



Wilderness Conservation Areas

Policy

A Wilderness Conservation Area is a specified area which aims to protect wilderness values while allowing low impact recreational fishing. Fish can be caught and consumed within the area but not taken away.

Recfishwest believes there can be benefits for recreational fishers and the community generally from establishing some of Western Australia's coastal areas or rivers as Wilderness Conservation Areas.

Wilderness Conservation Areas should focus on the preservation of the areas' natural condition and biodiversity value, while allowing for a low level of recreational fishing.

Recfishwest views Wilderness Conservation Areas as an important management tool in the suite of marine conservation measures. Wilderness Conservation Areas are Marine Protected Areas that offer an extensive level of protection whilst still retaining all recreational amenity values. Wilderness Conservation Areas are not seen as a replacement for IUCN Strict Nature Reserve Category 1a (sanctuary zones) rather they are a complementary zoning tool that aims to meet conservation objectives while maintaining recreational fishing values in a given area.

Wilderness Conservation Areas would be characterised by two principal features:

1. That the populations of fish species would be very close to their natural state before human exploitation, i.e. they would be only lightly exploited. This accords with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature description of "*slightly modified*" and meets IUCN Category 1b.

In order to maintain fish populations at near natural levels, mortality due to fishing must be minimal. Regulations should prevent the accumulation of fish and their removal from the area. Retained catch must only be for personal consumption while in the Wilderness Conservation Area. Any catch over and above this must be carefully released.

2. That Wilderness Conservation Areas should be virtually free of evidence of human development and there should be very few people in the area. In this way very low levels of exploitation will occur. Recfishwest prefers not to be prescriptive with respect to restrictions on numbers of people and methods of access. However the principles should fit the IUCN definition that the area is "*without significant and permanent habitation*" and should be "*managed so as to preserve its natural condition*". It must be clear that the aim is that the area will look natural, it cannot be allowed to become overcrowded, and the minimal take of fish will have a negligible impact on fish populations.

Definitions

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in its definition of Protected Area Management Categories defines Wilderness Areas in Category 1b (*Note: this is the second-highest level of protection listed by the IUCN*):-

Wilderness Area: *protected area managed mainly for wilderness protection.*

Definition: *Large area of unmodified or slightly modified land, and/or sea, retaining its natural character and influence, without permanent or significant habitation, which is protected and preserved to retain its natural condition.*

Recfishwest would consider the following characteristics before recommending Wilderness Conservation Areas;

- Such areas could be islands, atolls, coastal areas or river systems.
- These areas will normally be remote from towns or large tourist developments.
- Visitation levels in these areas should be limited and properly managed in particular in relation to accommodation, camping and water facilities.
- Adjacent terrestrial areas should be adequately managed to regulate any use which could impact on the integrity and objectives of the Wilderness Conservation Area.
- The visual amenity of the area must be maintained, placement of management devices such as signage, markers or moorings must consider wilderness values.
- The areas will enable indigenous communities to maintain their traditional lifestyle and customs as well afford respect and protect the relevant cultural and spiritual values of wilderness areas.
- The establishment of such areas will require effective consultation with other stakeholders such as local communities, representatives of indigenous groups, conservationists and commercial fishers.
- Wherever possible, detrimental impacts adjacent on the environment contained within Wilderness Conservation Areas should be strictly managed using the precautionary principle.

Examples

The following examples are not intended to propose particular areas, but rather to illustrate the nature of areas that could be suitable;

The Kimberley

In this region there are many areas which would be suitable for coastal or riverine Wilderness Conservation Areas. The region is highly valued for high quality of low impact recreational fishing and is virtually free of human development.

Exmouth Gulf (Eastern Side)

The concept of wilderness conservation has been proposed for this area by local recreational fishers for some time. A large area of the Eastern side of Exmouth Gulf is already protected as a prawn nursery area. Strong community support exists for protecting the wilderness values of this area.

The Gascoyne Coast

This area has seen a steady increase in recreational visitors due to the high quality recreational fishing opportunities. It is important that these values are maintained as visitor numbers increase. Vehicular access is generally through pastoral leases where compliance could be easily managed.