

Submission
No 94

INQUIRY INTO RECREATIONAL FISHING

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SUBMISSION TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON RECREATIONAL FISHING

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to present this submission.

As background, I have been an active recreational fisher in NSW for about 30 years. I was a founding member of the Jervis Bay Marine Park Advisory Committee and have also been a member of the Advisory Council on Recreational Fishing (ACORF) and also the RecFishing Services board. Since 1995 I have been the Editor of the national monthly angling magazine *Fishing World*.

My comments will focus on marine parks.

The process of creating marine parks is, in my view, a good example of how fishing is not planned well nor understood at all in NSW. The general concept of the parks is laudable - everyone wants healthy waterways and plenty of fish - but the execution of these parks has turned out to be something of a nightmare. The creation of the system of no-fishing or sanctuary zones in NSW's marine parks is considered by many anglers to be ad hoc and based more on satisfying political requirements/deals as opposed to any real conservation ethics. Particular attention should be drawn to the fact that consultation was undertaken but then the outcomes of that consultation was ignored (I refer in particular to the Batemans Marine Park.) This sort of arrogance has resulted in many NSW anglers feeling totally disenfranchised with the marine parks process. Worse than that, they feel alienated, angry and ripped off.

The science behind the creation of marine is also a point of major contention with rec anglers who in recent years have been locked out of areas they have traditionally accessed. Many anglers feel the science used to justify marine parks isn't all it's cracked up to be. There's considerable dissent amongst marine scientists about the validity of NSW's system of small no-fishing zones. Do these areas actually achieve anything or are they simply political "feel good" measures to satisfy conservationists and anti-fishing scientists?

Is there any science to indicate that well-managed rec fishing in NSW has degraded habitat or led to the imminent collapse of fish stocks? I would say there is no such evidence. Intensive commercial fishing can obviously have a deleterious effect on fish stocks (take the gemfish and southern bluefin as prime examples) but commercial fishing is vastly different to recreational fishing. Unfortunately, many politicians, green activists and bureaucrats fail to recognise the essential difference between the two activities. Many anti-fishing activists portray recreational fishing as some sort of free for all where anglers catch and kill as many fish as they can. Obviously this is not the case as rec fishing in NSW is tightly controlled via a system of bag limits, catch sizes, seasonal closures and so on.

Recreational fishing needs to be officially recognised by the NSW Government as a legitimate activity that provides much needed socio-economic benefits to NSW residents of all ages, social status and income levels. The environmental credentials of fishing also need to be publicly recognised and promoted. Catch & release is a proven method of sustainable fishing that deserves political support and promotion as a fisheries management tool, especially in relation to marine parks. Also, it needs to be recognised that fishing in NSW is extremely tightly controlled. As mentioned above, we have any number of regulations governing our time out on the water and the vast majority of anglers abide by the rules. We also pay for the right to fish via our fishing licence fees and rightly expect the money we pay to be used to create more fishing opportunities.

Most anglers understand the need to fully protect certain species and to maintain and improve habitat. Anglers want healthy fisheries. If a specific area requires protection, and the need for this is properly explained, then I think there would be no issue with gaining support from anglers to do so.

Unfortunately, the marine parks system in NSW has failed to achieve those basic goals in that the need for X percentage of an area to be closed to fishing has no real scientific justification.

Again, the creation of the no-fishing zones in NSW seems to be more about coming up with a quota that pleases or satisfies the particular interest groups involved - ie, a political solution - as opposed to rigorous scientific fact.

If the no-fishing zones so far created were more flexible and sensible - ie, allowing for fishing methods that don't impact on habitat or resident species (such as allowing trolling for transitory pelagic species in a sanctuary zone designated to protect habitat or specific demersal species) - then anglers would probably be more accepting of marine parks. As it stands now, many of us see marine parks as politically inspired devices that specifically and exclusively prohibit anglers from enjoying a public resource.

What needs to happen with the marine parks process as it stands now is that anglers are "compensated" for the loss of traditional fishing grounds. This could take the form of artificial reefs that are formed when a no-fishing zone is declared to cater for displaced effort and provide access to fishing areas. Other proactive measures include the creation of more exclusive rec-only zones (where no commercial fishing activity takes place), rec-only species, more re-stocking programs, more habitat restoration/creation programs and so on.

Make no mistake, the way the marine parks were unrolled in NSW has created a deep under current of anger and discontentment amongst anglers. If more time and consideration was given to this process, the marine parks program could have been far better for the fish - and the fishermen - of this state. If the marine parks process had been more inclusive, less politically inspired and more flexible, then the anglers of this state would have been willing and active participants in the process and thus the process as a whole would have been more successful. As it stands now, many anglers feel no sense of

ownership or interest in marine parks - unfortunately the parks are seen as examples of an oppressive and overbearing government which has been dictated to by green extremists.

Whether this is true or not is a moot point - the fact is that anglers are not happy with the marine parks process in NSW. That should be of major concern to all NSW politicians.

The NSW Government needs to address this situation via a through overhaul and redesign of the marine parks system.

Jim Harnwell

February 25, 2010.