

CAREFISH

Cairns REcreational Fishing Industry StakeHolders

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Submission

[Productivity Commission inquiry into regulation of the Australian marine fisheries and aquaculture sectors](#)

Introduction

CAREFISH is a group of industry stakeholders around the Cairns region who have interest in matters to do with fishing and fisheries management. We therefore would like to make this submission to the inquiry as above.

We consist of managers and owners of businesses like tackle shops, charter and guide operations, tourism providers, boat repair and sales operations, fishing writers, fishing clubs, environmental, and fishery and marine scientists, and others.

We have contributed to many inquiries by way of formal submission as well as participation on various committees and stakeholder working groups. Our goal here is to provide sensible and coherent advice to government, as well as to NGO's that may also have interest.



CAREFISH believes that all fisheries in Australia can improve in their environmental impact, social standing and their efficiency. This will require all moving towards a world's best practice model and that would streamline and align many regulations and reporting criteria.

CAREFISH has a simple plan to bring the Qld fisheries into the future.

- Get moving with the MRAG Fisheries Review
- Commission science to develop proper/robust stock assessments for all harvest, discard and bycatch species including species of conservation interest
- Construct harvest strategies that are plausible and not industry driven
- Go to quota managed fishery with an emphasis on replenishing fish stocks
- Regionalise the net and crab fishery with regional quotas
- Digitalise compliance requirements ie VMS and log books
- Assist and encourage MSC or equivalent accreditation
- Remove environmentally harmful harvest practices such as demersal trawl
- Communicate, communicate, communicate

Regarding Scope

The subject of Fisheries Management in Australia is a complex one. The complexity and multi jurisdictional makeup of current regs are largely the result of authorities stitching up exploited loopholes over the decades.

Many in the commercial fishing sector have proven (unfortunately) that strong regulation and compliance are paramount to their own management and sustainability. Integrity is regularly questioned of this industry, and that seems sometimes to have no bounds as we've just witnessed in Qld during the Net Free Zones debate.

The core to all of this, especially in Qld, is

(i) chronic over-allocation in the past and

(ii) the states inability to reduce allocation since fishing 'rights' have become property 'rights'.

An over-allocated and under-regulated fishery will not self regulate, that is very apparent to us.

These messy regulatory barriers may be inefficient and onerous, but it would be a most unwise move to remove them without having something else absolutely bulletproof in place. **Self regulation should NOT be entertained.** It must never be forgotten that **the resource is a shared one** and communities will be damaged by abuse and will stand up against faulty management and insufficient regulation.

Clearly it would be in Australia's interest to lead the world in '**Fisheries Management best practice**' not just for the sake of being first, but for the sake of getting it right. We believe this is possible, but it won't be easy that's for sure, there's a lot of reform to accomplish and vested interest will fight it tooth and nail even if they themselves request it and it would be to their own advantage! Oppositions will also oppose, and stir things up.

Some of the different fisheries in different locations can rightly claim sustainability, but many others can't. Before any discussion can be had as to making the wild harvest fishing industry more competitive, one **MUST** know the biological limitations on every given stock and also understand the social expectations of stock abundance.

Indeed the definition of the word 'sustainable' has to be thoroughly investigated, and agreed on.

The resource **is** a shared one and commercial competition has played a large role in depleting stocks to the detriment of all. Our fish stocks are finite and vulnerable, no-one can deny that, and they must be looked after sensibly and with great care. Facilitating harvest competition just for economic benefit always translates to competing with nature, and that rarely goes well as we've seen repeatedly.

To go through the complexities of the Queensland Fisheries Management situation, which we have studied extensively, would take volumes, and we've written over and over on it, and repeated ourselves to exhaustion.

To reduce the academic burden of repeating ourselves forever by identifying masses of problematic management topics, and suggesting solutions, here we will refer to a public document already in place written by **MRAG Asia Pacific** recently (attached), which addresses most of the relevant topics, and carries quite some authority.

