



## Fisheries – sink or swim

HOW did Western Australia get tangled up in these recreational fishing knots and how do we get ourselves off the sharp end of the hook?

One of the important ways of tracking fish numbers is to do creel surveys.

The first West Coast Bioregion creel survey was undertaken in 1996/97 when the Court government was in place.

Then there was a change in government and the next creel survey for that increasingly heavily fished region was not undertaken until 2005/06.

While creel surveys are based on recreational catches, they are an indicator of the total health of the fishery.

This indicator showed an increase from 269,600 boat-based fishing days to 311,400 boat-based fishing days in those 10 years.

According to Fisheries Management Paper No 225, 10 ten year survey gap was “due to resourcing constraints”.

In other words, the government of the day hadn't resourced the department to keep up with the burgeoning fishing pressure.

The warning signs should have been there.

There are about 88,000 registered recreational vessels in WA, and people are buying larger, faster boats which travel greater distances to fish over a far wider area.

Added to that, GPS, depth sounders and fish-finding devices make catches more readily predictable.

The government was registering these boats, and over that decade it would have been well aware of the obvious potential for a huge increase in effort - but it failed to increase the frequency of creel surveys.

The Fisheries report made it clear that commercial vessels also had an impact

on demersal scalefish stocks.

The panic outcome of the Fisheries Department was to recommend a 50 per cent reduction in fishing effort.

The Labor Government permanently closed down the commercial demersal fishery in the metropolitan zone.

Labor's second panic outcome was to announce recreational closures for last summer (from October 15 to December 25) and for this summer (from October 15 to January 31).

This would have sent the bait and tackle businesses and the charter boats broke.

Instead, there was a change in government and an opportunity to re-think the situation.

The new government had two scientists review the data and confirm the need for a 50 per cent reduction.

One proposal was to close off a large area of the available fishing space.

However, this would have meant an increase in the number of inspectors to police it and boat owners would need a GPS to identify no-take boundaries.

A second option was to impose a significant reduction in bag limits.

A third option was to impose a fee for those who want to catch the most prized, endangered species which are only found in deep waters.

The \$150 fee proposed for taking these fish was about the same cost as the fuel for a one-way trip to Rottnest on many of these boats.

Nevertheless, I am pleased the Minister has had constructive meetings with recreational fishing groups and is reconsidering the whole package, including the fee structure.

Many of us already pay fees for golf, tennis, bowls and other recreational pursuits on the basis that those fees help

preserve those facilities, and I personally support a \$30 boat fee.

Creel surveys cost about \$1 million a year, and a small license fee will provide extra funds to allow the Fisheries Department to set up a more comprehensive database.

In the meantime, the current government has given a commitment that it will:

- carry out creel surveys to estimate the 2008-09 recreational catch
- implement the outcomes of the independent review of the 2005-06 departmental stock assessment
- collect and analyse statutory catch and effort returns from the charter and commercial sector
- monitor the status of key indicator species; and
- apply genetic techniques and other studies to improve our understanding of the stock structure.

About 1,367 submissions were lodged in response to the previous government's proposals on the recreational fishing sector.

Of these, 1,195 commented on the proposed seasonal closure - and 75 per cent of them disagreed with the plan to close the fishery for four months over the peak season.

On the other hand, 902 respondents referred to the recreational fishing trust fund, and 82 per cent of them agreed that it was a good idea.

A small license fee to help fund better research could keep recreational fishing afloat and, as a recreational boat owner, that is fine with me.

**Brian Ellis**  
**Agriculture Region MLC**



**The future of fishing:** Agricultural Region MLC Brian Ellis takes a walk out onto the jetty at Kalbarri with his grandson Jack.