



Will there be fishing in the future?

I have a confession to make. I like to play with my food – so say some of the most ardent critics of recreational fishing. But I also participate in arguably the largest invisible industry in Australia. I cannot think of another group that generates around \$3 billion in economic activity with a participation rate of between 25% and 35% throughout the country that gets so little recognition. Recreational fishing evokes passionate support across every socio-economic gradient you can describe, from Governor Generals to the most humble child.

Up until the 1960's and beyond in a number of jurisdictions, there was a widely held and promulgated belief that the seas would feed the world. Even as the space race hotted up, the last frontier was the oceans and the vast mineral and food riches that it contained – all awaiting the brave and adventurous.

The inexhaustible sea myth, coupled with the economic rationalist thinking that people would stop fishing when it was no longer profitable, has directly lead to the collapse of some of the world's greatest fisheries.

In the 1990's, and at least partly as a result of the collapse of the Canadian cod fishery, another myth emerged that still holds sway in many quarters – that ALL fisheries collapse.

While recreational fishing has a history in Australia extending back to first human settlement (perfectly consistent with the maxim to catch a feed for oneself and one's family) and early European times, formal recreational fisheries management has a relatively short history. A definition about whether someone is fishing commercially or recreationally or for customary purposes actually becomes extremely important when it comes time to decide who pays for the compliance and management costs.

Australian fisheries has had its share of introductions through European acclimatisation societies. Many will argue the cost and benefits of trout, while others such as tilapia, carp and other escaped aquarium fishes have had little benefit.

But one of the significant benefits of the hard work in establishing trout fisheries was the extremely strong stewardship for the species and its habitat that resulted. Directly and indirectly, this has resulted in intensive management relating to the quality of the experience, as much as the catch itself. Eventually, Australian native fish and crustaceans became as highly valued as trout and many pro-active measures have been taken.

In the marine environment this stewardship took much longer. One reason was an historical dominance of commercial fisheries management, which in a number of jurisdictions, including the Commonwealth, still exists today. A WA letter from the Chief Inspector from 1940 sums up the situation *“In addition, the provision of fish for food is considered to be of very much greater importance from the point of view of the population as a whole than the sporting side of fishing, and consequently the professional fisherman must, and always will, receive greater consideration than the angler.”*



Recreational fishers have been reluctant to accept management that they saw as resulting in a shift of 'their' catch to commercial fishers. Recreational fishers frequently compared their individual catches against an individual commercial catch and righteously proclaimed that they were having no impact.

Collectively, recreational fishing can have an impact and indeed, here in Western Australia, we have clearly acknowledged that it was recreational fishing pressure that led to the collapse of two Shark Bay pink snapper stocks. But it was also leadership from the recreational sector that resulted in a recovery and the overall economic benefits of recreational fisheries are often ignored or attributed elsewhere.

So what exactly does a recreational fisher want?

They want to be able to have a relaxing time 'getting away from it all'. Sometimes this includes with the spouse and family, sometimes it is to have quiet time away from them. Fishing has a large male participation bias but there is no real reason why this should be the case, as in many instances women are better anglers.

They want to have an expectation that they will catch a fish. Ideally, they should be able to catch a couple of fish big enough to eat, but the chance to catch a large or memorable fish if they are good or lucky enough. It is extremely difficult to manage fisheries to have enough big fish out there that there is a reasonable hope that you can catch one. This is actually the precautionary principle in positive and real world beneficial application yet it is never acknowledged as such.

The truth is that most anglers are hopeless. They catch few fish, but actually spend an awful lot of money to do it. When I was in NSW in the 1990's I calculated that recreational anglers spent more than \$200 per kilogram of retained fish. And it has almost certainly gone up since then.

Only around 10% of the anglers catch around 90% of the fish, although this does vary dependent upon the fishery. Therefore in order for the mums and dads on a family picnic with a rod out while the kids are playing, to have any hope of catching a fish, you have to be extremely conservative with your management. And the key driver is not biological, it is attitudinal!

One of the interesting consequences of this highly skewed catch distribution affects management. Traditionally, good commercial fishers have been rewarded as part of the management process. Latent effort and inefficient gear is managed out of existence and the good operators who can have a long term and strategic approach to management survive. Smaller (anti-competitive) fisheries tend to be the best managed.

Conversely, the dedicated and successful recreational fisher is the one who continually must make sacrifices. Most anglers cannot even aspire to catch the bag limits so if further cuts are needed, it is the guys who are actually at the meeting that must make the sacrifices. After a while, the industry leaders feel like the Black Knight from Monty Python's Holy Grail.



Recreational fishers are true conservationists. David Bellamy said a couple of years ago (and I paraphrase) “If it wasn’t for the anglers and hunters, there would be no marsh and mangrove habitats remaining.”

Recreational fishers have been responsible for the MOST successful species rehabilitation programmes in Australia. They were initiated by, funded by, supported by and carried out by recreational fishers. I speak of the trout cod and Eastern freshwater cod projects. The challenge now, for trout cod in the Murrumbidgee at least, is ‘how do you manage them now that they are the predominant species’ (more than historically recorded)?

