

# Management of recreational fishing in Queensland

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Recreational fishing in Queensland encompasses a range of leisure activities from, fishing for yabbies with a piece of meat on a string in a muddy water hole in the west through to heavy tackle game fishing off north Queensland. It is considered to be one of the most popular and largest outdoor recreational pursuits.

We are reliably informed that there are between 700 000 and 1 million recreational anglers in Queensland alone. These figures comply with estimates from other Australian states and overseas which suggest that approximately one-third of a population participate in recreational fishing. The popular definition of a recreational fisher is a person who has been fishing at least once in the past twelve months.

Recreational fishers in Queensland are presently concentrating their efforts in marine environments along the east coast and freshwater impoundments.

Queensland has 65 dams, weirs and barrages that have been stocked with golden and silver perch, barramundi, Australian bass, Murray cod, East Coast cod and saratoga depending on their geographic locality and suitability of species.

Many of these impoundments also hold substantial wild stocks of angling species.

Queensland has a 9000 kilometre coastline of which is still accessible to anglers and 2000 kilometres of coral reefs which are popular recreational fishing destinations.

It is estimated that recreational fishing is worth \$800 million annually in Queensland alone.

It is little wonder then that in late 1992 the Queensland Cabinet instigated the Inquiry into Recreational Fishing in Queensland which became known as the Burns Inquiry after the Deputy Premier Tom Burns who conducted the inquiry.

The inquiry sought to identify key issues and the types of management arrangements required to address these issues. In excess of 3000 people at public meetings and over 4000 written submissions delivered a clear message to Government that the legitimate needs of recreational anglers must be met in future fisheries policies.

The Burns Inquiry has served to promote an expectation that the recreational fishing community will be treated as equal partners in the development of management regimes for the sustainable use of fisheries.

However, it was also recognised by the Inquiry that many of the issues raised by the public during the meetings and

through submissions could only be addressed by the injection of considerable additional funding.

A number of funding options were considered by the Inquiry ranging from licence fees for licensed bait and cast nets, to fees on a *per capita* basis for large commercially organised fishing competitions.

Most options were rejected either because they would not produce sufficient revenue or were politically unacceptable.

The concept of a general recreational fishing licence was rejected by Government and a seemingly more politically acceptable alternative was sought. The favoured option eventually accepted was to impose an additional charge on private pleasure boat registration fees. There are approximately 115 000 such vessels registered in Queensland, and this number is increasing annually by 3%. Many anglers do not favour the proposal as less than 30% own or fish from vessels and those vessel owners will be supporting shore based fishers. Additionally a considerable number of private pleasure craft are not used to take fish, for example, ski vessels.

In relation to fisheries management strategies the clear message from the bulk of submissions to the inquiry was that fishing pressure on some species in some areas had reached critical levels. The inquiry therefore made a number of recommendations which address both the commercial and recreational effort.

The Burns Inquiry highlighted the need for increased and better consultation. The Queensland Fish Management Authority includes one recreational fisher who has in the past forwarded the views of all recreational fishers in the State. The composition

of the Board is to change to be expertise based. Anglers now have equal representation on Fishery Management Advisory Committees (MACs) with the commercial sector. The Inquiry has recommended that another tier of consultation be established on a zonal or regional basis. The future establishment of Zonal Advisory Committees (ZACs) will enable 'grass roots' proposals to be progressed through MACs to Government.

The Inquiry also recommended that a Fisheries Policy Council be established to provide the Minister with independent and strategic policy advice and that it be representative of all aspects of fishing and associated activity.

The saying 'Recreational Fishers are fisheries managers' is slowly becoming a fact of life in Queensland, but has a long way to go. The recreational fishing fraternity is becoming better organised and more vocal and in due course will be a powerful lobby group. This will be accelerated if recreational fishing licences are introduced in the future with subsequent funding being provided to enable employment of full time representatives and lobbyists.

In the meantime who manages recreational fisheries? The Queensland Fish Management Authority has the responsibility for management of all fish resources in Queensland. It achieves its objectives through consultation with interest and user groups, but is possibly failing the 95% of anglers who are not represented under the umbrella of fishing clubs and associations.

