

Fisheries resource allocation— a recreational perspective—II

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The Australian Fishing Tackle Association (AFTA), which I am representing today, is an organisation for individuals or companies involved in the wholesaling and retailing of recreational fishing equipment in Australia. Both AFTA members and the commercial fishing industry have vested commercial interests in fishing activities (one group by obtaining and selling fishing tackle, the other by catching and selling fish), but these interests have also tended to place the two groups in opposition over a variety of issues such as allocation of access to fish stocks. The commercial fishing industry also appears to be aware of this situation, judging by their criticism of our lobbying activities over the past three years!

Up until three years ago the fishing tackle industry as a whole was somewhat lazy and complacent about fisheries issues, and tended to rely on recreational fishing club members to represent the interests of all sectors of the recreational fishing community. Whilst the club anglers have done a great job, we decided about three years ago that it was time for the fishing tackle industry to stand alongside them and give them every assistance to ensure that recreational fishing received its rightful amount of attention from governments and fisheries managers.

There is an urgent need to measure the extent of recreational catching of fish in Australian waters. If we can achieve reliable estimates of the overall recreational catch for specific fisheries, and if these are large in comparison with commercial catches of the same stocks, then this should tell fisheries managers that these recreational fisheries are important and recreational interest groups should have a large say in the management of these fish resources. It is also important to remember that recreational catches which are large even by commercial standards do not, by themselves, mean that something is necessarily wrong and that catches should be reduced. It is possible that the fish stocks can sustain these rates of exploitation.

Bag limits and other controls on recreational fishing catches have their purpose, and are fine when warranted. However, imposing limits merely for the sake of having limits is not necessarily good fisheries management. We think that some bag limits have been unnecessarily imposed on recreational fisheries through a combination of inadequate scientific research and a 'shoot-from-the-hip' response by fishery managers to community concerns. We think research is absolutely essential for any proper fisheries management decision. The

Australian Fishing Tackle Association supports the concept of bag limits or other controls on recreational fishing, but only if it can be demonstrated that the fish stocks in question are (or are likely to be) subject to excessive fishing pressure, and if the proposed bag limit or other measure is likely to rectify the situation. Furthermore, we support limitations on recreational catches only if commercial catches of the same species are appropriately limited at the same time. We have yet to hear of a case of severe fish stock depletion due solely to excessive recreational fishing pressure, but we are aware of commercial overfishing on many stocks and species.

Having pointed out our differences with the commercial fishing industry, and having acknowledged that some of our lobbying may have been a little over-enthusiastic, we nevertheless believe that commercial fishing and recreational fishing interests can and should co-exist. We accept that a member of the public should be able to walk into a fish shop and buy commercially caught fish at a reasonable price. What concerns us most is that some parts of the commercial industry do not appear to be operating in an economically viable manner, and some commercial fishing practices (e.g. fishing in nursery areas) are unlikely to be in the best interests of stock conservation or of other user groups. In those commercial fisheries where there are significant numbers of operators who are not really making a profit and are not commercially viable, I believe even the more far-sighted commercials would agree that there needs to be a reduction in numbers of participants in order to improve catches or profitability for more efficient operators and businesses.

In the past a majority of recreational fishers tended to be 'meat hunters', meaning that their main aim was to catch and keep as many fish as they could. For many club anglers, the only measurement of skill was the pounds or kilos of fish that they could catch. This attitude is now changing thanks to education programmes supported by club anglers and the Australian Fishing Tackle Association, and the advent of television programmes such as the Rex Hunt show where fishers are encouraged to return fish not needed for personal use to the water—with or without a kiss! This more responsible use of fish stocks is where our industry would like to see recreational fishing going.