

Peter Millington
Acting Chief Executive Officer
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Fisheries WA
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Cockburn Sound Crab Closure to Recreational Fishing

Dear Peter

The recent stock assessment for the Cockburn Sound Crab Fishery indicates that the stock of blue swimmer crabs is at dangerously low levels and at risk of collapse. Recfishwest understands that the Cockburn Sound fishery has been closed based on research advice and that the closure will be to all fishing for blue swimmer crabs for at least 12 months in order to allow breeding stocks to rebuild.

Recfishwest believes that this situation has been brought about by poor recruitment and over fishing. The recreational fishery has taken an average catch of 18 tonnes in recent years while over the same period the commercial catch has fluctuated from 350 tonnes to 40 tonnes.

Recfishwest believes the latest research findings, if correct, on blue swimmer crabs in Cockburn Sound raises significant sustainability issues for the State's blue swimmer crab fisheries, which require urgent consideration.

The Fisheries Research Report No. 113 published in 1999 was prompted to investigate the catch, effort and the conversion from gill nets to trap style fishing. The report states that *“Commercial blue swimmer crab landings reported in WA over the last 20 years, have shown a dramatic increase since the introduction of traps into this fishery”*.

We are particularly concerned by the take of year two pre-spawning female crabs during the winter months by the commercial fishery using traps. We believe that this practice has contributed significantly to the current sustainability concerns in Cockburn Sound, and may well be occurring in locations such as the Peel/Harvey Estuary.

We are extremely concerned that little is understood regarding the linkage between the Cockburn Sound and the Swan River crab stocks. Are the female crabs targeted by commercial fishers in the northern end of the Cockburn Sound crab fishery migrating out of the Swan River? This raises concerns regarding the impact of the depleted Cockburn Sound crab fishery on recruitment into the Swan River. Meanwhile there has been little progress on the election promise to make the Swan River system recreational only.

Recfishwest is concerned that fishing effort will be redirected from Cockburn Sound to adjacent systems such as Swan/Canning and Peel Harvey to continue fishing for blue swimmer crabs. Given that significant fishing pressure already exists, particularly in the Peel Harvey Estuary, any further increase in effort could have a significant impact on crab stocks.

To manage the overall impact on fishing stocks we believe that an integrated management approach must be taken to ensure the long-term sustainability of this important recreational and commercial fishery. A number of management actions are suggested in order to manage any overflow effects in surrounding river systems from displacement from Cockburn Sound and thus further reducing spawning stock of blue swimmer crabs:

- That the matter be referred to the Integrated Fisheries Advisory and Allocation Committee (IFAAC). In line with longstanding Recfishwest policy, priority should be given to blue swimmer crabs in order for a timely decision to be made;
- That the Peel Harvey Estuary be the priority for review and that consideration be given to a winter closure to all crab fishing in this system to ensure protection of pre-spawning females;
- That to help manage for an anticipated increase in fishing pressure a reduction in the recreational bag limit for blue swimmer crabs on the West Coast from 20 down to 15 be considered; and
- That a data collection program be established to collect recreational catch and effort information as well as recruitment information on the Peel/Harvey Estuary as well as the Swan River.
- That an independent review of the data that has had an impact disproportionate to recreational catch be reviewed by scientists who have studied this species.

When the fishery reopens, we believe that consideration must be given to:

- A winter closure imposed on commercial and recreational fishers to protect pre-spawn second year female crabs in the fishery.
- The fishery being managed as per the 3/8 recreational, 5/8 commercial ratio according to the agreement resource sharing agreement by Recfishwest, WAFIC, Recreational and Commercial crab fishers and the Department of Fisheries.
- The fishery being referred to IFAAC with the 3/8 – 5/8 Agreement as the starting basis for allocations.

In July 2003 Recfishwest wrote to the Department seeking intervention to develop management solutions to give effect to the specific provisions and the broad objectives of the Cockburn Sound crab voluntary resource sharing agreement. The negotiated resource sharing for crabs in Cockburn Sound was carried out in good faith with an expectation that the Department would see that the terms of the agreement were met. Regrettably we have seen no evidence to suggest that the Department is taking action to address the matter in an appropriate manner.

We look forward to your response. If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me at our office on 9246 3366.

Yours Sincerely

Frank Prokop
Executive Director

29th November 2006

cc Doug Bathgate, Chair, RFAC
Pino Monaco, Chair, Metropolitan RRFAC

Chairman – Des Wood
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