The Slippery Business of Naming Fish in New Zealand Waters

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A systematic examination of the Fisheries Reports of New Zealand's Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives (*AJHR*) from 1869-2004 reveals the distinctive language used in New Zealand to describe the harvesting of the marine environment in an official capacity. It also provides insights into how this has changed over time. This article reports on some notable features in this source, which is one of many being used in a larger study of New Zealandisms referring to the harvesting of the marine environment. One finding relates to the coining of terms in order to deliberately mislead. Also of note is that the various changes in the labels used to refer to fish[1] in the *AJHRs* indicate a subtle shift towards greater commodification of our marine resources. This is apparent in the changing labels and expressions employed to describe fish. While appearing to reflect growing commercialism, the language employed also shows an increasing tendency to construe fish as inanimate resources.

The Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives (*AJHRs*) began with the first parliamentary sessions in 1854. They include the annual reports of government departments, commissions and other agencies as well as additional papers and documents. The inclusion of background material and correspondence provides additional context and information. The reports, written by government departments, make this a rather formal data set and although it includes correspondence and transcripts of conversations the latter especially are likely to have been edited for publishing. The Marine Department was established in 1866 but it dealt with marine safety, including lighthouse

[1] Note that an extended meaning of **fish** is intended here, whereby it includes whales, crustaceans and other types of marine life.

functioning, and accidents. Fisheries did not come under the Marine Department until 1877. However, from 1869 when a commission was established to investigate fisheries in New Zealand there is the appearance of a New Zealand Fisheries report. It is from this year that the *AJHRs* offer a rich source of data to investigate changes in the marine harvesting lexicon.

1. Something Fishy

There are a number of labels which have a brief duration in the *AJHRs* and which appear to have been coined to deliberately mislead or creatively sidestep the law. As Singleton (2000: 125) suggests, new lexical creations "presuppose the existence" of the conceived referent. An attempt to use a label in order to create the belief that something exists is evident in the coining of **Karitane tails** which appears in the *AJHR*s in 1968. These are the tails of crayfish which have been caught in the Karitane region. However, the people who fish for them argued that they were a different and smaller species of crayfish (which apparently they were not). Rather than illegally sell crayfish tails which were undersized, it seemed preferable to market them as a separate item – a smaller type of crayfish, which when tailed were **Karitane tails**. To give them a name gives weight to their existence. This does appear to be a rather cynical attempt to use a label to sidestep the law and mislead the public, although the short duration of the label (it does not appear in the *AJHRs* after 1968) suggests the attempt may not have been entirely successful.

A similar case emerged with oysters. When in the 1880s the exportation of rock oysters was prohibited, a new variety of oyster seemed to emerge, the **shore oyster** (*AJHR* 1887, H4: 5). However, this label only appears in the *AJHRs* in inverted commas or with the preface of "so-called", reflecting that the label is not wholly accepted in an official capacity. There is reference to "the taking of the oyster which is stated to be the '**shore**' and '**mangrove**' oyster", but which the Marine Department maintained was a rock oyster: "The department contends that such oysters are the same kind as rock oysters, and the term '**rock**' is the name of the oyster and that it does not necessarily follow that such oysters grow on rocks" (*AJHR* 1887, H4: 5). Creative oyster dealers maintained that the mangrove and shore oyster grew in different places to the rock oyster and were a different type in their own right. Again, the creative coining aimed to establish the existence of a new referent, a new type of oyster, one which was not included

in the definition of oysters which could not be exported. That this was briefly upheld in court shows the power that the adoption of labels can have.

2. Transferred Use

When European settlers first arrived in New Zealand they were of course confronted with a new physical environment. Many of the creatures of the sea and the means necessary to exploit them were somewhat different to those they had previously experienced. As Maori were skilled fishers and quickly established trade, it is no surprise that a number of the local names were adopted as common currency in English to refer to various fish which were encountered. **Kahawai, tarakihi, moki** and **warehou**[2] appear in the earliest *AJHR* examined (1869) and these terms continue as the common names consistently employed throughout the reports. These were fish widely utilised by Maori, which may have been a determining factor in their names being borrowed. While Hutton (*AJHR* 1870, D9: 3) urged people involved in the fishing industry to employ Maori names because of their consistency, his advice was unheeded and many common names derived from English resources were used. Alongside Maori labels **herring, mullet, turbot, blue cod, red cod,** and **ling** all appear in the earliest report. Very commonly, the early settlers saw similarities between the fish they encountered in New Zealand and those from their previous experience and transferred use of labels is a very common occurrence. These settlers were not necessarily experts in the fishing field and the names mentioned above were applied to different species from those to which they were back in England. In the early volumes of the *AJHRs* (beginning 1869), these transferred names are already well-established.

