

Fisheries resource allocation—a commercial perspective—I

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You will all know the old Chinese blessing, or curse, 'may you live in interesting times'. Well, fisheries biologists can look forward to living in very interesting times in future. The same can be said for fisheries economists and fisheries managers in general.

I don't think anyone working in government fisheries departments around Australia, will lack challenges or media attention over the coming months and years. However, you will be comforted by the thought that during these times there will be commercial and recreational fishing representatives keeping you close company and suggesting simple, logical ways for you to overcome these challenges.

The decisions of fisheries managers will come under unprecedented scrutiny. It is interesting to see that groups like the Fishing Tackle Association have employed consultant biologists to advise them and sometimes act as spokespersons for them in relation to fisheries management. The angling media have been primed to carry a coordinated message on major issues. I understand that was evident in debate leading up to the passage of the new Fisheries Act in New South Wales, where the concept of 'property rights' was widely publicised as handing all the fish over to commercial fishers and

allowing commercial fishers to order anglers off the fishing grounds. I would be interested in hearing whether any fisheries managers ever thought that was the case or whether that argument involved just a little bit of exaggeration.

The angling media is also becoming far more hostile. Commercial fishers are regularly projected simply as the enemy. And as all the fisheries managers are said to be in bed with us, presumably they are something even worse.

You might have seen the hostile reaction from the Fishing Tackle Association, when the federal recreational fishing steering committee, suggested a \$20 saltwater angling licence. Now, an annual licence fee of \$20 a year doesn't seem like a lot of money—not compared with the 2000 to 3000 million dollars a year we are told anglers spend on fishing in Australia every year. However, we believe there is plenty of exaggeration in those spending figures and maybe it is a fact that the average angler can't afford something less than 40 cents a week for a licence. However, that's another argument for another forum.

Of course all this is relevant to resource allocation. Fisheries biology may be science but fisheries resource allocation is politics.

The fundamental question seems to be: 'What is a *fair* allocation?' It depends which side of the fence you're on, doesn't it?

In stark contrast to many amateur lobby groups, commercial fishers have never argued for exclusive access to the resource. We firmly believe that, providing the resource is properly managed, there is room for both the seafood industry and genuine recreational anglers.

For many years the commercial industry has been focussed on ensuring that harvesting of the resource was sustainable. This has resulted in the industry initiating many stringent management measures with severe impact on operators—all in the long term interest.

The trend in recent years to include amateur groups in the fisheries management decision-making process is welcome. For too long these groups have had the luxury of standing outside and throwing rocks at almost everything to do with fisheries management, and particularly commercial fishing.

How many self imposed restrictions have the amateur lobby sought on anglers in the last decade or two? It's about time anglers had their say, but most importantly it's about time they shared some of the responsibilities and some of the pain that goes with managing fisheries.

However some substantial changes of attitude are required before a constructive and cooperative approach to managing fisheries of interest to both commercial fishers and anglers can be achieved.

Negotiating with most amateur fishers is like negotiating in quicksand—there never seems to be a bottom line. Close this river

to commercial fishing today, close that bay next week, and within a predictable time-frame have no commercial fishing within sight of land. And then, presumably, get to work on the offshore trawlers and long-liners.

It won't surprise anyone that commercial fishers are not going to accept a situation where the industry, or even part of it, is eliminated, and where the majority of the community—who never, ever, wet a line even once a year—can no longer buy fresh local fish unless they pay for it over the back fence or at work from someone who is an angler.

And excluded from this debate so far are the many businessmen and women who have large amounts of money invested in the bricks and mortar and equipment needed to process and sell the catch, and service the fishing fleet. The allocation debate is focussing on commercial fishers but they are just the first of several groups who depend on commercial seafood catches.

And at the end of the line is the consumer. What is really being debated is not the allocation between commercial fishers and anglers: it is the allocation of fish between the 10% of people who catch enough seafood for their own needs and the 90% of people who do not—90% who get their seafood requirements, requirements that are increasing every year, through the commercial fishing industry.

And who would benefit from allocating more of the resource to anglers? Apart from the fact that most fish would be taken by the frequent, skilled angler, and not the genuine recreational fishers, angling has social value as an outdoor activity. But, given Australia's climate and open space,

we are not exactly short of opportunities for socially-valuable outdoor activities, apart from recreational fishing.

Is it so that more people will go fishing and join fishing clubs?

That's a perfectly legitimate goal for the office-bearers of fishing clubs, but it is no reason to exclude fresh fish from the shops and axe people's livelihoods.

Is it so that more fishing tackle can be sold?

That may be a legitimate goal for tackle retailers and importers, but they are not in competition with commercial fishers. They are in competition with the people who import and retail tennis racquets, and golf clubs, cricket bats and surfboards—although to make fishing look more attractive and generate more spending on fishing tackle, the theory seems to be that commercial fishing needs to be got rid of.

They are competing for the average Australian's recreational dollar, a share of disposable income. And that dollar will still be disposed of, will still flow through the recreational economy, whether it is spent on a fishing rod or a surfboard, or any other type of sporting equipment.

It is an interesting observation that while anglers' representatives argue that a fishing licence is not needed because anglers already pay so much money in sales tax on fishing gear, the same total amount of sales tax would still be spent at the end of the day if all the money went on tennis racquets, surfboards and other recreational equipment—but usually without making such demands on a limited, publicly-owned resource such as fish stocks which need such careful and expensive management.

