

# Government's Sea Lion move leaves risk to the species

March 7 2014, by Elaine Leung

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A University of Otago zoology expert has welcomed the Government's launch of a threat management plan to try and ensure the threatened New Zealand Sea Lion's survival.

However, Dr Bruce Robertson, a Senior Lecturer in the University's Zoology Department, is concerned there are some mixed messages in yesterday's announcements.

"This move is welcome, especially given the ongoing decline of [sea lions](#) and as the Government notes, the causes are likely to be varied and include fishing impacts, both directly via death in trawl nets and more indirectly, through resource competition with the fishery," Dr Robertson says.

He says the announcement, which effectively brought a proposed threat management plan forward, was fortuitous.

"That's to be commended, as this matter is very serious and needs action now.

"However, one glaring omission is that the current operational plan for the Auckland Island squid fishery SQU6T is not going to be revised now. Presumably, and based on my correspondence with the Ministry of Primary Industries, this operational plan will continue until the results of the new, proposed "Threat Management Plan" for sea lions is available. That will be at least another two squid fishing seasons for pup numbers to decline further before there is any action.

"It is worth noting that Minister Smith has highlighted the concerns with the efficacy of the sea lion exclusion devices, and was quoted as saying the effectiveness of Seal Exclusion Devices (SLEDs) used by the fishing industry to reduce the sea lion bycatch would be revisited, yet on the other hand, Minister Guy makes it clear he believes SLEDs are functioning as planned."

He says the effectiveness of SLEDs was a major concern raised by the recent international expert panel review of sea lion management and the assumption of high SLED effectiveness played a pivotal role in MPI's decision to increase squid fishing by 140% in 2012.

"Clearly, if the current "effectiveness of SLEDs", as Minister Smith puts it, is incorrect and in need of review, which is what the international experts say, then we are not managing the current known threats to sea lions adequately. Waiting another year or two to change the current operational plan is, in inherently risky.

"I call on the Ministers to immediately revoke the current operational

plan for the Auckland Island squid fishery, and revert back to the comparatively more precautionary previous operational plan of 2011 while we await the new Threat Management plan.

"This would give the fishing industry access to the valuable squid fishery, while giving due acknowledgement to the existing threats and uncertainties in sea lion management."

Conservation Minister Nick Smith has revealed the latest New Zealand sea lion tally is so low the Government will step in to try to address the population decline.

This year, only 1575 sea lions were counted on the Auckland Islands, an 18 per cent drop on last year.

Provided by University of Otago

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