

Great Barrier Island off Auckland's east coast is quintessential calendar New Zealand - blue shallows, white sands, crimson pohutukawa, green peaks. But it's become an environmental battleground since the Department of Conservation proposed a gigantic marine reserve along its coast. MIKE WHITE visits an island community badly divided and examines how DOC has managed to upset almost everybody.

Sea Stoush

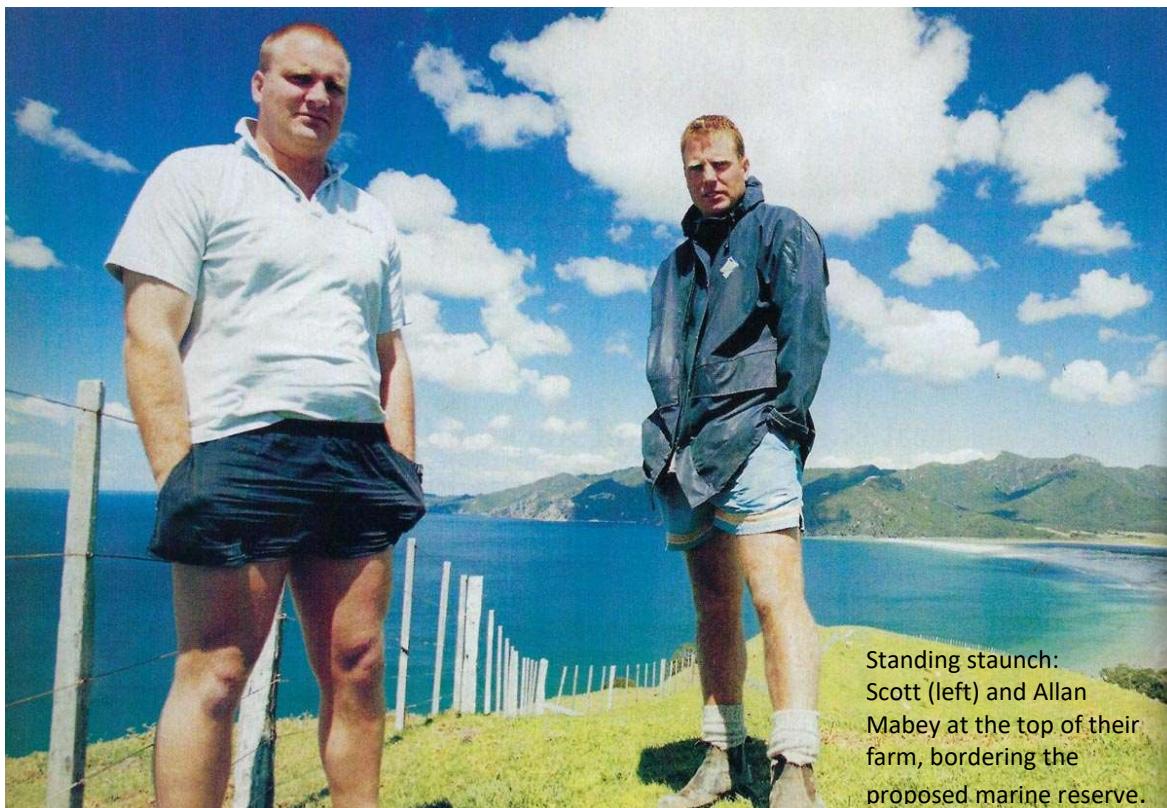
Great Barrier Island's northeast coast and Arid Island where DOC wants a massive marine reserve.

Mike White is a North & South Staff Writer.

Photography Mike White

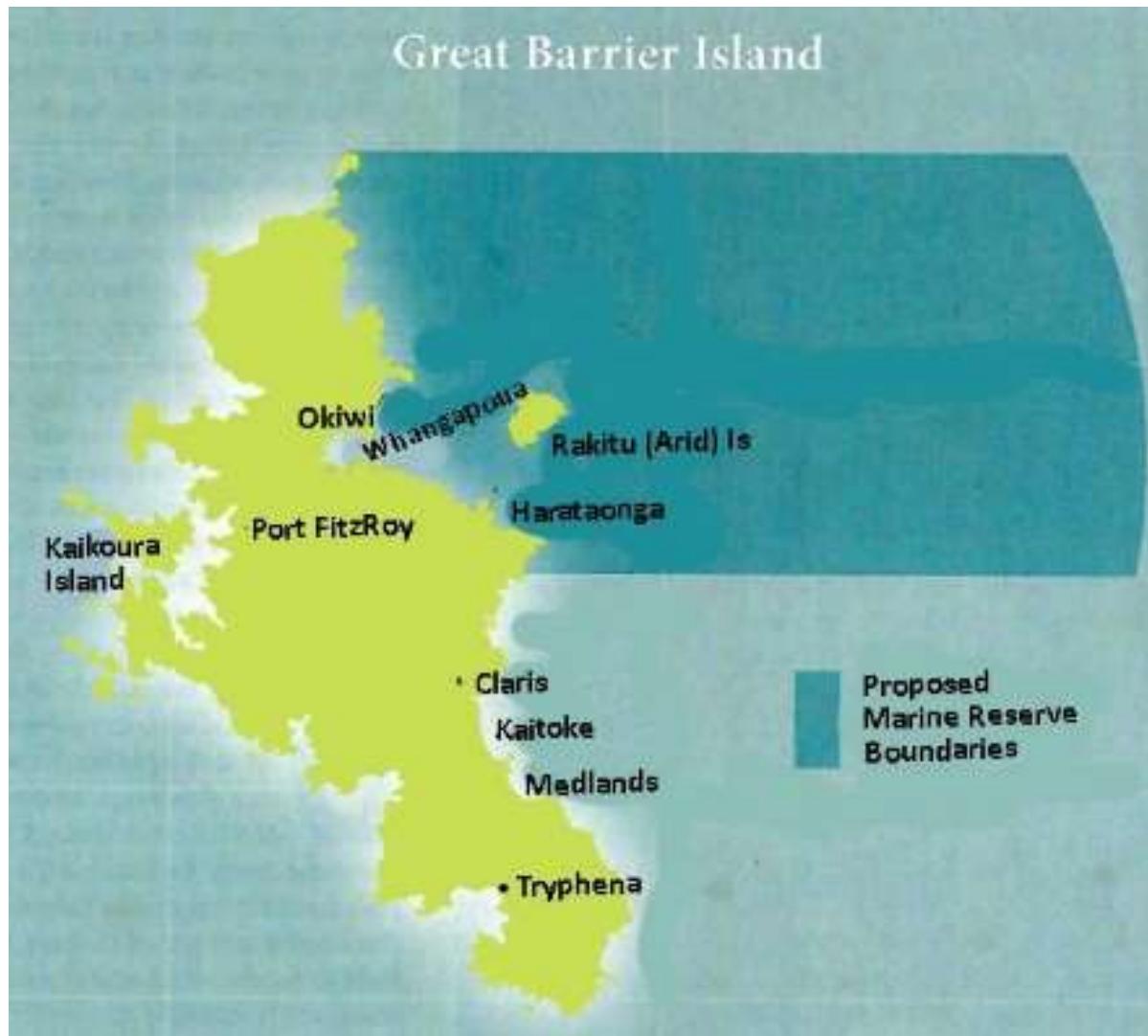
MIKE WHITE IS A NORTH & SOUTH STAFF WRITER. PHOTOGRAPH BY MIKE WHITE.

