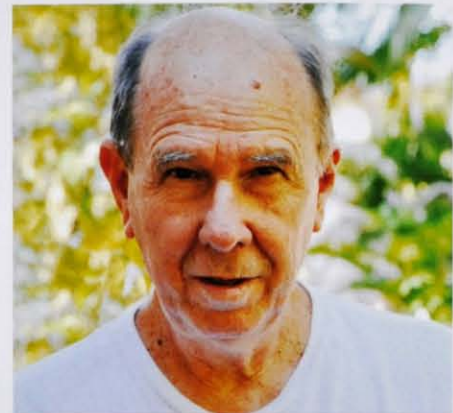


COMMENT

Like many of our state governments, Queensland has an unenviable record of failing to support our marine industries. They have failed to support private marine infrastructure projects, abandoned waterways and left them to narrow and silt up, persecuted recreational and commercial fishers and heavily taxed recreational boat owners, not to mention their failure to support marine manufacturers and the massive expansion of marine parks and exclusion zones.

More recently, the abolition of the state fuel subsidy has added nine cents per litre to fuel costs and now, in what is seen as a preamble to further limit and discourage recreational and commercial fishing further, have released a Draft Fisheries Strategy for public comment.

We invited eminent scientist and marine commentator Dr Walter Starck to provide an objective assessment on this latest piece of bureaucratic waffle. While the proposals contained in the draft strategy are specific to Queensland, the reasoning and scientific evidence provided by Dr Starck are applicable to every Australian fishery.



Dr Walter Starck PhD

A perspective on the Queensland Draft Fisheries Strategy

The Queensland Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation has recently released a Draft Fisheries Strategy document for public comment. This study acknowledges an ongoing decline in the participation, production and profitability of our commercial fishing industry both in Queensland and nationally. It also recognises that, "Over many years Queensland's fisheries management has developed a vast legislative framework of regulations, procedures, practices, rules, limits and permit conditions." After noting that this, "...has resulted in a relatively inflexible system..." it suggests a need to develop a more "flexible, adaptive, responsive system."

For bureau-waffle, this all sounds pretty good. However, implicit in the entire strategy proposal is an unquestioned acceptance that maintaining sustainability is a core problem and that a solution to terminal bureaucratic sclerosis can be effected by measures to introduce flexibility. Unfortunately, it appears that the proposed solution must inevitably entail a further expansion of management complexity and bureaucracy when what is really needed is simplification and accountability.

Few people truly appreciate the overall low level of fishing pressure in Australia. We have the third largest area of Exclusive Economic Zone in the world and the second largest total shelf area. On a per-capita basis, we have by far the largest fishery area of any nation. We also have the most heavily regulated fisheries in the world with the highest management cost per unit of production.

Despite widespread concern about overfishing, actual instances are rare. Our already small fishing industry is rapidly declining primarily because the burden of regulation is driving fishermen to quit, and deterring new entrants. The result is that we have the world's lowest fishery harvest rate, about 1/30 of the global average rate, and 70% of

the seafood we consume must be imported. These imports currently add some \$1.8 billion to our annual trade deficit. We are selling off non-renewable mineral resources to import a renewable one we have in abundance. Additionally, we still have the environmental impacts and resource depletion attendant to whatever other economic activity pays for these imports. Worse still, this amount is entirely removed from the economy and the flow-on benefits it would generate if spent domestically are thus lost as well. Then, as a final certification of economic idiocy, our politicians and bureaucrats warble on about how all this is "sustainable management" and assuring our future..

