

Western Rock Lobster Industry The Best Managed Fishery in the World Myth, Science or Guesswork

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE MINISTER FOR FISHERIES

Date: 30 July 2009

To: Minister for Mines and Petroleum; Fisheries; Electoral Affairs
Honourable Norman Moore BA DipEd JP MLC

From: Walter Starck PhD

Re: Proposed restrictions on Western Rock Lobster Fishery

Dear Mr. Moore,

The proposed restrictions on catch and effort in the WRLF to an unprecedented low level will wreak economic havoc on the fishermen, their families and entire coastal communities. Needless to say this may also have political implications for some marginal seats in Parliament.

The heavy economic impact is not a risk. It is a certainty, as it will come on top of earlier cuts that have already made profitability marginal and severely depressed the market for boats, licences and pots. Many fishermen are now heavily indebted from borrowing to buy extra pots due to previous cutbacks and the value of these assets have sunk well below the price at which they were bought.

Although past reductions have been absorbed by what was a profitable industry, that margin no longer exists and the additional cuts that have been proposed will force many fishermen into insolvency. This will put even more boats and pots on an already depressed market further collapsing their values and will force banks to recall loans. The end result will be the nation's most valuable fishery delivered into the hands of a few cashed up investors at fire sale prices and an effective monopoly provided to the dominant processor.

Whether this is the deliberate aim (as is widely rumoured), or it is simply economic incompetence and utter unconcern for any misery inflicted is unclear. What is clear is that there will be devastating consequences for many, benefit for a few and at least prima facie grounds for investigation by the CCC.

While it is understandable that you must take heed of the scientific advice of the Fisheries Department it is also incumbent on you to consider the full spectrum of information and circumstances in deciding this matter. This is why you, not the scientists are charged with making such decisions and why you, not they, will be seen as responsible for the outcome.

Although the puerulus counts that are the basis for the proposed cutbacks have proved to be reliable indicators in the past, the current circumstances are unprecedented in several respects. This includes their fall to near zero level, a progressive decline for three years, a similar decline in a suite of other species which are normally also found with the puerulus collectors, coincidence with an unprecedented three consecutive positive Indian Ocean Dipole events and a high easterly (i.e. offshore) wind anomaly in the peak puerulus settlement period. All these conditions are outside the range of past experience and impose a high level of uncertainty in making future predictions based on past relationships.

Most importantly, the expectation of low juvenile recruitment following low puerulus counts is contradicted by the widespread and numerous observations of many fishermen. They are not only seeing unusually high numbers of small juvenile crayfish in many places but these are also often in locations where few or none are normally seen. In addition, plankton tows further offshore are also finding good numbers of earlier stage phyllosoma larvae of the crayfish. The only missing element is the puerulus numbers on the collectors just off the shore. The most reasonable explanation is simply a poor settlement close to the beach. This might well be due to offshore winds resulting in a lack of surf noise and generation of an offshore wind driven surface current both of which could inhibit near shore settlement.

That the abundant juveniles being observed are not being detected by the limited fishery independent surveys conducted by the department is unsurprising in view of the relatively limited sampling effort and adherence to specific randomly selected collecting locations. Juvenile crayfish are much more restricted to specific habitat than are adults and they will not venture far from shelter. The probability of catching many with a small number of randomly placed pots is poor.

Although fishermen could quickly prove the existence of abundant ongoing juvenile recruitment their real world observations are being dismissed. This is not good enough. Trying to run an industry worth several hundred million dollars on a single indicator of production three to four years later while ignoring clear closer term contradictory indication goes beyond poor management and into the realm of culpable negligence. That no large scale tagging is being conducted is also inexcusable. Especially when results of the limited tagging which is being conducted strongly indicates much of the lower depletion by the fishery than is being claimed by management. Why is a meaningful tagging program not being conducted? Is it because the current limited results strongly indicate firm real world data would refute the modelled results now being used for management?

If we were to severely reduce the farming and grazing industries every time there is any indication of a poor year we could not feed ourselves. Using this approach in fisheries has resulted in our having to import 2/3 of the seafood we eat, all of it from resources far more heavily harvested than our own. This is unconscionable. Selling off non-renewable mineral resources to import a renewable one we already have in abundance then calling this sustainable management is simply retarded.

In view of the scientific uncertainty and the very real certainty of inflicting a great deal of human misery there is only one rational way forward. This is to permit an economically viable level of effort/catch in the fishery and is to carefully monitor the results until a clear indication of depletion or recovery becomes apparent. Despite all of the waffle about maintaining sustainability of the resource this is a non-issue. Nowhere, never, has fishing exterminated any marine fish or invertebrate. Lobster fisheries everywhere are noted for large fluctuations in catch. Regardless of management, catches often collapse and they do recover. How much intensive management helps is difficult to discern. It may smooth out the highs and lows a bit but the benefit is debatable.