The view from the top of the Mabey's' Great Barrier Island farm is one an arsenal of adjectives and fistful of photographs just don't do justice to. Allan Mabey, one of three brothers farming the property, sweeps his arm from the curve of bleached beach stretching to Whangapoua estuary, across Caribbean-coloured water to Arid (Rakitu) Island, past a patch where schooling fish boil the surface and on to the island's northern tip. It's magic but there are no smiles swapped between him and brother Scott.



"We've had an absolute gutsful of the whole thing really - we just wish it'd go away." He's talking of a vast marine reserve DOC is pushing through that will take in everything his arm encompassed and much more over the horizon - more than 50,000 hectares (500 square kilometres) - in the name of science.

It will easily be the country's largest mainland marine reserve (there are two much bigger ones around the remote Kermadec and Auckland Islands) with all fishing banned from the high-tide line to the 12-mile limit. Nothing can be taken from the reserve, not even seashells, stones or seaweed from the beach.



Scott wants young daughter Jessica to enjoy the same sea-laced upbringing he had. "But if a reserve goes in you won't even be able to catch a sprat. They'll bloody near chuck you in jail for building a sand castle. It's crazy."

Says Allan: "Most people would be on side if they [DOC] came up with a reasonable proposal. But it's so unrealistic and will affect too many people in too many ways - and then they wonder why the community won't support it. They've been told a million times what the people think but they're still going ahead with the full thing."

Like all marine reserves, the legal basis for creating this one is to preserve special areas for the scientific study of marine life.

In doing so it will change the lifestyle of hundreds of Great Barrier locals, not to mention the thousands who visit the island annually to soak in its relaxed charm and be stunned by its scenery.

Roughly a quarter of the island's coast is soon likely to be off limits to anyone who comes on holiday with a dusted-off rod a packet of squid bait bought from the general store. Over summer campers who swarm to popular grounds at Harataonga Whangapoua won't be able to cast hopefully into wind-chopped waters from limpet-lined rocks. And the tent-and-tin-dinghy brigade won't be able to put to sea to catch dinner. The surfers at Okiwi won't even be able to gingerly creep round the coast searching feed of paua after hours being swept and swamped by the breakers.

Locals in the affected area won't have the small luxury customary right of diving for a sack of scallops or coaxing a cray from a crack in the submerged cliffs. The coast, where hidden gems of beaches are sprinkled along the sheer rocky island edge, will go strangely quiet.

It's necessary to back up two decades to get to where this began and see how an idea that virtually everyone broadly agrees on has turned into an ugly fight that's left the community warring with accusations of bribery, lying and legal action.

Talk of a marine reserve on Great Barrier's north coast began in 1985. A local steering committee suggested a modest reserve around Whangarei estuary and Arid Island but DOC rejected this and in 1994 applied for a larger area covering 400ha. Shortly after, DOC dropped the whole plan, blaming changed priorities and cost, but opposition on the island was undoubtedly also a factor. Not a single submission from islanders supported DOC's 1994 proposal mainly because the area was too large.

Local resident Michael Newman is still bitter: "If DOC had supported the [smaller] steering committee proposal it would have gone through and the reserve would be there today."

Then in 2001 Newman attended another meeting with DOC staff and was stunned to hear a marine reserve for scientific study was again being considered. "I couldn't believe it - I pointed out we'd been told this wasn't coming back."

But coming back it was - and more than 13 times bigger. By March 2003 a discussion document and questionnaire had been distributed and things really started getting dirty and divided.

Four public meetings on the island showed overwhelming opposition to DOC's new plan, with the department assailed for shoddy science, overstating support and deliberately misleading people.

Despite having a clearly identified area in mind for the reserve, DOC's questionnaire bizarrely didn't ask if people supported it but only if they supported the "principle" of a marine reserve "somewhere" on the northeast coast.

Even with such a broad question, only 24 per cent of respondents liked the concept; 74 per cent were opposed. DOC put a brave but bruised face on the result, claiming "a core of support", and promised to discuss concerns raised.

DOC staff had earlier repeated that if islanders opposed the reserve it wouldn't go ahead, so naturally many believed it had again been parried. But in August 2004 a reinvigorated DOC returned to the fray with a formal application to the Minister of Conservation for a marine reserve of 50,100 hectares, a mere 2000 hectares smaller than the previously heavily rejected model. Just two changes had been made to the bigger version - the southern boundary had been shifted to make it easier to mark and Whangapoua estuary had been omitted.

