

Monitoring the recreational catch of bluefin

Record of meetings held in Auckland and Westport 12 and 25 August 2008

Attendance

Auckland

Arthur Hore
Stephanie Hill
Graeme McGregor
John Holdsworth
Tim Sippel
Richard Baker
Keith Ingram
Mark Franklin
Kurt Briggs
John Anderson

Westport

Graeme McGregor
Pete Saul
John Holdsworth
Dave Wooff
Des Walshe
Jason Wootton
Caroline
Mark Hoare
Brendan Carson
Lance Goodhew
Dave Barracouan
Mike Boswell
Anthony Butler

Introduction

Graeme McGregor opened the meetings with a presentation. The management of these highly migratory species is the responsibility of the Convention for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna (CCSBT) and the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC). The CCSBT has set national catch limits for southern bluefin tuna, and the WCPFC requests member states such as New Zealand to exercise reasonable restraint of their fishing fleets when fishing Pacific bluefin tuna. The New Zealand approach to implementing national catch limits or achieving reasonable restraint has been to introduce both stocks into the Quota Management System in 2004.

Since 2004 an off season game fishery has developed off the west coast South Island. Anecdotal information suggests up to 100 bluefin were taken by game fishing and spear fishing west coast waters during winter 2006, however it is unknown how many of each species were landed or released alive. Voluntary reporting suggested improved catches in 2007 with 137 Pacific bluefin (44 retained) and 55 Southern bluefin (35 retained). These data suggest landings in 2007 exceeded the recreational allowance set for Pacific bluefin and were about equivalent to the allowance set for Southern bluefin.

International obligations are likely to require more active management of Pacific bluefin in the future to ensure sustainability. National catch limits have already been imposed on the Southern bluefin fishery. New Zealand is required to monitor these fisheries and report on steps taken to support CCSBT and WCPFC measures. Accordingly, there is a strong incentive for fishers to report and MFish to monitor the fishery to ensure the national interest in the fishery can be taken into account. Some specific outcomes suggested for the fishery include:

- Review catch limits and allowances
- Develop a uniform code of practice useful for stimulating greater numbers of tag and release (already in place on some charter vessels and under development by Free Diving NZ).
- Safety issues might also need to be addressed.
- Continue tagging program in 2008 to determine survivability of fish tagged and released, migration patterns, residence times within NZ waters and relationship with fish targeted by commercial fishery off the ECNI.
- MFish proposed that monitoring of charter boats continue for the 2008 season but requested ideas for improving the voluntary system of reporting.

Discussion

There was a general agreement of the need to obtain game fish catch information on these two fisheries. It was acknowledged that charter vessel operations contribute most of the recreational catch and such information was important for establishing an interest in the fishery and as inputs into management. It was agreed that more accurate information is required to ensure the effective management of fisheries such as bluefin where game fishers take a substantial proportion of the total catch. However, some questioned the long term intent of managing these commercially valuable species, citing swordfish where it was alleged provisions of the Billfish Moratorium were not adhered to. It was noted a goal of shared fisheries management in New Zealand is to get best value from the use of fisheries resources and a sound basis for establishing an interest in the fishery is vital to this assessment.

There was generally a poor response from charter operators in 2007 to letters, emails and phone calls requesting information. Some charter operators did report but most of the data had to be obtained from other sources. This poor voluntary response increases the uncertainty of the accuracy of catches reported for 2007 with some at the meetings believing them to be underestimated.

Charter operators present at Westport agreed to provide information subject to the following improvements to the 2008 proposal for monitoring:

- Charter operators agree to report the number and weights of retained bluefin caught by game fishers on their vessels;
- Independently MFish will obtain estimates of the number and weights of tagged and released bluefin from billfish report cards;
- MFish to provide forms and a return addressed envelope to charter vessels operating in the bluefin fishery to more easily facilitate reporting the retained catch.

There was an assurance that data collected by this proposal were not intended for establishing catch history or to issue some form of recreational quota to charter vessels. MFish will be responsible for collecting and keeping data confidential and will report data only in summary form.

It was noted that wastage and ensuring sustainability are particularly important issues for charter operators in this fishery. In response various codes of practise to encourage the releasing of fish are already operated by some charter boat operators. It

was suggested a standard code of practise for all operators be devised and adopted for the fishery.

In terms of spear fishing the diver representative said that it should be up to individual divers to satisfy themselves of the ethics of taking fish by this particular method. This issue was recently discussed by Free Diving New Zealand and at a special meeting of New Zealand Underwater. NZU had referred to the MFish website and agreed to take Ministry advice on how to treat the fishery.

The seas and bars on the west coast are notorious for dangerous conditions. In addition, vessels are manoeuvring in close proximity to each other and large fishing trawlers and their gear. Safety is an important issue and it was noted the Maritime Safety Authority have indicated an intention to undertake work.

Tagging of bluefin

John Holdsworth presented on the satellite-tagging work undertaken to date. The study provides behavioural information on Pacific bluefin to investigate migration patterns. The research supported the hypotheses that tagged and released bluefin survived and that Pacific bluefin spent up to six months residing in New Zealand waters.