Speech: Shaun Lee, STET Limited

Tuesday 30 April 2025

Distinction Hotel in Te Rapa Hamilton

Hearing on Waikato Regional Councils proposed Coastal Plan.

Kia ora ko Shaun Lee toku ingoa

Last time I spoke to you, I highlighted that under the Resource Management Act, Waikato Regional Council has a statutory obligation to maintain indigenous biodiversity — and that you may control fishing to achieve that. I reminded you that biodiversity is clearly not being maintained, and that the evidence from four State of the Gulf reports shows:

- The scallop fishery has collapsed.
- High-value fish have disappeared from reefs.
- Kina barrens are rampant.
- Workups are smaller and less frequent.
- Resident whales have stopped eating fish.
- And seabird and freshwater fish species are sliding toward extinction.

I also told you that I compared commercial landings from 2005 to the present. Alarmingly, 37 stocks showed a decline of over 25%, with 8 of those collapsing by more than 90%. Many species were already struggling before 2005.

I explained that fishing is harming Threatened and At Risk seabirds, mammals like Māui dolphins and Bryde's whales, and even freshwater fish like longfin eels and giant kōkopu — species WRC has a responsibility to protect.

Last time, I made it clear that 90% of marine biodiversity has no backbone, and that these invertebrates, our sponges, corals, and biogenic habitats are being smashed by bottom impact fishing methods.

I warned that relying on Revitalising the Gulf or the Hauraki Gulf Fisheries Management Plan is naive. I also told you that partial-take areas under the Hauraki Gulf Protection Bill are a good step — but not enough.

And finally, I stressed that regional councils must act even if central government fails. WRC has both the authority and the obligation to manage the effects of fishing under the RMA. Where biodiversity is being lost, the Plan must respond actively, not just wait for Fisheries New Zealand to fix it. The public overwhelmingly supports more marine protection, and other regional councils have already shown leadership.

Since then, we've seen yet another collapse: the inner Gulf is now closed to crayfish harvest. But if you look at the Minister's decision, it's clear they are simply continuing

an irresponsible pattern — fisheries are only being shut down once they are worthless to commercial fishers. This reckless, bottom-of-the-barrel standard is not just failing our marine ecosystems; it is actively driving their destruction, and it shows no sign of stopping.

You would have also seen that in the expert evidence, Dr Nick Shears considers the Hauraki Gulf Marine Protection Bill provides little additional 'no-take' protection of shallow coastal areas. Note this doesn't mean deeper reefs are less important, there is a great article out today in the Conversation¹ by Dr James Bell on mesophotic reefs, or those deeper than 30m, it mentions threats to them including from recreational fishing and urges Councils to take care of them.

I looked into this to share the numbers with you today.

If we use coastline as a proxy to estimate the percentage of reef protected. The proposed Coastal Plan notes that the Waikato region has 1,200 km of diverse coastline.²

Currently, there is only one marine reserve — Te Whanganui-A-Hei (Cathedral Cove) Marine Reserve — which protects 4.4 km of mainland coastline and 2 km of island coastline, a total of 6.4 km.

The Hauraki Gulf / Tīkapa Moana Marine Protection Bill might add a few new areas.

- There's the Motukawao Islands High Protection Area, which would cover about 7 kilometres of coastline that's 3 kilometres along the mainland and 4 kilometres around the islands.
- Cape Colville might get a High Protection Area too, but it's small just 3 kilometres of coastline.

And then there's Slipper Island, or Whakahau, where about 7 kilometres of island coastline would be protected.

However, no coastal reefs in the Aldermen Islands High Protection Area will be protected from fishing.

Adding this up, there may be an additional 17 km of protected coastline, bringing the total to 23.4 km — or just 2% of the Waikato Region's coastline.

If you would prefer to just talk about area you currently have 0% of the West Coast protected from all fishing and 0.1 percent of the east coast. If the protection bill goes

¹ <u>https://theconversation.com/reefs-in-the-middle-light-zone-along-nzs-coast-are-biodiversity-hotspots-many-are-home-to-protected-species-254597</u>

² https://www.waikatoregion.govt.nz/assets/WRC/ProposedRegionalCoastalPlan.pdf

through the East Coast number only increases to 6.2%. Far short of the international 30% target by 2030.

By anyone's standards, that is a pathetic level of protection — and given the current political climate, wildlife in the Waikato CMA will be lucky to even get that.

No matter what level of relief from fishing pressure this Panel decides to afford wildlife in the CMA, some key trends are already clear and unavoidable:

- Fishing pressure will grow. Waikato's human population grew by 2.2% last year. More people means more fishers and more fishers means more dead wildlife.
- Auckland is growing even faster, and every summer more Aucklanders like me — flood into the Waikato CMA to fish. This growing recreational pressure will compound existing stresses on wildlife.
- Climate change is intensifying environmental stress with marine heatwaves increasing in frequency and severity. Warmer waters disrupt food webs, weaken fish stocks, stress kelp forests, and make ecosystems more vulnerable to collapse.
- Avian influenza is emerging as a new and serious threat to seabird populations. This disease has already caused devastating losses internationally. It will have a devastating impact on Waikato's already declining seabird populations.
- Exotic Caulerpa will expand it's range and we will start to see it affect productivity of reef ecosystems.
- The next invasive marine species is just around the corner if it's not here already.

