Marine conservation in the Hauraki Gulf

Auckland

New Zealand has a rich diversity of marine habitats, which provide homes to more than 15,000 known species. Scientists estimate that there may be up to 35,000 marine species yet to be discovered, and as much as 60 percent of New Zealand’s indigenous biodiversity is found in the sea. Our isolation means that many of these species are not found anywhere else in the world.

The Hauraki Gulf Marine Park covers 1.2 million hectares of sea, including the Hauraki Gulf, Waitemata Harbour, Firth of Thames and east coast of the Coromandel Peninsula. The park is studded with more than 50 islands and islets and the waters contain diverse marine environments and a wealth of marine life. Five marine reserves protect a range of different marine habitats and species within the park.

Marine reserves are the national parks of the sea where the coastal and marine landscapes and all marine life within them, are fully protected. Marine plant and animal communities in the reserves can thrive safe from harvesting, fishing, and other disturbances, for the benefit and enjoyment of all. People can visit marine reserves, but must not take marine life or harm the natural habitats in any way. They can dive, snorkel, take photos, swim, kayak, anchor (with care), navigate through reserves, picnic on the beach, build sand castles and explore the rock pools.

Cape Rodney – Okakari Point Marine Reserve (known as Goat Island) near Leigh was New Zealand’s first marine reserve. Established in 1975 so that scientists and students could carry out research in an area with minimal human disturbance, it was one of the world’s first no-take marine areas. There are now 28 marine reserves in New Zealand waters protecting a tiny portion of our vast marine environment.

The marine reserve at Goat Island is an example of typical rocky north-eastern coast. The effects of protection on marine life have been stunning. Fish numbers have multiplied and visitor numbers soared. Snapper have been found to be up to 27 times more abundant inside the reserve than outside and they are typically 10-centimeters longer. Huge snapper now swim in the shallows to the delight of the people snorkelling.

Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai
The Long Bay-Okura Marine Reserve protects a stretch of coast, typical of much of the Waitemata harbour and inner Hauraki Gulf. It is moderately sheltered and includes a variety of coastal habitats, sandy beaches, rocky reefs, estuarine mudflats and mangroves. Students often visit this marine reserve to study the marine life on the rock platforms and reefs.

Te Matuku Marine Reserve (690 ha) protects one of Waiheke’s largest and least disturbed estuaries and an area outside Te Matuku Bay in the Waiheke Channel. Te Matuku Bay has many special features. Its intact estuarine system links native bush with freshwater and coastal wetlands to the sea. The diverse habitats include saltwater wetlands, broad inter-tidal mudflats, low-lying islands, shell spits, rocky shorelines and deep water around Passage Rock. Te Matuku Bay is an important area for migrant and resident shorebirds.

The Motu Manawa (Pollen Island) Marine Reserve protects some 500 hectares of the inner reaches of Auckland’s Waitemata Harbour around Pollen Island Scientific Reserve and Traherne Island. It includes the inter-tidal mudflats, mangrove swamp, saltmarsh, and shell banks. Auckland’s northwestern motorway passes through the reserve which is bounded to the south by the industrial area of Rosebank Peninsula and to the east by the residential suburb of Waterview.

Te Whanganui a Hei (Cathedral Cove) Marine Reserve was the first for Coromandel and protects diverse habitats condensed in a small area. The popular snorkel trail in Gemstone Bay is a good example of this, where there are four distinct habitats that support a variety of seaweeds, fish, shellfish, sponges, anemones, corals and starfish.

A marine reserve has been proposed off the north-east coast of Great Barrier Island. Rocky shores, golden sand beaches, clear oceanic waters, sub-tropical fish, sponge-studded deep reefs and coral trees all feature in the proposed marine reserve area, which is two thirds the size of Tongariro National Park. The Minister for Conservation approved the proposed Aotea (Great Barrier Island) Marine Reserve in 2005 but it needs approval by the Minister of Fisheries before it can be established.

More protected areas to come

Existing marine reserves and other protected areas in the Gulf and the rest of the country still cover only a small area of New Zealand’s marine environment, and do not represent the full range of habitats and ecosystems. The government has committed to establishing a network of marine protected areas that protects the full variety of our marine habitats and life. The goal in the New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy (2000) is to protect 10 percent of the marine environment by 2010. Planning to fill the gaps in our marine protected area network will occur on a regional basis and will involve existing users of the sea.

Further information

More detailed information on marine conservation in the Hauraki Gulf is available from DOC offices in Auckland, Warkworth and Great Barrier, and the DOC Visitor Centre in the Ferry Building on Quay Street, downtown Auckland. Also check the DOC website – www.doc.govt.nz

Snorkelling at Goat Island
T & J Enderby

Kayaking at Te Makutu Marine Reserve
R. Barnett