

Marine life in the Hauraki Gulf is in crisis. Where is the political will to heal it? Caroline Wood

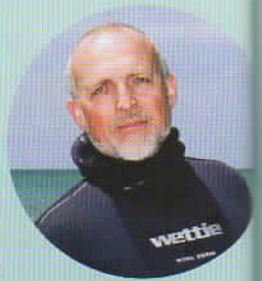
Next March, sailing fans the world over will sit down to watch a livestream of America's Cup yachts lining up in Auckland's Waitematā Harbour to compete in one of the most prestigious and hotly contested sailing races in the world.


Who couldn't fail to marvel at the sparkling blue waters of the Hauraki Gulf as the high-tech boats take off on their way to Waiheke Island, flying past protected predator-free Rangitoto Island, in an all-or-nothing contest to win the coveted Auld Mug.

From the boats, the islands and ocean look healthy, "100% clean and green", as Aotearoa's tourist brochures proclaim. Efforts to restore nature on islands in the Gulf have been encouraging, but under the surface it's a different story.

Many visitors won't realise that, beneath the sleek hulls of the Challenger and Defender boats, lies an increasingly barren underwater world. One that only scuba divers, snorkellers, and spearfishers can see.

People like award-winning marine photographer and writer Darryl Torckler, who has been diving and snorkelling in the Gulf over the past 50 years.



Darryl Torckler.
 Lauren Hahn

"It's really hard for people to see what's going on under the water. It's not like a forest that you can walk through and see the decline in birdlife," he says.

"As a kid in the early 70s, I would fish off Rakino and Rangitoto Islands. I took a little boat out there. Big schools of trevally and kingfish were common in the summer months. I doubt you would see one now.

"There has been a general decline in schooling fish in the Gulf. If you take out species like pilchards, you are emptying the pantry for whales, dolphins, and seabirds that used to be prolific but are now in decline."

Darryl's observation that there has been a steady decline in the ecological health of Gulf is backed up by science.

In May, the *State of our Gulf 2020* report warned that little improvement had been made over the past two decades.

For example, the commercial fish catch in the Gulf is 30% higher than before the marine park was established 20 years ago, and 22% of seabirds are threatened with extinction.

BARREN

STATE OF THE GULF

Wildlife in the Hauraki Gulf is in big trouble, with some species sliding towards extinction.

Kōura crayfish

Thought to be functionally extinct in parts of the Hauraki Gulf and have declined by about 20% since 1945.



Kūtai mussels

Once populated large areas of the Gulf and Firth of Thames, but most mussel beds were dredged in the 1950s and 60s and never recovered.



Tohorā Bryde's whales

Still nationally critical and no longer found in the numbers seen a decade ago (see page 18).



Kelp forests are being eaten by advancing kina (sea urchin) barrens caused by a catastrophic drop in crayfish and snapper populations that would otherwise keep the kina under control.

Population growth, coastal developments, and climate change will make an already dire situation worse.

But there is hope. With more marine protection and less overfishing, our fish stocks, marine mammals, and birdlife can bounce back.

For example, if the balance of fish and crayfish on the reef is restored, the kelp grows back and life returns to the kina barrens, as scientists have documented at the Poor Knights Islands.

Dr Nick Shears, a marine ecologist from Auckland University, has been monitoring the extent of kina barrens in the Hauraki Gulf since 1999.

“The cover of barrens fluctuates but is particularly high at the moment,” he says.

“There is a lot of research that demonstrates this is due to fishing of snapper and crayfish, and that long-term protection can reverse this trend.”

Darryl Torckler wants to see an end to commercial fishing in the Hauraki Gulf and new marine reserves in biodiversity hotspots, including parts of the Mokohinau, Great Barrier, and Little Barrier Islands.

“The Hauraki Gulf desperately needs many more marine reserves. For years, there has been a very

frustrating talkfest about them.

“It’s an absolutely no brainer. They preserve and allow fish do what they do best – that is, grow big and spawn. The eggs and juveniles drift out of the marine reserve and repopulate adjacent coastlines, replenishing the fish stocks.”

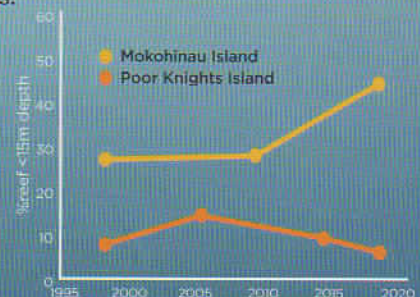
The Hauraki Gulf Forum is a statutory body set up in 2000 to promote the protection and enhancement of the Gulf. It is administered by Auckland Council.

In May, the Forum adopted a new set of goals for the Gulf, including at least 30% marine protection (up from the 20% goal established in 2019).

“Science shows that we need to protect at least 30% of our moana in a way that respects biodiversity and habitats,” said co-chair Pippa Coom.

But the Hauraki Gulf Forum doesn’t have the legislative power to compel change – only government ministers can do this.

This graph shows how kina barrens are increasing at the Mokohinau Islands, in the Hauraki Gulf, which have no marine reserve. In contrast, kina barrens are retreating at the Poor Knights Islands, which are fully protected from fishing.



WATERS

30% safe seas, see overleaf →

Tāmure snapper

Overfishing has led to serious declines of 83% on historic levels.



Tara iti New Zealand fairy tern

The Hauraki Gulf is a key habitat for the country’s rarest bird, with just 40 birds left on Earth.



Tāiko black petrel

At risk of being being hooked by the snapper longline industry. Efforts are under way to work with fishers to protect this nationally vulnerable species.

