

COMMERCIAL FISHERIES

General Overview

The Commercial Fisheries Program is responsible for the management of commercial fisheries throughout Western Australia. This work is undertaken by a team of Commercial Program Officers located in the Department of Fisheries Head Office in Perth as well as Regional Policy Officers in Albany, Fremantle, Geraldton, Carnarvon and Broome. Management of most aspects of the major fishing activities is achieved through formal management plans declared under the *Fish Resources Management Act 1994 (FRMA)*, while other forms of fishing activity are managed through a combination of controls derived from the *Fish Resources Management Regulations 1995*, orders under the FRMA and conditions attached to fishing boat and commercial fishing licences.

The major commercial fisheries rely on relatively high-value, low-volume products for their viability. Tight management controls ensure that each fishery is sustainable. These management controls may be input controls, such as limitations on the number of licences, gear restrictions, seasonal closures and limits on fishing time (effort quotas), or output controls (catch quotas) which directly limit the quantity of fish that can be landed. There are often also permanent closed areas or other measures, under both effort and catch quota regimes, to protect juvenile or breeding fish or to protect important habitats.

Key factors in the successful management of fisheries are the rational implementation of advice on management issues and industry support for sustainable fishery management practices. Consultation with industry is a key factor in achieving management approaches which have strong support, and this is undertaken through a variety of forums. In the major managed fisheries, management advisory committees (MACs) provide key advice to the Minister for Fisheries, while in the smaller fisheries the Department's Commercial Program and Regional Policy Officers meet directly with industry. Consultation also takes place through the production of discussion papers on proposed fisheries management arrangements. MACs currently provide advice on the West Coast Rock Lobster, Shark Bay Prawn, Shark Bay Scallop,

Exmouth Gulf Prawn, Abalone, Purse Seine, Demersal Gillnet and Longline and Northern Demersal Scalefish Managed Fisheries.

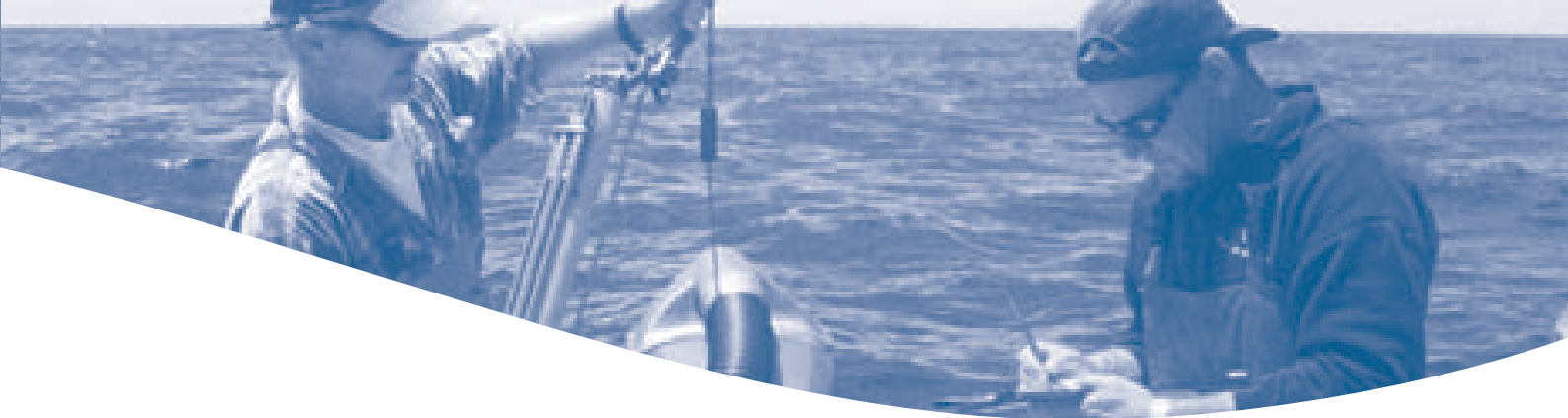
The five major commercial fisheries (West Coast Rock Lobster, Abalone, Exmouth Gulf Prawn, Shark Bay Prawn and Shark Bay Scallop) operate in a fully cost-recovered management environment, which requires that licensees in these fisheries pay fees to cover the total cost of management. Cost recovery has been phased in over a number of years, with the final stage of cost recovery (100% cash costs plus capital accruals and employee entitlements) being reached in 2001/02.

