

Individual transferable quotas

## In search of fish and chips

The Viaduct Basin, home to most of Auckland's fishing fleet, has changed irrevocably

I couldn't buy fish and chips in Ponsonby; at least, not the old way from a fishmonger's, with the waterfront window's fascinating display of diverse kinds of fresh fish—big, small, whole, filleted, even heads—and the occasional strange squid.

I'd gone back to Ponsonby for an anniversary and to search for the remnants of my childhood. What was once a working-class suburban shopping centre is now a trendy upmarket centre of restaurants and boutiques. Then, in my childhood, the special treat after doing the Saturday night paper round was eating fish and chips—hot, salty, succulent, wrapped in newspaper and extracted with burning fingers through a tear at the end of the packet. Standing at the corner newspaper stand outside the pub was an excuse to watch with avid fascination what I then thought was perdition, as workers and drunks shambled out after the 6 o'clock swill. It was, I now realize, virtually my first contact with the fishing industry. More significantly, prime, fresh, locally caught species were readily available at affordable prices and made up the staple diet for many in the local population.

Later, in the early 1980s, just a year or so before the individual transferable quota (ITQ) system was introduced, I had a six-month research project based on the Viaduct Basin, home to most of Auckland's fishing fleet. The Viaduct is squeezed between the industrial waterfront of cement silos, shipbuilding or repair slipways, the tank farm and oil tanker berths and Auckland's central business district. It was closed off by the road and wharves and split by the lifting bridge, which allowed boats in or out and gave the area its name. Larger boats, trawlers, barges or others awaiting repair,

refurbishing or demolition, berthed on the outside, while the wharf broke the northerly swell and sheltered an incredible diversity of smaller boats on the inside. Then, the Harbour Board workshops, the fruit and vegetable markets, big and small fishing companies, the gear suppliers and other support industries surrounded the Viaduct. Despite rubbing shoulders with the Harbour Board repair facilities and their workboats, the timbers of the old fishermen's wharves were rotting and, in places, barricaded off.

Then it was home to big-company, smaller-company fleets and owner-operator boats. The big-company boats, Sanford and Jaybel Nichimo's, were mainly medium-sized, steel trawlers (40 - 60 footers). Many of the smaller-company boats were older, more traditional wooden fishing boats; a few had even steamed from the United Kingdom to form fleets of three to five. But owner-operator boats were numerically dominant, and, by far, the most diverse, including Danish seiners, longliners and a few setnetters. Between 150 and 200 boats used the Viaduct and formed a thriving multicultural industry; with a leavening of Maori, a good representation of Dalmatian—certainly the backbone of the industry—some Dutch, the hoi polloi of Kiwi and, no doubt, other ethnic groups too.

### Chaotic scene

I was living on Waiheke Island, just 35 fast ferry minutes from downtown Auckland, but even arriving at dawn on the workers' boat, the Viaduct was chaotic. Dozens of boats, scores of people, crews unloading, stacked crates of fish, buyers haggling with skippers and themselves over boxes of snapper, trevalli, gurnard, leatherjackets, kingfish, flounder, dogfish,

sorted for export or local shops, scaled, cleaned and gutted to later grace the window displays.

**F**ishermen were beginning to learn of exports for the lucrative Japanese *iki jimi* snapper market. Starter motor-driven reel line haulers were replacing hand pulling and the ubiquitous bicycle inner tube 'Frenchies', and new methods for catching and handling fish were being developed with a fervour of innovation. It was all bustle. Cars, trucks and utes (utility trucks) were coming and going but, as morning wore on, the chaos eased. Satisfied or disappointed with the returns, the fishermen's excitement dwindled but the chores remained as boat or dock crews cleaned, loaded ice or prepared for the next trip. Afternoons were often more subdued, with gear, electronic, boat repair or maintenance experts focused on their tasks.

Then skippers and crews fuelled, loaded up on ice, and even before the gear was stowed, dropped warps and slipped out for their next trip, under the raised bridge, into the harbour and out into the reaches of the Hauraki Gulf, or the secretive recesses and estuaries behind the islands of the inner gulf. Seagulls and gawkers rubbernecked throughout, past the curious, bystanders and passers-by, office workers on lunch break, and tourists gaping at another world. In general, the Viaduct was a masculine domain and

other than bystanders and passers-by, there were few women around. One of the small trawlers or Danish seiners supposedly did have a woman skipper, and some skippers' wives were part of the regular crew on a couple of the longliners or setnetters, while other wives occasionally did form part of the crew. It was only later that I discovered hidden participation, where wives "kept the books" and provided shore liaison and other necessary support with buyers.

Fresh fish for the local shops and the fish and chips I'd so enjoyed seemed to be mainly supplied by this motley fleet of owner-operator boats. The longliners targeting snapper were the most numerous. They were a collection of older, converted launches for mullets, including a couple of converted yachts that showcased a history of pleasurable design, ranging from the long counters and plumb stems of the pre- and early 1900s to the contemporary flybridge cruisers.

#### **Popular boats**

Some of the earlier boats had been extensively rebuilt. Others had been well maintained through a long working life. Such boats had been popular, not just for their cheap price in the 1970s, when there was a large influx into the fishery, but also for their economy in handling. While many were converted pleasure craft, others, especially the 'mulleties' and

snapper boats had been purpose-built for fishing under sails. The former were used for setnets up the estuaries for mullet, while the latter were fuller bodied craft targeting snapper; both were well equipped to race the catch back to the market.

**I**nitially surprised that most fishermen were not anxious to move to modern, purpose-designed vessels, I was assured time and again that the old boats were better. They'd been designed traditionally for comfort and function in the Gulf, and their narrow, gutted, low freeboard hulls were easily driven and, therefore, thrifty on fuel. Also, the long and low forward but higher aft meant they sat easily head to wind, as the fishermen worked in the cockpit, setting or hauling lines over the transom and well sheltered from the elements.

