



Te Pānui Kaitiaki o Ata Whenua

In this issue, we highlight the launch of the Deep Cove marine education programme and the remarkable discovery of a giant black coral in Fiordland. You'll also find updates on recreational fishing information, citizen science for blue cod, hāpuku tagging, and the work of Southland's marine biosecurity ambassador over the summer.

We begin by acknowledging the outstanding contribution of long-serving Guardian Mark Peychers, whose dedication has played a significant role in championing Fiordland's protection.

As always, we welcome your feedback and thank you for your continued interest and support.

Meet the Guardians

Thirty years is a helluva commitment. But that's how long Mark Peychers has committed to the Fiordland Marine Guardians (the Guardians) – over 30 years since a ragtag group of commercial and recreational fishers first sat around a table in Te Anau to discuss how they could care for Fiordland's marine environment, and 21 years since the Fiordland (Te Moana o Atawhenua) Marine Management Act was passed (2005) and the Guardians were formally recognised.

Peychers, a crayfisherman in his younger years, was there at the outset, and has worked tirelessly as a Guardian throughout. After three decades, he's about to step down.

As friend, crayfisher and fellow Guardian Pete Young says, *"Mark – he's Mr Fiordland, his contribution to the Guardians has been above and beyond us all. His astuteness, his professionalism is just next level. He's never been scared to say, 'No, that's not right'. It's a massive loss, a massive loss to Fiordland that he's no longer going to be there."*

The vision statement of the Guardians is all about caring for Fiordland's marine environment. Mark Peychers says it's simple. *"It's always been about the protection of Fiordland's marine environment. I don't own quota, I haven't owned quota for 20 years, it's always been about what's best for Fiordland."*

"Peych was a Guardian even before the Guardians," says Pete Young.

Peychers – derived from 'fisher' in French – made a major contribution to Fiordland as a lobster fisher. His first expedition south was at the age 16, sailing all the way down the West Coast from Nelson as 'boat boy' on Vic King-Turner's crayboat. He went on to buy his own vessel, Spindrift, and lobster fishing in Fiordland.

Peychers' stepped in to representative roles in the fishing industry at a critical time. He was dragged to meetings of the Fiordland Fishermen's Association in 1980 (going on to serve as President), then the NZ Federation of Commercial Fishermen by Vic King-Turner and good friend

John Steffens, the first Chair of the Guardians.

This was during the major downturn in the lobster fishery. The Quota Management System was introduced, but not before Peychers and associates worked tirelessly on the science behind the TACC (Total Allowable Commercial Catch), and ways to improve fishery techniques to ensure minimal loss.

"We had to learn best practice as to how to look after the animals," he said.

Peychers also worked to improve the design of escape gaps on lobster pots that eventually became mandatory in every Quota Management Area.

He had to end his fishing career when he suffered a back injury, but since the early 2000s has continued working for CRA8, and for the Fiordland Lobster Company. He has also committed an enormous amount of time to the Guardians.

"It's been his whole life. If anyone should be recognised, it should be Mark," Pete Young says.

Guardian Chairperson Dr Rebecca McLeod says, *"Mark can 'straddle all worlds'. He can be on a fishing boat thinking about practicalities, anchoring in a specific location, then he can zoom right out and think about government legislation and policy. He's gonna leave the biggest shoes to fill. He always puts in so much work, and brings it back to what it's all about, the big picture."*

McLeod says Peychers' fishery experience has been critical to the Guardians. *"Mark has lived through those days of cutting quota voluntarily and taking massive hits, but also relying on getting good information to inform decision making."*



Today, we have so many issues around fishery sustainability in Fiordland. What Mark has brought to the Guardians, and Pete Young too, is that experience of turning a fishery around. They showed that you can do it, but that it doesn't come without some sacrifice."

"I think it puts the Guardians in a way stronger position when it comes to working with other sectors like the recreational fishery or charter operators for example."

Pete Young also points out that Mark Peychers is never there for the awards or to hear the accolades. *"Peych never celebrates what he does, he's never there to receive the praise. All he's done, it's never done for personal gain."*

Dr McLeod also acknowledges that modesty. *"Mark has such pride, quite rightfully, in what we've achieved. He doesn't need others telling him, cos he's seen it with his own eyes. We all – not only the other Guardians, but everyone who enjoys the Fiordland marine world – owes Mark Peychers a huge debt of thanks. It's incredible what he's given."*

She can't yet say who is going to take his place on the Guardians.