The worst that may happen by continuing to fish and monitoring the results

is that a possible downturn might be somewhat more intensified and recovery more prolonged. Or it might not be. The overwhelming determinate will always be the random natural variables which determine recruitment success. All indication from the abundance of oncoming juveniles and abundant breeding stock is that no problem exists and the real condition of the stocks is excellent.

Inflicting bankruptcy on hundreds of families and hardship on whole communities while claiming it is necessary for future sustainability of the industry is nonsensical. It is reminiscent of bombing villages with napalm in order to save them from the Viet Cong.

The industry is much better positioned than management to gather real world data and to conduct field research. It could do this much more cost effectively and should be assisted in taking responsibility for doing so. This is not unthinkable or even radical. It has been very successfully done in the Spencer Gulf prawn fishery and is widely used in New Zealand. Incidentally, they produce twice the total fishery catch of Australia with a shelf area 1/8 as large.

In a reduced fishery, recovery of management costs will mean an increasing share of this cost for each fishermen still remaining. Ever increasing costs for management has resulted only in ever decreasing production and profitability. This is a travesty of the very concept of management. If management costs were indexed to the resulting production and profitability of the industry you would see a huge change in attitude and approach by managers. There is a real opportunity in this regard to institute a legacy of major improvement over the entire renewable resource management sector. Please consider.

We are facing a serious global recession with government on all levels running serious deficits. The productive sector is threatened with declining profits and retrenchments. The electorate is worried about their job, their mortgage and their cost of living. There is a very real possibility of increasing fuel prices and further decreases in demand for luxury items such as lobster. Beyond the immediate economic situation looms an end to the era of cheap abundant energy on which our whole economy and way of life is based. This is the worst of times to be closing down healthy industries as a precaution.

At the recent Rock Lobster Congress you may recall the fishermen being asked to reserve their questions for the next day's workshop session. The next day no Fishery researchers showed up and the fishermen were left with many critical questions unanswered. A lobster council spokesperson trying to defend the DoF scientists stated that they had intended to be there but were ordered by their CEO not to attend. This is unacceptable when people are facing financial ruin.

A further matter for consideration involves the plan to establish large scale Marine Protected Areas taking up major portions of what are now prime fishing grounds for the WRLF. The previous experience of doing this on the Great Barrier Reef was that the best fishing grounds were in fact taken to protect their high biodiversity. The fishing industry was squeezed into reduced areas of poorer grounds and the resulting compensation claims blew out from an estimated \$2.5 million to over \$150 million paid out thus far with a similar amount still to be settled. Following this debacle the head of GBRMPA's contract was not renewed and the minister was replaced. It seems unlikely that DEHWA would be setting out to repeat this fiasco on an even larger scale with the WRLF. Downsizing the WRLF by half before declaring the MPAs would nicely eliminate this problem as the remaining fishermen would retain a similar fishing area per boat. Please be aware this may be an agenda behind some advice you are receiving. The fishermen are well aware of this and it will not pass unnoticed or without resistance.

The WRLF is largely a Commonwealth resource and management is ultimately answerable to the Commonwealth. If current management is insistent upon euthanasing the industry, difficult questions will assuredly be raised in Parliament and will have to be answered. In the end the real condition of the resource will become apparent. The abundant juveniles and breeding stock combined with effects of earlier catch reductions show strong indication of resulting in exceptionally abundant stocks. Imposing a clearly foreseeable economic disaster for dubious reasons which prove to be incorrect would be an avoidable tragedy for all involved.

Finally, I should also advise you that an independent review of the management of the Broome trap fishery (NDSF) has found serious shortcomings in the implementation of the stock modelling used by the department. I am now in the process of having the findings of this review examined by leading experts. This process has only just started but early feedback indicates that the criticisms raised by the review will be strongly confirmed and indeed expanded. It appears that some of the most telling criticisms of the NDSF modelling will also be applicable to the WRLF modelling. I advise this good faith. The stock assessment projections being used are far less soundly based than you may have been led to believe and this will be proved in due course.

I can appreciate your difficult position in this situation, most especially in view of even larger and more critical issues in your portfolio. However, this is not a trivial matter. To go ahead in disregard of the clearly apparent widely recognised doubts, conflicting information, suspicions and adverse consequences will be to accept full responsibility for acting on dubious grounds where high risk is obvious. This is not necessary. Don't do it.

Regards,
Walter Starck

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Sponsored by a group of
concerned Zone C Fishermen and Citizens