

The Impact of Bottom Trawling on Food Security, Sovereignty and Nutrition

Hauraki Gulf, Aotearoa (New Zealand)

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This case-study is part of the wider Transform Bottom Trawling Coalition research highlighting the global impact of bottom trawling on food security.

Introduction

The Hauraki Gulf is one of Aotearoa New Zealand's most valued and heavily used coastal ecosystems, but its ecological condition has declined over time. Official assessments describe long-standing pressures from pollution, sediment runoff, overfishing, and climate change, resulting in depleted shellfish beds, loss of seagrass meadows, and widespread urchin barrens (Department of Conservation 2025; AEBR 2021).

Coastal seafood plays an important role in local diets and cultural practices. Species such as snapper, crayfish, kina (sea urchin), scallops, mussels, and oysters are central to customary and recreational fishing, particularly for iwi and coastal communities. Inshore commercial fishing also operates in the Gulf, with industry representatives emphasizing their role in supplying fresh fish and participating in restoration efforts (Seafood NZ 2023).

Policy responses have increasingly focused on spatial management. The Hauraki Gulf Marine Protection Act, which came into effect on 25 October 2025, introduced a network of protection tools aimed at improving ecosystem health (Department of Conservation 2025). In parallel, fisheries planning processes have proposed trawl corridors that would allow bottom trawling and Danish seining in defined areas while closing others to protect sensitive habitats (AEBR 2023). These approaches remain contested, with iwi-aligned coalitions and environmental groups calling for a full phase-out of bottom trawling in the Gulf (Hauraki Gulf Alliance n.d.; Greenpeace Aotearoa 2025; Forest and Bird n.d.).

Key Context

- There is an existing Inshore Exclusion Zone at 5 km from the coastline.
- Fleet composition: ~1,000 mechanized vs. ~3,000 artisanal boats.
- Primary diet species: Indian mackerel, oil sardine, squid, prawns and mullet.

- Participation in trawling: 100% Goan ownership; Crew is >90% migrant (India) labour.
- Major threats: LED fishing, Bull trawling and spatial encroachment.
- Weak enforcement, rather than absence of regulation, is a central driver of conflict and food-system impacts.

Key Informant Interviews

To deepen understanding of these impacts, two interviews were conducted with key stakeholders:

- Interview 1: A Greenpeace member working on the Hauraki Gulf campaign
- Interview 2: An environmental activist

The interviews focused on research questions regarding (1) negative competition; (2) participation in trawling; (3) nutritional impacts; and (4) prevailing narratives.

Results Based on Interviews

1. Negative competition and impact on small-scale fisheries

Interviewees reported increasing difficulty accessing key food species such as snapper, crayfish, kina, scallops, mussels, and oysters. They described rising prices, reduced availability, and growing inequities, with lower-income households and customary fishers most affected. Wealthier recreational fishers were seen as better able to travel farther offshore to secure catch.

Spatial competition and habitat degradation were repeatedly identified as key pathways through which bottom trawling affects local food systems. Interviewees described the Gulf as highly degraded, with bottom trawling singled out as a major and addressable pressure alongside land-based runoff and climate change. Scallop depletion was linked to dredging and other bottom-contact fishing methods. Practices such as high-grading, bycatch, and discards were also reported to reduce local availability and undermine ecosystem recovery.

Concerns were raised about compliance and enforcement, including alleged illegal activity in closed areas and limited observer coverage in inshore fisheries. Electronic monitoring using cameras was widely viewed as a positive step, but interviewees questioned whether it was sufficient on its own.

2. Participating in trawling and food security

Interviewees did not identify bottom trawling as a significant contributor to local food security in the Hauraki Gulf. They emphasized that customary and recreational fishing are far more important for local diets. Inshore trawl catches were described as largely export-oriented, with one interviewee estimating that up to 90% of trawl-caught fish leaves domestic markets. While industry statements frame commercial fishing as supporting food supply for Auckland and beyond, trawling primarily supports a national or export supply stream rather than a source of local nutrition.

3. Nutritional impacts and consumers

Interview evidence indicates that bottom trawling contributes little directly to local protein intake. Local diets rely mainly on customary and recreational species rather than trawl-caught fish. Interviewees reported that most bottom-trawl products are exported, limiting its role in local food provisioning. Store-bought fish was described as expensive, with iwi and community members reporting growing difficulty affording seafood for everyday meals and gatherings.

4. Narratives and policy framing

Narratives around bottom trawling in the Hauraki Gulf are strongly polarized. Industry groups emphasize a limited trawl footprint, evidence-based management, and the need to address other pressures such as invasive species and sediment runoff, while calling for clarity on trawl restrictions (Seafood NZ 2023). Conservation groups, iwi, and community alliances argue that bottom trawling has caused long-term seafloor damage and should be phased out entirely, warning that trawl corridors risk concentrating impacts rather than reducing them (Hauraki Gulf Alliance n.d.; Forest and Bird n.d.; Greenpeace Aotearoa 2025).

Interviewees described the Marine Protection Act and earlier Sea Change process as hard-won but fragile, with last-minute political compromises perceived as favoring industry. They reported low social licence for bottom trawling in the Gulf and broad alignment among iwi, NGOs, and recreational fishers in support of stronger restrictions.

Conclusion

The Hauraki Gulf case illustrates that bottom trawling affects food security primarily through habitat degradation, spatial competition, and the diversion of locally caught seafood into export markets rather than local diets. Interviewees emphasized the central role of customary and recreational fishing in sustaining food security and cultural practices, and highlighted rising costs and reduced access for iwi and lower-income households.

While policy responses are moving toward spatial protection and trawl corridors, these measures remain contested. Interview and documentary evidence point to the need for clearer and enforceable limits on bottom trawling, stronger monitoring and compliance in inshore fisheries, and management approaches that explicitly prioritize customary food access alongside ecological recovery (AEBR 2023; Department of Conservation 2025; Greenpeace Aotearoa 2025)

Priority actions emerging from the evidence include:

1. Establish clearer and enforceable spatial limits on bottom trawling to reduce habitat damage and conflicts with inshore fishers.
2. Strengthen monitoring and compliance in inshore fisheries to ensure trawl regulations are effectively implemented.
3. Prioritise customary fishing rights and access for iwi within fisheries management and spatial

planning processes.

4. Expand spatial protection and carefully manage trawl corridors to support ecosystem recovery in the Hauraki Gulf.
5. Promote policies that improve local access to seafood, reducing the diversion of locally caught fish exclusively into export markets and supporting domestic food security.

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