Whilst we don't 100% agree with all that's written in that document, it's fair to say we agree with most. CAREFISH networks with many other similar groups throughout Qld and has discussed this, and we believe all agree with our position.

This was commissioned by LNP Fisheries Minister John McVeigh a couple of years back out of the public purse, after consistent lobbying from groups such as ours, in fact many recreational fishers, commercial fishers, science and

environmental groups lobbied for structural and comprehensive change in Fisheries Qld. We were very pleased it was undertaken, although nothing has come from it at this stage.

In it there are many recommendations made for wholesale changes to the Qld system, and largely to bring Qld in line more with Commonwealth Fisheries Management methods which should interest this inquiry.

A final point here would be that there has been mention that **Australia imports around 70%** of its seafood product and this influences thinking. That statistic is misrepresentative and misleading as (i) it does not mention that we export 50% of our own harvest and (ii) it does not mention that 'import' includes product that we send offshore for processing, such as canning tuna etc which is returned therefore importing our own product and (iii) it includes non edible product like pearls, shell product, oils, sauces etc.

Define 'sustainable'

Apart from the internal restructuring and leadership issues necessary in Qld, the MRAG report strongly recommends wild harvest fisheries be treated more carefully with a move away from the current and long standing MSY (Maximum Sustainable Yield) model, which typically allows for running a particular stock down to 20% to 40% of estimated virgin bio-mass and replacing that model with MEY (Maximum Economic Yield) or 40% to 60% model.

We recommend going one further to the OSY (Optimum Sustainable Yield) model which carries more emphasis on social values/community benefit/environmental outcomes, and starts at 60%.

This means **more fish in the water, and that means reduced harvest for a certain period** of time whilst stocks recover. Facilitating increased competition at this point would obviously be counter-productive to this basic necessity.

Some simple math can be applied here. Say an exploited stock had an estimated virgin biomass of 1000 tonnes. If it was considered the stock could be maximum harvested down to 20% without collapsing the stock (MSY) and then annually harvested at 10% of that, then yield would be 20 tonnes pa. On the other hand, if the stock was only allowed to fall to 60% (or allowed to rebuild) and then harvested at 10%, then the yield would be a much more **productive** 60 tonnes. This would also resolve the social rebellion when communities discover their shared resource has been decimated for the commercial gain of a few.

Quota/TACC

The wild harvest fishery should NOT be looked upon as a growth industry, considering many stocks are already fully exploited, close to, or over exploited using the MSY model. The Qld example will show that there is a high level of uncertainty as to the exact point of exploitation on most species, since very few '**stock assessments**' have been carried out, rather basing assumptions on '**stock status reports**' which are very inferior investigations. Also missing are '**harvest strategies**' so little confidence can be held that stocks could be further exploited without further, or perhaps even irreversible, harm.

The MRAG recommends the entire commercial system be made a quota based harvest system, and that would bring Qld in line with other fisheries which would fit with this Productivity Inquiry.

We agree, **provided** there was sensible and adequate science commissioned to establish the formal stock assessments and harvest data to inform the TACC/quota. This process would have to be science led, definitely not 'vested interest' led, as we've witnessed in the past where TACC's have been installed way above the falling harvest rate, offering utterly no protection to the resources/species in trouble.

Further, there is strong argument for a more regional approach to some of the Qld fisheries, particularly the inshore net industry, but also crab and perhaps live trout. Certain Qld stocks have individual and non-mixing populations that

are area bound, so placing a TACC on an overall statewide stock offers no adequate protection to the individual regional stock. This has been clearly demonstrated as the case with grey mackerel and threadfin species, and also likely with barramundi and more recently shark.

Currently, there is no restriction for *all* the commercial gill netters (with the required endorsement) from the entire state descending on any particular location and taking the entire state wide TACC from that location. This does happen to varying levels now, and regional depletion and community outrage are the results. Social outrage leads inevitably to political interference, and that will always be the case where unfairness and inadequate regulation presents.

