



Fish lock-ups lazy way of stock management

Healthy oceans and sustainable fisheries are goals we should all desire. But should “fortress conservation” - simply locking away vast areas of the ocean – come at the cost of everyone?

It is an extreme argument put time and again by highly resourced and organised groups that the only way to truly manage a resource is to lock it away.

The current debate is being driven by a powerful environmental lobby intent on persuading Australian politicians that our waters are in serious and immediate danger and in order to be protected must be locked away forever.

With a decision imminent on Commonwealth marine planning in waters between South Australia’s Kangaroo Island and along the west coast as far north as Western Australia’s Abrolhos Islands, significant pressure is being applied to Federal Environment Minister Tony Burke to establish a large network of “no-go” sanctuary zones.

Marine scientist, Professor Jessica Meeuwig recently expressed that her views were settled on the need of marine sanctuaries for the management of fish stocks.

Whilst she is entitled to her opinion, Professor Meeuwig’s claim there is “broad scientific agreement” on the benefit of marine sanctuaries as a fisheries management tool requires examination.

What she fails to acknowledge is that WA waters are already heavily controlled in terms of where, when and what type of fishing can occur.

The existing fisheries management arrangements already afford significant levels of protection to fish populations. These arrangements translate to the spatial or temporal protection of up to 30 % of WA’s marine waters.

There is a growing body of literature which documents institutional and community issues associated with marine reserves and emerging Australian examples are not supportive of “no-go” sanctuary zones as the principal tool for managing impacts on the marine environment

The benefits of marine reserves to recreational fishing are often predicated on “the spill-over effect”. Professor Meeuwig referred to this in her recently reported comments... in effect implying that fish leave the marine reserve to be caught by recreational anglers.

Associate Professor Daryl McPhee, Director of Environmental Science at Bond University and author of the textbook Fisheries Management in Australia has recently reviewed the issue of these no-take marine parks and recreational fishing, including the “spill-over effect”.

His work to be published in the International Journal of Science in Society - has found that broad statements of benefits to recreational fisheries used in Australia to support marine reserve implementation through spill-over effects greatly oversimplify the issue.

Professor Mcphee also found there were no detailed recreational fishing cost-benefit analyses for marine reserves found in any of the case studies reviewed, or in the peer reviewed literature.

The WA public deserves more than lazy marine policy that seeks complete exclusion over sound and inclusive management.

A recent report delivered by the Victorian Auditor-General, Des Pearson, drew the conclusion that marine sanctuaries were not a "magic bullet". His audit found effective marine conservation requires a holistic approach with integrated management across catchments and coastal areas.

Questions need to be asked about drivers for expensive and often inappropriate lines on the water, when other management strategies can deliver better outcomes for everyone.

Interestingly there is another player in this marine park debate that changed the paradigm of conservation advocacy.

The American Pew Environmental Group, which ironically has strong historical ties with the oil industry, has been using its abundant financial power to resource environmental lobby groups and attempt to influence policy decisions in Australia.

The Pew Environment Group has also funded a number of Australian scientists sympathetic to its agenda.

The public needs to be aware that the green lobby constantly uses whale protection as simply an excuse to ban fishing. These organisations take an "anti-fishing" approach and purport to be the voice of marine conservation. This is neither realistic nor necessarily accurate.

The blue whale is the "poster child" for urgency of marine conservation in the south-west bioregion. Professor Meeuwig describes the majestic nature of these amazing mammals that would convince many of their need to be protected.

However, it is telling that she fails to mention that the entire Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), extending to the 200 nautical mile offshore limit of Australian territorial waters, is already recognised as the Australian Whale Sanctuary and has been since 1999.

Professor Meeuwig also fails to mention that recreational fishing poses no meaningful threat to these majestic creatures. We can have blue whales without excluding recreational fishing.

Recreational fishers are amongst the strongest of conservationists at heart and include vocal and committed advocates for increased marine protection when clear conservation objectives are identified.

Recreational fishing is a big part of the West Australian way of life. Nearly one third of our population goes fishing at least once a year and contributes approximately \$500 million to our economy.

Professor Meeuwig is potentially right in stating that the decisions made by the Federal Government in the Western Australia's south-west will set a precedent around the rest of Australia.

We should hope these decisions include a balance of opinions to ensure legitimate marine users and real resource management are not excluded for partisan political purposes.

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