

Fisheries resource allocation—a commercial perspective—II

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The National Fishing Industry Council represents all sectors of the commercial fishing industry in Australia, including catchers, processors and aquaculturists. Ted Loveday has outlined the position of commercial fishers in the current debate with recreational fishers over allocation of access to fish stocks, and I'm not going to expand on that. What I want to focus on is how we resolve the debate, because it seems to me that if we continue to wait until we get more and better information then we are still going to be debating this issue a decade from now. The fact is that even a decade from now we are still not going to have enough data to be comfortable about making resource allocation decisions. We have got to somehow get a consultative process going now. As unscientific as some consensus 'deals' on resource sharing may be, the fact is that we are more likely to arrive at workable resource sharing arrangements by doing such 'deals' at the State and federal levels than we will by doing nothing until we get all the necessary data. That's not to say that we shouldn't bother collecting the data—indeed, we should be focussing more resources in this area—but we cannot wait until we have got everything before we start making resource sharing decisions.

What we are trying to develop in the commercial fishing industry in Australia is a culture based on pride in the industry. In my experience I have seldom seen two groups with more pride and sense of common identity than game fishers and marine biologists, and I think a similar outlook would be of great benefit in the commercial sector.

I believe that in recent years the commercial fishing industry has generally become a bit more sophisticated in its approach to the issue of sharing fish resources with the recreational sector. My personal view two years ago was that we should never promote the idea of recreational fishers paying licence fees. The rationale for that view was that if recreational fishers had to pay for the use of a resource they would want a bigger say in the management of the resource, and that was the last thing the commercial sector wanted! However, there is no use in the commercial sector thinking that the recreational sector is going to go away because it won't happen. We are all entitled to a fair share of available fish stocks and we are just going to have to co-exist. Such co-existence should be possible because, when you look at it, we share common views on many more fisheries issues than those which we dispute. For

example we both want to conserve fish stocks and protect fish habitats, we share some of the old hunter-gatherer mentality of our ancestors, and we share a common confusion over the meaning and future implications of the latest crop of fisheries management concepts such as 'ecosystem management' and 'maintenance of biodiversity'! Some of us also share dreams of stock enhancement of highly valued target species such as snapper, King George whiting, tuna, barramundi or whatever else it may be.

I have also seen in the United States that the development of strong local recreational fishing associations has resulted in greatly improved consultative processes for fisheries management, and I think this is something that needs to be promoted in Australia. Already we have a strong game fishing association, but we do not have good regional recreational associations. If we are going to come to a set of arrangements on sharing of fish stocks, then the commercial sector has to feel that those arrangements are going to remain in place for some time and that the recreational sector is sufficiently organised and cohesive to stick to its part of the bargain. Unless the strong local or regional recreational associations I mentioned are in place, it is difficult to have any confidence in a system of negotiated resource sharing arrangements.

So far I have been talking as though commercial and recreational fishers are the only two groups involved in the debate over allocation of fish stocks. Of course the situation is usually far more complex than this, as there are people out there who want access to fish resources for purposes other than fishing. I will use three short personal experiences to illustrate some of these

other aspects of resource sharing. The first is from New Zealand, where I heard a brilliant speech by the Chairman of the Waitangi Treaty expounding the view that the fish resources of New Zealand belong to the Maoris, and that if other user groups such as the commercial or recreational fishing sectors want access to these resources then they should have to pay for it. Now I'm not saying that the 'Maori experience' will be duplicated in Australia, but it does illustrate that there are other groups in the community who will claim ownership or interest in fish resources and who will want us both to pay for access to the resource.

The second experience is that I attended a meeting in Hobart a month ago to discuss options and strategies for conserving and managing populations of albatross—particularly the Wandering Albatross. There were at least 15 people around the table who devoted a substantial part of their life to protecting albatrosses, and properly so. But in pursuing their cause these people were, and will continue to be, promoting measures that will impinge on the interests of both the recreational and the commercial fishing sectors.

The third experience arises from my involvement in the tuna industry in South Australia. We have a member in our Association who game fishes for six months of the year in Queensland and farms tuna for the other six months of the year. What a perfect life! But again, the development and promotion of inshore tuna farming by this person and others is sure to impinge on the interests of both recreational inshore fishers and the pre-existing commercial capture fishery for tuna. Integration or chaos—call it what you like!

Returning to my theme of the need for consultation, last week I saw yet another proposal to measure the value of competing uses of local fish resources, presumably to be used as a basis for making resource allocation decisions. In this case the South Australian fisheries management agency (David Hall's group) was proposing to measure the value of commercial and recreational fisheries for King George whiting in South Australia. Having seen this approach many times, and not disputing the value of it at the regional level, I just wish it was that rational and that easy. The fact is that resource allocation decisions are made in the political arena based on a variety of considerations in addition to measures of the value of fish catches, and this will probably still be the situation a decade from now. The need for regular and ongoing consultation on the development and refinement of resource sharing arrangements is vital because, as we all know, the average attention span of politicians is somewhere between five minutes and the next election!

The problems of arriving at workable arrangements for sharing of fish resources become even greater as more and more commercial fisheries are placed under Total Allowable Catch (TAC) and quota management, as they are in New Zealand and are becoming so in Australia. New South Wales in particular will provide a fertile test of how the public comes to terms with a new fisheries management system which formally divides fish resources between the commercial and recreational sectors. An interesting problem arising from this process is how the recreational sector lives within its TAC, but that's not a question I can address today.

