

Draft Conservation Services Programme Annual Plan 2020/21 Submission on behalf the Yellow-eyed Penguin Trust

8 June 2020

Background

The endangered endemic yellow-eyed penguin | hoiho is an iconic species, which is exposed to a range of impacts. Hoiho are rapidly declining in abundance in the northern part of their range, and in 2019/20 only 168 breeding pairs were observed on mainland New Zealand. Their serious plight requires action to avoid extinction, whilst continuing to improve our understanding of the causes of the decline.

Te Kaweka Takohaka mō te Hoiho is an integrated strategy to support the health and wellbeing of hoiho across their marine and terrestrial habitats, and its implementation is supported by Te Mahere Rima Tau, a five year action plan. These plans were recently developed in partnership between Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu, Department of Conservation, Yellow-eyed Penguin Trust and Fisheries New Zealand.

General feedback

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the Draft Conservation Services Programme Annual Plan 2020/21.

The Conservation Services Programme works in parallel with other relevant planning and management processes, for example, the National Plan of Action –seabirds, and various Threat Management Plans. Alignment is also recommended with Te Kaweka Takohaka mō te Hoiho, the overarching strategy for hoiho conservation, and Te Mahere Rima Tau, the supporting five-year action plan to ensure a seamless strategy across the various government frameworks.

The Yellow-eyed Penguin Trust are keen to see specific research on hoiho funded, as well as programmes which have broader implications for hoiho.

2. Interaction Projects

2.1 Observing commercial fisheries (INT2020-01)

This project is supported overall. The Trust supports the provision of observers for coverage of fisheries, in order to help understand the nature and extent of bycatch. Of particular relevance is observer coverage in the East Coast South Island and South Coast South Island setnet fisheries where there is overlap with hoiho habitat.

The percentage of observer effort coverage planned for setnets in 2020/21 in the East Coast South Island is 30% and for the South Coast South Island is 65%. Observer coverage of at least 50% is recommended however to provide reliable bycatch estimates for rare species (Babcock et al. 2003). The objectives outlined in the NPOA-Seabirds 2020 have been considered in the planning of observer days, but should also consider the strategic priorities and actions in Te Kaweka Takohaka mō te Hoiho and Te Mahere Rima Tau. Actions under this plan recommend that annual observer coverage be at least 50% on setnet vessels within hoiho habitat. Specifically, this would involve increasing the observer effort in the East Coast South Island area, where coverage is currently only set at 30%.

The targeted statistical areas for estimating hoiho capture rate in setnet fisheries have been identified as 18, 24 and 26. It is recommended that statistical area 22 should also be included, as this is where juvenile hoiho in particular are known to forage (determined by recent satellite tracking research) and is also known as an area where hoiho bycatch occurs (e.g. two hoiho in 2016 off the Waitaki River).

Of particular importance are specific objectives two and four which aim to “*identify, describe and where possible quantify measures for mitigating protected species interactions*”, as well as “*collect other relevant information on protected species interactions that will assist in assessing, developing and improving mitigation measures*”, respectively. A major focus moving forward should indeed be the development of effective mitigation methods alongside fishers, whether through specific types of fishing gear, fishing activities, times or places. This aligns well with the strategic priorities and actions set out in Te Mahere

Rima Tau which aim to implement measures that remove bycatch as an impact for hoiho, and investigate the impacts and opportunities for transitioning fisheries from setnetting to other methods (not only on fishers and hoiho, but also on other species).

3. Population Projects

3.9 Utilisation of the marine habitat of yellow-eyed penguins from Stewart Island / Rakiura (POP 2020-05)

This project is fully supported. Information on the diet and foraging ranges of hoiho are important for assessing overlap with fisheries and other marine activities, and for informing future conservation management of this protected species. This is particularly important given that there is limited information available on hoiho habitat use to enable informed management decisions and that setnetting around Rakiura is currently unrestricted (unlike areas of the mainland).

This project continues the research to map hoiho habitat utilisation around mainland Aotearoa and directly aligns with the strategic direction of Te Kaweka mō te Hoiho to protect and support marine habitats and ecosystems that nourish hoiho, in particular the action set out in Te Mahere Rima Tau to investigate the foraging ecology of hoiho from colonies where little data currently exist.

4.3 Protected species liaison project (MIT 2020-02)

This project to grow liaison capacity across inshore fleets is fully supported.

The protected species liaison roles are an essential link between the fishers, industry and Fisheries NZ. The focus of this project on ensuring that fishers have adequate support and information to enable them to implement mitigation methods into everyday operations, particularly through the development of vessel specific Protected Species Risk Management Plans. Of particular relevance for hoiho are setnet and to a lesser extent inshore trawl fisheries.

Again, alignment with the strategic priority to ensure bycatch does not threaten hoiho, and conservation actions for hoiho is recommended as this project works towards zero bycatch.

4.4 Mitigation gaps analysis towards reducing protected species bycatch (MIT 2020-03)

This project to identify significant gaps in mitigation practice in order to achieve reduced bycatch is supported, but preferably it should also contain an additional implementation phase to fill those gaps and actively reduce bycatch. It would be good to see this mitigation project specifically identify mitigation tools to enable the reduction of bycatch on hoiho, which is one of the at-risk protected species identified for setnet fisheries.

The gap analysis project directly aligns with the strategic direction of Te Kaweka mō te Hoiho to ensure bycatch does not threaten hoiho, in particular the action set out in Te Mahere Rima Tau to Implement and incentivise practices that eliminate bycatch as necessary.

Other comments

It is somewhat disappointing to see that the proposed projects on determining hoiho diet via DNA analysis of faeces, and on investigating transitioning fisheries from setnetting were not included in the CSP draft plan this time. It is hoped that these will be considered next year as key projects which align directly with the strategic priorities and actions set out for hoiho conservation.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to make a submission on the draft CSP annual plan.

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