(DOC painted the latter as a major concession, claiming it had responded to the 40 per cent of submitters concerned about losing the estuary as a source of shellfish. However, excluding the estuary had always been flagged, with DOC regularly suggesting it could be left out. While it responded to this isolated minority concern, ironically it chose not to respond to the 74 per cent of people who opposed a marine reserve in the area.)

DOC's glossy application brochure gave considerable scientific argument for the massive no-take reserve but glossed over the previous opposition. Island opponents were stunned their concerns had again been ignored with the department showing a "we-know-what's-best" attitude.

The public was given two months to make further submissions and by October's deadline more than 3400 had been received.

(By comparison the nationally controversial Seabed and Foreshore Bill got only 4000 submissions.)

This time DOC claimed more submissions were in support of the reserve but most submissions from both sides were form letters that carry little weight. The majority of substantive submissions were from opponents. And of submissions from Barrier residents 30 were supportive of the reserve application and 170 were opposed.

To understand why most residents have consistently and stridently opposed the proposed' reserve you, need to glimpse how Great Barrier life differs from the mainland, the psyche its isolation engenders - and DOC's role.

At 285 sq. km it's New Zealand's fourth-biggest island. At the 2001 census the population was 1017 and falling, with jobs hard to find, no high school and the cost of island living dulling the enthusiasm of mainland escapees. It's the kind of place that's so compact everyone refers to their phone number by just the last three digits. There's no grid electricity - everyone uses diesel generators, solar panels or small windmills. It's about 80km from Auckland and almost the last place between New Zealand and Chile.

Only the resourceful and the reasonably rugged survive. Go to Tryphena's Currach pub and you can meet a guy missing one finger with another one swollen from a spider bite and he's just waited three days with an excruciating tooth abscess for the island's dentist to get back from holiday. He can tell you about the bloke who had his leg ripped off in his generator earlier in the year. (Six months on, the latter hardy local was nimble enough to remove his new artificial leg in the bar to try to whack someone around the head with it.)

Many have come here to escape bureaucracy and regulations. Local rules such as the one saying you need resource consent to chop down trees over three metres high are greeted as warmly as a kina spike in your wetsuit. Yet islanders bristle at the idea they're some sort of six-fingered, banjo-jangling Deliverance hillbillies.

It's the kind of place where, as you shoot rooster tails of dust driving unsealed roads, passing locals raise index fingers from steering wheels, acknowledging even obvious out-of-towners, Your rental car could easily have 200,000km on the clock and the insurance excess is probably more than it's worth. Old wrecks are put out to pasture and overtaken by grass along paddock boundaries.

Two-thirds of Great Barrier is DOC land. There are no possums, stoats, ferrets, weasels or even hedgehogs, but there are 16 permanent DOC staff who maintain tracks, campgrounds and huts for tourists who arrive on the island searching for a mixture of de-stressing, nature and adventure. It's probably the island's biggest employer and, other than two cops, is the government's face on the island.

DOC has its headquarters in the northern settlement of Port Fitzroy where manuka-cloaked slopes skip twisting roads and plunge to supremely sheltered waters. This isolation from the main populations around Claris and Tryphena only fosters a sense of "us and them".

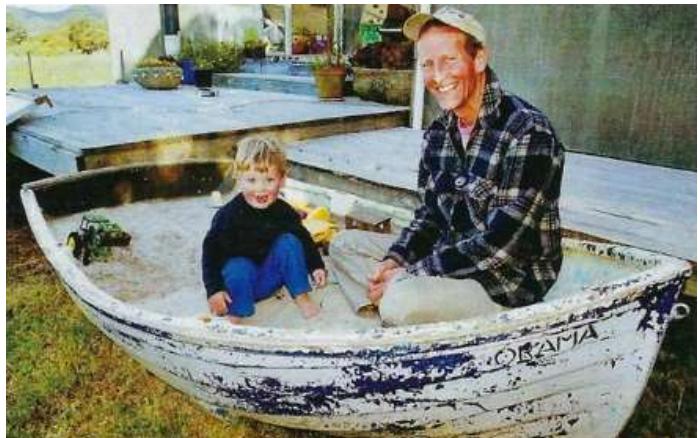
Spend any time listening to locals and you'll discover seething anti-DOC resentment. They'll tell you how DOC chopped down Norfolk Pines in a fit of ecological evangelism; how it removed the jetty at Port Fitzroy; how it never rebuilt a hut that burned down; how the tracks are overgrown and it can't look after the land so ' what hope is there of managing a marine reserve.

Some of the criticism is unwarranted or out of date. A lot of it stems from loving to bag the government or its agents. But whatever its validity, it was widespread and well known when DOC's Auckland office resurrected the unpopular marine reserve plan. Why the department strode into this suspicious, antagonistic environment with a plan for a vast no-take marine reserve - the most extreme form of marine protection (there are a variety of marine conservation options ranging from marine parks to banning commercial fishing to closed seasons) - has left observers shaking their heads.

Even one of the reserve's most committed island supporters, David Speir of Okiwi, says DOC was wearing flak' jackets from the start. "They knew what they wanted and they knew the shit was going to fly. DOC put its head up and said, 'Here I am, shoot at me'. And everybody did."

Driving the process is Auckland DOC conservator Rob McCallum, from his office overlooking Karangahape Road in uptown Auckland. At 39, he's a departmental star with a reputation for getting things done. McCallum makes no apologies for the reserve's scale.

There are many distinct habitats within the area that should be preserved for scientific study, he insists. Even though it's a big chunk of sea there's still more than 90 per cent of the Hauraki Gulf to fish in - and actually only 18 per cent of Great Barrier's coast will be closed.