"We'll find someone to fill his seat, but it's gonna take a very long while to fill his shoes."

On behalf of the Guardians and everyone who values Fiordland's marine environment, thank you, Mark, for all you have given to this place.



Deep Cove marine education programme



School camps to Deep Cove, in the heart of the Fiordland National Park, will have the opportunity to explore the marine environment with the launch of a new marine education programme.

The Fiordland Marine Guardians partnered with the Deep Cove Outdoor Education Trust (www.deepcovehostel.co.nz) to develop a marine education programme befitting the unique and fragile underwater environment.

More than 1200 students from schools in Southland and Otago attend the Deep Cove Hostel for school camps each year.

Students are now able to go for a virtual 'dive' in the fiords without getting wet, thanks to a virtual reality experience developed by researchers at Victoria University of Wellington. This is supported by an engaging film, teacher resources and educational posters, to provide a comprehensive module aligned with the year 7 and 8 curriculums.

The programme provides a range of interactive activities before, during, and after camp, to grow students' understanding of the unique marine environment, the pressures it faces, and how to care for it.

Fiordland Marine Guardian John Cushen, a former school Associate Principal, says that for people to develop a sense of caring, they must first understand what it is that is so special.

"I strongly believe that this programme will influence the students' attitude towards the marine environment

at a foundational time in their personal development. Our marine programme is designed to immerse the students in the environment, to spark their interest. I would then hope it would naturally follow that they would be compelled to care for the place."

Mr Cushen was delighted by the community's contribution to the programme's development, including researchers, education experts, the Department of Conservation and Fiordland business operators.

"This is how we tend to roll in Fiordland – we all want the same for this place, in terms of protecting it for future generations – and we're really good at working together to make things happen."

Deep Cove Outdoor Education Trust Trustee Tom Clark said there were practical steps that people can take to protect the marine environment. Fishing was an important part of the school camps, with many students catching their first fish in Deep Cove. It was a great time to be instilling responsible fishing practises such as fish identification, good handling, and catch and release – messages all supported within the new marine education programme.

The marine education programme is available to participating schools from the start of 2026.

The Fiordland Marine Education Programme received a Highly Commended recognition at the 2025 Environment Southland Community Awards.



The great Fiordland (big) black coral hunt

Most people that have dived in Fiordland know, once you break through the dark freshwater layer and into the clear sea water, you are almost guaranteed to see black coral.

Its eerie white shapes lurk out of the darkness and, once you stop to look at the colonies in detail, all sorts of life can be seen living on the coral – snake stars, ascidians, bryozoans; sharks and squid even use them to attach their eggs.

It has been estimated that the larger coral colonies may grow to 4-5m across and live for over 400 years, but one question that scientists and the Department of Conservation (DOC) have always pondered is, what is the biggest black colony

in Fiordland? Recently in January 2026 DOC and researchers from Victoria University discovered a very large black coral living in Taitetimu/Caswell Sound, it measured ~ 4.1m high by 4.6 across and the biggest one that anyone on the trip had seen before.

The discovery prompted a lot of discussion about large black coral colonies in Piopiotahi/Milford Sound. Ken Grange, black coral legend and former Fiordland Marine Guardian knew of large corals in Patea/Doubtful Sound and Te Puitaha/Breaksea Sound but, was there one bigger than 4.1 x 4.6m?

So, we thought it would be a good opportunity to ask those users of

the fiords if they know of large black coral colonies that DOC/researchers can measure to see if it's possible to work out the biggest one. We'd love to document the large ones and check to see if they are in places that might be vulnerable to disturbance.

If anyone would like to provide GPS coordinates or descriptions that can be followed up, it would be hugely appreciated – please contact the Guardians at info@fmg.org.nz.

The discovery of this large black coral received national media attention, for example:

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/583906/centuries-old-enormous-black-coral-found-in-fiordland>

Improving recreational fishing information in Fiordland

Good information is essential for effective fisheries management, but in Fiordland there are still important gaps, particularly for recreational fishing, which makes up most of the activity in the internal waters of Fiordland.

While there is good data on commercial fishing in the Fiordland Marine Area, this provides limited insight locally. Commercial fishing is closed in Fiordland's internal waters, and activity within the fiords is relatively low.

Recent improvements are helping strengthen other datasets. Amateur Charter Vessel operators have moved from paper forms to mandatory electronic reporting in 2024, improving accuracy and timeliness.

