Transport Accident Investigation Commission

Summary: MO-2022-206 Charter fishing vessel i-Catcher capsize, Goose Bay, New Zealand 10 Sept 2022

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The below is a brief plain English summary of key points in the report. The Commission's report speaks for itself -- you can download the full document here: www.taic.org.nz/inquiry/mo-2022-206.

What happened

The i-Catcher was an 8-metre aluminium, commercial charter fishing vessel. On this journey its ten passengers were photographing birds.

The i-Catcher's occupants felt a sudden impact from beneath the hull and the boat capsized. The skipper and five passengers scrambled from the water onto the upturned hull. Five other passengers were in an air pocket inside the vessel.

The skipper called 111 on a cellphone and Police initiated a search and rescue operation.

The six people on the upturned hull survived and were rescued by responding vessels. The Police National Dive Squad later recovered the bodies of the other five passengers in an air pocket heavily contaminated with petrol. All were wearing inflated lifejackets.

Why it happened

It is virtually certain that impact with a whale near the surface caused the capsize.

It is virtually certain that defects in the vessel's fuel system enabled fuel to leak into the air pocket of the upturned vessel, reducing the survivability of the accident.

The inflated lifejackets worn by the five deceased passengers would have hindered their ability to escape. Other factors included inhalation of petrol fumes in the air pocket; time immersed in the 10°C water; and confinement in a toxic space.

Safety issues and recommendations

Please download the report to see full details of the eleven safety issues and fourteen recommendations. below is an outline of the three major themes of the report.

Regulations and standards

Regulations and standards need to be strengthened. These include:

- **Vessel surveys.** Survey over the thirteen-year commercial service of the iCatcher did not include inspections of the entire fuel system, and critical issues—like an ineffective fuel tank vent—went unnoticed. TAIC is recommending that Maritime New Zealand enhance oversight of the survey system to safeguard vessels and their occupants.

- **Lifejacket servicing**: incorrectly serviced inflatable lifejackets may not work properly. Currently, anyone can re-pack and re-arm lifejackets that are used commercially, and surveyors aren't required to record their servicing history. TAIC is calling on Maritime New Zealand to work with industry stakeholders to improve safety standards, including recording the servicing and expiry of lifesaving equipment.
- **International standards** for manufacturing lifejackets. TAIC is asking Standards NZ and Maritime NZ to work with international bodies to make lifejacket information clearer— about putting them on and taking them off, deflation, and the risks of inflating under obstruction.

Lifesaving equipment

Life-saving equipment is essential in emergencies at sea, but it has to be well maintained and easy to use. And the Commission found several areas for improvement.

- **Inflatable lifejackets - maintenance**. TAIC recommends that Maritime New Zealand work with industry stakeholders to ensure inflatable lifejackets are serviced correctly and records are kept up to date.
- **Inflatable lifejackets – usabilty**: Getting thrown into water is stressful, debilitating, and disorientating. If you surface in a confined space and you're wearing an inflated lifejacket, you'll want to swim underwater to escape – so your lifejacket should be as easy to deflate as it is to inflate. Maritime NZ has the public education function for maritime safety, and we'd like it to develop briefings on putting on a lifejacket, inflating it, and deflating it.
- **EPIRBS and PLBs:** The i-Catcher's Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB) was correctly positioned for its type in the cabin but it was out of reach after the capsize. Survivors had to rely on a mobile phone to alert emergency services. But cellphones can be unreliable when wet and they lack full coverage offshore. So TAIC recommends that crews on vessels that carry passengers have a Personal Locator Beacon (PLB) as an extra way to send a distress signal.

New Zealand's emergency response system

The Commission found delays in coordinating the search and rescue didn't change the outcome in this case but highlight the need for better planning for future emergencies.

- **111 system**: Crucial information sharing was delayed by incompatible communication platforms across the emergency services. TAIC is calling for reviews and improvements by MBIE and the Next Generation Critical Communications agency.
- **Skilled experts**: Vital access to the Police National Dive Squad was delayed because procedures meant they weren't called on or involved early enough. TAIC recommends that Police address this gap.
- **Maritime rescue planning**: Every region with a lot of people using the water should have a maritime rescue plan. But in the Kaikōura region there was no established plan or training for responders to work together efficiently. We recommend Tasman District Police, the Rescue Coordination Centre and others work together on such a plan.

What we can learn

Vessel owners and operators:

- Regularly inspect fuel systems -- small faults can be fatal
- Regularly check and service inflatable lifejackets.
- In safety briefings, cover lifejacket use, including deflating and removing them in the water

Emergency equipment:

- Carry a backup location device such as a PLB. The capsized boat's EPIRB was unreachable in the upturned hull.
- All inflatable lifejackets should be easy and intuitive to deflate and remove in emergencies

Emergency rescue system

- Leaders: prioritise improving communication systems and planning for future emergencies