Committed reserve supporter David Speir and son Taric - "DOC was wearing flak jackets from the start".

Deterioration of marine ecosystems from overfishing, pollution and sedimentation from erosion means it's vital to set aside some areas to hand on 'unspoilt' to future generations. At present just over 0.1 per cent of mainland New Zealand's waters out to the 12-mile limit is in marine reserves.

McCallum's undeterred by continued opposition and stresses that the submission phases, showing strong opposition especially among locals, haven't been a vote and it's how valid people's views are that matters. "The process isn't designed to be popular, it's designed to be fair."

Some would ask what's fair about ignoring the fact that the clear majority of people whose backyard it's in don't want it.

However McCallum responds that many national parks were initially opposed but are now treasured icons. "In this debate it's not about who makes the most noise or heat, it's about the people that are most affected."

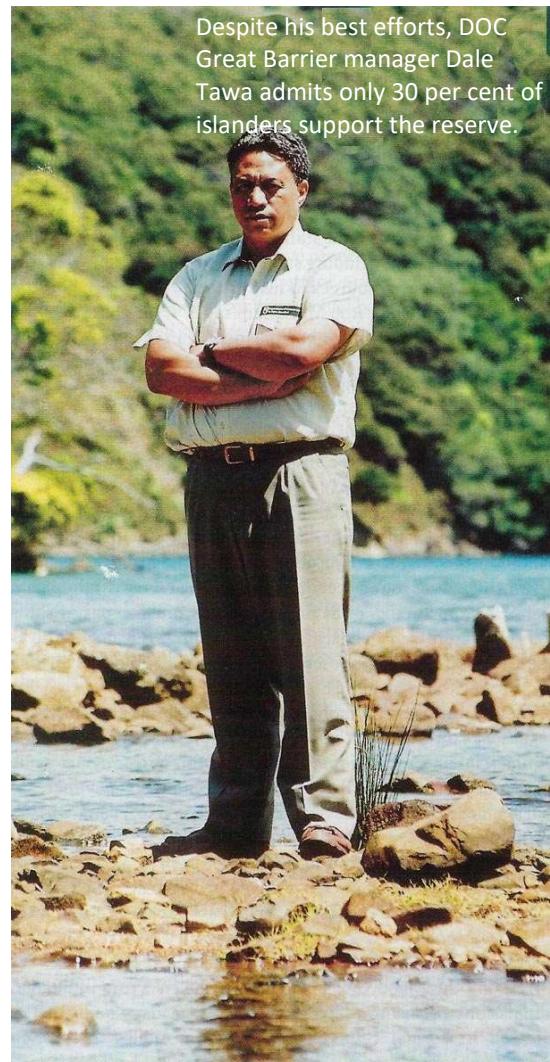
It's clear he doesn't care for the views of recreational fishermen, who've been among his loudest critics. Fishermen can go somewhere else, he says dismissively.

He points enthusiastically to a national survey suggesting 86 per cent of New Zealanders support marine reserves. But this is meaningless on its own - it's where they go that's crucial. Most people would say they like eating meat - but not necessarily if it was their cat.

DOC's main man on the island is area manager Dale Tawa, who arrived four years ago. It was his first job after 23 years in the army and obviously DOC thought the guy with tattoos on his hands, shades perched on his head and an "anti-procrastinating" list on his wall had the tough front needed to win people's support.

Locals have sympathy for Tawa, believing he's been lobbed a hospital pass by his superiors. Despite his best efforts, even the optimistic Tawa acknowledges only about 30 per cent of islanders support the reserve.

Determined DOC: Auckland conservator Rob McCallum is unconvinced by opponents' arguments.



What about statements last year that the reserve wouldn't go ahead if the islanders didn't want it?

Tawa awkwardly claims this referred only to the first 52,000 hectare proposal- the one altered slightly to its final form.

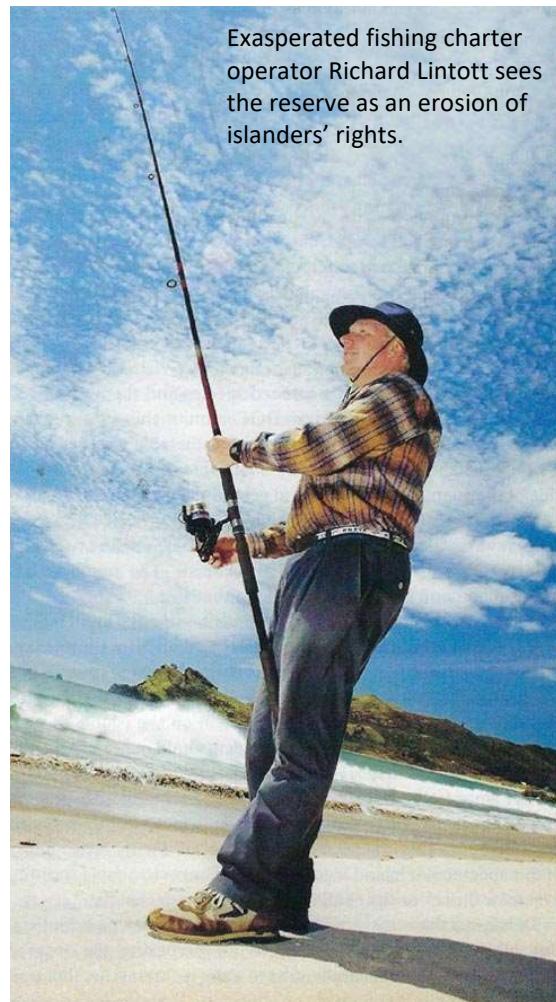
Critics say this is pathetic bureaucratic butt-covering. The reality is that the promise, made perhaps when DOC was confident of gaining island support, has left many residents feeling cheated and duped. Again.

