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EDITORIAL

WHY ARE SLAVES CATCHING OUR FISH?

Who said it was our fish when it's caught by foreign charter fishing vessels, by crews who are nothing short of slaves, living in worse conditions than you find in our prisons.

And don't forget, the catch disappears offshore to be processed in foreign lands by foreigners, refrozen and packed. When it finally lands in supermarkets it is labelled as "Produce of New Zealand". Bollocks! What a load of old crock we are being dished up and the fish is probably not much better.

Now who is duping whom? Is there any integrity left among the leaders of our fishing industry? Are those who control this deepwater catch just as guilty as the rest of our international fish thieves?

At the risk of tarring the whole deepwater fishing industry with the same brush, I suggest those who are without blame best stand up and be counted. So far I can only see one snowy head from Motueka defending the rights of our fishermen.

Professional Skipper has raised concerns in the past as we have witnessed our once proud New Zealand deepwater fishing fleet becoming a shadow of its former self.

This industry was all about New Zealandisation, giving work to Kiwis fishing our exclusive economic zone, catching our fish and landing it on our shores to be processed in our factories, manned by our people, producing money for our communities.

Our nation was built on these dreams. We had it, we were there, with a fleet of modern, efficient deepwater fishing vessels we could be proud of.

Sadly, these dreams were shortlived once the bean counters began ripping the very guts out of the industry. Their actions alone have resulted in nightmares for many innocent seafarers who are now no more than fish slaves. They are working for unscrupulous fishing companies who are only out for the dollar, who have no concern for the welfare of fishermen working in substandard, dangerous ships, and who apply poor fishing practices that have no consideration for the sustainability of our fishery.

What is really bad about it all is the government has either allowed itself to be conned by these money-grubbing rogues or is part of the skulduggery. How can I say this? Because government papers received under the Official Information Act reveal a high level of awareness among officials and politicians of the horrible conditions on board many of these foreign fishing ships and their poor safety standards.

These ships are hired by companies domiciled in New Zealand and fish for New Zealand quota with no observer coverage and uncontrolled waste.

How can this be? Because they can, and our government will not do anything about it because these companies can make more money by ripping the system off, chartering substandard ships and paying a tenth of the wages a New Zealand equivalent should be paid.

It is the current policies of government that

allows these substandard ships to operate and no-one cares. Not even when we have ships sinking like the *Oyang 70* and *No1 Insung* in our southern waters, along with a huge loss of life do these folk care.

If it were New Zealanders dying, you can bet you would hear the squeals from parliament the length and breadth of New Zealand. Sadly, for a few foreigners life is cheap. On the SOS call for help, the Talley's Nelson-based *Amatal Atlantis* stopped fishing to respond immediately to a cry for help and in doing so, saved lives. It was the *Atlantis* that sent out the mayday relay and ended up co-ordinating the search and rescue on the grounds.

Meanwhile, some of the foreign boats reluctantly stopped fishing to offer support in the search for lost fishermen. Others, some fishing for local companies, adopted the view, "more fish for us". Yes, there were boats two or three miles closer to the stricken ship than *Atlantis* and yet it was *Atlantis* who was first on the scene to rescue survivors.

This rort is huge and we are letting it happen. Yet we could stop it overnight. How? Simple - it is New Zealand fish quota and all the government has to do is ban the use of sub-standard foreign charter fishing vessels to catch our fish.

If New Zealand wishes to use foreign vessels they must meet New Zealand safety standards and be manned by New Zealand seafarers who are paid the appropriate wages, with all the fish being landed in New Zealand ports for processing. It's not hard when you think about it.

You know, the really sad bit is that Maori, who own 40 percent of the quota, have the power to stop this now. They can adopt a responsible approach at iwi level by saying who will catch their fish. But no ...

While we have New Zealand ships owned and manned by Kiwis, some of Maori descent, they cannot get to lease this quota because it all goes to the foreign boats who can fish for less cost, meaning more profit for Maori.

By this action alone, Maori are condoning one of the biggest fishing scandals at sea, and turn a convenient blind eye after determining any loss of catch on a sinking ship will not affect their cash payments.

Mark my words, this issue will not go away until our fishing industry has the balls to say "enough is enough", and does something about it. Think about it, are you a part of this fishing slave scandal? Can you sleep at night? Or how will a public backlash and boycott affect your business... Interesting!

Finally, we farewell our lovely columnist Carol Forsyth, who is taking a breather. We thank Carol for sharing a snapshot of her people with us and wish her well for the future.

Keith Ingram, Editor