

## **Bringing Maui's dolphins back from the brink**

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There has been speculation for some time that the small population of Maui's dolphins located off the north-west coast has been in decline. But the numbers released by the Department of Conservation last week were worse than expected. Scientists now estimate that there are only 55 adult dolphins remaining.

This estimate is much lower than that of 2005 which put the population at 111. It means that the dolphin is rapidly heading towards extinction. We have a short window of opportunity to save them.

New Zealand has been here before – with the kakapo. By 1995 the kakapo population had declined to only 51 birds. This critically low number ignited concerted action. A national kakapo team was established within the Department of Conservation to focus on the recovery of the species. A comprehensive risk assessment was undertaken and this fed into a revised recovery plan. Scientific experts were mobilised. Government provided additional funding and staff. As a result, the decline of the kakapo was successfully reversed, with numbers currently well over 100 and growing.

It's time to mobilise a similar effort to save the Maui's dolphin. Being a marine species, the tools required to reverse the population decline will not be the same. But there are a range of potentially effective tools available. Research findings indicate that if we remove the human-induced risks to the dolphins, there is a good chance that the population will gradually recover under its own steam.

With the population in such a perilous situation, the recovery effort needs to be based on a deeply precautionary approach. It is therefore heartening to see the Ministers of Conservation and Primary Industries proposing urgent interim measures. These will increase the extent of a ban on set nets further south around the Taranaki coast as well as restrictions on seismic activity in connection with oil and gas exploration. It is intended that these measures will stay in place at least until the Maui's threat management plan is reviewed later this year.

Entanglement in fishing nets is thought to be the main reason for the dolphin's decline. So this is a good start.

The proposed measures have been supported by the Auckland Council, the Environmental Defence Society and Forest and Bird.

The Seafood Industry Council has called organisations supporting the measures 'extremists'. The Federation of Commercial Fishermen refers to 'a knee jerk reaction'. These responses are very disappointing. It is redolent of an out-dated style of oppositional politics where the response to an issue is to directly attack the parties promoting it.

It contrasts with the much more constructive position taken by the Petroleum Exploration and Production Association. It has come out in support of the interim rules proposed to manage seismic surveying off Taranaki. The Association's CEO, David Robinson, stated that the "industry recognises that caution must be taken not to do anything that could further reduce the size of the population"

and “it was important that the exploration industry played its part in ensuring the survival of the Maui’s dolphin”.

This is the kind of response we need on behalf of all marine resource users. If we are to succeed in saving the Maui’s dolphin, all parties will need to play their part.

The Department of Conservation, as our national champion for protected species, will need to play a strong leadership role. The Maui’s dolphin threat management plan needs to be speedily updated. A well-resourced team should be set up within the department without delay, tasked with preparing the new plan, and spearheading a multi-agency effort to implement it. The scientific community needs to be brought on board to work closely with the department.

As well as extending the area covered by the set-net ban, the Ministry for Primary Industries will need to ensure full observer coverage on fishing vessels operating within the west coast North Island marine mammal sanctuary area. This is to ensure that the rules are adhered to. On smaller boats, where there is little room for an additional person, video cameras can be deployed. Fishing industry bodies could provide useful assistance in liaising with their members over observer arrangements but there will need to be an attitude change first to reassure the public that they will act responsibly.

The Auckland Council, Northland Regional Council and Waikato Regional Council will all need to make changes to their regional coastal plans to ensure that activities such as mining and coastal development do not adversely impact on the dolphins. Under the New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement, councils are legally required to change their plans to avoid adverse effects on threatened species. Such plan changes are urgent, because there is growing interest in mining ironsand along this coastline. This activity could impact on the dolphins and resource consent applications are expected soon.

Maui’s are New Zealand’s own special little dolphins. It would be a national tragedy if we lost them. Now is the time to all pull together to bring them back from the brink.

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