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NEWSLETTER OF THE ANGLERS ACTION GROUP "FISH FOR EVER"

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Commercial overfishing and Mulloway? A question for NSW Fisheries management

There have been reports of commercial fishers netting large quantities of schooling mulloway. And these reports are from various areas such as Port Stephens, the Hawkesbury, and the Shoalhaven. It is accepted that these are just reports, (and some or many may be exaggerated rumours on the part of recreational anglers) of alleged catches that have not been confirmed. One report of a large mulloway haul made the minutes of the 35th meeting of ACoRF on 22nd September 2005 where "It was reported that about 6 tonnes of mulloway were netted and sold for approximately \$40,000. There are concerns that such a large biomass was removed from a single estuary system. Specifically, questions have been raised regarding the economic and social potential of recreational fishing when species such as this are heavily exploited by commercial fishers."

The latest such report was in the Hawkes Nest area north of Port Stephens where beach haulers supposedly netted 18 tonnes of mulloway, presumably a spawning aggregation. Eighteen tonnes of mulloway would likely represent between 1000 and 1200 individuals. Although only anecdotal, there are strong indications that this did occur. And local DPI Fisheries staff do accept this catch did occur, but believe the size of the catch to be exaggerated.

Even if the supposed Hawkes Nest catch of 18 tonne of mulloway were true, the commercial fishers involved were totally within their rights as they were not doing anything illegal. What it does indicate is poor fisheries management practices that can allow such a thing to happen, or to potentially happen.

The NSW DPI report "Status of Fisheries Resource in NSW 2006/2007" edited by James Scanlon, Kevin Rowling and Ken Graham lists mulloway as being strongly overfished as indicated by the age composition with 98% of the commercial catch being less than 5 years old. What's called the spawning potential ratio is below the recommended threshold. The commercial landings of mulloway are continuing to decline.

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NSW DPI uses data from reported catches of commercial fishers and surveys of recreational fishers during the assessment and review of various fisheries resources. The recreational catch estimates are based on the National Recreational and Indigenous Fishing Survey of 2003 and other catch surveys undertaken by NSW DPI. The commercial catches are based on catch records submitted by commercial fishers. So what are the respective catch data on which NSW DPI base their management plans? DPI Fisheries use a figure for the recreational catch of mulloway of between 100-500 tonnes with the commercial catch between 44 and 101 tonnes.

And similar figures are used by DPI Fishers for two other popular recreational fish species, yellow fin bream and dusky flathead. The estimated recreational catch for yellow fin bream is between 820 and 1070 tonnes with a reported commercial catch between 335 and 550 tonnes. For dusky flathead the

estimated recreational catch is between 570 and 830 tonnes while the commercial catch is between 116 and 241 tonnes.

So the recreational catch is supposedly between two to five times that of the commercial catch for mulloway, and with similar ratios for yellowfin bream and dusky flathead! Recreational fishers may dispute these figures, pointing to the validity of both the phone survey of the recreational estimates and the



"Fishing Australia" host, Rob Paxevanos with a mulloway prior to releasing it back into the water. A mulloway of this size is a memorable achievement for the average recreational fisher. But what is the sustainability of this species with current NSW Fisheries management practices?

accuracy and honesty of the "reporting" system for the commercial sector. But the fact remains it is these figures that DPI Fisheries use in determining management strategies for fisheries resources. It should also be emphasised that the recreational fishing saltwater trust funds have spent about \$5 million towards mulloway research, which includes the various stocking programs of fingerlings.

With DPI Fisheries currently developing a draft recovery plan for mulloway it can be assured that recreational fishers will face further restrictions on mulloway. We already have a possession limit of 5, and only being allowed to keep 2 over 70cm

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and this could well be reduced to 3 with 1 over 70cm in the new recovery plan. Bag limits placed on recreational fishers is a de facto Total Allowable Catch for the recreational sector for that species.

But what limits are placed on the commercial sector regarding mulloway? It appears none – instead there are a number of trigger points where various actions will be put in place when these triggers are met. There is currently no quota system for the commercial sector regarding mulloway. And this is despite the fact that mulloway has been known to be overfished for a number of years.

