



Seabirds and people

The impacts of fishing on seabirds

In recent times many seabird species have become threatened or endangered. Some of the greatest threats to seabirds today include loss of habitat, introduced predators, being caught or killed in fishing nets or on baited hooks, eating or becoming tangled up in plastic, oil spills and climate change.

“Most fishermen consider seabirds our friends at sea. When you’re out on a fishing boat just the sight of an albatross soaring in the sky above can lift your spirits.”

-David Kellian, fisherman

Fishing for solutions

Fishing is an important part of New Zealand’s economy. It’s also been an important part of our history ever since Kupe and his followers landed here. But sometimes fishing poses a major threat to our seabirds both in New Zealand and overseas.

Southern Seabird Solutions is a group of fishermen, scientists, government officials and conservationists working to reduce the numbers of seabirds accidentally killed.

Longlines

Albatrosses are one of the world’s most endangered family of birds. One of the main causes of their decline has been longline fishing. Longline fishermen set lines up to 95 kilometres in length behind their boats. Attached to each line are hundreds to thousands of baited hooks to catch fish like tuna, swordfish and Patagonian toothfish.

Seabirds see the baited hooks and try to eat the bait. Unfortunately sometimes the seabirds get caught by the hook or tangled up in the line. Every year thousands of seabirds drown and die this way all around the world.

Key words

threats, endangered,
longlining, trawl fisheries

Manu moana - Seabird

toroa – albatross

Seabirds scramble for food near a fishing vessel, photo courtesy Johanna Pierre, DOC



Weighting lines so that the bait drops out of view more quickly, setting hooks at night, and flying bird-scaring lines can help to save thousands of birds each year.

In New Zealand some of these techniques are required by law. Many fishermen use these techniques and along with government officials, scientists and conservationists are working on other ways to stop seabirds accidentally being killed.

Pirates

One of the biggest concerns for seabirds, marine mammals and fish stocks is illegal fishing, which is called pirate fishing. It's estimated that pirate fishers are responsible for half the seabirds killed by longlining. Pirate fishers also reduce the amount of fish legal fishermen can take and deplete fish stocks for future years. Pirates do not fish close to New Zealand but seabirds fly to the high seas where pirates may operate.

Trawl fleets

The trawl vessel fleets in New Zealand and other parts of the world use large nets to catch squid and fish. Seabirds sometimes get caught in the nets or struck by the large cables used to tow the nets.

The trawl fishery in New Zealand is trying to reduce the number of seabirds killed and injured by their vessels each year. Flying scaring lines from the trawler is one solution, but the trawl fishery is also looking at ways to manage offal (the fish waste that is released from the boat after the fish are processed). Offal is a big attraction to seabirds that gorge themselves on it. Some people compare offal to fast-food restaurants for seabirds.

When seabirds come near the fishing boats to eat the offal they're much more likely to accidentally be injured or killed by fishing equipment as they forget danger and chase the food. Many individuals and groups like Southern Seabird Solutions, the

Department of Conservation, the Ministry of Fisheries and fishing organisations are looking for an answer to this problem.



Smaller seabirds are particularly vulnerable to being accidentally captured in trawl nets, photo courtesy Southern Seabird Solutions



Photo courtesy Southern Seabird Solutions

Throwing seabirds a lifeline

New Zealand fisherman Chris Carey won an international prize for a contraption he invented to scare birds away from the cables of a trawl vessel.

Chris calls his invention the 'flying bottlebrush' or 'carefree's cunning contraption'. The device is a rope that has streamers made from strapping tape on it. The contraption can be clipped on to a fishing vessel's cables. The streamers help the birds see where the cable is so that they don't fly into it or get hit by it.

The judges liked Chris' invention because it's simple to make and use. The device is currently being tested in New Zealand.