The remaining fisheries paid a contribution towards their management costs of 2.17% of their gross value of production (GVP) in 2002/03. All fisheries also contributed to the Development and Better Interest Fund, which in 2002/03 was levied at a rate of 0.655% of their GVP to ensure that the fund achieved \$3.5 million in contributions.

There was continued and significant progress in 2002/03 in the production of ecological sustainability reports to Environment Australia (EA) for continued listing of species taken in various export fisheries under Section 303 DB of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. The reports for the West Coast Rock Lobster, Shark Bay Prawn, Shark Bay Scallop and Exmouth Gulf Prawn Managed Fisheries resulted in those fisheries being accredited as ecologically sustainable and five-year exemptions were granted for species taken in those fisheries. Final reports for the Abalone, Pearl Oyster (wild harvest) and Shark Bay Snapper fisheries were submitted and draft reports produced on 16 other fisheries.

The ongoing requirements of maintaining the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification for the West Coast Rock Lobster Managed Fishery involved a significant level of input from rock lobster managers and researchers. The main focus of this effort has been the development of an





environmental management strategy, which is expected to be completed in the second half of 2003 for consideration by the MSC auditors. Another key area of focus in the rock lobster fishery was implementation of the Government's decisions on regulatory changes in response to National Competition Policy requirements. This resulted in removal of the regulatory limitations on the domestic processing sector and the abolition of the 150 pot operating limit.

In the State's trawl fisheries there was continued progress in the implementation of bycatch reduction devices (BRDs). By the commencement of the 2003 fishing season all trawl fisheries except the South West Trawl Managed Fishery had fully implemented grids designed to allow the escapement of turtles and other large species and had identified strategies to trial and implement fish escapement devices (FEDs), typically square mesh panels designed to allow the escapement of smaller fish species (except in the scallop fisheries where the large mesh size makes FEDs unnecessary). An extensive review of the effects of prawn trawling on pink snapper stocks in Denham Sound was undertaken and a comprehensive scientific assessment submitted for peer review. A Fisheries Research and Development Corporation (FRDC) funded project to assess the impacts of trawling on biodiversity was also commenced. There was an extensive assessment of options for dealing with the excessive levels of latent effort in the Kimberley Prawn Managed Fishery, with the result that management has now moved to an effort pool system.

In the finfish area there was significant progress in the development of management plans for the Mackerel Fishery and the West Coast Estuarine Fishery and revised management options for the state's shark fisheries. Perhaps the major initiative in the finfish area, however, was the commencement of a review of wetline fishing. Not all commercial fishing in Western Australia is subject to specific management regulation, and fishing activities undertaken under the authority of a fishing boat licence are referred to as wetline fishing. Usual methods include handlining, droplining, trolling and hand-hauled netting, while less commonly used methods include drop netting, squid jigging, lift netting and diving. In total 2,524 t of fish were reported as wetline catch during 2001/02,

comprising 1,440 t (57%) from the west coast bioregion, 605 t (24%) from the north coast, 313 t (12%) from the Gascoyne and 164 t (7%) from the south coast.

The review of wetline fishing was announced in September 2002 and in March 2003 the Minister announced that two panels would undertake different aspects of the review in the west coast and Gascoyne bioregions. A Commercial Access Panel will examine matters surrounding access to the wetline fishery and a Management Planning Panel will consider management arrangements for the fishery. The implementation of more effective management for the wetline fishery will be a key element of giving effect to the principles of Integrated Fisheries Management.



WEST COAST BIOREGION

REGIONAL MANAGEMENT OVERVIEW

The principal commercial fishery in this region targets the western rock lobster, but there are also significant fisheries for scallops, sharks, blue swimmer crabs, pilchards, and coastal and estuarine finfish, with many of the inshore fish resources shared with the recreational sector.

The size and importance of the West Coast Rock Lobster Managed Fishery make it a key focus of the activities of the Department on the west coast. In particular, the accreditation of the fishery for export approval under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* was a key event during 2002/03. There was also a high level of focus on the ongoing requirements of maintaining Marine Stewardship Council accreditation for the fishery and, in particular, the development of an environmental management strategy. Implementation of the Government's National Competition Policy decisions, including removal of the 150 pot rule and deregulation of the domestic processing sector, were also major areas of activity.