Angling clubs and organisations have a major role to play in fisheries management through representation of members. However, in Queensland this aspect of club life

is not well exploited by either members or management agencies. Clubs could become more active in promoting angling and the ideals of fish management. Many are formed as social clubs with limited membership often opposed to, and largely uninterested in, management regimes, until they perceive their activities to be threatened by proposed changes.

The tools available to managers for the management of fisheries have remained constant. We still rely on the old favourites such as size and bag limits, closures, licences and apparatus constraints. Whilst all these tools are effective in controlling activities in the recreational fishery, without appropriate catch and effort data it is impossible to determine the level of effectiveness.

Recent innovations in data collection include Charter Vessel logbooks. Presently there are approximately 110 charter vessels voluntarily keeping an approved logbook. Most of these vessels are involved in the demersal fishery on the Great Barrier Reef. They conduct charters ranging from 1 to 28 days duration, but averaging four days. This logbook scheme has enabled the Queensland Fish Management Authority to assess the impacts of the charter fleet which were previously unknown. The information has assisted both the Authority and the charter vessel fleet in establishing appropriate bag limits for charter vessel clients.

In order to improve data quality an extensive reporting back mechanism has been developed including quarterly summary reports and a report on the individual charter boat's operations which is sent to each operator.

Currently there are 5000 boat days of fishing recorded for some 90 boats submitting

logsheets for 1300 fishing trips ranging from 1 to 28 days.

Fishing club data are being collected from a number of clubs throughout the State. Typical data include numbers of anglers, numbers and weight by species of fish caught, fishing location and weather.

The Queensland Boating and Fisheries Patrol, the enforcement agency in Queensland, continues to provide data about recreational fishery sightings, numbers of anglers interviewed, catch rates by species and some fish size information.

A number of data bases are presently used to store and analyse these data. The Burns Inquiry concluded that a comprehensive database should be developed to monitor catches of popular fish species and to establish angler effort throughout the State as part of an overall programme aimed at the sustainability of these species.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has undertaken or commissioned a number of angler surveys adjacent to the reef, and ongoing State-initiated research programmes into mackerels, snapper and other estuarine species provide valuable data.

It has been reported that every major fishery world wide is either fully exploited or overfished and I don't believe Queensland is any exception. Recreational effort in Queensland is said to be increasing at a rate of 7.5% annually. In other words it doubles about every ten years. In light of this, the question 'where to from here' springs to mind.

The 'soft' management options of the future will include a greater education programme preferably at primary school level

but also through the media in the form of television advertisements, natural resource education programmes and direct involvement with the public through seminars, conferences, research programmes etc.

The development of angler Codes of Practice espousing the fishing ethic of 'take only what you need' and other voluntary arrangements will be more widely used. The aim should be to build an ethic of conservative use and to change attitudes towards sustainable practices.

The harder management options will become increasingly necessary and will include the introduction of recreational fishing licences. This can certainly be 'sold' to the public on the basis of low fee levels, exemptions for the young and aged, ensuring funds do not go to consolidated revenue, involving anglers in the management and distribution of funds, providing representation on Management Advisory Committees, and material benefits to anglers including access to fisheries resources, artificial reefs and fishing piers.

These options in themselves will not be sufficient in the long term to ensure equitable distribution of stocks. In some fisheries it will be necessary to limit access by anglers through ballots, 'first in first served' arrangements and other methods.

Management of quota will become a reality for anglers. Recreational fishers may find themselves negotiating with other users for a portion of the available catch. In such cases the recreational quota will usually be set through bag limits, sale of tags, open seasons and the like.

When recreational fishing licences become a reality they will be a source of increased funding for recreational organisations. This

will result in increased political 'clout' through lobbyists. It will also greatly increase awareness of recreational fisheries in the political arena with greater pressures being placed on commercial fisheries although the rationale for this may be absent.

The commercial industry catchcry of who will feed the masses will be overrun by the push from anglers to have the commercial effort out of sight—over the horizon.

To maintain sustainable fisheries for future generations greater emphasis on education and consultation will be necessary. Fisheries managers will require public administration skills and enhanced analytical abilities. Conflict resolution will become a normal part of management and the level of expertise and knowledge displayed by individual anglers will become focussed and be a major impact on future management arrangements.

These changes will not only be evolutionary but necessary to conserve fish resources which are subject to greater pressures on their environment.