Fiordland's internal waters are solely a recreational fishery, yet this is where data is weakest and key datasets remain limited. An example is the blue cod potting survey which has

been discontinued due to cost and concerns about fish mortality, reducing the availability of long-term local monitoring data.

The main national tool for getting information on recreational catch is the National Panel Survey (NPS) and boat ramp surveys. The NPS is a telephone-based diary survey conducted every five years, where selected households report their fishing activity over time. While this provides reliable estimates at national and regional scales, it is less precise in Fiordland because:

- It relies on sampling from a large resident population, which Fiordland lacks.
- Much of the fishing effort comes from visitors rather than local residents.
- Fishing activity is seasonal and highly variable.
- Sample sizes in the region are small, increasing uncertainty in estimates.

As a result, existing methods can struggle to accurately capture recreational catch and effort in this unique setting.

The Guardians met with the Minister for Oceans and Fisheries in 2025 about these issues and are working with MPI/Fisheries New Zealand to explore solutions. One promising option is recreational self-reporting, using simple digital tools to capture catch and effort information at a more local scale. There would be wider engagement before progressing any solutions, to help inform practical and user-friendly approaches to improving recreational fishing information in Fiordland.

Improving recreational data is intended to support future reviews of the recreational management measures that were implemented in 2024, allowing us to track how fish stocks respond and ensure management remains effective, evidence-based, and fit for Fiordland.

Citizen Science for blue cod: Working together

The Guardians are supporting a collaboration with the University of Otago and Amateur Charter Vessel (ACV) operators to improve information on blue cod in Fiordland.

With the blue cod potting survey discontinued due to cost and concerns about fish mortality, an important information gap has emerged, particularly around sex ratios, which are key to understanding stock health. Alternative methods like baited underwater video surveys are being explored, but these cannot reliably capture sex data.

This project takes a citizen science approach to help fill that gap. A University of Otago Master's student, trained by Earth Sciences New Zealand (formerly NIWA), will work with ACV operators to collect information on:

- Fish length
- Sex of blue cod

Operators will be supported with clear guidance and photo resources, and the existing ACV reporting app can be used to record data, keeping the process simple and practical.

This initiative complements other monitoring tools and highlights the value of partnerships between fishers and scientists. By working together, we can gather information that is otherwise difficult and costly to obtain.

Better data will strengthen our understanding of blue cod in Fiordland and support informed, adaptive management into the future.

Hāpuku tagging in the Tamatea/ Dusky complex

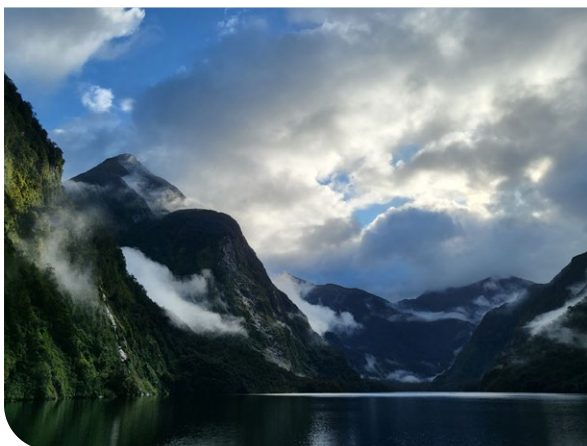


When Captain James Cook came to Dusky Bay more than 250 years ago, the area abounded with life, fish and shellfish were seemingly in never ending supply and hāpuku or groper were easy to catch in shallow water. Fast forward to 2026 and species like hāpuku have been removed from the recreational catch list inside the fiords to try and recover stocks so that they can once again be caught sustainably.

There are some signs that hāpuku may be doing okay in some parts of the fiord and recent BUV (baited underwater video) surveys picked up a few in the shallower heads and bays in the fiords and so the Guardians, DOC and fisheries are keen to try and understand a little more about the remaining stocks.

In June 2026 it is hoped that DOC, Auckland Museum and the Tindale Foundation will undertake a tag and release programme throughout the Tamatea/Dusky complex (including Te Puaitaha/Breaksea Sound and Tamatea/Dusky Sound). The aim of the trip will be to collect information on the abundance and size structure of hāpuku in the fiords and by tagging as many fish as possible, see how far they travel around (or if they travel around).

Planning work is still underway at this stage, but information will hopefully be available soon.



