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30 November 2013

Hon John McVeigh MP,
Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Level 8, Primary Industries Building, Ann St.
Brisbane 4000

Your ref: CTS 21465*/13 dated 20 Sep & CTS 17555/13 dated 23 Aug. 2013*

Dear Minister McVeigh,

Serious concerns remain over netting of grey mackerel (and other inshore species): the need to introduce adequate regional management of gillnetting effort giving due attention to the stock structure and size, spawning seasons and spawning locations of various species

SUMMARY

This letter outlines continuing widespread public concerns relating to FQ's recent assertion that grey mackerel are "sustainably fished". FQ's analyses of grey mackerel catch data and the assumptions they make as presented in the Minister's letter dated 20 September are challenged. Whilst this letter focuses on grey mackerel, it is noted similar concerns are being expressed for other important inshore species targeted by the ECIFF gillnet fishery.

The concerns have been outlined under the following headings:

1. ***The 'Framework for Defining Stock Status'*** used fails to take into account important biological, distribution and fishery related issues.
2. ***Localised stock depletions****, grey mackerel stock status and lack of effectiveness of 2009 management measures in halting such depletions*
3. ***The big picture:*** *– unsustainable, lack of adequate checks and balances and invalid assumptions*
4. ***Lack of recent catch data online*** *and obstructive and unnecessary secrecy relating to catch data from areas where less than five boats operate*
5. ***Quality of the advice*** *given to the Fisheries Minister: the apparent need for advisers to meet stakeholders and gain field experience of NQ/FNQ and also to review NSF publications (2008 – 2012 available at www.ffc.org.au)*
6. ***Progressive loss of commercial economic opportunities*** *and also loss of rewarding recreational opportunities for communities*
7. ***Political implications*** *of claiming mackerel species and the ECIFF gillnet fishery in general are managed according to ESD principles when informed fishers in the general public can clearly see they are not.*
8. ***The way forward*** *following the ongoing net licence buyback programme requires introduction of:*
    - *appropriate management of gillnetting effort by region/area,*
    - *net-free areas (NFAs) and restricted-netting areas, and*
    - *recreational fishing licences to help fund costs.*

Thank you for your letter of 20 September and the level of detail provided. I regret not having been able to respond earlier, despite very serious concerns remaining over the sustainability of grey mackerel gillnetting. Indeed it is likely most fisheries management specialists, when given the full picture would consider that the QLD east coast grey mackerel fishery is not managed according to ESD principles.

Our concerns as outlined below are too numerous to include in a conventional one page letter, hence the above summary. My attached article[1], to be published in December's issue of a popular fishing magazine, is one of a series I have had published by the magazine this year addressing many of the concerns raised here and in earlier correspondence.

1. The 'Framework for Defining Stock Status' used to determine sustainability inadequate

I note your assurance that key features of the biology, stock structure and nature of the fishery have been taken into account. The view persists, as expressed in my letter of 3 September that the Framework is inadequate for the assessment of the east coast grey mackerel fishery as it fails to consider vital features of the fishery.

This may explain why the results of desktop studies in Brisbane and Canberra conflict with the observations and conclusions of our network members in NQ and FNQ.

2. Localised stock depletions

Your letter does not explain why members of our various fishing networks along the coast have observed instances where local aggregations of mackerel have failed to return in subsequent years to traditional sites following a few years of intensive netting. This suggests depeletion of local stocks[2] and indicates there may have been and may still be more than just two stocks of grey mackerel on the east coast (see Welch *et al*, 2009).

I note the responses in your letter to my Qu. 3, 5, 7 and 8 regarding:

- how FQ is treating the possibility or likelihood of a "*number of metapopulations of grey mackerel at the embayment level*" (to quote the GBRMPA website),
- how the single TAC was arrived at and why 250 tonnes is considered "precautionary" (NB: prior to 2003-04 the highest ever annual catch was around 170 tonnes),
- how a single TAC can protect a number of different populations.

The quality of these responses indicates a high level of uncertainty as to the "precautionary" nature of the TAC and its ability to safeguard different populations.

I note it is implicit in your reply that this problem is recognized and that research is underway to help address this issue. From a political perspective this and any recommendations for further precautionary management action should be strongly supported in view of the level of regional concern over observed depletions to date.

