

NZSFC Fish File Series: No. 4

Marlin - a recreational only fishery in New Zealand



Since the first sport fishing captures in 1914 to the present day over 22,000 striped marlin have been certified and weighed in New Zealand. The New Zealand Big Game Fishing Council, now NZ Sport Fishing Council, and its 59 clubs provide substantial support for the ongoing research and input into management of billfish and other migratory species like tuna and sharks.

Having healthy and abundant game fisheries generates much-needed business for coastal communities and surrounding districts. It also contributes to our reputation as a world class fishing destination.

Nearly 100 years of recreational marlin fishing

The first striped marlin caught on sport fishing tackle was caught in the Bay of Islands in 1914. New Zealand striped marlin are the largest in the world, with 20 of the 22 current world line class records held by striped marlin caught here.

Early development of the marlin fishery was based on wealthy, touring anglers utilising charter boats firstly in Northland and later in the Bay of Plenty. The domination of charter vessels was challenged during and after the 1970s as increasing numbers of private launches were outfitted for deep sea fishing.

Over time, the availability of increasingly capable small trailer boats has revolutionised the sport in this country. Many people are now well equipped to target striped marlin around the northern half of the North Island.



The detailed catch records kept by sport fishing clubs, some going back to the 1920s, have been extremely useful for both monitoring changes in the size and availability of marlin in New Zealand, and driving management change.

The national marlin catches compiled by the New Zealand Sport Fishing Council form the most complete national marine recreational catch records for any species in New Zealand, possibly the world.

A history of commercial catches

In 1952 Japanese tuna longline vessels entered the South Pacific for the first time. Prior to that, the only significant striped marlin catch in the South Pacific was the northern New Zealand sports catch. By 1956 the Japanese vessels were beginning to fish close to NZ shores. Soon after, other nations including Taiwan and Korea expanded their efforts into the South Pacific.

By 1980 foreign tuna longline vessels were required to obtain a licence to fish in NZ waters, and had to provide catch and effort records. In 1989 the first domestic tuna longline vessels began operating, and the fleet expanded very rapidly.

Recreational marlin catches increased throughout the 1970s and peaked in 1981, after which they steadily declined to a low point in 1987, when only 226 striped marlin were landed in the entire sports fishery. Angling clubs placed the blame squarely on the commercial fleet and began lobbying for the foreign vessels to be prohibited from fishing northern waters.

The Billfish Moratorium

1987 was election year. The Bay of Islands Swordfish Club, led by John Chibnall, Garth Marsland and Russell hotelier Karl Anderson, threatened legal action against the government if billfish were not protected from commercial exploitation. Financial backing from business leader Ray Smith ensured the threat was taken seriously. Local Member of Parliament and the then Minister of Fisheries, Colin Moyle, also supported the campaign.



In October 1987 Moyle announced a 3-year moratorium on commercial marlin catches in the Auckland Fisheries Management Area (AFMA). This applied between Tirua Point on the west coast to Cape Runaway on the east coast, and from 1 October to 31 May each year. This moratorium was conditioned, recreational anglers had to agree to tag and release 50% of the marlin catch for research purposes. The Council imposed a minimum weight of 90kg in anticipation that half the fish caught would not qualify for club or Council points unless they were tagged and released. In 1990 the moratorium was renewed for a further three years.

The Billfish MOU

From 1990 until 1996 a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between commercial fishers and recreational fishing representatives from the NZ Sport and Recreational Fishing Councils and the Marine Transport Association provided a framework for annual discussions on billfish management measures.

In 1991 the regulations were altered in two ways. Firstly, the ban on taking billfish in the AFMA was extended to the whole EEZ, around the entire coast and out to 200 nautical miles. Concurrently, the ban on taking broadbill swordfish was lifted, to assist the development of the local tuna fishery. Broadbill were allowed as a bycatch on the basis that most of them came to the boat dead. In contrast, observer data showed that around 80% of striped marlin were alive when brought alongside.

By 1997 there were many new tuna longliners entering the fishery who were unaware of the Billfish MOU. It was not signed that year. Some commercial fishers were abusing the broadbill bycatch-only provisions and demanding the right to land some striped marlin, this caused serious disagreement between the MOU parties.

Since the MOU lapsed contact between recreational and commercial representatives has mainly been through Ministry working group and Fish Plan meetings. NZSFC makes representations through the Highly Migratory Species Working Group and funds professional submissions on other matters as they arise.

Tag and release takes hold

Although a tag and release programme was initiated in 1975 only 1% of striped marlin were tagged prior to 1988. Catches rose rapidly after the Billfish Moratorium's implementation in October 1987, to the consternation of government scientists who had written off its introduction as a political decision that would have no effect on recreational catches. Tagging rates also increased.

Marlin anglers, encouraged by the Council, quickly rose to the challenge of tagging the 50% requested by Moyle. In 1988, 25% of the catch was tagged – a massive change in attitude by fishing club members. In 1989 the percentage rose to 42%, and since 1994 it has exceeded 50% in every season. The detailed catch records kept by NZSFC clubs are vital for calculating tagging percentages.

Tag and release has become an integral part of marlin fishing in New Zealand. Many anglers now tag and release their catch regardless of its size. The NZSFC acknowledges that Kiwis have a strong tradition of fishing for food as well as sport. The decision to land or release a marlin remains with the angler.

Support for research

Individual weights measured on certified scales are available for over 22,000 striped marlin spanning 80 years of the sport fishery. Catch and effort surveys have been conducted since 1977 and the average catch per day is a good indicator of striped marlin abundance in NZ. The project was started by MAF but NZSFC provided the resources to continue the annual survey between 1997 and 2002. Now, MFish fund the collection and analysis of catch and effort data from billfish logbooks used by charter and private fishers around the country. Contact secretary@nzsportfishing.org.nz if you want to assist by keeping a logbook.

Between 2003 and 2008 the NZSFC and affiliated club members helped the NZ Marine Research Foundation raise the funds to attach satellite tags and track the progress of 32 striped marlin caught by recreational fishers. Over 90% of the marlin survived capture and release well, even with the additional handling required. Most left NZ waters within a week, but a few circled back. Three peer reviewed scientific papers have been published using the data collected. The most recent is on an open source journal available at <http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0021087>.