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# GHOST FISHING

**Kathryn Curzon** heads underwater to help the Ghost Fishing New Zealand crew clean up Wellington Harbour.

Descending into the Taputeranga marine reserve off Island Bay, Wellington, on a sunny day, I was astounded by the volume and diversity of ocean life this much-loved dive spot supports.

Inquisitive blue cod didn't hesitate to come within inches of my dive mask, the rock pinnacles were covered in healthy kelp beds, and it was easy to spot a large resident conger eel hiding from the sun.

Sitting on the doorstep of our capital city, this popular marine reserve stretches across 8.5 square kilometers and is positively thriving.

But the same can't be said for other underwater areas around Wellington, which are struggling against a continual tide of pollution from our shores.

Diving with Rob Wilson of Ghost Fishing New Zealand, I discovered the scale of the issue and the

inspiring work it is doing to improve Wellington's underwater environment before it's too late.

The organisation is the New Zealand branch of a worldwide organisation that removes lost or "ghost" fishing gear from the oceans, protecting marine life from net entanglement, and removing waste so that marine life can recover and thrive.

The team at Ghost Fishing NZ has taken this concept to heart and is working hard to clean up Wellington's waters. They remove not only ghost nets but also plastic waste, tyres, cones, batteries, shopping trolleys, angling gear, and more. All of this is collected during volunteer-led clean-ups both underwater and along the shoreline.

The first time Rob and a six-person team organised a clean-up dive at Wellington's Clyde Quay, they

removed about 1200 glass bottles and three tonnes of waste in just one 80-minute-long dive! Another clean up in 2019 at the same site removed an additional 1735 glass bottles.

"If we did it again now, we could probably find another layer of bottles," says Rob, Founder and President of Ghost Fishing NZ.

The Ghost Fishing NZ team, which is based in the capital, does a clean-up in the Wellington area once a month and sometimes heads further afield, with a recent trip to remove rubbish in Auckland's Okahu Bay.

"We're talking hundreds of kilos of rubbish being pulled out every trip," adds co-founder Serena Cox.

The extent of the problem is staggering. The seabed opposite popular Frank Kitts park is littered with plastic cups from waterfront markets and events, blown from overflowing litter bins into the ocean.



Kathryn Curzon diving in warmer climes. Cuttlefish and blue cod in Wellington Harbour. Photos: Kathryn Curzon.



Ghost Fishing NZ founder Rob Wilson.

As layers of waste accumulate on the seabed, marine life simply ceases to exist in places badly affected by sea litter, including Clyde Quay. These patches of "dead ocean" ultimately limit the fish stocks we love to catch and eat.

"It's so devoid of life. It's such a massive blanket of junk [at Clyde Quay]. The sediment beneath the waste is just black mud; nothing can live in it," says Rob.

There is, however, something to be hopeful about thanks to Rob and Serena's tireless hard work.

Their focus on removing waste from Wellington's Frank Kitts lagoon has seen the return of numerous eagle rays and stingrays, which are a source of local pride and are often featured on social media.

After toxic rubbish, such as tyres, car batteries, and scooters, was removed from the lagoon, the rays have gone from zero to flourishing. Rob has also seen the return of large brood stock snapper to the area.

"I have never seen snapper that big anywhere in the whole Wellington region. They're just massive," says Rob, clearly delighted.

While the challenges of sites needing repeated clean-ups and Wellington's unpredictable dive

conditions must no doubt take their toll, Rob and Serena's commitment and enthusiasm remain undiminished.

Their passionate "de-critter crews" return any living marine life found on waste they've collected back to the ocean.

Data collected during clean-ups is used to identify long-term waste hotspots, and Ghost Fishing NZ works closely with councils to improve waste management practices.

The couple is also busy with outreach and education work, and you can see why Rob and Serena won Wellingtonians of the Year in 2017 and were invited to deliver a TEDx Wellington talk in 2019.

"It's full on – it really is. But then you do a clean-up and pull out all that rubbish, and you're like 'Yeah, that's why we're doing it.'"

Drifting between one of Taputeranga's crevasses, Rob's passion for his work is clearly evident. He points out the underwater treasures around him, including carpets of vibrant jewel anemones in every shade of pink and purple imaginable.

Watching him work, I realise how important these efforts are for the wellbeing of humans as well as marine life. The Ghost Fishing NZ team is changing the face of Wellington's underwater landscapes for the benefit of us all.



## How can you get involved?

Everybody can join GFNZ's clean-up events, and you don't need to be a diver to help. You can also become a member and take part in their pool diving sessions, annual quizzes, and more. Details of membership and events can be found at [www.ghostfishing.co.nz](http://www.ghostfishing.co.nz) and on Facebook @ GhostfishingNZ.

Ocean waste drone invented, see overleaf

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