Nothing in any of the answers received in your attachment 2 gives me confidence that the management of the east coast inshore finfish fishery (ECIFF) is such that small aggregations like those on the Douglas Region grey mackerel grounds will not be once again depleted by just a few visits by one or two large net boats as occurred in 2006-07. ***This is the crux of the issue***.

3. The big picture: unsustainable, lack of checks and balances and invalid assumptions

In response to the points made in your letter and the lack of access to relevant data online, it remains for us to focus here on the big picture material, including:

i. Netting of aggregating, pre-spawning and spawning grey mackerel, on all their spawning grounds, is a recipe for stock collapse.

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[1] Cook, D. Dec 2013. Concerns over Minister's latest reply on Grey Mackerel. NQF&B, Mackay. (Attached)

[2] Note there is also continuing widespread concern over low numbers of various other species targeted by the east coast inshore finfish fishery (ECIFF) gillnet fleet along the urban east coast of NQ and FNQ.

ii. As one local spawning stock may be virtually wiped out during its spawning season in just one month by one or two large net boats, in reality FQ is unable to adequately regulate/manage who fishes which grey mackerel stocks, where and by how much.

iii. Several instances of long term local depletion of what were quite likely different regional spawning stocks of mackerel by gill and/or ring netters have been recorded. Knowledge of stock status is insufficient to prevent such depletions continuing to occur. This is in violation of ESD principles.

iv. 2009 changes in management regulations did not remove the continuing high risk of similar serial depletions of grey mackerel stocks as a result of netting spawning aggregations.

v. A single TAC of 250 tonnes (NB: prior to 2004 the highest ever annual catch was around 170 tonnes) for grey mackerel when there is an unknown number (at least two, almost certainly more) of different regional stocks risks serially overfishing regional stocks as the years go by.

vi. Since 2009 when a total allowable catch (TAC) of 250 tonnes of grey mackerel was introduced after a peak catch of about 450 tonnes in 2008-09, the landings in 2010-11 were around 180 tonnes (higher than any year prior to 2004) and those of 2011/12 and 2012/13 have not yet been made available to the public. Care must be taken to determine whether we are already witnessing signs of overfishing stocks as no attempts have been made to assess the total size of each grey mackerel stock. This begs the question as to how FQ can claim the TAC is "precautionary".

vii. Considering that FQ have no indication of the biomass of any grey mackerel stock, or can be certain how many there are, or where they spawn, and cannot control where and when netters fish, the assumption in your letter stating "*the level of biomass being harvested and the low amount of fishing pressure being applied indicate the stock is unlikely to become ... overfished*" is unfounded. (I regret I am not quite so subtle in my December article.)

viii. Although catch rates (as opposed to landings) for netting of greys remained high in 2009-10 and 2010-11, this is not necessarily a sign of a healthy fishery. Unlike a fishery based on a widely dispersed stock, an overfished fishery based on aggregated stock can display good catch rates right up to the unexpected collapse of the fishery. When aggregating stocks are targeted by netters the phenomenon of hyperstability (apparently poorly understood and rarely if ever mentioned by Qld fisheries managers) explains the reasons for this.

ix. The assumption your advisers have made regarding the significance of the high proportion of two year old grey mackerel caught is highly questionable. Information indicates that previously the average weight of individuals caught in the Douglas Region was around the 7 kg mark or at least 5 yrs old (age/length relationship used is from Welch *et al*, 2009) whereas now it is closer to 3 kg (2 yrs old). Such a drop in average size/age is a sure sign of a fishery under significant pressure that needs to be managed with caution.

It is clear from the above that the management of the fishery is heavily biased towards the short-term commercial advantage of netters to the detriment of (i) sustainability of stocks, (ii) the livelihoods of commercial and charter mackerel line-fishers, (iii) catches of recreational fishers and (iv) local communities in general. This is in contravention of the Fisheries Act which, as you are of course aware, requires that fisheries are managed to ensure optimal community and economic benefits and fair access to fisheries resources.

4. Lack of recent catch data online and the five boat secrecy ruling

The analyses upon which some of FQ's conclusions are based are highly dependent on the quality of the raw data, including how and where the data were collected and how representative they are of the various stocks involved. I have attempted to track down some of the data your letters suggest are available online but have failed to locate these. Since this information does not yet appear to be freely available, the material upon which the analyses were conducted has not been independently examined.