No marine species in Australia has ever become extinct from human causes. None are now threatened by such extinction. The Great Barrier Reef is in pristine condition. Of the over 2500 named reefs in the complex, only a few dozen near population centres are regularly visited. Over 90% of the reefs are seldom or never fished or even visited by anyone. Most of the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) is too far offshore to be affected by human activities on the coast. Most of the adjacent coast remains undeveloped. The GBR commercial fishing harvest rate is a miniscule 9kg/km²/year. Even conservationists estimate 4000kg/km² to be an average sustainable harvest rate for reef fisheries. All this is easily verified, non-controversial fact. The reality of this situation is readily observable to anyone making an extended reef cruise or a flight over the reef. Away from proximity to the few small population centres, boats are rarely seen and one passes reef after reef with no vessel anywhere in sight.

A few more facts to consider

- Much environmental regulation addresses no demonstrable problem but is only a political cheap shot to appear environmentally correct and pander for the urban green vote.



Most of the Great Barrier Reef is too far offshore to be affected by human activities on the coast.

- No marine fish or invertebrate, anywhere, has ever been exterminated by overfishing.
- Line fishing is self limiting. Increased fishing results in a population which is wary of hooks and increasingly difficult to catch.
- I am unable to find even one example anywhere of a marine stock collapse due to recreational line fishing.
- After a century of intensive and growing recreational line fishing in the Florida Keys, the fishing remains excellent. This involves a fishing pressure far greater than anything anywhere in Australia.
- The environmental impact of recreational line fishing is a non-problem while the social, health and economic value of the industry is substantial. Any competent government should be encouraging recreational fishing, not restricting it.
- Under Article 10 of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (to which Australia is signatory), Australia is required to:

"(c) Protect and encourage customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices that are compatible with conservation or sustainable use requirements...."

Note that "customary" and "traditional" is not limited to indigenous peoples. Under this convention the obligation to protect and encourage the customary practice of recreational fishing by non-indigenous people is in no way distinct from the obligation to protect such practices by indigenous Australians.

In addition to the economic and recreational value of fisheries, a growing number of recent studies have found important health benefits associated with seafood and efforts to encourage greater consumption have been implemented by government. At the same time, though, it continues to impose ever more stringent restrictions on the fishing industry. On the one hand government is telling us to eat more seafood while at the same time it is making it increasingly scarce and unaffordable.

Seafood is high in proteins and low in fats, cholesterol, and sodium. It is an excellent source of minerals and vitamins. It is easier to digest than other meats and is among the most nutritionally balanced of foods. It aids weight control and is highly beneficial in preventing heart disease.

In particular, seafood is high in essential omega-3 fatty acids which are deficient in most terrestrial foods. Their consumption has been found to be beneficial in preventing or alleviating a wide range of immune related disorders. These include asthma, arthritis, osteoporosis, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, hypertension, migraine headaches, certain cancers, age related maculopathy and some kidney diseases.

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They also play a vital role in neurological development and functioning. A diet rich in seafood facilitates brain development and has indicated significant cognitive and behavioural benefits for children. It has also been found to be valuable in reducing depression and schizophrenia in adults as well as maintaining mental function with ageing.

The bottom line is that high levels of seafood consumption correlate directly with happier, healthier, longer lives. Fish really is a brain food and it would quite literally be stupid to continue to mismanage our fisheries. It seems particularly ironic to call ourselves "The Smart State" and "The Clever Country" while closing down our fisheries and selling off non-renewable resources to pay for imported seafood we could easily produce in abundance at higher quality and better prices.

One might well imagine a new generation of Asians talking about Australia, "Lovely country, too bad about their brains."

Still, with no demonstrated problem of overfishing but simply as "precautionary measures", office bound bureaucrats continue to restrict our fishing industry. This is unneeded, unethical and unaffordable. Our marine resources could easily sustain a fishery harvest several times larger than the present one, eliminate any need for imports and still maintain the most lightly harvested and pristine marine environment in the world. This potential is largely unrecognised and won't improve unless an aroused public begins to demand it. Appeals to unverified computer models, claims of scientific authority by office based experts and wafflings of eco-gibberish aren't good enough. Show us the evidence.

