



The Future of the South Australian Snapper Fishery; Our Position

Introduction

Recreational fishers are a very diverse group whose fishery values and aspirations vary widely. Through our vast membership and social networks, Recfish SA has considered the values and aspirations of the recreational fishing community when developing this position paper on the future management of the snapper fishery and formulating this advice to government. This position statement provides a means for improving the way we manage our valuable snapper resources and creates a strong bias for action.

RecFish SA recognises that snapper is amongst our most popular species and we will not stop advocating until the interests of the recreational fishing sector are recognised.

Supporting policy

For the first time, the SA government has publicly proclaimed a policy of increasing participation in recreational fishing. This is a game changer for SA fisheries management policy and commits government to delivering a suite of actions to achieve the desired outcome.

Increasing participation in recreational fishing means a greater investment in the things which support a strong and vibrant recreational fishery. This starts with improving the health and resilience of fish stocks so that more people can derive greater benefit without compromising the biological sustainability of stocks.

Increasing participation also means increasing the allocation of fish stocks for recreational fishing and the government has committed to work with Recfish SA and the recreational sector to develop a plan for better access and allocations for the recreational sector. It also provides opportunities for the recreational sector to become better engaged and build their understanding of fisheries management and contribute to efforts to restore aquatic environments which support our key fish stocks.

What do we want the future of the recreational snapper sector to look like?

Our vision is to restore the snapper fishery to its former glory, where SA is once again recognised as the best place in Australia to catch snapper. It will be a long hard road to get there but the recreational fishers of the state are prepared to step up to the plate and play their part.

Principles

1. RecFish SA will always put the fish first and the biological sustainability of snapper stocks underpins everything we do. Protecting stocks and restoring them to support a vibrant and productive recreational fishery is the core objective of our stance. This includes the appropriate protection and restoration of the habitat and environments which snapper need to live and reproduce.
2. Recreational snapper fishing is a tradition in SA and these quality fishing experiences must be improved and maintained. The snapper resource should be managed to provide the most benefit for the most people. For snapper, this means recreation and tourism. It also means family, health and well-being benefits for tens of thousands of recreational fishers. The right of recreational fishers to access sustainable aquatic resources promotes these benefits.
3. Recfish SA support access to fisheries resources in a fair and equitable manner yet recognise that fish are a limited resource and that the values and aspirations of different sectors may be difficult to meet in every instance. All recreational fishers targeting snapper should be provided with access to their sustainable share.

Our Views

Sustainability benefits

The commercial sector is allocated ten times more snapper resource than the recreational sector, yet the economic, social and environmental benefit of the recreational snapper fishery in SA is much greater than that of the commercial fishery, this is clearly inequitable. Increasing the allocation of shares for recreational fishing will deliver even greater benefits to SA while maintaining a reliable supply of snapper to the seafood market.

The closure of the snapper fishery in Spencer Gulf/West Coast and GSV has had a profound impact on thousands of fishers and their families, as well as regional caravan park owners, charter operators and tackle shop owners who hold very real concerns about the future of their businesses.

Allocations

RecFish SA believe that the data on which the allocated shares of the snapper resource are based, is anomalous and unreliable. The allocated recreational share of 18% of total catch is based on the 2007 recreational survey which shows the recreational catch of snapper to be 19.3%. Yet more rigorous surveys conducted in 2001 and 2013 show the recreational catch as 42.3% and 37.6%. The total allocation for the recreational sector of 18% is unfair and inconsistent with the established principle of utilising the best available information in fisheries decision making.

Historically, the commercial fishery has captured a much larger proportion of snapper than the recreational sector and this is especially the case for the once famous Spencer Gulf fishery. The commercial sector, which captures the largest proportion of the snapper resource, has by far the largest impact on stock levels, yet the recreational sector is being hit unnecessarily hard by these excesses.

Within the recreational sector, shares in the snapper fishery resource (and many other species) are divided between recreational fishers and the charter boat industry because the government

considers all catch taken on charter boats to be recreational catch. This division is only a nominal apportionment of the explicit recreational share of the fishery and consequently, the charter sector has no explicit rights to this share.

RecFish SA have consistently contested the determination that all catch taken on charter boats is considered recreational catch. The Fisheries Management Act (2007) recognises the Charter Fishery as a commercial fishery, where individual operators require a licence to conduct fishing and have a right to derive income from the activity, just as in other commercial fisheries.

The 2007 survey of recreational fishing shows that only 2% of all recreational fishing trips were conducted on charter boats, yet the commercial charter fishery was nominally allocated 55.5% of the shares in the fishery based on these data. Recent data show that in the South-East snapper fishery, the charter sector takes only a very small proportion of its nominal share meaning that the recreational sector is being denied access to its remaining legitimate share. This allocation to the charter sector is excessive and inequitable.

RecFish SA supports the charter sector in securing an explicit share for its operations but considers that this should be procured from the commercial sector. Recreational fishers will not consider any reduction in the explicit share of 18% for the recreational snapper fishery to support the charter sector.

Technology

All fishers, both commercial and recreational, now have access to advanced technology for locating snapper. Modern day sonar, GPS and bigger, safer boats make it easier to access fishing spots. This can have the effect of concentrating effort on known grounds or distributing effort across greater areas as fishers seek new grounds.

The technological advances and changed practices of the commercial snapper fishery have had a profound impact on the biological sustainability of snapper stocks. The adoption of highly efficient monofilament longlines to target snapper during the spring and summer spawning migrations has fundamentally changed the commercial fishery, which was previously dominated by handlines. These practices coincided with a massive increase in commercial snapper catches, firstly in Spencer Gulf, then Gulf St Vincent. Stocks in these areas are now considered depleted and fishing has been closed to all sectors for nearly 3 years.