What to do if you catch a tagged fish

If you're lucky enough to encounter a tagged fish while fishing in Fiordland, you have the opportunity to contribute valuable information to ongoing marine research. The process is simple but important—accurate reporting helps build a clearer picture of fish movements, growth, and population health.

First, check the fish for a small tag, usually located near the dorsal fin, and carefully record the tag number. This unique ID is essential for linking your catch back to its original release.

Next, take a moment to gather key details about the capture. At a minimum, record the date, species, location, and fish length. If possible, also note depth, capture method, and any observations about the fish's condition.

You can then choose to either keep or release the fish within legal limits. If releasing, handle it gently and return it to the water quickly to maximise its chances of survival and future recapture.

Finally, report the catch through the Tindale Marine Research Charitable Trust's tag recovery system [here](#). Submitting your information ensures it contributes to scientific understanding and sustainable fisheries management.

By taking a few extra minutes to record and report a tagged fish, you become part of a nationwide citizen science effort helping protect New Zealand's unique marine environment.



Marine biosecurity ambassador for Southland

John Carter has spent the summer roaming the waterways of Fiordland.

As marine biosecurity ambassador for Southland, he is carrying out a new role created by a partnership between Environment Southland and Biosecurity New Zealand to bolster the Protect our Paradise marine biosecurity campaign.

His job has been to visit boat ramps, wharfs and marine-adjacent events, promoting and protecting our precious marine environment.

Environment Southland team leader marine Kathryn McLachlan said John, who is also a diver in the Ata Whenua Fiordland Undaria Control programme, is the perfect person for the job.

“He’s the kind of person who knows everybody and can chat away to anyone, making him the perfect ambassador.”

“He does that by working across Fiordland and Southland, focusing on entry points to the Fiordland Marine Area like the Milford and Doubtful Sound boat ramps,” she said.

“He’s popped into the hostel at Deep Cove to talk to the kids, and the Rotary Club, attended an EnviroSchools workshop, and any event that we know is happening to tell people about the work we do.”

While chatting and making connections, John is also collecting valuable data for Biosecurity New Zealand including where people are coming from, what kind of boats they are operating and what kind of activities they are engaging in, she said.

Environment Southland also oversees Clean Vessel Passes, which prevent the introduction of damaging pests to pristine areas, and Kathryn said there is an increase in these passes being issued thanks to John’s advocacy.

His recent visit to Colac Bay was a true two-way street and example of how important these face-to-face interactions are.

“They had some ghost fishing gear floating in the water that could become harmful to other boats, and because John has the contacts, he was able to escalate it. It was cleaned up within a week, so the community saw an outcome straight away.”

“He’s visiting communities and events right across the region and making these valuable connections,” she said.

“The pilot has been incredibly worthwhile and we’re hoping to continue this important advocacy work into the future.”

Heading to Fiordland this summer? Be prepared Hold a clean vessel pass

Applying for a clean vessel pass is a simple process that can be completed online at www.es.govt.nz/fmpp or by calling Environment Southland on **0800 76 88 45** to receive a hard copy form.

Your clean vessel pass comes with a copy of our new book *Fiordland by Sea* – the must have guide for boaties.



Download the NZ Fishing Rules app

We get it – Fiordland's recreational fishing rules are getting rather complicated. To ensure you have the most up-to-date information at your fingertips, download or update this app before you head over the hill. [NZ Fishing Rules mobile app | NZ Government.](#)

Download the Mainland Catch app

Do your bit to help the rebuilding of Fiordland's fisheries. Mainland Catch is anonymous, easy to use, and gives you a record of your catches so you can show off to your mates. [Mainland Catch App – Fish Mainland.](#)

The new version of the Mainland Catch application is available here:



FMG-agency meetings 2026

Thursday 13 August

Environment Southland, Invercargill

Wednesday 11 November

Te Anau (venue TBC)

For more information visit www.fmg.org.nz

All welcome

Our quarterly FMG agency meetings are open to the public and agenda items for discussion at these meetings can be sent to the Guardians. The agenda is set three weeks in advance of a meeting.

Keeping in touch

The Guardians work hard to facilitate community-led, proactive approaches that are informed by the best scientific information and knowledge available. We place a high value on the experiences and understanding of the Fiordland community and encourage you to share your thoughts with us. Please let us know if there is anything you would like us to cover in our next issue.

For more information visit fmg.org.nz or email info@fmg.org.nz.

Thank you

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