

A LOOK AT SA'S MARINE SCALE FISHERY

Jamie Crawford makes some interesting observations about the interaction between our commercial and recreational fishing sectors.

Everyone has their own views and sentiments about commercial fishing here in our state, and these views generally shift from that of appreciation through to frustration, and everything in between. If you're a non-fisher, you'll likely value and rely on the industry for providing fresh seafood for the table. For recreational fishers, however, the view is rarely positive, and there has been a divide between the two sectors since the dawn of time.

I've always had some level of interaction with commercial fishers over the years, mainly through my various workplaces. For the past nine years I have managed a marine chandlery here in Port Lincoln, and while we deal with plenty of recreational customers, we are primarily suppliers of commercial fishing and aquaculture equipment. In this role I get to see both sides of the argument between the recreational and commercial sector, and unfortunately a lot of the quarrels escalate from misinformation on either side. There are a lot of preconceived notions and beliefs surrounding the marine scale fishery here in SA, and unfortunately some recreational fishers are quick to pass

judgment or believe hearsay.

It's true there are some cowboys in the commercial sector, but then no industry is immune to personalities. I interact with our marine scale fishers on a daily basis and on the whole they are a great bunch of guys (and girls) to deal with. Don't forget that the vast majority have pursued a career in the marine scale fishery because of their genuine love for fishing; they're seldom in the industry for the money because at the end of the day it's a tough gig. I know plenty of pro fishers who have quit their day job and taken a serious pay cut to pursue marine scale fishing. For the vast majority it's the lifestyle of being on the water and being one's own boss.

Contrary to popular belief, most marine scale fishers are conscious of the marine environment and acutely understand their surroundings and target species. The desire of the marine scale fishery is to be sustainable, because without sustainability their industry has no future. Most marine scale fishers have invested significantly to enter the fishery, and for them the industry is a long-term commitment.

Most readers would have heard



about the marine scale industry reform that is currently underway, which will alter how the whole industry operates and is managed. From July 1 this year the reform is set to be implemented, and at the time of writing the management strategy is still being measured and not yet confirmed, bringing a lot of uncertainty to the industry.

To summarise the marine scale fishery, we're looking at licence holders targeting local species for sale into domestic and interstate markets. The marine scale fishery includes line fishing for King George, calamari, Bight redfish (red snapper), wrasse and leatherjackets along with secondary line-caught species. It also includes net fishing for whiting (yellowfin and King George), mullet, salmon, garfish and herring (tommies).

Long lining for bronze whalers, gummy and school sharks is common, with the latter two species tightly regulated. It can also include pot fishing for sand and blue crabs, raking pipis (mainly Goolwa cockle and vongole), plus other lesser-known finfish, shellfish and crustacean species around our state. The marine scale fishery does not



Commercial crabbing is big business.
Photo Credits: Darren Longbottom

include the tuna industry, southern rock lobster, prawns or abalone. These are managed separately.

I've always been interested in fishery management and industry structure from both a recreational and commercial perspective. I was keen to find out more about the upcoming reform and how this will affect the industry as a whole, as it indirectly affects our recreational sector too. So I did some research and caught up with a few marine scale fishers in my local area to see what changes might be rolled out and how this might affect the sector.

Below I've tried to provide a rundown on the marine scale fishery here in SA, offering some historical stats and relevant information on the upcoming reform. The restructuring is quite complex, and I'm still trying to understand all of the ins and outs. I will try to offer basic facts without pushing my own opinion on the proposed management.

In 1984 there were 666 marine



scale fishery licence holders in South Australia, and since that time the number has been on the decline. Since the year 2000 alone, the number of licences has dropped from 450 to approximately 305. In 2005 there was the net buy-back, which cost the industry, not tax payers, \$17 million.

The aim of the current licence buy-back scheme is to remove a further 150 licences from the industry. At the time of writing there have been 68 finalised, with another 54 pending the special circumstances process (amount of quota allocated). The industry feel is there will be approximately 200 licence

holders left after the reform.

The new reform will see the state split into four management zones – the West Coast, Spencer Gulf, Gulf St. Vincent and the South East, with each zone being managed independently. The new reform will see key species managed under a quota system as an output control, with the licence holder allocated Individual Transferable Quota (ITQ), which is primarily set on catch history.