The regulation that FQ should not publish landings in areas where five or less boats are operating is highly contentious. This is especially so in FNQ where the operations of just two large gillnetters working pre-spawning aggregations of grey mackerel in 2006 and 2007 are considered to have caused the collapse of the Douglas Region grey mackerel fishery until their partial revival noted in 2011.

5. Progressive loss of economic and recreational opportunities for communities

From accounts of many experienced fishers, including some gillnetters, both commercial and recreational inshore catch rates of key gillnet target species are now well below what they used to be. The commercial sector is reportedly now making much more use of once less highly prized species to make up tonnage. Although a number of factors including deteriorating environmental quality will be responsible, this requires management change.

Some netters are requesting access to protected areas. Opening up protected areas however would be only a short-term measure before such areas were also overfished because of poor management.

Declining fish stocks are considered by many to be causing loss of economic opportunities to regional communities in all fishing sectors. This is greatly resented by a significant number of fishers in coastal communities and causes conflict both between and within sectors.

6. Quality of the advice given to you and the need for advisers to meet regional stakeholders, gain field experience of FNQ/NQ and review NSF literature

It may prove useful if your advisers could visit the regions and meet with those who have real and long-term practical experience of the depletions of inshore fish stocks.

If your advisers check their topographic and rainfall maps they would see just how small some NQ and all FNQ east coast catchments are and how the vast majority of rainfall in FNQ flows into the Gulf of Carpentaria, not into east coast waters.

The implication is that the east coast of FNQ and to a lesser extent some of NQ have inherently relatively low inshore fishery production potential and potentially vulnerable, not very resilient inshore fisheries that cannot afford to have their spawning schools targeted by gillnetters.

We trust the CARM study of grey mackerel you mention, has referred to material prepared by the NSF to date regarding concerns for the sustainability of our inshore fishery. Our report prepared for you, the "***Community Campaign for Sustainable Inshore Fishing in FNQ***" dated 26 August, 2012 (available from www.ffc.org.au) contains important material and references.

Your advisers suggest the recent improvements in Douglas Region grey mackerel numbers may be the result of management changes introduced in 2009. As I had already pointed out in a letter to the previous minister in 2009, those management changes would have had little if any effect on grey mackerel stocks whilst they may have facilitated illegal targeting of a "bycatch" of spotted and Spanish mackerel.

The netters in FNQ were unaffected by the 2009 change in minimum mesh size to 6 ½ inch as they already had the good sense to be using the 6 ½ inch mesh size. The big difference to our local Douglas Region fishery is that the netters have had the decency and perhaps wisdom to stay away; in doing so they have avoided escalation of the conflict that was brewing in 2006-07.

The reasons for the failure of the co-management talks you refer to under the "*Whose fish is it anyway*?" project have been explained in detail in articles and reports by Dick Eussen and me. Basically it is very naïve of authorities to assume that recreational and charter fishers and commercial line fishers can negotiate constructively with out-of-town, large-scale gill-netters. This is almost always doomed to failure (findings of e.g. Gutierrez *et al*.[3])

[3] 2011, Gutierrez, Nicolas L., Ray Hilborn & Omar Defeo. Leadership, social capital and incentives promote successful fisheries. Research Letter. Nature publ. on line 5 January 2011.

7. Political implications of maintaining the claim that grey mackerel and indeed the entire ECIFF gillnet fishery is managed according to ESD principles

Without important management change the political problem of declining inshore fish stocks will persist. The level of communication between various regional fishing networks which have sprung up along the coast in the last few years as a result of concerns over declining inshore fish stocks, and their use of social media, will continually focus on this problem until it is seen to be fixed.

It would be unwise for any politician to underestimate the level of frustration felt. Many share the frustration expressed both in style and content by the attached article[4] by charter fisher, Dave Donald, published in the same Queensland fishing magazine as my own series of articles.

Whilst my intentions are apolitical, it is relevant to emphasise the real political implications of perpetuating the pretence of sustainable management of the ECIFF. LNP has shown good intentions with the on-going netting buyback scheme but this alone, without supplementary management reform, will be insufficient to reverse the ongoing decline in inshore fish stocks.

