

FAQ – Marine reserves and marine protected areas

February 2015



In February the New Zealand Herald posed a series of questions to LegaSea. These are the questions and answers provided by the LegaSea team.

Questions

1. (a) What is LegaSea's view on the establishment of marine reserves in New Zealand?
(b) How important does it see their role in preserving species and habitats?
(c) Does it have a special interest in their role in maintaining habitats?
2. Are there any general concerns it has around the establishment of new reserves and MPAs, in regard to recreational fishers being denied access?
3. What does LegaSea see as the best way forward in planning and implementing new reserves? Does it support the marine spatial planning model?

Questions & Answers

1. (a) What is LegaSea's view on the establishment of marine reserves in New Zealand?

LegaSea: Establishing marine reserves in New Zealand has been an ad hoc series of private initiatives by special interest groups.

1. (b) How important does it see their role in preserving species and habitats?

LegaSea: A marine reserve might be appropriate to preserve a specie or habitat, but no circumstance has arisen in New Zealand. Species under threat tend to be sea birds and some mammals. For those, a marine reserve offers little protection, unless of course it was enormous in scale. And even then, a marine reserve would not guarantee their viability.

More direct interventions aimed at known stressors are likely to be far more effective than assuming a marine reserve will remove the stress on a species.

It is conceivable that some particularly fragile habitat could be preserved by a marine reserve – at least from direct human interference. Such opportunities are rare however, and in most cases a simple prohibition of a particular human activity is enough to remove risk.

For example, large-scale benthic loss is attributed to trawling, particularly shallow waters that serve as nursery grounds. It is not necessary to declare a marine reserve to reverse the damage; simply removing the trawl disturbance will be sufficient.

1. (c) Does it have a special interest given their role in maintaining habitats?

LegaSea: LegaSea has a keen interest in the marine reserve conversations. Not so much as a tool for preserving habitat, but as a misplaced tool for fisheries management.

As mentioned, habitats at risk need to have the risk assessed and then managed.

Removing undue fishing impacts is provided for in the Fisheries Act and it is here we need to look for the solution, not simply drop into a 'marine reserve fixes everything' mindset.

2. Are there any general concerns it has around the establishment of new reserves and MPAs, in regard to recreational fishers being denied access?

LegaSea: Every marine reserve that reduces the area available for recreational fishing adds pressure to adjacent areas. It is easy to get into a domino effect where the concerns that led to the marine reserve being established are now repeated next door, and another marine reserve used to mitigate that effect which leads to further undue impacts.

A marine proposal cannot just consider the area being proposed, it must also take account of the magnified effect of increased fishing in non-proposed areas, something that doesn't presently happen. When the wider implications are considered most often a marine reserve is not the best solution, unless it is targeting a very precise problem that has no other solution available.

We hear of the need to declare 10, 20, or even 30% of the marine area marine reserves. It appears to have become a bit of a bidding contest between political parties.

We hear that biodiversity is protected by these marine reserves, but never are we given a list of species under threat, or habitat under threat, just a general claim of success. Very similar to how years ago our mothers insisted we take a daily dose of cod liver oil. No particular problem was being treated, just a faith that everything would improve.

Marine reserves have become the cod liver oil for those unhappy with the present state of our oceans and desire to see improvement. These people have been sold the idea that marine reserves will roll the clock back and the oceans will again resemble their childhood memories. This crusade is fraudulent.

3. What does LegaSea see as the best way forward in planning and implementing new reserves? Does it support the marine spatial planning model?

LegaSea: With respect to marine spatial planning we see it as unnecessary and mostly just an attempt from Councils and the Department of Conservation to claim some regulatory authority over areas they presently have none. The Hauraki Gulf

Marine Park has far more spatial regulations, covering all major uses, than anywhere else in New Zealand. There exists a comprehensive spatial plan for the Hauraki Gulf – there isn't a vacuum that needs filling.

What we see is the Auckland and Waikato Councils spending ratepayer's money trying to make a case for spatial planning to improve the ecology of the Hauraki Gulf.

This is at a time when it is well known that the major stressor and risk to the Gulf ecology comes from declining water quality, run-off from cities and farms. Controlling these inputs into the Gulf is Council core business, and yet they are clearly failing to manage and reduce these inputs. Instead, they turn attention to lines on a chart, when the contaminants running freely from their jurisdiction into the Gulf continue unabated and have no regard whatsoever to lines on the chart.

With respect to the future of marine reserves, we need to stop and rethink the entire process. At the moment the process is driven by those for whom the establishment of a marine reserve is the end in itself. Yet international research tells us that in most cases the purposes stated for the establishment of marine reserves are not achieved. It is difficult for the somewhat possessed community of marine reserve advocates to accept that to succeed we need to go slowly and eliminate the mistakes made elsewhere.

There must, in the first instance, be a specific purpose for a marine reserve. Not some generalised cod liver oil statements, but something clear and measurable that is needed and will be achieved.

To finish, we have sympathy for many in the community of marine reserve advocates. These folk genuinely desire better marine management and higher environmental conditions in the Hauraki Gulf, just as we do. Unfortunately they have heard for 20 years that it is only a matter of more reserves to lead us all to the marine ecosystem of our memories.

These good intentioned folk unwittingly set back the cause of marine conservation by encouraging the use of misplaced marine reserves. Far more direct interventions through the Fisheries Act, aimed at restoring habitats and improving fishing behaviours, while cleaning up the run-off from the catchment, are where immediate conservation efforts need to be aimed. A very quick ecological turnaround can be achieved with existing regulatory tools.

Marine reserves are a most inappropriate tool for the conservation minded to promote. They cause division, domino damage, are slow, and have no measurable widespread benefit.

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Help us protect the future of fishing in New Zealand by getting on board with

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LegaSea is a public outreach initiative of the New Zealand Sport Fishing Council. The Council has an experienced fisheries management, science, policy and legal team. On behalf of the Council LegaSea raises funds and provides public-friendly information about a variety of processes that are important to the sustainable management of fisheries for future generations.