Licence holders who have good catch history would expect to be allocated more kilograms of each species, and hence some licence holders will have equity in their quota to trade. This will benefit some licence holders, but not others. Some younger marine scale fishers who haven't been in the industry long will likely be allocated less quota, so they will have to buy quota off another licence holder in order to have a realistic quota from which to make a living.

Each ITQ will accumulate to equal the total commercial TAC (Total Allowable Catch). The recreational sector also has a percentage of the TAC for each species, which is governed by our bag limits. Our bag limits are estimates of the recreational harvest resulting from recreational fishing survey data. Hence the need for accurate recreational statistics is so important.

The data on commercial catch rates is a lot more accurate than the recreational estimates, thanks to their compulsory reporting. If our State Government ever implemented recreational licensing or, at the minimum, registration and reporting, we'd have a much better understanding of the recreational activity and harvest, rather than relying on non-compulsory surveys.

The commercial catch had historically been managed through input controls, which included gear restrictions, seasonal and regional restrictions, and limited entry (licence). The quota system will see key species

managed to a set harvest yield. These key species will include King George, calamari, garfish and snapper, with each species managed independently in the different state zones, as outlined below:

Someone looking to enter the marine scale fishery can do so through one of three ways. The easiest way is to either buy an existing licence or lease a licence. The rules for leasing a licence have tightened over recent years to encourage an owner-operator fishery, promoting greater investment and resource stewardship. The third option is to become a registered master under an existing marine scale fisher who holds multiple licences.

I caught up with local Port Lincoln marine scale fisher Michael Elton recently, and asked him a few questions

Region	Snapper management	King George / garfish / calamari management
West Coast	Fishery closed	Not to be managed by ITQ To be managed through TAC and input controls
Spencer Gulf	Fishery closed	To be managed under ITQ
Gulf St Vincent	Fishery closed	To be managed under ITQ
South East	To be managed by ITQ	Not to be managed by ITQ To be managed through TAC and input controls



about his involvement in the industry. Mike is a well-known and respected member of the Port Lincoln community, and is one of the younger marine scale fishers in our area.

JC: What made you pursue a career in the commercial fishing industry?

ME: Fishing has been a passion of mine since a very young age, so commercial fishing was a natural path for me. I moved to Port Lincoln from Adelaide when I was 19 years old to pursue commercial fishing, which was in 2005. Most of my career has been in the cray fishing industry, but I bought my marine scale fishing licence back in 2016, which was a dream come true.

JC: What are the main target species and main fishing styles for you?

ME: My main targets are calamari,

King George and sand crabs. I also fish the deeper water reefs for red snapper (nannygai), blue morwong, shark and wrasse using hand lines, long lines and drop lines.

JC: Where does most of your catch end up?

ME: My first preference is to sell locally in SA, however some species are in higher demand interstate. It's roughly 50/50 for local versus interstate markets.

JC: How had COVID affected your business?

ME: Besides the initial shock in March 2020 when demand dropped, COVID-19 has since had a positive effect. COVID has highlighted the importance of knowing where your food comes from and to buy Australian produce where possible.

JC: What is the best thing about

your job?

ME: The freedom, the thrill of the hunt, and every day is a new day. I like studying the weather, moons and tides and coming up with a plan that works.

JC: Do you have much interaction, whether positive or negative, with recreational fishers while on the water?

ME: I have a medium level of interaction with recreational fishermen. Here on the Eyre Peninsula we are fortunate to have plenty of room, which reduces the interaction. Also, most commercial fisherman avoid fishing over times of high recreational activity. Personally, my interaction with recreational fishers is mostly positive.

JC: And lastly, if you could offer one fact about the commercial fishing sector to the public, what would it be?

ME: This year marks the 185th year

of the MSF, which is made up mainly of small family owned and run businesses. We generally work alone or with one other deckhand.

Whether you're a supporter of commercial fishing or opposed to it, our marine scale fishers put a lot back into local communities and they fulfil an important role in the food supply chain. At the end of the day they are entitled to do their job with respect, but this respect should be mutual and reciprocated; we share the same water and the same resource.

We're all eagerly waiting to see how the new reform is going to roll out, and to see exactly how it's going to affect our local pro fishermen and the small coastal towns that rely on their industry. Keep an eye on PIRSA media releases for up-to-date information.