8. Way forward following buyback

Even after the buyback is complete, under present management practices, there is a clear risk that continuing declines in inshore fish stocks will cause continuing hardship in the fishing industry, loss of commercial opportunities for both commercial and charter fishers and support industries and also those industries supporting recreational fishing whilst offering no incentive for kids to take up one of the healthiest and most character building of pastimes.

The solution lies in appropriate regional management of fishing effort and removal of part time commercial netters, such that only genuine, i.e. fulltime local netters are licensed to fish their local areas at appropriate levels.

The solution may well be to keep in the commercial inshore fishery at the community level with small-scale fulltime operators operating restricted lengths of nets on their assigned home range with appropriate spawning closures in place. Under such a system they would be more inclined and indeed encouraged to operate under sustainable management practices.

Because this fishery is so limited in production potential, at least along the east coast of FNQ, with small local stocks vulnerable to overfishing, it would be highly risky to allow larger scale and/or roving operations. This should be specified in any revision of the investment warning with regards to gillnetting. To reduce conflicts a limited number of key areas of recreational and conservation importance need to be developed as net-free areas.

In summary, it is clear there is still much work to be done on the fisheries management front if we are to achieve an ECIFF gillnet fishery that is sustainable at acceptable stock levels. Many in our networks consider it time for Queensland to recognize the need for the introduction of ***recreational fishing licences*** to help fund our much needed management changes.

I wish you and FQ all the best in 2014 for your continuing efforts to achieve a sustainable ECIFF.

Kind regards,

David C Cook

Attachment 1: Cook, D. Dec 2013. Concerns over Minister's latest reply on Grey Mackerel. NQF&B, Mackay
Attachment 2: Donald, D. Nov 2013. Sustainable fisheries management – dream or nightmare. NQF&B. Mackay.

(See over/)

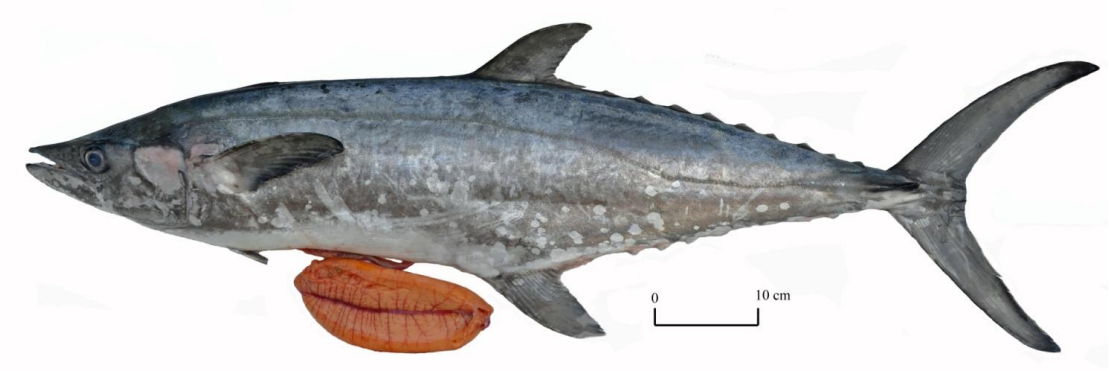
cc FQ, GBRMPA, Fisherman's Portal, QSIA, DSSG, Douglas LMAC, QRFN, CAFNEC, Sunfish, DSEWPAC Sustainable Fisheries, Cooktown FRG, NSF, CAREFISH, Mackay Fishing Alliance, WWF
Also for wider distribution on various other networks and onward forwarding.

[4] Donald, D. Nov 2013. Sustainable fisheries management – dream or nightmare. NQF&B, Mackay. Attached.

Attachment 1: Cook, D. Dec 2013. Concerns over the Minister's latest reply on Grey Mackerel. p34, NQF&B, Mackay.

Concerns over Minister's latest reply on Grey Mackerel

By David Cook, Wonga Beach



One of the largest greys landed in the Douglas Region this season, a monster at 111 cm length and 8.9 kg, showing well-formed roe by 28 August. The average weight of fish caught is now around 3 kg, down from an average of around 7 kg.

