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ECONOMIC DOWNTURN PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES

First we must acknowledge all the positive calls and emails we received from readers and advertisers congratulating us on our finalist position in the Qantas Media Awards and for continuing to maintain the very high standard we set for ourselves.

It would be fair to say our editorial on Our Dying Fleet has touched a few raw nerves and created the debate we hoped it would. In saying this, I hope the fishing industry, and in particular the quota owners, respond positively. This would enable younger skippers and deckhands to have the cash reserves that are essential for upgrading or maintaining our inshore fishing fleet, as now would be an opportune time, given the current changes in disposable income affecting the recreational market.

Magazine editorial staff are frequently in touch with the current developments that their particular magazine is supporting. Our situation is no different, and one thing we can measure is trends. As we look back over the past five years we have observed an exponential steady growth in the recreational and pleasure craft market. This growth included vessels from runabouts to large, luxury craft worth \$1 million or more and everything in between, from chandlery to water accessories and fishing tackle.

Obviously the pleasure market has enjoyed buoyant times until January of this year, when the bubble burst. So quick has the drop been that in seven months this market is now where it was three years ago, and industry commentators suggest we will be back to square one, where we were five years ago, by Christmas.

Meanwhile, the commercial workboat and fishing industry did not enjoy this market flush and soldiered on with small ups and downs. I would suggest from talking to fishermen that the truth would be more downs than ups, but somehow they have remained in business. The cost has been clearly demonstrated in recent accident reports like the *Kotuku* and the state of our decaying fleet, but it cannot continue.

In moving around the yards, we note that many boatbuilders, repair yards and suppliers who have been hit by the rapid economic downturn are now looking with renewed pricing structures at the commercial industry for work to carry them through these harder times.

This is a plus for owner and vessel operators, as the commercial fishing and workboat industry only has a limited number of dollars to spend on maintenance and every dollar must count.

The wallets of the Queen Street boaties have suddenly become empty and likewise, the boatbuilding and servicing industries are

revisiting their cost-plus pricing structures and now offer services or goods at stock-moving discounted prices.

While we are on the subject of the economy, we note that the Department of Conservation has shed over 60 field staff positions. These are the people who do the important work of looking after our endangered birds and critters, while DoC's policy section retains their cosy positions. There is something at odds here. Surely field staff are more valuable than our pen-pushing dreamers who create policy.

We note that the director-general, Al Morrison, has just announced that DoC has put out to tender a "brand refurbishment programme" to help the public understand what it does. This project is likely to cost many hundreds of thousands of dollars so advertising agencies can develop the new brand, leaving DoC to then spend millions more to change all the signs in the department and around our countryside. One has to ask, how is this ill-thought out proposal going to protect that which is special and unique to New Zealand?

DoC needs to change its behaviour, not its logo.

Surely the public has a very clear understanding of what DoC does and its responsibilities. A restructure is necessary but not among the dedicated field staff. It should happen at senior level, and the government should be the first to react and remove DoC's ability to build its empire by removing the department's role of nominating and adjudicating any new marine reserve, marine protected area or national park. DoC should only be responsible for administering those national parks and marine protected areas that are in place to protect our endangered species which are special and unique to New Zealand.

The current situation could be likened to where the possum is in charge of the forest.

It is arrogant for the officials to assume that the public does not understand what the department does or what it stands for. This proposal smacks of those in charge trying to hide past mistakes and bad favour through poorly or ill-conceived management decisions by trying to give the department a new look is nothing short of incompetence.

Let the field staff do the job they are entrusted to and the government must control DoC's policy management zealots who keep coming up with costly dumb ideas.

Keith Ingram, Editor