One result of this transference, was a perception that New Zealand fish were in some way imitations of the real thing. There are numerous references to New Zealand fish not being "true fish". **Native salmon** (or **kahawai** as it is almost exclusively called now) are mentioned as "resembling the true salmon" (*AJHR* 1885, H15: 6). The only deep-sea species known at the time, the "so-called turbot", is said to be "very unlike turbot" (*AJHR* 1885, H15: 9). Although there were fish referred to in New Zealand as herring, there is mention of establishing the true herring in New Zealand. Mackerel in New Zealand is said to be "a good

[2] It is interesting to note that for many of the fish for which a Maori label is used, it is used consistently, while for others for which a transferred British label was used there are frequently multiple common names. **Hapuka** is consistently used in some regions.

fish" but "much inferior in delicacy to the true mackerel" (*AJHR* 1870, D9: 5), while horse mackerel is said to be "somewhat like the true mackerel" (*AJHR* 1885, H15: 7). The implication is that there are fixed common names for fish in English and in New Zealand they are being used wrongly. Also implicit is that the New Zealand species are in some way inferior to those of the colonial homeland. It is forcefully expressed in this introductory comment which refers to both marine and freshwater fish: "It seems strange that in the generally complete furnishing of the earth so much was left undone in New Zealand. It depends on acclimatisation societies and individuals to remedy this defect" (*AJHR* 1892, H45: 3). The difference in marine life between New Zealand and England was construed as a defect which ought to be mended and the 'false' use of names appears to reinforce this. During these years it is widely acknowledged that New Zealand was positioning itself towards England, creating a Britain in the Pacific and seeking to "emphasise the Britishness" of the colony (Macalister 2005: xii). However, as confidence and interest in developing an export industry progressed, such references to being inferior and a poor imitation were reduced.

3. The Rise of Trade Names

After World War Two, the supply of food was considered a priority and there began to be a feeling that New Zealanders should utilise an increasing range of fish and fish products in their diet. It is apparent that the use of labels is seen as one method to alter public perception. One example of this is **dogfish** which is first mentioned in 1869. There are numerous references to this fish as a pest and the following type of comment is common: "dogfish of fair size were then numerous, and when caught in the nets tore them considerably" (*AJHR* 1935, H15: 21). Dogfish were clearly not viewed as eating fish. However, from the 1940s it appears on a table of fish caught for sale, but its name has changed to **pioke**, **dogfish** appearing only occasionally in brackets. The Maori name has none of the connotations which 'dog' brings to mind for an English speaker. When this fish begins to be increasingly popular as a frying fish it undergoes a further change and is exported (along with **elephant fish**) as **white fillets,** a label which appears to deliberately hide the origin of the species, and then separately as **lemonfish** (*AJHR* 1962, I 19: 84). While **dogfish** served adequately to label a fish considered a net-tearing pest, it does not survive the fish's transformation to a valuable commercial item.

Likewise, **leatherjacket** is frequently referred to in the *AJHR* from 1903. Initially it was not much esteemed but figures in the tables documenting values of respective seafood items reflect its growing commercial value from the 1940s. Coinciding with this increase in value is a change in label to **creamfish**. By 1957, **creamfish** is used exclusively for this fish in these official documents. Another example is **butterfish** which begins to dominate over **greenbone** and **kelpfish** and is in fact applied to a number of species. **Crayfish** also undergoes a change when in 1969 **rock lobster** appears in brackets. In the following year it is **crayfish** which appears in brackets and from the 1970s **rock lobster** dominates. As the export market for crayfish tails to the United States grew, the Fishing Industry Board explicitly stated a name change was required (*AJHR* 1969, H15a:9).

These examples point to an acknowledgement that there is a link between the label used and our perception of its referent. As Paul, a notable New Zealand marine biologist, states: "Often a name has become an integral part of our attitude towards a particular species and has emotive as well as descriptive significance" (2000: 239). It would certainly be hard to deny that **fillet of creamfish** conjures up a more pleasant dining experience than **fillet of leatherjacket**. An exotic **surimi** salad is likely to sound more appealing than one of **processed fished bits**. In the coining of trade names such as **creamfish, lemonfish** and **butterfish,** we see the features which humans value in them as a resource being emphasised; that is, their edibility. This seems to support Nwigwe's assertion that "names give expression to human experience and economic interests", rather than something's essence (2001: 6). Additionally, names may be chosen to convey a particular image that it is thought will appeal to the target market. In the case of **lobster**, it was thought that the familiar name would appeal more to the US market and the switch was made in the fisheries reports.