Only remnants of this fleet remain. Many, like the skippers who ran them, are near retirement anyway. Others have been converted back to pleasure craft; still others lie in various stages of disrepair in the coves and bay around the Gulf. Two are on the beach under the trees just a few hundred yards along the foreshore. One is a bare, deckless hull, which lost its topsides when it sank at the mooring during one of the summer storms. Now on the shoreline, it exposes to the elements and to the gaze of anyone

interested, the workmanship of carvel planking on steam-bent ribs. The other is being rebuilt in a more houseboat style by the liveaboards. More relevantly, the old fishing culture of the Viaduct has gone and, with it, most of the people who supported and were supported by it.

At that time, about 30 boats, roughly one-third of the longline fleet, were based on Waiheke Island. They supported families and crew and many other economic enterprises on the island. But under ITQs, by 1996, the 'Quota Bible' listed only four quota owners living on the island. Now those fishermen have moved into charter fishing, running trips for recreational fishers and tourists.

When ITQs were first introduced, some of the Viaduct fishermen, especially part-timers, were ineligible for quotas, while others got less than required for a viable enterprise. Some sold out early, losing their chosen occupation but getting sufficient money to set up alternative businesses.

#### **Economic operations**

The shrewd ones took buy-backs on larger, older vessels, and then set up leaner, more economic operations for non-quota species. Others tried to continue. Inevitably, with fish stocks varying from season to season, fishermen face fluctuating fortunes. Some, of course, have done well. Others, with quota as

their only available tradable asset, have had to sell out, usually to companies, and lease back to raise funds for unexpected repairs or to tide over a bad season.

**I**n addition, under the quota system, the Ministry of Fisheries instituted a system of cost recovery to retrieve the costs expended as a result of the commercial fishery. The Department of Conservation has added levies to compensate for costs and damage to the environment. Though they once dominated the industry, the attrition rate of owner-operators has been high and their numbers have declined drastically.

Much of the quota was bought up by the big companies. By 1995, the top 30, representing just five or six consortia, owned 91 per cent of the total quota. Eighty per cent of the quota is for deep-water species, but these companies also owned 72 per cent of the quota for inshore species. In addition to these vertically integrated corporates, there are, of course, many other companies bigger than the traditional family firms of owner-operators.

Many fishermen lease quota from them, with the cost of the lease, and uncertainty of quota availability, adding to their economic woes. The companies say they ease the paperwork, which was indeed an added chore for more practical minded fishermen. Certainly, by 1999, independent fishermen were a disappearing breed, “angry, disillusioned, disheartened and frustrated, to say the least” (*Seafood New Zealand*, July 1999, p39).

It is ironic because these men had been the biggest voice calling on the government to save the fish stocks. Yet, with the ITQ system, they, more than any other sector of the industry, lost their chosen means of livelihood.

More positively, the local remnants of Waiheke quota owners, who are no longer ‘commercial fishermen’, but still in the chartering game, say the ITQ system has improved the amount of fish around the island. The companies that have the quota are using converted trawlers to longline in deeper waters, leaving more fish in the favourite fishing spots inshore.

With the fisheries privatized, the Viaduct became upmarket. No longer ‘The Viaduct’, it has been commandeered by international corporate advertising and is now ‘The American Express Viaduct Harbour’, taken over for billionaire superyachts, and the America’s Cup yacht syndicates. The big fishing companies are still in the vicinity but now the area has been redeveloped with ‘public spaces’, streetscaping, plazas and cafes, and specialized retail and luxury apartments. Only a few small fishing boats and the larger trawlers remain.


There are still fish shops in Auckland that sell fresh fish and even fish and chips; but not as many as there used to be. There is also a retail market and restaurant near the Viaduct redevelopment area. French fries and fish are readily available from the fast food outlets and takeaway bars, occasionally even wrapped in newsprint, but more generally in cartons. Instead of snapper, trevalli and terakihi, now its usually deepwater mass-caught hoki, a whiptail related to hake, from off the West coast of the South Island or, for a while some years ago, according to rumour, from Chile. The prime species we used to enjoy can still be found but at luxury prices. There are certainly more seafood commodities and aquacultured greenlipped mussel in the supermarkets, but nothing like the locally caught fresh fish we used to enjoy. Despite living on Waiheke Island in the middle of what was once the nation’s biggest coastal fishery, it is a year or so since my family has bought fresh, locally caught fish. Since the fish shop closed, the little that is available is far too expensive.

#### **Good old days**

But that’s nostalgia. So much for the good old days! New Zealand is a country of progress, privatized and liberalized. We have ITQs! The Fishing Industry has reinvented itself as the Seafood Industry. Certainly, there are more factory jobs for workers, but not self-sufficient businesses and freedom of occupation for independent fishermen. The seafood industry is a thriving one that exports to predominantly luxury markets. The biggest companies have stakes and joint ventures in overseas companies, and operate with a global strategy. Supposedly, most New Zealand quota is



still controlled by New Zealanders or companies that are still predominantly owned in New Zealand. But there have been suggestions that foreign interests have set up front companies with New Zealanders being only nominal owners of the quota (Peter Talley, *Fishing News International*, Vol.38, No.3, March 1999).

Other vital sectors of the country's infrastructure—banking, railways, electricity and telecommunications—have been largely sold off to overseas interests. We have lost our sovereignty. Even our biggest fishing company is part owned by a Japanese corporation and there is pressure for quota to go the same way. The fact that communities, small fishers and local people have missed out is a cost that is not considered by the ITQ system. 

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