There was significant progress in the development of a management plan for the west coast estuaries, and it is expected that the Swan/Canning and Peel/Harvey estuaries will come under more formal management in late 2003.

In Cockburn Sound the West Coast Beach Bait, Cockburn Sound Fish Net and Cockburn Sound Line Fisheries Adjustment Scheme closed on 28 March 2003. This scheme saw significant reductions in the number of fishing units with 8, 1 and 12 fishing units respectively withdrawn from the three fisheries.

Access to the southern zone of the Mandurah–Bunbury Inshore Crab Fishery was finalised, with four entrants authorised to use a total of 240 crab pots. The access arrangements for the northern zone (Comet Bay) are under review. The Geographe Bay Crab Mediation process continued, involving representatives from the commercial and recreational fisheries, community members and the Department. A final report has been prepared and submitted to the Minister for Fisheries for consideration.

The wetline fishery in the west coast bioregion operates mainly in the areas of demersal line fishing, beach seining and near-shore gillnetting. The demersal line fishery takes a range of demersal fish species including dhufish, snapper, baldchin groper and emperors from boats operating purely as wetliners (i.e. no form of access other than a fishing boat licence) and boats which hold managed fishery licences (e.g. west coast rock lobster) in addition to a fishing boat licence. There is also a take of fish by beach seining and near-shore gillnetting using hand-hauled nets. A review of the wetline fishery was announced by the Minister in September 2002 to develop

more effective management controls and to prepare the fishery for Integrated Fisheries Management.

REGIONAL COMPLIANCE AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION OVERVIEW

Commercial fishery compliance inspections on the west coast are conducted by Fisheries Officers working from District Offices located in Geraldton, Dongara, Jurien, Lancelin, Hillarys, Fremantle, Mandurah, Bunbury and Busselton. These officers undertake a variety of activities, including sea- and land-based inspections of licences, catch, fishing gear, fish processing factories, retail outlets and catch consignments.

The major single focus for commercial fishery compliance monitoring is the West Coast Rock Lobster Managed Fishery, and the outcomes for this fishery are reported separately on pp. 7–9. Compliance services are also delivered to fisheries targeting abalone, blue swimmer crabs, pilchards, scallops, sharks, prawns, coastal and estuarine finfish, and offshore demersal species (e.g. dhufish and snapper). Many of the inshore fish resources are shared with the large number of recreational fishers operating out of the metropolitan and south-west areas, and this increases the need for rigorous compliance monitoring in some areas.

Inshore at-sea compliance is generally conducted using patrol vessels up to 8 m, while two dedicated large patrol vessels (> 20 m), based in Fremantle and Geraldton, undertake offshore patrol duties. A third large patrol vessel periodically operates from Fremantle to assist with compliance duties in the rock lobster and inshore trawl fisheries. In addition to duties conducted by district-based Fisheries Officers, the Serious Offences Unit conducts investigations into serious fishery offences.

Activities during 2001/02

During 2001/02, Regional Services personnel undertook 39,776 hours of compliance work in commercial fisheries in the west coast bioregion (West Coast Commercial Compliance Table 1), excluding work conducted for the Australian Fisheries Management Authority in Commonwealth fisheries. Of these approximately 80% of the hours consisted of duties performed in the commercial rock lobster fishery, with the remainder dedicated to the wide range of other commercial fisheries within the bioregion.

Fisheries Officers recorded 7,578 field contacts with commercial fishing operations and 4,257 office contacts with commercial fishers. A percentage of these contacts resulted from information received through the 24-hour Fishwatch hotline, a toll-free statewide telephone service to allow the public to report incidences of suspected illegal activity. There were a total of 568 commercial and recreational Fishwatch

reports received during 2001/02. During the year, 336 infringement warnings and 93 infringement notices were issued, and a further 76 cases resulted in prosecution of commercial fishers.

WEST COAST COMMERCIAL COMPLIANCE TABLE I

Summary of compliance and educative contacts and infringement types in commercial fisheries within the west coast bioregion during the 2001/02 financial year.