As technology in the 1960s and 70s facilitated greater exporting of fish, the question of nomenclature was raised internationally. In 1970, it is stated that "the fish must be called in export markets by the name by which it is known in New Zealand" (*AJHR* 1970, H15a: 17). It would therefore be important for those involved in the industry locally to establish as common currency within New Zealand labels which would be thought to be desirable to the external target market. Hence, in this official document we see a trend for the new trade name to replace the previous, often less desirable- sounding common name. It would be

interesting to see whether this change is apparent in other sources such as fishing magazines and books.

4. Emphasising Economics

An orientation towards fish as a commercial commodity is also illustrated in the way that fish are described. Fill (2001: 49) discusses how natural phenomena tend to be named from the perspective of their usefulness to humans, and this is apparent in a number of terms which emerge from the 1960s. The description of fish size illustrates a measurement relative to human interest. An **undersized fish** is not one which is too thin for its own health, but one whose weight is below the legal size to be caught and sold. Reference from 1979 to the rearing of **pan-sized** salmon (*AJHR* 1979, C6: 17) and **plate-sized lobster** clearly describe the ultimate destination of the referent. The coining of **rough fish** and **prime fish** (*AJHR* 1962, I19: 17) is not reflective of intrinsic features of the fish, but how they are perceived by the public. Hence, while tarakihi was **rough fish** in Dunedin it was considered **prime fish** in Wellington, and while snapper was **rough fish** in Wellington, it was **prime fish** in Auckland. From the 1970s, the terms **preferred species** and **less-preferred species** were coined to categorise fish. These labels were not attached to particular fish but shifted with region and time, based on the perception of the target market, and they are labels which serve to emphasise the economic usefulness of their referents.

5. The Decline of Direct Language

While there appears to be growing commercialisation of the marine resources (the catch of finfish doubled within five years in the 1970s (*AJHR* 1979, C6: 5), there also appears to be an attempt to downplay the exploitation by adopting language which distances the reader from viewing fish as living creatures. In the early *AJHR*s, fish are frequently **caught** and **killed**, seals and whales are **slaughtered** and there is **destruction** of oyster populations. Of toheroa, it is mentioned that their "**deaths** were taking place in their natural habitat" (*AJHR* 1938, H15: 31) and there is an admission that "fishing must inevitably **kill** fish and so diminish the fish population" (*AJHR* 1945, H15: 11). When more efficient fishing methods are introduced it is stated that they are "from the point of view of the fish, more **deadly**" (*AJHR* 1945, H15: 11). These are direct references to fish as living creatures. It is difficult to imagine the point of view of the fish being

mentioned in later volumes because this would be to acknowledge that fish could have the ability to perceive. Instead, the language appears to remove the idea that fish are living at all. Fish are hidden within the label of **quota**, which construes the fish as a piece of property, and those caught accidentally are **bycatch.** Rather than being killed, they are **processed** and **produced –** a label usually reserved for man-made resources. A fish species whose numbers are falling is exploited at, or near, "the **maximum sustainable level**" (*AJHR* 1980, C6:5). These terms have the effect of distancing us from the activity of fishing.

The *AJHR*s trace the rise of the fish from being considered an inferior meat source[3] to being a valuable consumer product, caught in increasing numbers and the basis of our fourth largest export industry. While the quantity and value of fish catches have risen, the language which construes fish as inanimate resources has also increased. This is referred to by Jacobsen (2004: 68) as "deanimating"or "deanimalizing", which she argues spares the consumer from the moral dilemma of taking lives. In this instance we could argue that the language helps to ease the dilemma of the Ministry of Fisheries, which is charged with the dual role of conserving fish but also of sustaining fisheries. By diluting the language which refers to the capture of fish there is less emphasis on the details of fishing which may detract from their conservation role.

The Fisheries reports of the *AJHRs* clearly illustrate that the labels used to name and describe fish are not fixed or static. Rather, they are subject to change, based on their economic value and the market at which they are targeted. The selection of labels is not arbitrary; it aims to influence our perception of a species. Whether the names used outside the official documents examined here follow similar patterns is an interesting area yet to be explored.

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[3] Note that because these begin from the 1860s they do not trace the clear on-going importance to Maori from before European settlement.

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