

Submission on Proposal to Establish a Busselton Jetty Fish Habitat Protection Area

Introduction

Recfishwest is the peak body for recreational fishing in Western Australia. It represents the interests of more than 600,000 Western Australians who go fishing and is recognised by the Government of Western Australia, the WA Department of Fisheries and other government departments and authorities. Given our charter, we have a significant interest in any initiative or development that has the potential to impact upon recreational fishing activity.

In recent years Recfishwest and the recreational fishing community have become sensitive to proposals that include recreational fishing closures. Fishing closures are being proposed much more frequently, often without reasonable justification and rarely accompanied by suggested 'trade offs' that may ameliorate or offset the loss of recreational fishing amenity.

While Recfishwest supports the Busselton jetty observatory concept it is an initiative that, if not carefully designed and managed, has the potential to significantly and unnecessarily impact upon recreational fishing.

Recreational fishing is one of the major attractions for holidaymakers visiting the Busselton region. The Shire of Busselton would be well aware that the jetty has been the centrepiece of land based recreational fishing in Busselton for decades. This is particularly the case for family oriented fishing activities.

The jetty is also unique in that it provides a rare opportunity for land based fishers to catch deep-water pelagic species such as sampson fish, yellowtail kingfish and tuna. This has been one of the jetty's major recreational fishing attractions for many decades.

Overview

Recfishwest has considered the report to the Busselton Shire Council detailing the case for a fishing exclusion zone around the Busselton Jetty Underwater Observatory and was represented at the public meeting/workshop to discuss the proposal.

There are several unfortunate conclusions we have drawn from this report and meeting. These are that:

1. While recreational fishers are the only jetty users to be disenfranchised by the proposal there has clearly been no prior attempt by the proponents of the underwater observatory to engage the recreational fishing community in any meaningful consultation or involvement in the observatory design.
2. The report to the Busselton Shire Council is starkly void of any appreciation of the needs and aspirations of recreational fishers for their ongoing access and use of the Busselton Jetty.
3. At best there has been a significant lack of communication between the Busselton Jetty Management Committee and the public in respect to jetty restoration planning and timeframes. This has resulted in deep scepticism within the recreational fishing community

that restoration of the end section of the jetty will be carried out in a reasonable timeframe, or at all, should recreational fishing access to this part of the jetty continue to be allowed.

Case In Support of a Fishing Exclusion Zone

Recfishwest considers that the case in support of the proposed fishing exclusion zone, as detailed in the report to the Busselton council, principally consists of statements and assertions that are unsubstantiated and misleading.

We do not believe that the proposed exclusion zone will assist in fish spawning and recruitment or add to the fish biota around the jetty. Nor do we accept that one its consequential benefits will be to improve fishing on the jetty.

The jetty simply acts as a fish aggregating structure that attracts fish to it from the surrounding area. The vast majority of fish species of interest to Busselton Jetty recreational fishers are pelagic, generally migratory and have a breeding cycle unrelated to the existence of the jetty.

The corals and associated organisms of principle interest to the observatory proponents have been growing on the jetty structure for many decades. They have not magically appeared during the last 4 years when jetty access has not been possible due to fire damage.

It should be noted that while fishing access has not been possible from 'on the end of the jetty' in recent years, there has actually been an increase in the amount of boat fishing activity around and alongside it. The end of the jetty has become an extremely attractive boat fishing option due to the jetty's fish aggregation characteristics and without the interaction issues that previously existed with jetty fishers.

The corals, organisms and fish species developed and continue to co-exist alongside recreational fishing. Any suggestion that fishing somehow significantly damages the corals and associated organisms is not accepted. The impact of fishing would be insignificant compared to the effect of storms or even the feeding habits of a number of predatory fish species.

In short Recfishwest absolutely rejects the notion that the proposed exclusion zone will meet any fisheries management or conservation purposes and will oppose any exclusion zone proposal put forward on this basis.

Having said this, Recfishwest notes that there are relevant safety issues associated with some fishing activities and designated dive sites. We also accept that the visual amenity from the observatory may be 'enhanced' if fishing does not occur in its immediate vicinity.

Recfishwest therefore accepts that a fishing exclusion zone may need to be part of the observatory design. However the design and management of the site will be crucial to its acceptance especially by the recreational fishing community.

Recfishwest Position

Recfishwest will vigorously oppose a Busselton Jetty Fish and Fish Habitat Protection Area application unless several key conditions are met. These are that:

1. The size and location of any proposed fishing exclusion zone is negotiated between the Busselton Jetty Management Committee and local recreational fishing interests and an agreement is reached which provides for reasonable fishing access to the end of the jetty.
2. A program and timeframe for completion of repairs and restoration that will enable suitable and reasonable recreational fishing access to the end of the jetty must be publicly documented and accompany any Fish and Fish Habitat Protection Area application.
3. Recreational fishing access to the 'end of the jetty' must not require payment for entrance to the underwater observatory or attract a fee in addition to that charged for general jetty admission.