Management

The snapper stock must have clear and transparent management objectives, currently this is not the case. Fisheries management objectives are a set of goals or aspirations which guide resource use in line with community values, benefits and expectations. Good management objectives are created through consultation and discussion with all stakeholders. The current management system for snapper does not integrate the social and economic dimensions of the recreational fishery and does not protect the interest of the tens of thousands of SA anglers who fish for snapper.

An argument put forward is that the advent of commercial quota in the snapper fishery means that input management measures, including seasonal spawning closures are unnecessary. RecFish SA does not subscribe to this position and believes that spawning closures, when snapper are often most vulnerable to capture, are a critical tool in sustainably managing fish stocks.

Bag, boat and size limits

Daily bag and boat limits for the recreational and charter sectors are a management measure which are effective in controlling the catch of snapper in these sectors and RecFish SA supports the appropriate use of these tools for future management. Bag and boat limits must always remain a tool to manage recreational and charter catch outputs within sustainability limits but should not be used to suppress recreational fishing effort.

RecFish SA supports the general principle of setting minimum size limits to allow 50% of female fish to breed at least once before they can be taken and notes that the current size limits for snapper achieves this. The use of slot limits to protect larger “super spawners” is also supported as a key tool in managing snapper stocks.

Where the research is clear, further adjusting minimum size limits and slot limits to support the recovery of snapper stocks is supported however, consideration must be given to the nature of the snapper fishery in different locations. Parameters such as water depth, prevailing age and size of fish and fish behaviour may vary greatly between locations and may require different management approaches.

Data

Data to support the responsible management of the recreational snapper fishery is depauperate. The Fisheries Management Act (2007) requires that data used in the calculation of allocations will be no more than 5 years old, and that recreational fishery data will be taken from formal scientific surveys, determined by PIRSA, that are no more than 5 years old. The last formal recreational fishing survey was conducted in 2013/14 and is now 8 years old. RecFish SA believe that securing the resources to conduct a recreational survey every 5 years, must be prioritised.

Access

Measures should be taken to reduce conflicts on shared snapper grounds. RecFish SA have received many reports from anglers about conflict between sectors on these grounds. All user groups have a moral obligation to respect others and we ask all anglers to respect the activities of commercial operations and vice versa. However, please be aware that SA fisheries legislation does not give any one sector the right to fish over the top of the other.

Best Use

Promoting the best use of the snapper fishery resource and providing the tools to do this is critical to the future of the recreational fishery. Catch and release fishing is now a large part of the recreational sector and research has demonstrated that it can be undertaken with minimal harm to the fish. The use of simple technologies such as fish cradles and release weights, significantly increases the survivability of released snapper particularly, those caught in water greater than 10 metres deep.

Maximising the returns from kept fish by handling them correctly, using humane dispatch methods and storing fish on ice, are responsible practices which should be widely encouraged.

The commercial fishing sector has a responsibility to use the snapper resource in the best possible way. Flooding the market with commercially caught snapper and driving the price down is not the best use of the resource and is a practice which should not be happening. The

commercial sector should also accept a social responsibility to ensure that adequate supplies of fresh snapper are provided for the local market before pursuing markets interstate.

Closures

RecFish SA believes that there is a better solution to recovering snapper stocks than a total closure which destroys all of the social and economic benefits that recreational snapper fishing provides. We don't believe it's necessary and we are really keen to sit down with government to achieve a better solution.

Proposed Management Measures

The recommendations are focused on protecting the sustainability of our snapper stocks while delivering the best social and economic benefits from the fishery, along with enhanced education and more research.

Stewardship and best use

1. Implement a multi-year joint snapper steward's education campaign informing recreational fishers on best practices when fishing for snapper and developing the capacity of the recreational fishing sector to participate in the management of the snapper fishery more effectively.
2. Consider introducing the mandatory use of release weights for all boats operating in water greater than 10 metres deep.
3. Encourage and promote the use of best practice handling techniques for fish kept for consumption.

Snapper fishery adjustment

4. Adjust allocations in the snapper fishery to increase recreational shares to a minimum of 50% of the fishery.
5. Procure snapper quota from the commercial sector to support the charter fishery.
6. Remove the use of longlines for the capture of snapper.

Environmental restoration

7. Implement and support aquatic restoration projects which improve snapper habitat.

Stock enhancement

8. Further investigate the feasibility and application of stocking snapper to support stock recovery.

Access

9. Create a network of recreational fishing havens in popular locations to support recreational and tourism fisheries for snapper and other species.
10. Reducing conflict by restricting commercial fishers from operating on weekends, public holidays and school holidays.
11. Maintain seasonal spawning closures as an important tool in managing access to vulnerable stocks.

Planning

12. Investigate the development of separate management measures for offshore and inshore snapper stocks.

13. Develop a specific snapper fishery management plan incorporating social criteria and a social impact assessment.
14. Adopt a dedicated process to establish clear objectives for the future of snapper in SA so that the value and benefits for all users are recognised and clearly articulated in Government policy.

Data

15. Undertake a recreational fishing survey every 5 years which measures key biological, economic and social data.

Bag, boat and size limits.

16. Investigate the impact of removing or reducing minimum size limits where research indicates this would not increase total mortality (e.g., deep water)
17. Implement consistency and improve enforcement of snapper possession limits.

Research

18. Investigate how a changing climate is impacting on snapper stocks.
19. Undertake further research on snapper to better understand snapper spawning behaviour in the South- East and West coast of the state.