

The World's Friendliest Fish

Beneath the waves at the Goat Island Marine Reserve, ninety minutes' drive from Auckland, a virtual marine desert once decimated by over-fishing has become a rich ecological area, teeming with fish and other sea life. New Zealand's first marine reserve, it was established in 1975, thanks to a long struggle by a group of dedicated scientists.

Set free from exploitation, this 547 hectares of protected foreshore and sea attracts tens of thousands of people each year. Equipped with snorkels, scuba gear and kayaks, visitors are conducting a fascinating love affair with marine life, enjoying the company of the inhabitants of the ocean floor, and exploring reefs and caves.

The taming of many fish species has been due in part to human interaction, in a sheltered and safe environment. Retired resident snapper up to 50 years old occasionally swim alongside bathers in the shallows, and don't see them as food or foe. The blue maomao and blue cod are most prevalent inshore and, on the reef, red moki, parore, cod and crayfish safely cruise the waters.

Scientists at the nearby Leigh Laboratory, able to study and preserve the marine life in its natural state, are stunned at the dramatic increase in sea life. Not only are the fish in the reserve tame; many are growing to a legendary size. Snapper up to a metre long have been documented, and crayfish numbers are significantly higher.

The Marine Reserve is a 'no take' area that extends 800 metres beyond Goat Island. This allows scientists to safely investigate eco-systems for large numbers of fish and shellfish. Coral, sponges, seaweed, rocks and shells are all included in the 'no take' policy.

Another prohibition is fish feeding. It can be very harmful, and disturbs the natural behaviour of the underwater world.

Dr W J Ballantine of the Leigh Marine Laboratory, University of Auckland, says "natural unexploited areas in the sea are required as an insurance against ignorance and errors."

Now free from exploitation, the Goat Island Marine Reserve on New Zealand's northeastern coast has ensured its future as a valuable playground. Sea life is left in peace to multiply and survive in harmony with people from all around the globe. This leaves scientists free to investigate the health of the eco-system, while providing a field base for University of Auckland Masters Degree students.

Visit and enjoy it . . . but leave the fishing line at home.