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Busting the myth of 'unknown recreational catch'

By Trish Rea, LegaSea Liaison

In 2015 we have a better understanding and more data than ever on recreational harvest nationwide, particularly about catches from the popular Hauraki Gulf. In November 2014 the Ministry for Primary Industries published a report detailing national and regional catch, by average weight per species and percentages of landed catch bags.

This report has been useful in busting the myth of 'unknown recreational catch'.

Science providers have told us they have better data on recreational harvest than any other sector because there are uncertain levels of customary harvest, commercial discards and poaching.

The 2014 report summarises the National Panel Survey conducted in 2011-12. The survey is the most comprehensive study of recreational harvest undertaken in New Zealand. The National Research Bureau (NRB) used a door-to-door survey of 30,000 homes to recruit over 7000 fishers who reported their personal catch over 12 months. Their catch was scaled up to estimate total catch by New Zealand residents aged 15 years and older.

A concurrent boat ramp survey provided data on the average weight of many of the common species. For snapper on the northeast coast of the North Island, in SNA1, the average weight of fish kept was 1.03kg. The NRB results were compared to an independent NIWA survey and the estimates were similar. Both surveys estimated the total recreational harvest of snapper in SNA1, during 2011-12, was just under 3,800 tonnes.

These survey results were used in the 2013 SNA1 management review, which led to changes in the minimum size limit (27 to 30cm) and lower bag limit (9 to 7) for recreational fishers. In his 2013 decision, the Minister increased the overall recreational allowance by 500 tonnes, to 3050 t.

It seems that 2010-11 and 2011-12 were very good years for snapper catch in the Hauraki Gulf, where most snapper fishing occurs.

Ongoing NIWA surveys show total recreational harvest has declined in all three sub-areas of SNA1, probably due to fish movement and a lack of fish in close since 2011-12.

Estimated catch has declined around 18% in East Northland, more than 50% in the Hauraki Gulf and around 47% in the Bay of Plenty.

These declines are occurring in the same sub-areas where commercial fishers report too many snapper are getting in their way of catching other species, particularly in the Hauraki Gulf.

Comparing trawl catch with rod and reel fishing is a waste of time, especially when the commercial minimum size limit remains at 25cm and a 30cm MLS applies to recreational snapper catch.

What next?

The next Panel survey is due in 2016-17, but that depends on the Minister allocating sufficient funds.

LegaSea wants Nathan Guy to see the value in repeating the survey to validate current results because recreational fishing is important.

Recreational fishing contributes to our social and cultural wellbeing, and supports a vast range of industries. And for many of us, fishing to feed our family and friends defines who we are and what it means to be a Kiwi.

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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 restoring abundance in our fisheries for future generations.