

Mr Mieke Bourne
Department of Water
Policy Officer – Estuary Management Plans
PO Box 525
ALBANY WA 6331

Dear Mr Bourne

Re: Draft Stokes Inlet Management Plan

Thank you for your letter of 19 October asking for comment on the Draft Management Plan for Stokes Inlet.

The principles and issues which you and we have raised in response to this draft are being replicated, frequently in a similar fashion, throughout Western Australia and beyond. Recfishwest believes that our efforts are best spent in providing input into the development of such plans, rather than in commenting on full proposals.

In this case, we could have provided a briefing on the research and history aspects associated with recreational fishing. The government representatives are not always in the best position to provide objective information.

Recfishwest has long been concerned about the development of equitable management strategies for the South Coast estuaries.

The South Coast commercial fishery was the beneficiary of a substantial readjustment package, with more than \$1 million of taxpayers money spent to reduce the number of licensees. It was an explicit condition of the Cabinet approval for this Fisheries Adjustment Scheme (FAS) that there be a tangible shift in the resource from the commercial to the recreational fishing sector. In fact, the catch has not reduced, yet the commercial fishery has been the beneficiary of a taxpayer funded restructure.

Recfishwest has been advocating, as a matter of highest priority, for Stokes Inlet to have commercial and recreational netting prohibited for more than 8 years. Included are several examples of correspondence on this matter over many years.

The Department of Fisheries has made no attempt to discuss recreational fishing concerns about this management plan with either Recfishwest, the peak body, or RFAC, the statutory body, on this matter.

Recreational fishing is clearly an important activity at Stokes Inlet. With the increase in interest in catch and release fishing for black bream, the most important species in the estuary, the opportunity exists for Esperance and associated areas to gain significant benefit from tourism. Low impact recreational fishing is to be encouraged.

Specific comments on the recommendations:

F1: Recfishwest believes that Stokes Inlet should not have either commercial or recreational netting permitted. This should be implemented immediately.

Recreational gill netting is not consistent with the ethos of recreational fishing, although it is strongly supported by a small number of people who use nets. By-catch is high and many nets are used to take species other than mullet. Recreational netting has been scheduled for removal since 1992 a position which was reinforced in 1996 in a recreational netting review and should now be removed along with commercial netting.

Recfishwest, as the peak body, recognises that this will not be universally popular, but the commercial adjustment should have been made as part of the FAS and recreational netting has been on notice since 1992, which is more than generous.

As with Walpole estuary to the west, Recfishwest believes that there will be considerable economic and amenity value increases in encouraging recreational line fishing in Stokes Inlet.

F2: There is no reason why on social, economic or political grounds (given the Cabinet decision) that commercial netting should be permitted in Stokes Inlet. Implementing something that should have happened nearly 10 years ago makes this recommendation superfluous.

F3: The issue of allocation of the black bream stocks in Stokes Inlet is not a priority for the Integrated Fisheries Management process. Recfishwest has made recommendations for additional species such as blue manna crabs and these have not been supported.

F4: We support monitoring Stokes Inlet bream populations, but need to recognise that a major study, including an assessment of bream stock enhancement has now been concluded for the Hardy estuary. The Murdoch study on the South Coast is being finalised and replicating it is not likely to be cost effective. A low level sampling project to determine spawning success would be more appropriate.

Recfishwest is concerned that this recommendation is being used to avoid taking on the real ecological issues in Stokes Inlet and the surrounding catchment.

Any monitoring program must have tangible and measurable management responses as part of the process. Otherwise the collection of data for its own sake is not supported.

F5: Much research has already been undertaken and this will be an expensive exercise. Recfishwest strongly supports an attempt to get greater participation in the Angler Log Book program run by the Department of Fisheries.

There has already been considerable work done on the survival of released black bream, including considerable work by Challenger TAFE in the Blackwood estuary and by NSW Fisheries on hooking mortality and by Victorian Fisheries on movement and migration patterns of black bream. The Department of Fisheries should be able to provide the committee with these papers.

F6: As a rule, Recfishwest does not support artificial manipulation of the bar. The recent, fully supported decision by the EPA regarding Wilson's Inlet that a management plan must include an assessment of impact should also apply to Stokes Inlet. This will require a commitment by the Department of Water to prosecute anyone interfering with the bar opening as we hope is happening as a result of the recent breaching at Torbay.

If the bar needs to be breached, then the timing should take into account biodiversity benefits and the opening should be timed to allow maximum exchange of species out of and into the estuary which is an extremely important nursery.

F7: Recfishwest supports identifying refugia areas in upstream areas. Murdoch University in particular has special expertise in this area and should be engaged with the Department of Fisheries.

This action requires a clear commitment from the Department of Water and other authorities to take remediation action to protect these refuges.

A1 and 2: In recent years, it has been pleasing to see a considerable cultural shift within DEC, culminating in an excellent process for the management of Walpole-Nornalup.

However, we are cautious about a greater vesting of areas in DEC who have reduced recreational fishing amenity in a number of areas on the South Coast by closing off access tracks with limited or no consultation. These recommendations need careful monitoring.

A5 and A6: Recfishwest is aware of the issues involving the interaction of water skiers and recreational fishers and canoeists. The problem is one where the enjoyment of many can be impacted upon by one person ignoring the rules and 'showboating' outside of designated rules.

We recognise that this is a challenging issue for the committee. The issue of wash derived erosion is one that is generally poorly handled. A speed limit of 5 knots reduces speed related incidents, and makes the water ski issue moot, however, for many boats this is the speed at which the greatest wake is generated.

Recfishwest believes that the speed and activity regulations for Stokes should be jointly administered by staff of DEC, DPI and Department of Fisheries and all should be trained in handling on the water compliance issues in a sensitive manner.

CH2: A total ban on four wheel drives to the mouth of the inlet is an unnecessarily adversarial approach to an important and sensitive issue which should be worked through.

Recfishwest believes that a sub-committee should be set up with traditional owners to see if access can be maintained that does not impact on the cultural values. For example, Recfishwest has worked with Doc Reynolds for many years and has found him to be an excellent promoter of workable outcomes.

CE4: Stokes Inlet is an important local resource but it is also important to the wider community both from an access perspective and the fact that it acts as a nursery for bird and fish species with a very wide distribution. It is therefore important that the working group engages the wider community, which perhaps it could have done better in the development of this plan.

Recfishwest would be please to provide further information on this submission. Please feel free to contact the office on (08) 9246 3366.

Yours sincerely

Frank Prokop
Executive Director
Recfishwest

25 November 2007

Cc. Hon Jon Ford – Minister for Fisheries
Hon David Templeman – Minister for Environment
Hon John Kobelke – Minister for Water
Peter Millington – Director Department of Fisheries
Doug Bathgate – Chairman RFAC
Alan Longbottom – Chair Esperance-Goldfields RFAC