Digitalisation, VMS and Log

To justify and monitor this quota reform, the interested and caring public would have to have confidence the harvest data collected from commercial operators was reasonably accurate, and the paper log system currently in use does not inspire much confidence, quite the contrary. Many commercial operators openly boast about how soft the data can be with almost no checks and balances in place.

MRAG looks at this too and we recommend digitalising data with electronic VMS and real time log book reporting including landing and dispatch/sales records. This would pull the renegade influences within the industry into line quick smart, just as it did in the trawl industry some years back, and go a long way to re-establishing much desired integrity.

Consultation

Authorities around Australia seem more eager to consult with all the stakeholders recently and we encourage that. We now have open dialogue with Ministers and Authorities and endeavour to contribute and present solutions.

When a sector (or person) feels poorly or unfairly treated they turn to the political arena. They can also do that to gain a benefit. This does not often achieve the best result for the fishery but it does present some rebalancing mechanism and the wisdom of the politician is important. It's abundantly apparent some are better equipped than others.

All issues have different points of view, otherwise there wouldn't be argument. Very rarely can a decision be made to satisfy all the parties, and usually one loses out. But this MUST NOT seize wise decision making or governance.

CAREFISH always councils that Fisheries decisions should start and end with the resource, that is the most important consideration. If the resource was in good shape, there would be little to argue about between sectors.

Multi jurisdictions

Sectors don't start arguing for no reason, some event usually starts it off. In the case of multi-jurisdictional management, the competition between those departments can give rise to poor decisions and start disputes.

A couple of examples in Qld.

- Demersal trawl is a commonwealth fishery method used in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Essentially it allows for a large gill type net to be trawled around looking to capture fish. This experimental fishery was allowed to commence some decades ago and surprisingly it was allowed to harvest undersize fish. Fish that had a state regulated size limit were legally harvested undersize by the commonwealth fishery. The demersal trawlers learned that particular coastal species like Mangrove Jack left their state waters during their spawn and entered commonwealth waters. These areas were directly adjacent river systems. The school head to sea to spawn and they are targeted by demersal trawlers, undersize and all, and therefore runs the risk of reducing

the spawning stock of the river substantially, or even completely. Nannygai (small and large mouth) are also targeted and depletions are reported. These undersize fish turn up in fish markets, particularly supermarkets, and cause issues and confusion.

- GBRMPA is the overriding Authority in the GBRMP. State waters usually run out 3 nm off the mainland but in the GBR the state line is extended out to the outer GBR line. The area is jointly managed by both the commonwealth and the state, but the state has jurisdiction over fishing. Any business operating commercially within the GBRMP requires a GBRMPA permit, EXCEPT most all fishing businesses. One would need a GBRMPA permit to hire a surfboard, but not to run a trawler. The difference in environmental impacts between these two activities should be obvious. GBRMPA have almost NO management control over the commercial fishing fleet operating within its jurisdiction, and that causes many problems.

Also, the federal dept of Environment oversees the accreditation of permits for wild caught animal sold into export, and this includes fish. It is known as WTO and the federal dept has the power over the state to dictate the terms of the accreditation.

This Environmental dept has made many recommendations and requirements to FQ, many have NOT been implemented. This should not be acceptable, and different permits get extension after extension even without implementing reforms. There has been talk of that process being scrapped. We do not believe the state should self regulate at this time, and WTO accreditation should remain at federal Environment level. We believe the conditions should be adhered to.

External accreditation

CAREFISH strongly advocates for all Qld fisheries to seek higher sustainability accreditation such as MSC (Marine Stewardship Council). We believe Qld's seafood, particularly GBR sourced seafood ought to command a premium price especially for export product, and believe the state and federal governments should do all they can to facilitate that.

This is a marketer's dream product. The marketability of additional health benefits of eating pristine seafood, taken from abundant stocks (with believable sustainability credentials AND supported by other sectors) and harvested out of remote and unpolluted waters, should not be lost for a moment. It would require world respected accreditation and true sustainability. No fibbing!

