercial gill-netting still has not been reduced to sustainable numbers,' according to Dr Slooten of Otago University, who is also a member of the national executive of Forest and Bird. An observer programme on commercial gill-net boats in 1997-8 showed dolphins caught just outside the boundaries of the sanctuary.

A near-identical dolphin, now known as the Maui dolphin, lives off the west coast of the North Island, between Kawhia and the Kaipara Harbour. This pod numbers between 100 and 150.

Efforts to ban set nets in the Maui dolphins' habitat met with resistance, but if unattended set netting were allowed to continue, they might have become extinct in a decade or two. Of the seven dead dolphins found since July 2001, four had definite evidence of being caught in set nets and only one died of natural causes.

Set nets have recently been banned within four nautical miles of the coast between Maunganui Bluff, north of Dargaville and Pariokariwa Point, north of New Plymouth.

Yet we still tolerate other coastal set nets that kill more than they are entitled to and waste much of what they catch. Many fish caught don't come under the Ministry of Fisheries regulations. Consequently, there is no 'other species' limit for the silver drummer, parore, mullet and numerous species of wrasse.

Sea horses also fall into this no-limit category in New Zealand even though there is a huge market for them in Asia. Luckily they have great camouflage and are rarely seen and even less taken, but a net that snares their weedy habitat and pulls it up

will affect them. Although they will fall under the CITES agreement (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna), there is no move to limit the daily take under Ministry of Fisheries regulations in New Zealand.

Modern set nets, which are made from nylon and are cheap to buy, are now replacing the older cotton nets which quickly broke down if lost. Now, we often see tangled meshes of these nylon nets with the remains of red moki, butterflyfish and silver drummer. Crayfish detect the fish carcasses in the net and entangle themselves as they attempt to feed off them.

A large commercial set net recently snagged Laison's Reef, between White Island and the Volkner Rocks. Laison's Reef is one of the top dive sites in the Bay of Plenty and visiting divers noticed it and the carnage it was causing. With the aid of local fisheries officers they dived to the extreme depths of 70 metres to remove it. Without that effort it would have continued to snare marine life for years.

The damage caused by lost nets in non-dived areas remains unknown. Meanwhile, the net's owner just goes out, buys another net and the same situation continues.

In estuaries, nets are often laid right across the channels, rather than running parallel to them. Whangateau Harbour, an hour north of Auckland, often has more than its fair share, especially over the holiday season. The prolific fish life in early summer usually decreases markedly by late summer.

Most netters are after snapper, john dory, kahawai and flounder. But schools of parore also come into the harbour to breed and

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