This Workshop is valuable in focussing on facts and figures. More importantly on what facts and figures will be required in future to ensure that fisheries are managed on a sustainable basis, and to put some common sense into the allocation debate.

This is certainly something commercial fishers will welcome. We have nothing to fear from factual data. Introducing less emotion and more facts into the debate will help everybody. Most importantly, at the end of the day, it will help the resource, which in the long run will benefit everyone.

So what are some of the key areas in which these facts must be gathered?

Firstly, what is the amateur catch? How can it be measured?

While almost all commercial fisheries have logbook systems or some other data collection mechanism in place, very few data are available on amateur catches.

How many managers and biologists in this forum have been placed under pressure by the amateur lobby using commercial catch data as an excuse to further restrict commercial fishers, whilst at the same time the data on recreational catches were non-existent or negligible?

There are many cases where commercial fishers have been subjected to increased restrictions, only to find later that studies on total amateur catches indicate that they are many times the commercial catch.

Secondly, what is the value of the recreational catch?

An argument often used by the amateur lobby to convince governments to stop commercial fishing is that amateur fishing

is worth more to the economy than commercial fishing.

Figures loosely used to substantiate this are exaggerated and have little relevance to the real value of amateur fishing to the economy.

The basis of these figures is often a study undertaken by PA Consultants in 1983. The findings of this study have been used to influence politicians and fishery managers by almost every amateur lobbyist I know, and in almost every forum around the country. I suppose the old adage that if you keep on saying the same thing often enough (whether it's right or not) people will begin to believe you, has certainly worked to some extent in this instance.

Quite frankly the commercial industry has itself to blame for letting this myth go unchallenged for so long. The preliminary findings of an independent review of the PA study, which was recently commissioned by Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation are as follows:

- The study aimed at measuring expenditure incurred in recreational fishing in Australia; however, expenditure on recreational activities does not correspond to the economic value of that activity.
- It is not correct to infer from the PA study that recreational fishing is 'worth' \$2.2 billion a year to the national economy.
- The use of expenditure figures to measure recreational activity values was superseded long ago—virtually all studies of recreational activity reported in the literature over the past thirty years, which are numerous, have bypassed using figures on expenditure incurred,

in favour of more informationally correct approaches.

- The study was built on an outmoded theoretical foundation which is not appropriate to correctly measuring recreational activity values.
- Comparing figures on expenditure incurred, with those for other recreational pursuits, or indeed market-based activities such as commercial fishing leads to misleading conclusions. It is not only inappropriate but downright dangerous.

As well as highlighting problems with using expenditure figures, the review has found major problems with the expenditure figures themselves. For instance:

- A problem with the study is the correct allocation of expenditure to recreational fishing where multi purpose items or expenses are involved, and where parties involved comprise a mixture of participants and non-participants.
- The approach the study has taken includes all expenditure on a trip regardless of whether or not recreational fishing was incidental to the trip.
- The study generously allocates costs of multi purpose capital equipment to recreational fishing.
- The PA study has therefore attributed as many dollars as it possibly can to recreational fishing.
- A further problem is the correct attribution of overexpenditure, for instance when anglers stay in expensive hotels and/or purchase luxury 4 wheel drives. Clearly enjoyment factors apart from recreational fishing are at play here.

There are many more problems, but I don't need to go into further detail at this stage. I believe I've made my point.

The bottom line is that the PA study may well provide an indication of the maximum possible expenditure on all types of recreational (and some other) activities by persons who throw a line in the water either regularly or only very occasionally. However the study does not give an indication of the value of recreational fishing to the economy, in fact it has very little if any relevance to it.

Other types of information on recreational fishing that are urgently required include:

- When the appropriate allocations of the total resource have been determined how can the amateur catches be controlled?
- How effective are tools such as bag limits?
- What are the relative impacts of recreational and commercial fishing on species which are most surrounded in controversy?

These are important issues. Gathering and analysing information to put some rationale into this debate is essential.

Commercial fishers continue to recognise the importance of biological research, stock assessment etc., and this type of research, particularly in areas which have direct relevance and potential benefits to the industry, must continue to receive priority from funding bodies.

However the types of Research and Development issues discussed at this Workshop and which must be addressed to take the emotion out of the allocation debate must also be given high priority.

Let's face it, all the biological information in the world won't mean a thing to commercial fishers if at the end of the day they don't have access to the resource because this type of vital data has not been obtained and allocation of the resource is not based on fact.

And after all it is commercial fishers who pay a significant contribution to the overall cost of fisheries research in this country; it is those same funds paid by the industry that are responsible for attracting large amounts of the government contributions.

For at least as long as the five years I have been involved with the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation, fisheries managers in Queensland have been saying they need to have more facts and figures about the recreational catch. A start has been made now on gathering those facts and figures, but this effort must be urgently stepped up.

Finally, one of the ultimate tests for fisheries biologists employed by government departments is this: what happens when good fisheries management collides with good politics?

Of course *you* know that in the long run good fisheries management *is* good politics. But not all politicians have the luxury of looking at the long term. For many the horizon is no more than three years. In my experience in those situations, the biologists' scientific, ethic and professional pride have won out, and I really have no doubts they will again in future.

Congratulations to the Society for convening this Workshop. I am sure the discussions here over these days will help to advance the cause of rational fisheries management in general and rational resource allocation in particular.