Reserve opponents are easily dismissed as DOC knockers. But most have lived here for decades and followed the debate for years and their arguments are coherent and cogent - not "trash talk" or "f-off submissions", as Tawa labels many. Sure, there's anger at DOC's consultation process but the opponents have numerous logical objections to counter DOC's scientific soothsayers.

They point out recreational fishermen have virtually no impact on an area which has no threatened species and there's no need for such total exclusion. Even DOC admits this is a rugged, exposed Pacific coast. Big tides and unpredictable weather mean it's only fishable on good days by boats able to get round to that side of the island. Its isolation and geography protect it.

As charter fishing operator Richard Lintott says: "DOC argues every man and his dog from the mainland come out and rape and pillage the seabed. That's absolute rubbish. The numbers are insignificant and can't damage an area that size."

Of course, this is a two-edged argument - if not a lot of people go there, then what does it matter if it's closed off? But Lintott says on an island where there's no mains water, sewerage, streetlights, electricity etc, being able to catch a fish is a small luxury. (It's impossible to buy locally caught fresh fish on the island - it all comes from Auckland because no residents hold quota.) "And one of our very few privileges is being taken from us."



Exasperated fishing charter operator Richard Lintott sees the reserve as an erosion of islanders' rights.

Well-spoken but salty, Lintott was lured to the island by the sea and all it offers. Fishermen and divers he whisks out to sea with 230 horsepower on the back of his 7.5m boat are aghast so much of this spectacular island is going to be off limits to people wanting a feed for dinner or the challenge of playing a decent fish.

DOC says the reserve will be invaluable for marine scientists.

But other than DOC-sponsored work preparing the reserve proposal, very few researchers have shown interest in the area until now, despite its relatively pristine nature. Marine science is a tiny field in New Zealand and the remoteness and exposure of the northeast coast will limit its use by specialists, critics argue. They also note there are already two de facto marine reserves in the area that could be studied by scientists - the no-fishing area around the naval station south of the reserve and the cable zone north of the island. (Strangely, DOC hasn't surveyed these areas to see how appropriate they are.)

DOC says fishermen can go elsewhere but for people living near the reserve's coast that means travelling long distances.-And despite McCallum's insisting the reserve will take only 18 per cent of the island's edge, it will actually stop fishing along half the east coast (in addition to the naval exclusion zone) and encompass the three best anchorages.

DOC predicts the reserve will be an economic boon for an island where the median income is barely half that of Aucklanders. But remarkably it's done no economic impact survey to support this, merely insisting it's worked in other places.

The mild-mannered Lintott sighs with exasperation at this argument, saying it's ridiculous to compare the current proposal with popular reserves such as Goat Island near Leigh or the Poor Knights north of Whangarei. Access to both is off State Highway 1 and they have extensive established infrastructures. Getting to and around Great Barrier is much more difficult and expensive.

Kevin Burke, editor of the fortnightly Barrier Bulletin newspaper, contacted fishermen who are regular visitors to the island and many said they'd go elsewhere if a reserve was established, potentially robbing the economy of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

And Lintott argues even if people come to the island the reserve will be difficult to enjoy.

DOC's application identifies three access points. But good luck trying to launch a boat - there are no ramps. At two of them you can't even drive to the beach and at windswept Whangapoua you can get across the dangerous bar only an hour either side of high tide in good conditions.

So unless access is somehow sorted out, boats, including those carrying the touted tourists and supposed scientific researchers, will have to brave conditions and waste time coming round from calm harbours on the west of the island or take their chances launching from sweeping Medlands Beach in the south where Lintott lives.

Like many in this area, he fears that if the reserve goes in, both recreational and commercial fishermen will be squashed into the smaller southern area, simply hammering the environment there and making a nonsense of the marine protection goal. "And the tragedy of all this is that it's created division-on the island."

Scott Mabey maneuvers his ute up an improbably rutted ridge glancing out at the proposed reserve that will envelop his family's 280ha property. If a reserve goes ahead (the final decision rests with the Minister of Conservation, who must get agreement from the Ministers of Fisheries and Transport) it's people like the Mabey boys, Scott, Allan and Craig, that DOC will rely on to help police it.

DOC will give its island staff only a paltry \$50,000 a year to manage the reserve, including surveillance and publicity. There'll be no extra staff or resources to help with the massive expansion of territory it oversees, Rob McCallum says.

Asked how DOC will stop people fishing in the area - nearly half of which isn't even visible from land as it's over the horizon - he talks of help from the Navy and Air Force.

But could an Orion crew really see if someone has a line over the side? And anyone fishing would have ample time to stash their rods and dump fish if the Navy cruised by. Dale Tawa mentions remote drones and photographing offenders. It's hard not to laugh.

DOC has one patrol boat, based at Port Fitzroy. Tawa admits they can't launch it on the east coast. So if anyone is spotted fishing in the area it would take DOC at least an hour, weather permitting, to get round the top of the island and try to apprehend them. Tawa also talks of having locals in strategic coastal spots who can radio in if they see someone fishing. But nobody lives along the top half of the reserve's coastline - and how's anyone going to see those over the horizon?

Clearly, the reserve simply can't be policed or its aims enforced because it's too vast and there are no resources. Critics say taking commercial and recreational fishermen, who currently act as de facto monitors, out of a region where fish numbers may increase will simply turn it into a haven for poachers -like a bank with its vault doors open.

By upsetting and angering locals with the push for a giant reserve, DOC's chances of getting widespread cooperation are slim to nil.

Scott Mabey is blunt: "If it'd been a reasonable size I'd support it and help police it. But if they go ahead with what they want there's no way I'd bother. Nah, bugger them."

In 2003 the Mabey boys and mother Helen wrote individual submissions opposing the reserve. Then just days before DOC released its formal reserve application in August 2004, Rob McCallum visited.

He said DOC recognised they'd be affected by the reserve (because of their isolation the family rely on seafood at least twice a week) and was proposing an exemption that would let them fish up to 200m offshore.