It is obvious our premium product should not try to compete with lower grade product and imported seafood. Many people in Australia simply would not be able to afford seafood if imported product was not available. The commercial fishing industry should embrace this instead of crowing about the 'fish from Asian sewers' which only hurts themselves and will sooner or later get them sued.

Traditional hunt

No-one in Qld would condemn any traditional hunted for taking a traditional food source for subsistence living. That is very rare though these days and coastal communities must step up and help address sustainability issues of protected species.

[Redacted with the author's consent]

No-one should be going hungry; all have either jobs or access to benefit. Refrigerators are everywhere and shops and supermarkets are seldom too far away. So there is no need to harvest protected species and the practice of trading protected species meat should be crushed.

Gill nets should be commercial fishing apparatus and should only be in the possession of commercial fishermen. This is not the case in Qld and indigenous folk are allowed possession and gill nets are endemic in some communities, also causing social and environmental disruption.

Code of practice

Government can regulate and legislate and that keeps a lid on the large population of fishers and gives compliance the necessary tools to look after the others. From a recreational fisher's point of view, we don't see many setting out on a fishing trip with the goal of filling up a boat any more.

Most would be appalled at such a thing, a few for a feed is now the common goal.

The days of the bloke turning up at the local pub with a massive cod or groper hanging out of his ute, and being shouted beers by all, have long gone.

Most bag and size limits are either fair or a bit lenient. Most in the recreational sector understand that, and very few want a massive fridge load nowadays.

There is an unofficial 'Code Of Practice' that's loosely followed, and that is simply take what you need, no more. Some areas have a more precise set of recommendations and the new Gill Net Free Zones are working on this at the moment. Also most fishing clubs have some sort of agreement or recommendation in place.

This has been encouraged along the way by Fisheries Departments, Marine Park Authorities as well as by environmental groups and even schools. Some schools actually teach fishing as a subject and in the GBR there is a programme that goes into schools to teach environmental values and that makes a difference.

Teaching kids at grass roots level is a wise way to mentor and should be encouraged and assisted.

Recreational and Commercial licenses

Recreational Fishing Licensing (RFL) has been a hot topic around Australia, and has still not been implemented in Qld for salt water. There is a successful SIP (stocked Impoundment – fresh water) RFL and that seems to function well without much resistance.

There is some history that needs to be discussed. Queensland does in fact have a salt water RFL. It was recommended and constructed from the so called Burns Enquiry 1992/3. It was acknowledged that rec fishers ought to contribute more towards their pursuit above what the government would normally be expected to contribute. A RFL was considered politically unsavoury at the time and so a levy was implemented instead called PPV. This collected around \$7.50 per private boat rego per annum. It has increased over time and now collects around \$19.00 and has had a name change to RUF. It is considered that this fund has collected well over \$50m to date

We believe the original intent of these funds was reassigned without consultation right from the start. Gradually, more and more of the funds were reallocated to core fisheries business and now there is NO percentage of the funds allocated to the betterment and advancement of rec fisher interest.

Consequently the state is **NOT** trusted to collect a RFL. If a RFL was to be implemented, there would certainly be a political campaign against it.

This is not to say that we oppose a RFL, just that the circumstances would have to change considerably before we would support one.

Commercial fishing fees have not moved much over the years and many in the industry want increases. It is thought that latency and occasional fishers disrupt the full time professional fishers and that a substantial increase in fees would encourage those to surrender permits into buybacks

Conclusion

There is a lot to consider, and great care must be taken when rewriting or abolishing regulations. They were put there for a reason, and that reason may not be obvious straight away. The last LNP government in Qld instructed FQ to remove approx 30% of its regulations. There was no real reasoning, just that the government wanted a certain percentage removed to satisfy an election promise.

One section of the regs disappeared concerning shark harvest. Now there's a problem with shark harvest.

Best be careful !

Paul Aubin

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