The other problem with introducing TACs for different fishing sectors and individual catch quotas is that allocation of fish stocks becomes a legal process. In fact, commercial fishers consider individual catch quotas to be valuable property and thus they have a very strong incentive, if not a constitutional right, to ensure that the commercial TAC remains as high as possible.

The pressure to develop workable resource sharing arrangements is increasing. It's not just the demands for quality fishing opportunities from an increasing number of recreational fishers. The increasingly sophisticated structure and management of the commercial fishing sector is also putting pressure on the recreational sector to become better organised so that their views are more effectively represented during fishery management processes.

What type of consultative mechanisms do we need to deal with fisheries resource allocation issues? From what I have seen there are plenty of models available, so there is no excuse to delay the process by claiming that we need more data or that it is too hard. One model that really does appear to work is the concept of Integrated Management Committees (IMCs) in South Australia. The marine scale fish IMC in particular has five recreational fishing and five commercial fishing representatives. While the IMC process is sometimes haphazard, a majority of the 'deals' done appear to produce workable resource sharing arrangements. Furthermore, most of these agreements are not just struck at the lowest common denominator, because they are negotiated between people who have experience in their respective areas, who know the feelings and wishes of the groups they represent, and who also look at

the longer term implications of various resource allocation options. This system seems to work in South Australia and I think it can work in every other State and internationally.

A second consultative mechanism is that used by the East Coast Tuna Management Advisory Committee, where representatives of the recreational sector are invited to participate in deliberations over the management of fisheries for tuna and billfish. Admittedly, effective consultation is sometimes clouded by emotional issues such as access to marlin, and resource sharing arrangements are not always decided in the most scientific manner, but again workable agreements involving genuine concessions can be achieved. Our main concern in this case is that the commercial industry is providing most of the concessions for an increasing number of species. I keep asking the recreational representatives on the Committee to 'promise me that marlin is the last one and that this is not the slippery slope to yellowfin tuna etc.'. To their credit the recreational representatives have admitted that they cannot give such an undertaking, rather than making commitments they can't meet.

A third and more formal type of consultative mechanism comes from New Zealand, which appears to be addressing fisheries resource allocation issues better than many parts of Australia at the moment. A very detailed written agreement on the sharing of Bay of Plenty fish stocks has been negotiated, signed, sealed and delivered by representatives of the peak New Zealand recreational fishing council and local commercial purse seine operators. It has also been given some implicit endorsement by the Minister for Fisheries. The explicit and

formal nature of this resource sharing arrangement means that it is much more likely to be adhered to, and that's the type of arrangement we need to somehow reach in Australia at the State and Commonwealth level.

A fourth consultative mechanism involving broad community participation is that used by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) to develop or review management plans for the Great Barrier Reef region. GBRMPA is a Commonwealth Government management agency and was not set up specifically to accommodate recreational and commercial fishing interests. However, the consultative mechanism does work in that it provides GBRMPA with information on how a broad range of interest groups want to use the aquatic resources of the Great Barrier Reef, and thus gives an indication of what the most appropriate resource sharing arrangements might be.

Having considered alternative mechanisms for arriving at acceptable resource sharing arrangements, the next step is to look at ways of adjusting existing resource use activities to meet new allocation targets if necessary. In fishery terms this inevitably means that some people will want to buy others out. For example, some local government councils in Australia are already considering buying out parts of the commercial fishing sector, and to some extent even the recreational sector, in areas under their jurisdiction. What we need in Australia, and which I have not yet seen, is a set of rules and/or mechanisms which allow changes in fishery resource allocations in an orderly and just manner.

The biggest problem is establishing a mutually acceptable price for buy-outs. For

example, a number of commercial net fishers operating in Coffin Bay, South Australia could be bought out of their fishery if only someone was willing to pay their asking price. The fact is that the longer we delay tackling the need for adjustment in some fisheries, the more entrenched people will become in their current positions, the more they will feel that there is a legal and political obligation to settle the issue in their favour, and the harder the problem becomes to solve. There has got to be a willingness, particularly at the State Government level, to confront these problems, and we can learn from consultative processes such as the East Coast Tuna Management Advisory Committee, just what trade-offs are necessary to achieve resource allocation adjustments in, for example, the tuna and billfish fisheries off Queensland.

As a commercial fishing industry representative I feel we really are better educated these days to accept trade-offs, whether they be buy-outs to meet changed resource sharing arrangements, or other controls for other fisheries management purposes. That's not to say that there is any single rationale or magic prescription for solving resource sharing and other fundamental fisheries management problems, but there are a lot of models around (particularly in the United States and to a lesser extent New Zealand) that should be looked at and used.

So there you have it. There *are* ways of fixing the fisheries resource allocation problem. There is nothing awesome about it; it is just a matter of both the recreational and the commercial fishing sectors having the will to sit down and come to an agreement about it. That's happening where I come from in South Australia, and it has the very

strong support of the State fisheries authority. When all is said there is really no excuse for us not coming to terms with one another and fixing the problem now. We don't have to wait a decade for more data because the solutions are to a significant extent already within our grasp.