To DOC this might have seemed a rational solution. But on an island where everyone knows everyone and relies on neighbourly goodwill the Mabneys were horrified at being singled out for special treatment. Word quickly flashed round the island that they'd cut a deal with DOC. (The family's situation was made even more awkward by the fact they lease 300ha of DOC farmland.) The reality is they never asked for the dispensation, have flatly rejected it and still completely oppose the reserve.

"It was a public embarrassment," says Scott. "It hasn't helped our integrity."

Adds Allan: "Basically they're just trying to buy our support."

We wouldn't have minded if there'd been a reserve somewhere in our backyard - but it's the whole backyard."

A concession to fish within the reserve was extended to one other family, the Ropes, who farm Arid Island under lease from DOC. Bryce Rope said he felt caught when DOC made the offer because farm managers are isolated and rely on seafood to survive. His daughter, Charmaine Foster, one of those who'd benefit from the deal, is appalled her family has been offered special treatment. "We're all New Zealanders and I don't want to be singled out just because we've got property there - it's all New Zealanders or none."

For Conservation Minister Chris Carter to approve the marine reserve he has to be convinced that any impact or objections are insignificant or can be overcome. _

He may have a hard job. Alongside crucial adjoining landowners like the Mabeys are other vital groups opposing the plan. The area's main hapu calls DOC's forging ahead with the proposal while the two parties were consulting "offensive".

Ngati Rehua Trust Board chairman Mervyn McGee says the area has been a traditional fishing ground for 600 years but believes there are other ways to protect it - such as a mataitai (allowing controlled recreational fishing while excluding commercial boats).

A no-take reserve could operate within that (a compromise made in June 2004 in Stewart Island's Paterson Inlet).

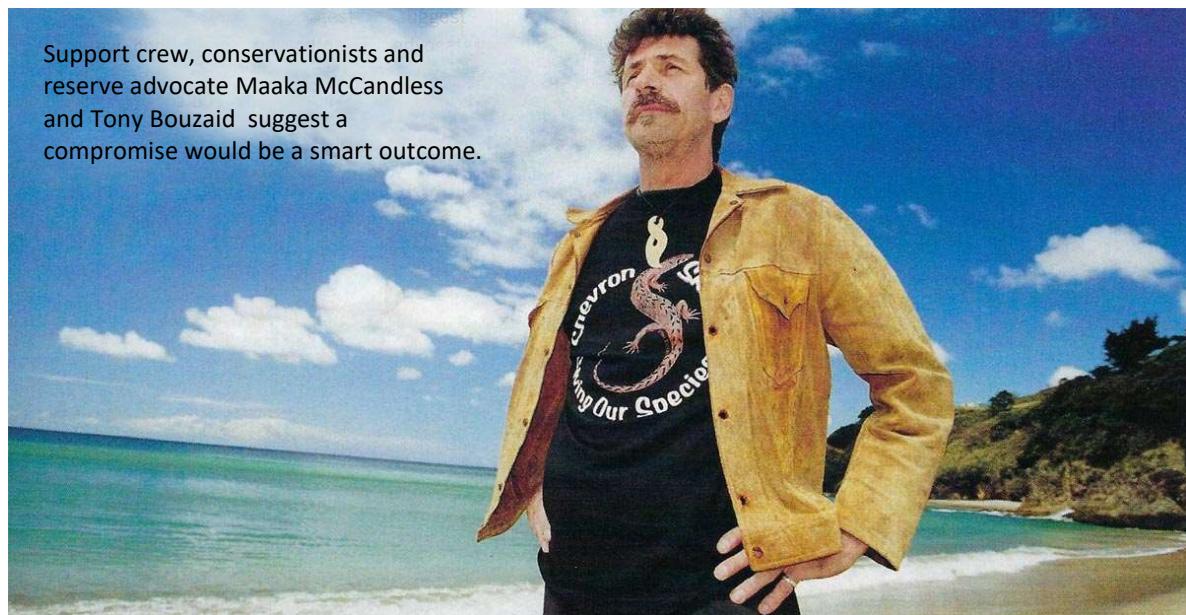
"DOC's process was to put everything in place, then come and consult. It was almost tokenism," says McGee.

Auckland City Council, under whose bureaucratic ambit Great Barrier sits, also opposes the reserve in its present form, wanting a more coordinated approach to Hauraki Gulf marine protection among many other things. The island's own elected community board also formally opposed the application.

Northern Inshore Fisheries chairman Brent Marshall, who represents commercial fishermen in the area, says he's never seen such united opposition to a reserve proposal.

After spending nearly four years and \$250,000 massaging DOC's message, department bosses must be concerned so many of those most affected still don't want a bar of their good idea.

Some on the island do though. A supportive petition collected the names of more than 200 residents or ratepayers in September. (Its weight or accuracy is contentious. Many people didn't actually sign it but had support "confirmed" by phone or email. North & South even spoke to one person whose girlfriend signed for him without his knowledge or consent.)



Support crew, conservationists and reserve advocate Maaka McCandless and Tony Bouzaid suggest a compromise would be a smart outcome.

Maaka McCandless was one who signed happily. He manages a t conservation trust, lives like many islanders in a half-finished house backed into bush, wears a tee-shirt crying out to save the island's rare chevron skink and is a strong reserve supporter. His parents were immigrant

lighthouse keepers who learned Maori on the East Cape and encouraged their son to do the same. Locals call him a bush lawyer because, without formal training, he's become an authority on resource management law. His critics reckon he has the ability to tie things up for ages in court.

While he says marine environments need to be saved, McCandless agrees islanders have been misled over the reserve.

He encourages those weighing up the proposal to be smart and compromise. "Don't be cut-throat. Think about the people who've been living here for a hundred years and get a meal from there. But also, get them on side. Sit around a table and say, 'Hey, what do you want and what do you want?'"