CONTACT WITH THE COMMERCIAL FISHING COMMUNITY	NUMBER
Hours delivered in bioregion	39,776
Fisher field contacts by Fisheries Officers	7,578
District Office contacts by Fisheries Officers	4,257
Fishwatch reports *	568
OFFENCES DETECTED	
Infringement warnings	336
Infringement notices	93
Prosecutions	76

* This represents the total number of Fishwatch reports, both commercial and recreational, since the service provider reporting mechanism cannot differentiate between sectors.

There continued to be concerns over interference with commercial fishing gear in the Cockburn Sound and Peel/Harvey crab fisheries during peak periods. This was despite increased levels of surveillance, including joint patrols with police, during 2001/02. The Department is working with industry on a number of compliance and management initiatives aimed at minimising interference with gear.

A number of targeted compliance operations were conducted in Zone D (Comet Bay) of the South West Trawl Managed Fishery to ensure vessels were not fishing outside of their authorised trawl areas.

The overall level of compliance in the estuarine, purse seine, shark and wetline fisheries was good, with only a small number of compliance issues arising. Some stakeholders questioned the activities of certain fishing operations, however compliance checks found no illegal activity occurring.

Further north, the Mid West Regional Office conducted a pre-season briefing for operators in the Abrolhos trawl fishery. The use of VMS in the fishery will enable closer scrutiny of where vessels are operating to ensure fishing activities do not extend to closed areas at the Abrolhos Islands.

Initiatives in 2002/03

The Department, in its attempts to minimise the offence of gear interference, has continued the development and testing of new technologies to assist in the detection of illegal interference with fishing gear.

The Department's database system for recording field-related compliance activities has become a valuable tool

for compliance planning, targeting of repeat offenders, and ensuring all vessels are regularly inspected. This tool has helped to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of compliance service delivery.

REGIONAL RESEARCH OVERVIEW OF WETLINE FISHING

The catch and effort statistics (CAES) database indicates that over half (57%) of the wetline catch in 2001/02 was reported from the west coast bioregion, which includes the waters of the populous lower west coast and the Abrolhos Islands. The top ten species comprised pink snapper (*Pagrus auratus*) 250 t, West Australian dhufish (*Glaucosoma hebraicum*) 219 t, whitebait (*Hyperlophus vittatus*) 125 t, sweetlip emperor (*Lethrinus miniatus*) 77 t, samson fish (*Seriola hippos*) 72 t, Australian herring (*Arripis geogianus*) 64 t, sea mullet (*Mugil cephalus*) 63 t, western sand whiting (*Sillago schomburgkii*) 41 t, redfish (*Centroberyx affinis*) 40 t and copper shark (*Carcharhinus brachyurus*) 39 t. With wobbegong (*Orectolobus* spp., 35 t) as the next most abundant species in the catch, it is interesting to note the increasing prominence of shark in the wetline catch.

Catches of dhufish, pink snapper and emperor are the main product of the demersal scalefish operations reported on pp. 41–46, noting that catches of emperors are mostly from the Abrolhos Islands. Whitebait, Australian herring, sea mullet, and western sand whiting comprise most of the catch of the beach bait fishers who operate between Tim's Thicket and Augusta (see pp. 35–37).

West Coast Rock Lobster Managed Fishery

Management Summary

Operators in the West Coast Rock Lobster Managed Fishery target western rock lobsters (*Panulirus cygnus*) between Shark Bay and Cape Leeuwin using baited traps (pots). The fishing season runs from 15 November to 30 June of the following year and most of the catch, which has averaged 11,300 t per season over the past 10 years, is exported to Asia, North America and, to a lesser extent, Europe.

This catch makes the fishery Australia's most valuable single-species fishery, with a seasonal gross value of production between \$300 and \$350 million.

The fishery is divided into two major zones, Zone B (north of Green Head) and Zone C (south of Green Head), with another zone (Zone A, which is effectively a subset of Zone B) for those fishing the Abrolhos Islands between March and June.

Following record catches of 13,000–14,000 t in 1998/99 and 1999/2000, the catch fell to around 9,000 t in 2001/02, but has returned in the current season to approximately 11,300 t. Such variations in catch are not unusual, and largely reflect the level of puerulus settlement four years earlier, which is in turn dependent upon environmental factors such as the Leeuwin Current.