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EDITORIAL

OWN UP! WHO'S KILLING THE MAUI DOLPHINS?

Are we playing into the environmentalists' hands? Are we being irresponsible in the use of set nets? These are fair questions that need to be addressed.

I am becoming increasingly concerned with reports in the media of recreational and commercial fishers setting nets in the evening and leaving them to soak overnight. Sometimes their recovery is delayed and they may be left unattended for days when caught by bad weather. This causes waste, and I defy any fisher to say they never find dead or lice-infested fish in their net when setting them at night.

The environmentalists are currently on the warpath, and they don't look like they are about to go away. Set net fishers are being accused of catching and killing our Maui dolphins, one of the rarest dolphins in the world. They are now calling on the government to ban the use of set nets nation-wide in an effort not only to protect the Maui dolphin and its close relative, the Hector's dolphin, but also the common dolphin.

Unfortunately, these eco-ites are not being very liberal with the truth. In fact they are being quite deceitful when they are attributing the recent deaths of four Maui dolphins to set nets, when the truth is that two of them died of some horrible known marine virus or disease before they could be treated at a marine mammal hospital. The third was a stillborn baby, and the last was too decomposed to offer up any post-mortem information.

However, we do know that there were no identifiable net marks on the corpse, so contrary to what the environmentalists say, none of these recent sad deaths is attributable to set nets. That's not to say that dolphins have not been caught in nets, nor will it not happen again. So yes, we need to be proactive and minimise the risk to these rare and endangered creatures.

Unfortunately, the environmental groups have so far resisted our invitations to discuss the threat that set nets pose to marine mammals with recreational fishers. They have failed to acknowledge that numerous species, including mullet, flounder, butterfish (green bone) and blue moki, can only be taken effectively by using set nets.

These folk want widespread marine protected areas and are using the threat of set nets to drive up the eco-hype for environmentally driven marine mammal protected areas, all of which have the ability to remove or restrict our access and ability to catch fish for food.

No-one I know likes to or wants to catch

a marine mammal in their set nets, and I have suggested to the Department of Conservation and the environmental groups that instead of seeking a blanket ban on the use of set nets, let's consider other solutions, including the compulsory attendance of set nets by all fishers when used in any location where the at-risk dolphins are found.

Because dolphins breathe air at about the same rate as humans, they are visual, and you can see them coming. But you can't see them in the dark, so my second suggestion is to ban the night setting of all set nets. The practice of night setting has grown since the advent of monofilament net webbing, which has led to problems of associated high set net mortality, as the fish caught in the early tides die and then attract lice overnight, all contributing to wasteful fishing practices.

There is the added risk of attracting other large fish, including sharks or maybe dolphins, but the jury remains out on this one, and lost nets encourage ghost fishing, which all strengthens any arguments for set net bans.

By introducing such commonsense practices, if dolphins appear in the area where the net is set, the fisherman or woman may recover their net quickly and thus remove the threat. We have to share our coastal resources. Set net fishers must adopt a responsible attitude when using set nets or we will lose them. Your choice!

In this issue, seafarer safety features quite strongly as the effects of the sailor's bewitching season takes effect. Why is it that we see professional seafarers coming to grief when they are carrying out normal seagoing duties? And then we have the risk-taking spearfishers who are now pushing the limits to spear that super-large bluefin tuna, often referred to as "stopping the freight train!"

These guys are not dumb, it's just that they are now starting to let their enthusiasm potentially affect the safety of others. Maritime New Zealand is asking for skippers of the vessels carrying these underwater fishermen to ensure commonsense prevails and not to launch their swimmers around the stern of factory ships while the net is still in the water. Not only is it stupid to risk life and vessel, you can bet your last dollar who will cop the blame if there is an accident.

I believe a deep breath is in order before someone dies.

Keith Ingram, Editor