The suggestion isn't as dreamily idealistic as it seems. The Guardians of Fiordland (North & South July 2004) showed that disparate locals can agree how to manage and protect their waters through a process of gifts and gains.

Up in Port Fitzroy, conservationist Tony Bouzaid is nursing a gash to his cheek. Given the attacks on him for trumpeting the reserve's benefits you might imagine it's from an opponent's barb. In fact it's from a branch he walked into on Glenfern Sanctuary, the deeply green ecological reserve he's established where pests are persecuted and native birds reintroduced.

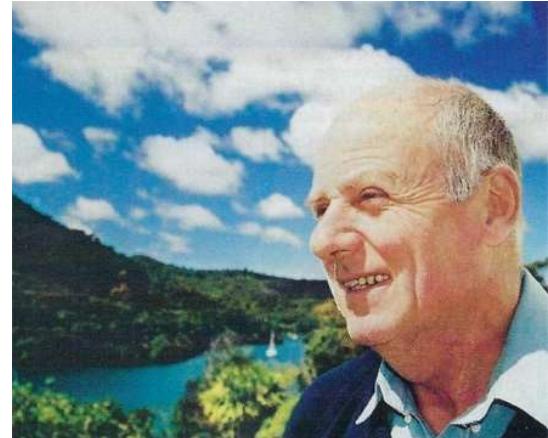
Bouzaid believes the marine reserve will help put Great Barrier on the ecotourism map. Those opposing it are typical of the "not in my backyard" mentality, he says, but he acknowledges DOC could have a lot more people on side by now. "They didn't handle it well. They came out with a glossy brochure and made some questionable statements. They should have started low key and told people approximately what they were thinking of before coming up with a formal proposal. But they're in too much of a rush."

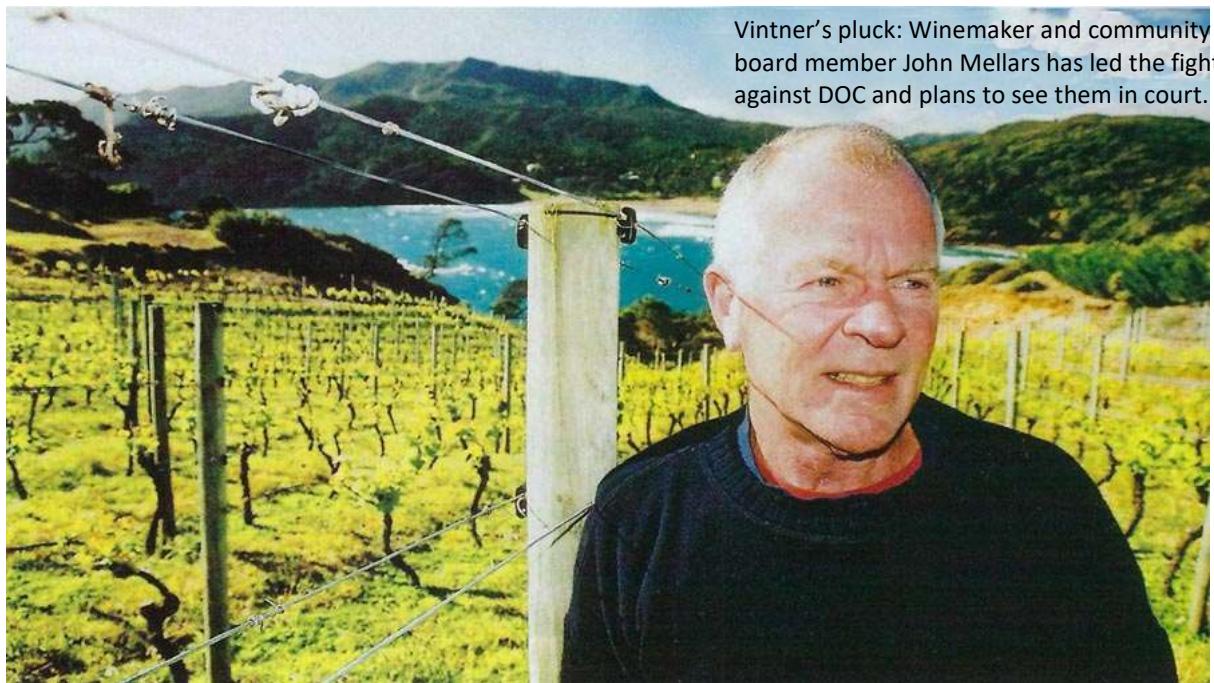
Bouzaid would accept a compromise - even watering down the no-take status - because anything's better than no protection.

At the first meeting of the newly elected Great Barrier Community Board in November Bouzaid was elected chairman, knocking back a challenge from John Mellars, the incumbent and his ideological enemy.

In the early '90s Mellars produced the island's first wine from 1500 vines on a small block at Okupu Bay and has just released his 2003 vintage at \$40 a bottle. Chances are, Rob McCallum won't be getting one for Christmas.

In June McCallum warned if Mellars didn't tone down his attacks on local DOC staff he'd advise them to take legal action. The wry but riled Mellars shot back that he'd continue to "object loudly to whoever I choose, in whatever manner I choose," adding it wasn't a civil servant's place to tell an elected representative what to do. He agreed with McCallum that DOC staff were dedicated and well meaning. "The problem is some of them are also seemingly brainwashed, environmentally irrational and devoid of community spirit or common sense."





Vintner's pluck: Winemaker and community board member John Mellars has led the fight against DOC and plans to see them in court.

Mellars polarises people but still polled second highest in October's community board elections despite not advertising or campaigning. To get to his place you have to leave your car, walk round one bay, skirt a headland, cross a stream and look for the quaint stone winery where he gives tastings by appointment. At low tide he practises his golf, driving balls far onto the sandy flats in front of his pohutukawa-fringed house.