The Network for Sustainable Fishing is still in deadlock with Fisheries Queensland (FQ) regarding whether grey mackerel can currently be considered "sustainably fished".

In September's issue of NQ Fish and Boat, I challenged Queensland Fisheries Minister, Dr John McVeigh, that the species does not merit this recently awarded status. In that article I also presented a summary of the reasons I gave to the minister why, under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity (EPBC) Act 1999 and its supporting documents, grey mackerel should not be listed as fished in an ecologically sustainable way, as indeed is required by law.

My article in October's issue covered the Minister's first reply which did not adequately address the concerns I raised with him.

In view of failed or depleted mackerel stocks in a number of areas, I urged all Queenslanders to stand up for their rights regarding our need for healthy inshore fisheries. We need to take much firmer action to pressure government for adequate regional fisheries management. I suggested we consider the possibility of a class action in the courts against the state for failing to adequately manage the fishery.

In October's article I also listed a number of direct questions regarding the recent assessment process for grey mackerel. Minister McVeigh has in his most recent letter ensured fairly comprehensive answers to my questions.

Sadly his answers still fail to put my concerns to rest. The minister is not a fishery management specialist; he is totally reliant on receiving the appropriate advice. This comes from a combined total of "*23 professional aquatic scientists*" (note: not *fisheries* scientists) with "*a combined 450 years of experience in fisheries science/management*". He states "*22 had science bachelor degrees ... and eight had doctorates*".

It may well be significant that Dr McVeigh did not specify any of his team having degrees or post graduate qualifications or doctorates in the highly specialised fields of fisheries management or stock assessment. Is that where the problem lies?

Whilst I do have post graduate if rather out-dated qualifications in fisheries management, I do not consider myself a fisheries scientist. I am however convinced that competent and ***suitably specialised independent expert analysis*** would confirm FQ have come up with the wrong answer regarding the sustainability of the current netting of grey mackerel.

The big picture

In a nutshell, the history of other fisheries throughout the world suggests that concentrated netting of aggregating, pre-spawning and spawning fish, on all their spawning grounds, is a recipe for stock collapse.

In some past instances of major stock collapses there has been very little prior warning that the fishery was heading for trouble. Warning signs were often picked up by only a few fishery managers and because they were hotly contested by the industry lobby, politicians inevitably failed to take the decisive regulatory actions necessary to save the stock. Some disastrous collapses have followed this industry denial and political inaction.

The collapse of the cod fishery off the east coast of North America is a classic example. Three well-researched Penguin books, two by Mark Kurlansky, the other by Paul Greenberg, give fascinating layman's accounts of the history of this fishery.

The collapse of the fishery threw thousands of people permanently out of the industry. The industry had failed to allow for the fact that the fishery was actually composed of many non-mixing stocks of the one species. It was wrongly assumed, at the time, that there was just one stock moving progressively offshore in response to heavy fishing pressure.

It now appears that different non-mixing stocks of Atlantic cod existed in different areas according various factors such as latitude, currents, bottom type and distance offshore. These individual stocks were progressively overfished as skippers moved to larger more efficient boats and roamed the ocean, wrongly assuming they were searching for the same stock that was "learning" to avoid previously overfished grounds.

In the Queensland grey mackerel context, the risk of stock collapse is high as the fishery is based on a number (at least two, probably more) relatively small, non-mixing, regional inshore populations. It remains to be seen whether a case can be made that managing them as if they were one stock amounts to negligence and/or incompetence.

When grey (or spotted) mackerel or indeed any other fish species fails to return to traditional spawning grounds, as a number of regional areas have experienced, the reason may not be that they have "learned" to avoid the area. It is quite possible that, as with the Atlantic cod (and herring and Atlantic mackerel) stocks have simply been fished out.

When it comes to gillnetting of grey mackerel, FQ is unable to regulate who fishes which stocks, where and by how much. The single TAC allows different stocks to be serially overfished as the years go by.

Ecologically Sustainable Development

The Queensland Fisheries Act 1994 includes the principles of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) in its objectives. These include ensuring fisheries resources are managed in an ecologically sustainable way, ensuring optimum community, economic and other benefits can be obtained from fisheries resources and ensuring access to fisheries resources is fair.

