

Dave Kellian, fisherman

There are lots of reasons not to become a fisherman if you listen to Dave Kellian, of Whangaripo. He says inequitable quota systems, competition from fish farms and government regulations are just a few of the reasons why profit margins are shrinking. The fact, then, that Dave is raising finance to buy a new fishing boat is the paradox of this fisherman cum seabird champion. Recently returned from Peru where he has been spreading the seabird mitigation message, he spoke to Local Matters editor Jannette Thompson



Did you always want to be a fisherman?

I grew up on Great Barrier where Dad supplemented the money he made from a guest house, at Tryphena, by fishing, selling smoked fish at Mechanics Bay and running a charter boat. We moved to Warkworth because Mum wanted us kids to have a proper education. Dad worked at the Warkworth Post Office at first but then went fishing again, and that's how I got my start. Later on, I worked for Merv Strongman who was, at that time, one of the best fishermen in the Hauraki Gulf.

Was the decision to be a commercial fisherman a good one?

We were doing okay in the 70s, before the quota system. Most of the fish being caught was being sold through agents and directly to fish shops. The boats weren't sophisticated and the catch was iced as it'd always been done. Then the new trawlers came along with bigger horsepower and new nets. Suddenly there was a lot more fish on the market and prices dropped. A few of us could see what was happening so decided to have a go at exporting fresh fish to Japan.

How did that go?

About this time, Japan had a change of policy which allowed other countries to get into its market, albeit at the basement level. Barry Torkington and I drove to Auckland to meet a Japanese businessman who agreed to handle a trial shipment. We headed back to Leigh and I went fishing off Takatu. Less than 24 hours after I'd pulled those fish out of the sea, they were in Japan. Friday Watene and Paul Davies at Leigh Fisheries gave us a hand. When we finally got our money and did the sums, we reckoned we could get \$6 a kg for the fresh fish. Most fishermen were getting \$1.10 a kg at the time.

So it was a success?

When we told Leigh Fisheries what we wanted to do they turned us down. It caused a lot of unpleasantness. In the end, we formed a breakaway group and did our own exports. We pioneered what eventually became the backbone of the Leigh industry. When the quota system came in I was pretty fed-up with the fishing scene in NZ. I steamed to Australia and started fishing for swordfish and tuna. There was still a lot of rubbish coming from NZ about

the problem with seabird by-catch so when my boat was sunk by a coal carrier I used part of the compensation to start working seriously on developing the underwater setting device.

Where did the idea for the device come from?

I was fishing off Whakatane for yellowfin tuna, using live bait. I started experimenting by lowering a raincoat full of pilchards into the water on a string. When I pulled the string, it released the pilchards. At eight metres the birds didn't bother diving; between five and eight metres they'd dive for some; but above five they'd get every piece. The light went on – 'if we could get the bait to 10 metres, the problem of birds being killed by baited hooks was solved'.

What happened next?

Coming up with a device that doesn't cost a fortune and is simple to use on the boats hasn't been easy. MS Engineering in Warkworth developed a prototype which has been trailed in Australia but it's taking longer than I imagined. When get the device right, though, it could help seabird conservation around the world.

How involved are you in seabird conservation?

I've caught my share of seabirds but it was a different time and we didn't understand the impact of what we were doing. When levies for seabird by-catch were introduced, I believe they wasted fishermen's money putting advisory officers on boats. In the end I was challenged to 'put up or shut up'. I took a job as a seabird advisory officer for one year. Laurie Hill had designed a tori system that actually worked so I visited all but five boats in the pelagic longlining fleet and talked them through the complicated business of seabird mitigation.

Is this what led to your involvement with Southern Seabird Solutions?

Pretty much. The alliance includes representatives from the fishing industry, environmental groups and government agencies, and works towards reducing the number of albatrosses and petrels being caught by longliners. The NZ industry has really cleaned up its act. For instance, most of them have adopted night setting practises and lighting plans to mitigate bird catches. Fishermen are an easy target when people talk about protecting marine wildlife but there are a lot of other activities that need to be addressed if we are serious about protecting birds. Cruise ships and shipping are a prime example. They sail around the oceans lit up like Christmas trees and kill thousands of birds every year.

So where will you be in the next 12 to 18 months?

Fishing. I've got "tuna fever" and probably always will have. They're a great fish to catch and I love fishing. It's still a good business if you're prepared to do your own maintenance, live off your boat and go at it hard. I'd also like to see an underwater setting device on every pelagic longline fishing boat in the Southern Ocean. Solving the problem in NZ isn't enough. That's what the trip to Peru was about it – talking to fishermen about the problem and finding solutions that will work for them.

** In 2004, Dave Kellian received the NZ Green Ribbon Award for outstanding leadership in the field of conservation and the environment.*