The situation with aquaculture is even worse. It is the fastest growing sector in world food production. During the past three decades global production has increased by over 1200 percent with an average compound growth of around 9 percent per annum. Australia, with some 60,000 kilometres of mostly uninhabited coastline well suited for aquaculture, a benign climate and unpolluted waters, clearly has vast potential; yet, development of the industry is now declining after a weak start.

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A comparison of Australian aquaculture production with that of a sampling of other nations is instructive. Thailand and Vietnam each have only about one-eighth of Australia's coastline; but, both have around 30 times (i.e. 3000 percent) greater aquaculture production than Australia. The European Union has over 40 times greater production. Even New Zealand has over double Australia's production. Although the small size of Australia's industry has been attributed to higher cost structure there is obviously something more to it than this. Certainly Australian costs for land, labour, equipment, energy and feedstock are at no disadvantage to Canada, France, Japan, Norway, the UK, or the US, yet all have hugely greater aquaculture industries.

The real reason is only one thing, over regulation. Despite the world's best natural conditions for it, aquaculture in Australia has been strangled at birth by an impossible morass of regulations. These impose multi-fold greater expenses, delays and uncertainties than anywhere else. Apart from a few exceptions which became well established before regulation made new operations uneconomic, aquaculture here has been declining in recent years while it continues to boom elsewhere. The only marine sector booming here is regulation.

To top off all this mismanagement, the Queensland government now has plans to implement a \$30 million scheme to train people for employment in the fishing industry.

When the planning bureaucrats for this latest fiasco have been confronted with fact that the declining industry can't even maintain existing jobs and there is no prospect for trainees to obtain the sea time required for certification, it becomes apparent that they not only don't know this, they don't want to know. It isn't their concern. They have a budget for marine training and it will be done regardless of whether there is any need for it. If nothing else it should qualify graduates for a secure place on the dole. I guess it must be part of the economic stimulus effort.



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The era of cheap abundant global resources is drawing to a close. Immediately beyond the current financial recession lurks a second knock down from a resumption of steep energy price increases. The world faces tough, ongoing economic circumstances. No nation is better situated than Australia to weather these conditions, but doing so will entail making full use of our abundant natural advantages.

We simply can no longer afford the burden of a bloated unaccountable bureaucracy stifling productivity nor can we continue to pander to the delusions of green non-producers. The bureaucracy will have to be pruned and made accountable for positive results. Ever increasing management budgets which result only in ever decreasing production and profitability are a travesty of the very concept of management. The one sure easy way to improved outcomes would be to index management budgets, employment and salaries to the production and profitability of the sector for which they are responsible.

If government won't impose accountability, severe recession will. Adding more and more ill-conceived restrictions onto our producers is tantamount to treason in a time of war. It is time that positive outcomes be required, not just meaningless eco-waffle. It is also time that real evidence be demanded of researchers, not just unsupported claims by a chorus of 'experts' singing for their supper. Above all, it is past time for the public to realise that we are all paying the price of gross resource mismanagement in our cost of living, our health, our freedom and in the broader well being of the nation.

Over the current recession, government of all stripes has repeatedly demonstrated that they are clueless as to the nature of the real economic problems confronting us or what to do about them. Only the productive sector can create the products, services and real jobs necessary for prosperity. Government has no solution. It has become a major element of the problem. The productive sector is going to have to put together a clear reform agenda and go over the heads of government directly to the electorate. A year ago this would have been impossible to do; but, people are now worried about their mortgages, their jobs and the escalating cost of food. They are ready to listen to well reasoned solutions. The time is right.

The long time Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kwan Yew once infamously observed that, through mismanagement, Australia was in danger of becoming a white trash backwater of an Asian super economy. Sanctimoniously sitting on vast stores of badly need resources while mouthing platitudes about biodiversity, sustainability and our precious fragile environment, won't cut it. If we won't make use of our resources, hungry others will. Having to scrape aside a bit of green scum to get at them won't be much of a deterrent.

USE IT OR LOSE IT!