



Help stop New Zealand sea lions becoming extinct

New DOC study reveals our nationally critical New Zealand sea lions are likely to become extinct in just 23 years at the current levels of by-catch



Photo: Rod Morris

- NZ sea lions were once found all around coastal New Zealand but are now restricted to sub-Antarctic Islands.
- Our sea lions are the rarest in the world.
- NZ sea lions are in the same endangered/threatened category as kakapo and Maui dolphins.
- The squid fishery trawls in the same area as the main breeding population of the threatened NZ sea lion.
- The fishery could catch squid without NZ sea lion or seabird by-catch if it changed its fishing method from trawling to jigging.
- We urgently need your help, sign our online petition to stop NZ sea lions becoming extinct

Background:

New Zealand sea lions once bred around mainland New Zealand coasts but are now restricted to a few colonies on the sub-Antarctic Islands plus a few individuals on Otago beaches.

The NZ sea lion population has **declined by 50% in the past 12 years** and has New Zealand's highest risk classification - "nationally critical" - which ranks them alongside iconic threatened species such as kakapo and Maui's dolphins.

The squid trawl fishery (SQU6T) overlaps with the foraging range of the largest breeding population of NZ sea lions which inhabit the Auckland Islands. NZ sea lions are being captured and killed in the giant trawl nets used to catch squid, which is one of the main food sources for these marine mammals. The fishery uses sea lion exclusion devices in the trawl nets, which are meant to allow NZ sea lions to exit the trawl nets through a hole. The problem is that there is **no evidence** that NZ sea lions that exit the trawl nets survive the encounter.

The squid fishing season also coincides with the NZ sea lion breeding and nursing period. This means that the majority of females killed by the trawl nets around the Auckland Islands will have a dependent pup on shore and are often pregnant with next season's pup. Unborn pups share the fate of their pregnant mothers, and pups are left to starve onshore, significantly increasing the death toll from the trawl fishery. While NZ sea lions are fully protected under the NZ Marine Mammals Protection Act 1978, incidental captures during fisheries operations are not an offence, as long as they are reported.

In the past the management approach by MAF (which now includes the former Fisheries Ministry) has been to set a fishing-related mortality limit (FRML) to constrain NZ sea lion mortality to a level deemed 'appropriate' by fisheries managers.

MAF released its initial position paper late last year on the management of the SQU6T fishery for the upcoming 2011-12 season and concluded that the "direct effect of fishing-related mortality on the NZ sea lion population is minimal". MAF is proposing that the squid fishery should have no limit on how many critically endangered NZ sea lions it can kill.

Ninety one percent of all squid fishing is carried out by Foreign Charter Vessels. MAF has favoured the squid fishery and has ignored key research which found that the by-catch of NZ sea lions in the fishery was the most likely cause for the 50% population decline.

Specifically, a Department of Conservation (DoC) study by sea lion expert Dr Louise Chilvers that was released in December 2011, found at the current levels of by-catch the Auckland Island NZ sea lion population would be "functionally **extinct by 2035**", just 23 years away.

In separate research, Dr Bruce Robertson, senior lecturer in Zoology at the University of Otago, concluded that the most likely causes for the NZ sea lion decline were direct fisheries related by-catch and resource competition with the squid fishery.

MAF has failed to recognise any science which doesn't fit with its own advice that fishery interactions are not causing a significant impact on the NZ sea lion population. MAF is legally required to use the best available information to advise David Carter, the Minister of Primary Industries, a portfolio which now includes fisheries. MAF has also only provided the Minister with one management option.

The SQU6T fishery also has other serious problems. It has the worst record for seabird by-catch of any fishery in New Zealand. Large numbers (between 1850 and 2560) of the endemic white-capped albatross that breed on the Auckland Islands are caught annually across all squid fisheries. Fishery related deaths are likely to be causing the decline of this species. White-chinned petrel – a globally threatened species and sooty shearwater are also caught in significant numbers. These trawl vessels are required to use a bird scarer and manage fish offal, but it appears that application of these mitigation measures is highly variable and ineffective.

In addition to threatened seabirds, New Zealand fur seals and even globally threatened basking sharks are caught in this fishery.

Forest & Bird strongly disagrees with the major change in the management being proposed by the MAF and believes there is a lack of scientific evidence to support it. There is an **urgent need for an independent review of the management of the threatened New Zealand sea lion.**

What we want:

Forest & Bird recommends the following management objective should be applied:

Zero mortality of NZ sea lions from fishing activities as soon as reasonably practicable, and in any event by 2013

Forest & Bird wants to halt the decline in NZ sea lions and increase protection so that the species recovers to a non-threatened status.

To do this, we believe the government needs to:

1. Commission an urgent independent review of the management of NZ sea lions.
2. Increase the size of the existing no trawl marine mammal sanctuary around the Auckland Islands past the 12 nautical mile mark to include waters up to 500m deep, as this would protect key foraging areas particularly important to lactating female NZ sea lions.

3. Reduce the fishing quota for killed sea lions closer to zero and apply it to all fisheries, as NZ sea lions are also caught in some other fisheries, including southern blue whiting and scampi.
4. Switch the SQU6T fishery from trawling to jigging, which is an alternative fishing method which allows for squid to be caught in a way unlikely to kill any NZ sea lions, seabirds and other by-catch associated with this fishery.
5. Transfer squid quota from the SQU6T sub-Antarctic area into other areas.
6. Establish a no-trawl marine mammal sanctuary around Campbell Island out to the 12 nautical mile limit.
7. Develop a population management plan so NZ sea lions can be managed under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, rather than the Fisheries Act, which would allow NZ sea lions to 'achieve a non-threatened status as soon as reasonably practicable, and in any event within 20 years'.

What you can do to help:

We urgently need your help as the squid fishing season is due to start on February 1, 2012, and a final decision is expected from the Minister of Primary Industries (David Carter) within weeks.

- Visit your local MP and raise this issue and our concerns
- Write a letter or email expressing your opposition and concern to:
 - Minister of Conservation Kate Wilkinson (Freepost, Parliament Buildings, Wellington or k.wilkinson@ministers.govt.nz)
 - Minister of Primary Industries David Carter (Freepost, Parliament Buildings, Wellington or d.carter@ministers.govt.nz)
- Support Forest & Bird by signing up to our online petition calling for NZ sea lions to be managed under the Marine Mammal Protection Act rather than the Fisheries Act at www.forestandbird.org.nz

For more information:

Visit: <http://www.forestandbird.org.nz/what-we-do/publications/submissions> to download the following:

- Forest & Bird detailed submission on the management measures being proposed for the 2011-12 squid (SQU6T) fishing season
- MAF's Initial Position Paper proposing what management measures are being put forward
- Important published literature on the likely causes of the NZ sea lion decline



Photo: Louise Chilvers

Thanks for your support,

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