The Status of Fisheries Resource Report states overfished in a commercial fishery is where the rate of fishing mortality is greater than double the natural mortality rate, and that catch rates are less than some set percentage of the estimated biomass for the unfished stock for that fishery. The report also says that 4 species, silver trevally, mulloway, snapper and yellowtail kingfish to be growth overfished, meaning the fish are being harvested at a size smaller than the biological and economic optimum. And breeding closures and bag limit reduction do little for growth overfishing. Increase of size limits is the recognised answer for growth overfishing.

But are mulloway truly growth overfished? And what are the real catch rates for the commercial and recreational sectors? And what of the draft recovery plan for mulloway – will the commercial sector face quotas and/or size restrictions? With the development of a Share Management Plan for the commercial sector will any commercial quota be transferable?

Drinking from the “Last Chance Saloon”

The fiscal irresponsibility of the lemma Government was brought to the fore by former Treasurer Michael Costa when he gave a press conference of Friday 5th September 2008 following his dismissal by Morris Lemma. And the disastrous state of NSW's economy was confirmed by incoming premier Nathan Rees following his meeting with Treasury.

With NSW's income plummeting and debt rising and fiscal irresponsibility since the Carr years, only goes to highlight the spin that the State Government had been sprouting to hoodwink the people of NSW into believing the State was in safe hands and headed in the right direction.

But one has to wonder what else the State Government had been pulling the wool over the eyes of the people of NSW – perhaps marine parks?

Former Climate Change and Environment Minister Verity Firth in a letter on 16th July 2008 to Mr Alan Ashton, member for East Hills, stated: “A review of scientific monitoring and research in NSW marine parks is due to commence later this year, and the Marine Parks Authority has recently agreed to establish an independent and expert-based science panel to undertake this review. The panel will include several eminent experts who will provide me with important scientific advice about how effective marine parks have been in protecting marine biodiversity and what directions are needed in future research. Work to establish the panel and set the terms of reference have already commenced. Professor Kearney will be invited to address the panel.”

So we are to get an independent and expert-based science panel to review the scientific monitoring and research in NSW marine parks. With the NSW Labor Government's credibility shot to pieces one has to wonder if this is just more spin? Prior to the State Government's meltdown, the Member for Bega, Andrew Constance called on the then Minister for the Environment Verity Firth to formally announce an “independent” review into the science behind NSW marine parks and to consult broadly on its terms of reference.

Mr Constance stated “The Minister has finally realised that there is a need for such a review following the enormous angst against the lemma Government's lack of consultation regarding the Bateman's marine park and in particular the lack of science behind the zoning plan process.” He also said: “The fact that such a review has been agreed to is an admission that the whole marine park process has been political to date rather than based on sound science.”

But to continue their spin on marine parks, it is now part of the Marine Park Authority's ongoing research program to commission independent consultants to assess the level of knowledge and understanding of the marine parks and their zoning plans in the communities surrounding them. McGregor Ran Research was previously commissioned to conduct randomized telephone surveys of residents of the areas surrounding Jervis Bay Marine Park and Solitary Islands Marine Park. And the Government is quick to highlight the results that “showed that the overwhelming majority of people support the marine parks and the sanctuary zones within them, with 80% supporting the sanctuary zones in Solitary Islands Marine Park and 82% supporting the sanctuary zones in Jervis Bay Marine Park. Of those surveyed who identified as fishers, 68% supported the sanctuary zones in the Solitary Islands Marine Park, and 76% supported the sanctuary zones in Jervis Bay Marine Park.”



What is not stated is the many traps in this kind of survey, the main one being the exact nature of the questions that are asked that can easily bias the results. The results quoted above are only indicative at how effective the Government's spin and propaganda was regarding marine parks to an unsuspecting public. And the resultant spin is it appears locals are heavily in favour of marine parks and their zoning plans. This process is now to be extended the ongoing research of all marine parks.

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But as with the science behind marine parks and their zoning plans there are no peer reviews undertaken of the so-called research. AAG, and other recreational fishing groups, were previously promised copies of the reports into the research undertaken in the Solitary Island Marine Park with regards to the increased snapper catches adjacent to the sanctuary zones. But this was never forthcoming. And we also asked to obtain the methodologies and instrument of these attitudinal surveys mentioned above, but this request was ignored.

The NSW Labor Government is currently drinking from the “Last Chance Saloon”, but it's credibility has been brought into doubt with the revelations made by former treasurer Michael Costa. One has to wonder what else has been pure spin!

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