

Opinion Piece

Recreational fishers true conservationists

It is ironic that only a week after the recreational fishing industry were virtually the sole voice in calling for a definitive action plan for the Swan-Canning Rivers that we should be under direct attack with the release of the Rottneest Island Marine Strategy.

The simple question should be – Why is the 30% of the community who fishes so proactive in seeking protection of our aquatic environment in the estuaries, yet so positively evil when it comes to the marine environment?

The answer, sadly, is philosophy. The Rottneest Island Authority and CALM before them have limited avenues to manage the aquatic environment. In essence they have a single tool and it is a hammer. They find it easier to ban fishing than to look at managing it, and the evidence to support their perspective is limited and highly emotive – yet there are crusaders such as Hugh Edwards happy to jump on this populist narrow bandwagon rather to look at real solutions.

The truth is that recreational fishers have done much towards sustainable management of the resources – much more in fact than the conservation movement's advocacy for simple lock out strategies. The Cockburn Sound snapper closure was initiated by, advocated for, and implemented by the recreational sector before the science was available. Excellent work was funded and the closure modified to protect the majority of the spawning fish the majority of the time. This was a huge success with strong community support.

Even in Shark Bay, the moves to close the eastern gulf pink snapper fishery were strongly advocated for by Recfishwest and recreational industry leaders. The stocks have recovered dramatically. This is a wonderful initiative where the recreational sector took responsibility and took the difficult steps to recover the stocks.

Indeed, Recfishwest has actually asked for greater protection for a number of marine reserves in Western Australia including Jurien Bay and Shoalwater. We also asked for greater, but more enforceable controls at Rowley Shoals and yes, even at Ningaloo.

Recfishwest's Wilderness Fishing policy and our submissions for both areas, if accepted, would have delivered far greater protection to fish, been orders of magnitude cheaper to police, had wider community support and provided better opportunities for monitoring fish populations. Yet these proposals were rejected out of hand by a CALM department driven more by a desire to control the aquatic environment than to protect it.

The Rottneest Island Authority is guilty of the same manipulation of evidence to support an antagonistic view. Even Geoff Gallop, a leader who emphasised his green credentials, recognised the difficulties with justifying additional closures at Rottneest and said so in the election policy and the launch of the campaign. These directives from the party machine should not be ignored.

In spite of this, Recfishwest and the recreational fishers recognise that Rottnest Island is a special place which needs more intensive management. Recreational fishers have just completed a comprehensive review of west coast management with significant reductions in many bag limits. Many of the issues at Rottnest are much better dealt with in a wider context – the entire metropolitan area needs management.

Recreational fishers have strongly advocated for use of the release device to improve the survival of released fish, both undersized and those that people choose to release. Recfishwest has strongly advocated for total protection of cobbler in the Swan River. Recreational fishers have come a long way to ensure that they pass a legacy of quality fishing on to their children.

However, the lack of consideration for the real threats to sustainability is sadly lacking in the philosophy adopted by the Rottnest Island Authority. They set up a committee with many people who will benefit from banning fishing. When the recreational representatives offered a concession – it was taken and a consensus view recorded. When a trade-off was asked for by recreational fishers, it was voted down and a majority decision recorded. And the committee was bound by confidentiality and not able to discuss the process as it evolved. I have still not been sent the formal proposals as a key stakeholder.

Meanwhile, the opportunity for creative and outcome focussed discussion was not possible. The fact that the dive charters who make a profit from not having recreational fishers in the area can still drop their heavy anchors in the so-called sanctuary zones rankles. As does the closing of the ‘Chicken run’ at the West End to protect molluscs, which appears to be blatantly antagonistic.

If there is a problem with a species like blue groper, then let’s look at solutions to the problem and address them. The concept of protection for blue groper in all waters of the Rottnest Island would have been considered but the goodwill of recreational fishers has been terribly eroded by the half-truths and biased material prepared by the Rottnest Island Authority.

Many recreational fishers do not come anywhere near the bag limits because they limit their catch, don’t catch their limit. If we want soundly based management, we will have to bring all the community along. I am extremely proud of what recreational fishers have done to ensure quality fishing and our stance on environmental matters is exemplary. I’m just not sure why it has become trendy to blame us for what are still regarded as some of the best managed fisheries in the world.

Check out our submissions at www.recfishwest.org.au

Frank Prokop
(author, marine biologist, father)