In Western Australia, the recreational sector advocated for the total protection of all species of saw sharks and the river whaler (*Glyphis spp.*). In the case of the river whalers, the species had not even been described yet it was already totally protected as a precautionary measure.

Imagine therefore our concern when DEHWA put out a threat abatement plan identifying that recreational fishers were a significant threat to river whalers here. No-one had bothered to check the facts.

Over my career, I have fought many environmental battles with varying degrees of success. We got the Department of Water to stop using an ex-army tank to de-snag the Murray River near Corowa (the water would get to South Australia 6 seconds quicker). Ironically the same stretch of river now has micro-chipped snags replaced to study their benefits.

When I was with NSW Agriculture and Fisheries I was told that if the words Prokop, fish and cotton were used in the same sentence, one would have to go. I arrived in Western Australia soon after.

The recreational sector has done much to address the ongoing issue of incidental release mortality. Statistics show that over 50% of recreationally caught fish are now released. Two of these reasons, which are becoming more stringent with increasingly tight management controls, are for undersize or excess of bag limit fish. Many anglers also choose to release the fish they catch – increasingly using the saying – “Too valuable to catch only once.”

Recreational fishers want to assist in research. A recent study into Samson fish here in Western Australia found that they were moving from Rottnest Island off Perth to east of Albany in as few as 30 days! This could not have been determined without the help of anglers, many who took weeks of annual leave to help with the program.

Another angler was concerned about species floating away on the current to die. He developed a release weight device to get fish back to depth and as from 15 December 2009, it will be compulsory to carry (and use we hope) this device when fishing for bottom species here in WA.

It is therefore extremely frustrating to be viewed as wanting to fish species to ‘extinction’. The dangerous application of the myth that all fisheries collapse is that only massive ‘no fishing zones’ can save our oceans. I am still mystified when and where we went from being the protectors of the resource to being the enemy who must be eliminated??



The truth is that marine park management is an important part of overall natural resource management. As a concerned Australian I cannot fault the logic of having some areas where fishing and other activities cannot take place as a reference zone. But to then extrapolate this position to a minimum of 30% locked up is incomprehensible.

Australia is currently experiencing one of its first exposures to razzle dazzle lobbying in the form of the Pew Foundation. Based on the profits from the oil industry, this group has recently called for a lock up of the entire Coral Sea for such diverse reasons as to protect the war heritage values, to stop fishing and to prevent coral bleaching. This group acknowledges that recreational fishing is not causing any measurable damage to the area but should be banned anyway.

Australians have always objected to fundamentalism in any form and the mis-representation of the situation and its benefits should receive the good old Aussie salute. Let us work together on a reasonable solution, not one designed for an American agenda in the long term.

One of the biggest challenges facing us relates to Ningaloo – a beautiful part of Australia which will shortly be considered for World Heritage Listing. A tourist visits Ningaloo and is excited. They go out to watch the whale sharks, which is a really special activity. That night they have fantastic fresh local seafood – no chance of ciguatera here in Western Australia! The next day they go out on a charter boat and catch a Spanish mackerel and a few delicious reef fish. They may well let them all go – carefully.

This fairly typical tourist has consumed eco-tourism, commercial fishing and recreational fishing, yet only one is actively promoted and only one is considered sustainable!!??

Recreational fishing is an extraordinarily valuable activity. It promotes an active outdoor lifestyle. It directly attacks the obesity epidemic. It is of incalculable importance to regional and rural communities – from the support infrastructure around Queensland dams like Awonga, to Bermagui in Gamefishing season to the Tasmanian highlands for trout to little coastal towns like Lancelin and Guilderton here in WA. Take away the fishing and the towns almost disappear.

Research shows that families that fish together have fewer problems. The reason is simple; while you are fishing you can talk – maybe find out about a few problems at school or just let your kid feel good because they get to spend time with you. We run clinics for more than 3,500 school kids here – promoting the message of FishSmart-SunSmart and Addicted to Fishing not Drugs.

We encourage the kids to get out fishing with their grandparents – as this link is vitally important in our society and many grandparents do not like the technological interaction of our youth.

We have sole parent days – especially where single mums try and undertake an activity to bond with their teenage children. And we run breast cancer fly fishing clinics where research shows the exercise of fly fishing is perfect for recovery- and the chance to do new things with other sufferers is gratefully accepted.



Fishing has more than its fair share of rat bags. If only 1% of anglers are very bad – for us that is still 6,230 bad people running around out there giving us a bad name. But there are 620,000 spending money, enjoying the environment and being concerned about a sustainable fishery.

Recfishwest and Recfish Australia strongly believe that we are peak bodies. We try and stay up with or in front of changing recreational fishing community attitudes. We get a lot of criticism from our own people for not being more aggressive.

But if fishing is to survive, as it must, then we have to make sure that we continually look backwards to see how far we have come before looking at the enormity of the task in front of us. We also have to engage in a reasonable and responsible manner with all sectors and with you politicians. We have to expose the fundamentalists from within our own and with other sectors and work hard to follow the creed that I try and follow for fisheries management – “To do today that which in 5 years will be proven to be correct.”

In this way – fishing can get the recognition that it deserves as a sustainable and responsible activity to be encouraged rather than punished and an essential part of an overall healthy Australian lifestyle.

Frank Prokop