

Changing fortunes in the Hauraki Gulf

Five years ago the Hauraki Gulf Forum's *State of our Gulf* report found most environmental indicators showed negative trends. Today processes, such as Sea Change, Treaty settlements and carefully moderated conversations about whales, seabirds and fisheries management, are unlocking positive changes.

Tim Higham, Hauraki Gulf Forum Executive Officer, takes us on a virtual boat trip around the gulf to see some of the changes.

A Bryde's whales slowdown

Large vessels are now going slower through the Hauraki Gulf, which means they are less likely to hit and kill a resident Bryde's whale. The average speed is 10.8 knots compared to 14.2 knots in 2011. Previously Bryde's whales were washing up at an average of two per year killed by ship strike. To tackle the problem a collaborative group was formed, which led to the development of a 2013 Ports of Auckland transit protocol covering boat speeds. Today all four shipping industry associations are committed to an internationally accepted 10 knot target speed whenever possible. Monitoring information is being shared quarterly for accountability.

B Iwi involvement

In the past few years important conservation islands have been transferred to iwi ownership then generously gifted back to the Crown. On Hauturu/Little Barrier, the New Zealand storm petrel – presumed extinct for 100 years – has been discovered breeding in its forested valleys: its future enshrined in co-management arrangements with Ngāti Manuhiri, through its 2012 Treaty of Waitangi settlement. A Conservation Management Plan for Rangitoto, Motutapu, Te Motu-a-Ihenga (Motuihe) and Motukorea (Browns Island) is being developed by the Department of Conservation in partnership with the 13 iwi that are part of the 2014 Tāmaki Makaurau collective Treaty settlement.

C Black petrel boost

About 2,700 pairs of black petrels/taikō breed only on Great and Little Barrier Islands. In 2011 they were identified as the New Zealand seabird most at risk from commercial fishing, with an accidental capture rate 14 times higher than the population could sustain. Today the 55 long-line fishing boats operating in the Gulf have embraced 'seabird smart fishing practices', attend training courses, have on-board seabird management plans and use mitigation techniques. A working group of agencies, fishing companies and environmental NGOs – including Forest & Bird – monitors progress, coordinated by Southern Seabird Solutions Trust.

D Firth on alert

Monitoring in the central Firth of Thames water column shows dissolved inorganic nitrogen has increased at five percent per year over the past decade. A recent NIWA report, commissioned by Dairy NZ and Waikato Regional Council, suggests riverine inputs of nitrogen have stabilised from the intensively dairy-farmed Hauraki Plains. However if the Gulf's denitrification capacity has been compromised (decomposing algal matter suppresses bacterial action on the seafloor) careful attention will be required. The Forum has called for close monitoring and further research. The Regional Council has deployed additional monitoring buoys.

E Fast track restoration

Rotoroa Island has been transformed from an abandoned Salvation Army alcohol rehabilitation centre into a new education and conservation destination backed by the Next Foundation. In 2012 a partnership between the Rotoroa Island Trust and Auckland Zoo was established to populate the island with endangered species that require active human intervention. Brown teal/pāteke is the latest species to join saddleback/tieke, whitehead/pōpokotea, kiwi, shore skinks and takahē on the island. More than a dozen more species are planned for release by 2018, providing hands-on conservation training and learning visits for schools. It's another stepping stone in a network of Gulf island restoration success stories.

F Mussel power

In the first half of last century extensive green-lipped mussel beds were dredged to collapse around the Hauraki Gulf. Today new mussel reefs are emerging on barren seafloor. About 3.5 million 'reject' mussels grown for supermarket sale have been repurposed by the Revive our Gulf project. A pioneering underwater restoration movement is emerging.

G Fisheries management

Hauraki Gulf snapper stocks are fished to about 20 percent of original biomass, half the target level considered optimal. There were 12,450 trawl shots in the marine park area between 2011 and 2014, accounting for 30-40 percent of snapper landings. Sanford CEO Volker Kuntzsch said last year the company was prepared to end commercial fishing in the Hauraki Gulf if recreational fishers play their part and report catch. As many as 1,859 pleasure boats have been observed fishing the gulf on a single day and recreational fishers take about half the snapper caught in the inner gulf. A Snapper 1 Strategy Group is considering options to improve snapper stocks. In January a recreational fishing park in the Hauraki Gulf was proposed as part of the Government's reform of Marine Protected Areas legislation.

H Port process

Tired of flotillas and "Make Love not Wharf" placards protesting consented wharf extensions, Auckland Council has invited parties to make recommendations for the future of the city's port facilities. An independently chaired, stakeholder and Māori Consensus Working Group has commissioned research on the social, economic, cultural and environment dimensions of potential options. Its report to the Council is due later this year.

I Sea Change

The Sea Change/Tai Timu Tai Pari project is using a co-governance and collaborative stakeholder process to produce a Hauraki Gulf marine spatial plan, a first for New Zealand. It aims to safeguard the abundance, productivity and mauri of the Gulf/Tikapa Moana/Te Moananui a Toi. A stakeholder working group – including Forest & Bird – expects to complete the plan later this year.

**The Hauraki Gulf Forum is charged with the promotion and facilitation of integrated management under the Hauraki Gulf Marine Park Act and has been the catalyst for many new initiatives. It is looking at ways it can further lead and influence change in the Hauraki Gulf during 2016 and beyond.*