In short, the status quo is not stable. It is deteriorating. Every year the challenges grow larger. Even if fishing pressure were frozen today, external pressures like climate change, disease, and invasive species would continue to erode biodiversity.

That's why it's critical for WRC to not just maintain the biodiversity it still has — but to restore lost biodiversity and build resilience into the ecosystem, now, while there is still time.

If we want a future where the Gulf is thriving, we need to be honest about where we are now. The facts are clear — ecosystems are collapsing — and they demand urgent action. Yet time and again, we see recreational and commercial fishers refusing to take responsibility, pointing fingers at everyone but themselves. That has to change. A precautionary approach means protecting what's left, restoring what we can, and having the courage to lead, not to blame. We can't wait for someone else to fix this it's on all of us to act, and Council must use every tool it has to respond to the crisis.

Council has a powerful opportunity — and a clear responsibility — to secure a healthier future for the Waikato coast by fully protecting these outstanding areas from all forms of fishing:

- Elevate the Cape Colville Seafloor Protection Area by upgrading it to full protection, building on the strong start provided by the SPA and delivering meaningful gains for marine biodiversity.
- Extend protection south of the Motukawao Island SIBA-A to champion the recovery of rare Scarlett Tubeworm mounds, giving these extraordinary reefbuilders the best chance to flourish and expand across the Gulf.
- Create a practical protected area extending 2 km offshore from the Mercury Islands, ensuring the resilience of these rich and diverse ecosystems for future generations.
- Unite the proposed Alderman Island HPAs by closing the current gap, creating a connected and thriving sanctuary that supports stronger species recovery and ecosystem health.
- Fully protect at least one estuary, with Tairua offering an ideal opportunity to safeguard a rare, relatively intact ecosystem and showcase what proactive leadership can achieve.

Beyond these areas, Council must meet its obligation to protect marine biodiversity by closing Waikato's side of the Hauraki Gulf Marine Park to bottom impact fishing, including the region's unique deep-water benthic habitats — currently classed as SIBA-B.

Beyond the urgent need for protection, it's important to recognise that fully protected areas deliver substantial benefits. Not just for ecosystems, but also for local communities and economies. It's not appropriate to talk about fisheries benefits in this context but marine protection isn't a sacrifice — it's an investment that can generate rapid and lasting returns across multiple fronts.

1. Last month a paper published in Nature proved that marine and coastal tourism delivers economic benefits that far exceed those generated by fisheries. These returns can be fast with significant increases in fish biomass, diversity, and abundance detected in just 1–3 years. Increases in fish numbers and biodiversity make diving experiences better — divers are willing to pay up to 84% more for sites with higher fish biomass and up to 82% more for more biodiverse sites. Basically, a protected fish can generate more money by being seen by hundreds of humans than being eaten by one. The value is not just for divers, if you have ever paddle boarded in an estuary over big schools of baby fish, mullet, rays imagine that but with 500% more fish and clearer water because you have protected shellfish that clear the water. The abundance of fish attracts large flocks of endangered birds and inspire landowners upstream to reduce pollution.

- 2. The experimental pelagic High Protection Areas around the Alderman Islands have similar potential. Inshore tag-and-release programmes are helping us understand the range of large fish species in northeastern New Zealand, but we still have little data on their home ranges. I'm hopeful we'll see an increase in workups not just more seabirds and marine mammals, but also growth in pelagic ecotourism. However, the centrepiece of this reserve is changing fast. The centros barrens have expanded rapidly over the past five years, and biodiversity is now in steep decline, without Council relief for this SIBA-A there no meaningful protection on the horizon.
- 3. The benefits of marine protection are not just for fisheries, local economies, and healthier ecosystems. MPAs act as biodiversity banks for future threats like marine heatwaves, ocean acidification, invasive species, or even oil spills. Council can't afford to only bank on 2-5% of its reefs in MPAs and maintain resilient marine ecosystems. Without them Council is going to have to rely on active restoration techniques which are underdeveloped and take my word for it, incredibly expensive.

The people of Aotearoa want more marine protection. This was well expressed in a poll by the Hauraki Gulf Forum in 2021 which had 77% support for putting 30% of the Gulf into marine protected areas and only 5% opposing.

The decisions Council makes now will define the health, identity, and resilience of the Hauraki Gulf for generations to come. This is a once-in-a-generation chance to lead by example.

WRC has both the authority and the obligation to address these impacts. Given the urgency of marine ecosystem decline, WRC should take immediate action to manage the effects of fishing within its jurisdiction.

Thanks for your time today.