He started smoking again in 2004 and half-seriously blames DOC for that too given the stress it's caused. "If DOC had sat down and talked to people ... they'd have no trouble getting a marine reserve - it just wouldn't be quite like the one they've got."

Despite the overwhelming island opposition to the reserve Mellars has little confidence local submissions will be taken into account. "But they'll be very useful when we go to court."

And that's where this battle is heading. Strong and well-funded fishing lobbies, iwi and local groups are all threatening court action if the reserve is approved. Commercial fishermen will seek compensation. Whether it ends up with lawyers involved depends on what Conservation Minister Chris Carter decides, probably early in 2005.

Public submissions on the application are being collated (by, former DOC worker) and then DOC will send them to Carter along with its answers to objections and its recommendations.

Carter says he'll spend some of his summer considering submissions and visiting the island and will get an independent report.

But this statutory process again gives little comfort to reserve opponents. DOC is the applicant for the reserve and has carried out all the consultation and controlled submissions. Yet the person deciding if it goes ahead is its own minister who gets advice from it every day. It's the player and the referee.

As National Party environment spokesman Nick Smith, says "How can DOC be a neutral arbiter of a marine reserve application when it's the applicant? It's judge, jury and executioner - it's bullshit."

A defensive and at times snappy Chris Carter says that's his job under the Marine Reserves Act. "It's my obligation as a minister to be objective in the decision-making process."

This is again of absolutely no comfort to those fighting the reserve.

Carter's a passionate cheerleader for marine protection and reserves, saying the amount we have now is "pitiful".

He's determined to have 10 per cent of all the country's waters in some form of marine protection by 2010. (Currently there's 7.3 per cent through 18 marine reserves, four of which are in the Hauraki Gulf. Great Barrier's reserve would lift that to 7.6 per cent.)

He frequently says he's impatient to see more marine protection and has called it his highest priority before the next election.

He's bagged fishermen and anyone who's opposed marine reserve proposals where he doesn't like their objections (despite fishing groups having supported 12 of the country's marine reserves) and rails that it takes so long to establish them. (Paterson Inlet's took 17 years and shrank to a tenth of its original size.)

He calls no-take marine reserves the most important and significant form of marine protection. (And they're the main form he has jurisdiction over - the Minister of Fisheries oversees other tools such as mataitai, allowing local fishing without commercial incursion.)

So it's not unreasonable for Barrier residents opposed to 50,000ha of their coastal waters being set aside for science to wonder if someone so zealous about marine reserves will be able to effectively weigh their common-sense concerns against persuasion from his own department.

And beyond objectivity, isn't there a temptation for Carter to approve the reserve because the success of his ministerial tenure will partly be measured by how much concrete marine protection he achieves? Not to mention that creating the country's biggest marine reserve close to the mainland would be a noteworthy addition to Labour's manifesto in election year.

If Carter wanted another opinion on the issue he could chat to caucus colleague and Deputy Speaker Ann Hartley. For 18 years the Northcote MP has owned a hideaway bach south of the proposed reserve and she knows how important it is for people to be able to fish in the region.

She favours a community-based solution incorporating several types and degrees of marine protection, including a smaller reserve.

"But people aren't going to help unless you're reasonable to them. I see people being much more responsible than ever so I just think it's an opportunity being missed if you get offside with them."

Carter agrees. Asked how crucial community buy-in is he responds: "It's absolutely critical because the marine reserve won't work unless it's got local support."

So would the proposal go ahead if there was obvious local opposition?

"No. Because we have a clear process where issues like that are considered. My department doesn't have staff at most marine reserves so they have to have the support of the local community." "

It's worth noting the Marine Reserves Act is being revised and this would supposedly streamline the process for getting no-take areas.

More importantly, Carter has introduced a Marine Protected Areas plan that over the next three years would see greater coordination of where marine reserves go and attempt to get crucial support from all parties before applications are made. Neither move will affect Great Barrier's situation though, because DOC isn't prepared to delay its proposal. But more ground-up consultation and ending the random, ad hoc nature of reserve applications could avoid the mess that's occurred on Great Barrier being repeated elsewhere as the government strives to rapidly expand protected areas.

When Carter visits Great Barrier this summer he could pop in to Charlie and Winnie Blackwell's farm just south of the airport at Claris and hear why they oppose the reserve. He'd probably meet two-year-old grandson Tairone, who's sixth generation on Charlie's side, fifth on Winnie's.

"This is why we feel so strongly about it because it's our heritage," says Winnie. "We want our grandchildren to enjoy what we enjoyed."

Charlie remembers, as a kid, sneaking his Dad's .303 and shooting into the waves to stun fish then pulling them out of the surf with a shark hook on a bamboo pole. Now the family only catches enough for a feed and Charlie has a rule on his boat that any fish over 121b (5.4 kgs) goes back in the water to keep breeding.

Like many he can't understand why fish-spawning grounds aren't protected rather than the back of their island. (DOC insists it's about protecting marine habitats rather than just fish - but opponents wonder how dangling a hook off a boat destroys a habitat.)

"They won't listen to you. They come to you with an idea and you tell them what you think and they just ignore you. It's the arrogance of them that gets me," says Charlie.

His watch is an hour slow. It's his protest against daylight saving - he comes from the earthy and honest school where you work till dark then turn on the lights and carry on.

And he's ready for some more protesting - if the reserve goes in he, like many other islanders, will continue fishing there.

"He's a stubborn Blackwell," Winnie mutters. "But if they think they're fighting with us they've got worse coming up with our children and grandchildren."

They'll both turn 70 in 2005 and in their time they've seen a lot of change and learned a lot. Charlie says DOC staff might have university degrees and read all the textbooks but they'd be well served if they asked locals what they knew about the environment they shared.

"To be honest I think the Barrier's quite capable of looking after its own resources. We don't know everything - but we do know a little bit."

