

## **Perspective**

### **Akaroa Harbour Marine Reserve Application By Suky Thompson**

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Conservation Minister Kate Wilkinson's decision to reject a "no take" marine reserve in Akaroa Harbour on the grounds that it will adversely affect recreational fishing is a lost opportunity for Canterbury, with implications for marine reserve applications elsewhere.

Akaroa began as a whaling port and over ten years from 1835 to 1845, Southern Right whales were hunted to near extinction. When they were gone, sawmilling took over and the native forest was the next natural resource to be obliterated. Other boom and bust industries based on the exploitation of natural resources followed. Now for the first time Akaroa's economic interests align with its environmental interests, as the town's primary income earner is marine nature tourism.

On land we have set aside many such no take areas as national parks and reserves. As we have seen from the recent debate on mining, New Zealanders are justifiably proud and protective of them. In Canterbury we owe a huge debt of gratitude to people like Harry Ell who a hundred years ago had the foresight to recognise that if we did not protect the remnants of native bush it would soon be gone. The dappled beauty of the Peninsula's landscape that residents and visitors enjoy today has naturally regenerated over the last 100 years seeded from these original reserves.

The proposed 530 ha marine reserve would have protected 10% of Akaroa Harbour from north of Onuku to the harbour entrance from fishing. The area includes the spectacular Dan Rogers cliffs and Cathedral Cave. It is the "must see" destination for every nature cruise departing Akaroa township, allowing thousands of tourists to visit it every year taking only photographs and not even leaving footprints. It is the prime spot for viewing and swimming with Hector's dolphins and home of the last remaining penguin colony in the harbour.

The views of the recreational fishing lobby and Ngai Tahu, who opposed the reserve, were considered carefully by the Maori Land Court when it heard the taiapure application by Ngai Tahu in 2002. Nevertheless the Court specifically excluded the Dan Rogers area from the taiapure so that the marine reserve application could proceed and the taiapure was established over 90% of the harbour in 2006.

If the fishing lobby had been satisfied with 90% of the harbour and Minister Wilkinson had followed the lead of the Court we could now have both a marine reserve and a taiapure fisheries management area in the harbour. The no take marine reserve would have provided a scientific baseline to judge the success of the taiapure and acted as a breeding pool

The taiapure on its own will not achieve the same level of regeneration as its purpose is for fishery management not the protection of all marine life – indeed the taking of seaweed by a local paua farmer is already enshrined in the taiapure.

Although the taiapure committee (a non-elected group largely representing Ngai Tahu and recreational fishing interests) reduced bag limits for some species last summer, it has no control over the number of recreational fishers in the harbour. This means that when Akaroa Harbour swarms with recreational fishing boats over the holidays there is no control over the total number of fish taken.

When the marine reserve application was lodged in 1996, after seven years of local consultation and discussion on potential sites, commercial fishing was still part of the Akaroa economy and commercial fishers were the reserve's strongest opponents. Since then the decline in fish has meant that the commercial fishermen have joined the whalers and the sawmillers in the pages of Akaroa's history.

In the intervening years nature tourism, focussed on Hector's dolphin, has replaced commercial fishing as the marine based industry of the town. Akaroa's economy now relies on these endangered dolphins visiting the sheltered waters of the harbour but the dolphins will only come to the harbour if they can find a feed themselves.

Tiny Pohatu at remote Flea Bay, the only marine reserve on the whole of the South Island's east coast, has provided first hand evidence to this community of how well "no take" marine reserves work to regenerate fish stocks.

Hence the Minister was well aware that Akaroa District Promotions, the town's business association, supported the marine reserve proposed for the harbour, as did all the adjacent land owners, local conservationists and national conservation organisations.

But she chose to place more weight on the views of recreational fishers and Ngai Tahu, who not satisfied with 90% of the harbour under the pro-fisheries taiapure management system wanted Dan Rogers as well - "*that's where we fish in a north easterly*" being their refrain. In doing so, Kate Wilkinson has enshrined the right to catch a fish until every last fish has been caught.

Experience around the country has shown that marine reserve applications inevitably create an adverse response from recreational fishers in the short term but soon gain popularity once the regenerating fish stocks spill over into the surrounding waters. The Minister's decision to reject such a deserving candidate as the Akaroa Harbour marine reserve in favour of recreational fishing leaves little hope that other marine reserve applications will get approved.

*Suky Thompson lives in Akaroa and is well known for her historic tours of the town.*