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Find trawling troubling? Take heart from the data

OPINION: Doug Paulin, CEO of the country's largest deepsea seafood company Sealord, says the science is assuring when looking beneath the surface of bottom trawling.

Bottom trawling – it's a phrase that evokes strong emotions. It's also an important way that fisheries are harvested, not just in New Zealand, but around the world.

As Sealord approaches its busiest time of the year, the hoki fishing season, the issue is back in the frame.

Hoki is a tasty, versatile fish from a well-managed and sustainable fishery. They are also a deep-water fish so we fish for them where they are, on the bottom of our oceans. We do this using the most common fishing method in New Zealand – bottom trawling.

I acknowledge any reactions you might have to that. I'm not surprised if you have any discomfort – the campaigning against this type of fishing is well-funded, extensive and is often designed to make you feel bad.

But let's look at some of the scientific evidence showing that we are achieving the critical balance of food production to biodiversity conservation in our commercial fisheries. In particular, let's look at research findings published earlier this year, as way of example, by the National Academy of Science.

The internationally respected US-based academy published the results of a study estimating the effect of trawling in 24 marine areas around the world, including New Zealand. The study¹ is led by Dr Roland Pitcher, a senior scientist with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) in Australia, and can be found online by searching for 'PNAS trawling impact'.

Factors including the frequency of trawls, the fishing equipment used and the rate at which the fish stocks replenish in each area were analysed. A huge amount of data and information was used to calculate the effects of trawling on the benthic status (health of the seabed ecosystem) for each area. The benthic status of a trawled area was then compared to an untrawled area to conclude the Relative Benthic Status (RBS) ratio for each area.

New Zealand came out in the top third of results for least-affected areas. We achieved an average RBS for our trawled areas of greater than 0.9. This is compared to an untrawled state of 1.0, meaning that our trawled areas were calculated as being greater than 90% unaffected.

This puts us in the high achiever bracket for sustainable bottom trawling. In the words of the 13 scientists behind the study, "good fishery management contributes to better ecosystem outcomes."

We're not surprised. Commercial fishing is one of the most tightly regulated and studied food production industries in New Zealand. Bottom trawling is also nowhere near as extensive as you might have been led to believe – it is common, but not carried out all over the ocean.

¹

Although New Zealand's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is one of the largest in the world, covering about fifteen times the area of New Zealand's landmass, we trawl just 2-3% of the seabed each year, returning to the same fishing grounds. Only 8% of the EEZ has ever been trawled.

It is remarkable that most of our domestic fish supply is caught by trawling in such a small area, compared to the proportion of land in New Zealand that is used for food production.

We have a lot of fish in this part of the world, and we manage this resource carefully. Backed by technology and science, New Zealand produces 700 million seafood servings from this small part of our EEZ each year.

Going back to the topic of hoki, our fishers are preparing for the hoki season right now and if you asked them about these research findings they wouldn't be surprised.

They know their craft. They will catch their designated quota using the latest technology, adjusting their trawl depth, boat speed and other factors to be as precise as possible with their catch. They will leave and the fish stocks will replenish. New Zealand is blessed with an abundance of species that most other countries do not have and that is why we can bottom trawl, sustainably.

New Zealand's marine conservation measures have been designed to ensure food production is balanced with environmental protection. We take an ecosystem approach to fisheries, which makes it possible to manage bottom trawling and conservation of our native flora and fauna on the seabed in our EEZ, just as we manage conservation and food production on land. The science shows us this, so let's make sure we keep science at the heart of the discussion and corresponding decisions.