



THE UPDATE

Captain's Blog



Rakiura - adapting to change

Seafood New Zealand spent last week on Rakiura/Stewart Island.

Whilst still relying on a thriving blue cod, rock lobster and pāua industry, it is but a shadow of the fishing port it was decades ago.

This is not to say Stewart Island is in decline. Far from it. The Island is thriving; however, it is tourism that is currently fuelling the boom.

The COVID-19 lockdown had New Zealanders clamouring for overseas experiences, and both Rakiura and the Chatham Islands have hit paydirt.

Trying to find accommodation on either Rakiura or the Chathams is near impossible, as tourists pile in from all over the mainland.

We talked to some old timers, still involved in the seafood industry, about the lobster and crayfish booms of the eighties and the near collapse of the pāua fishery as a consequence. The Stewart Island pāua fishery is believed to be the only abalone fishery in the world that has pulled itself off the brink of disaster and it was all down to the fishermen who had the foresight to see what was to come.

This is a story that repeats itself in fisheries all over New Zealand but is not often publicly acknowledged. The men and women fishing the stocks know something is wrong a lot quicker than the system designed to protect those very stocks. This is the story of people who will put their livelihoods on hold to allow a fishery to recover.

The Stewart Island Pāua story is a triumph of determination over bureaucracy and will be told in the next Seafood magazine but it highlights, as pointed out in the Prime Minister's

Chief Science Advisor's report on the future of commercial fishing, how critical it is for the regulator to be more agile in adjusting to stock changes.

Fishing aside, the Island is more than deserving of a visit.

From the 10-seater flight into the grassy knoll that has the audacity to call itself an airstrip, to the van that meets the plane on the same grassy knoll, to the exceptional blue cod and chips at the Kai Cart and the hospitality of the South Sea Hotel, it is memorable.

It is also special. We didn't see kiwi wandering the beaches, but the locals swear they do. There are 20,000 brown kiwi on the island so one would assume you should be tripping over them. You can certainly hear them calling in the night. The kaka visit in the evening and in the morning, tapping on the window of your accommodation looking for attention, and forbidden food.

Fishing in New Zealand is still the lifeblood of many small communities, providing employment, opportunities, and regional growth – not least on Rakiura. However, it is a testament to the islanders that they have embraced the new injection of revenue in their gracious and welcoming way.

As Sue, who owns the Kai Cart told us, business is booming. For an island of 400 permanent residents, cooking 170 orders, feeding 250 servings of blue cod and chips on a good night is success by any definition.



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