**A fishy story**



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A prime example of selecting evidence to suit a purpose...

Last month the environmental organisation WWF and recreational fishing advocacy group Legasea [co-authored an opinion piece](https://www.nzgeo.com/mailster/513570/50e147b10fc673e6e1f6eb251dd85108/aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cubnpoZXJhbGQuY28ubnovbnovc2lja2x5LXpvbWJpZS1zbmFwcGVyLW92ZXJmaXNoaW5nLWRlc3RydWN0aXZlLW1ldGhvZHMtYXJlLWxlYWRpbmctdG8tdGhpcy1pY29uaWMtc3BlY2llcy1zdGFydmluZy10by1kZWF0aC8_dD00NDY1N19iOWYwODlmYzk3YjZjMmU0Yzk4N2MzY2QzODU0NTU3NA) for the New Zealand Herald suggesting the skinny, milky fleshed snapper being observed around Hauraki Gulf and Northland was a result of over-fishing, particularly commercial fishing, and more specifically bottom trawling. It was designed to take advantage of moral panic to fuel a long-running (but otherwise legitimate) campaign to end trawling in the Hauraki Gulf Marine Park.

Normal (L) vs milky fleshed snapper (R). [LegaSea]

But there isn't any evidence that connects milky fleshed snapper to bottom trawling. Only a small number of fish have ever been studied in a lab (a report shows only five snapper) and a [NIWA report](https://www.nzgeo.com/mailster/513570/50e147b10fc673e6e1f6eb251dd85108/aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cubXBpLmdvdnQubnovZG1zZG9jdW1lbnQvNjI3NzUtRkFSLTIwMjQyNS1EaXN0cmlidXRpb24tYW5kLXBvdGVudGlhbC1jYXVzZXMtb2YtbWlsa3ktZmxlc2hlZC1zbmFwcGVyLWluLVNOQS0xLz90PTQ0NjU3X2I5ZjA4OWZjOTdiNmMyZTRjOTg3YzNjZDM4NTQ1NTc0) suggests that, while they appear to be malnourished, “the root cause of the condition remains uncertain”.

That didn’t stop Seafood New Zealand announcing this week that [“aluminium pollution” was to blame](https://www.nzgeo.com/mailster/513570/50e147b10fc673e6e1f6eb251dd85108/aHR0cHM6Ly9pbWFnZXMubnpnZW8uY29tLzIwMjQvMDgvWm9tYmllRmlzaE1lZGlhUmVsZWFzZV82LUF1Zy0yMDI0LnBkZi8_dD00NDY1N19iOWYwODlmYzk3YjZjMmU0Yzk4N2MzY2QzODU0NTU3NA), citing a water sample from a tributary of the Kaipara Harbour with elevated levels. Given the affected snapper are found right around the upper North Island, and rarely on the west coast, this appears to be misdirection in order to shift public attention away from fisheries.

Disinformation is dangerous. We have complex environmental problems to navigate, and organisations mis-using data to serve their own purposes only creates confusion and delays solutions.

“There’s something going on out there that we don’t understand,” says University of Auckland marine scientist Nick Shears. “We need to stop jumping to convenient conclusions without evidence to support them.”

The advice could be true of just about every environmental crisis we face.