There is just no way all this big picture stuff, mentioned above, adds up to management according to the principles of ESD, regardless of how the minister's team of fisheries advisers wish to wave their "trick sticks" as suggested by Dave Donald in his tongue-in-cheek but thought-provoking article last month.

The devil is in the detail

The devil is in the detail ... and the assumptions. A number of the answers provided by the minister to my queries are based on data not available to us. There is no way of assessing whether certain conclusions are legitimate.

The minister's response does however contain a number of assumptions which do deserve closer examination and indeed a strong challenge.

The figures the Minister provides show that catches of grey mackerel have progressively fallen from 2009 when a total allowable catch (TAC) of a "precautionary" 250 tonnes of greys was introduced after a massive peak of about 450 tonnes in 2008-09. Indeed they have never even come close to reaching the "precautionary" TAC of 250 tonnes.

The assumption made by FQ is that these lower catches are the result of the introduction of the quota, poor weather and limited targeting of grey mackerel (lower effort levels). No evidence is given to support these assumptions and no reasons are given as to why netters reduced their targeting of the species.

Was the weather on the inshore fishing grounds in 2008-09 all that better than in the years that followed? Is an annual catch of less than 200 tonnes in 2010-11 the result of a "precautionary" cap of 250 tonnes ***or simply because insufficient schools of grey mackerel could be located to allow fishers to reach the quota?***

The justification for the assignment of the stock status as sustainably fished includes FQ's extraordinary statement "*the level of biomass being harvested and the low amount of fishing pressure being applied indicate the stock is unlikely to become ... overfished*". Considering ***there are a number of different stocks*** of greys and that FQ have absolutely no idea of the biomass of any stock, or even how many there are, or where they spawn, and as mentioned above, cannot control where and when netters fish, ***this statement is absurd***.

Catch rates high

The figures the Minister provides show that catch ***rates*** for netting of greys remained high in 2009-10 and 2010-11. As regular readers of this column should by now be aware, this is ***not*** necessarily a sign of a healthy fishery when aggregating stocks are targeted.

Unlike a fishery based on a widely dispersed stock, an overfished fishery based on aggregated stock can display good catch rates right up to the unexpected collapse of the fishery. Continuing high catch rates may also be helped by improvements in skills, knowledge, technology and the discovery of new stocks and/or spawning grounds when old grounds have been depleted.

Second year students

The breakdown of the age of the greys caught by the industry in some areas show that proportionally more fish in their second year of life are being caught in relation to the older fish. This certainly fits into the line fishery catch in our local Douglas Region, where fish of around 3 kg are in the majority. The exceptionally large 8.9kg 'monster' pictured here was one of the very largest caught by a local pro this season.

Information indicates that previously the average weight of individuals caught was around the 7 kg mark. Such a drop in average size is a sure sign of a fishery under significant pressure and likely to be a warning sign that the fishery needs to be managed with extreme caution. This is obviously not happening.

Overseas studies indicate some species when migrating apparently rely on the older, more experienced individuals to lead the schools. If heavy fishing continually reduces survival rates, there is the danger our second year grey mackerel being left without their leaders, possibly unable to find their traditional spawning grounds.

Titanic Problem

The minister's most recent letter points out that as an inshore species, grey mackerel are vulnerable to habitat loss, reduced water quality and climate change impacts. He suggests that "*the stewardship for addressing the issues you have raised rests with people such as yourself and your network*

membership. ..... Your Network members could also contact their local NRM group to become involved in action helping to make on ground improvements to important coastal habitats to mitigate environmental influences impacting on coastal areas."

Many of us are of course already volunteering our time in such areas. At a recent GBRMPA Local Marine Advisory Committee meeting, I commented that such remedial work can be likened to re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic as it ploughs on towards the iceberg.

From a regional standpoint, being aware that we have separate regional stocks, the gillnet fishery based on grey mackerel (or threadfin, or barramundi) is the Titanic and she is heading straight for the iceberg that is stock collapse. Only a timely change in course will reduce the severity of regional impacts, not just to grey mackerel stocks but to all or most of our large inshore species.

If climate change, loss of habitat, water quality and the inevitable impacts of port dredging and dumping are making stocks less resilient, then all the more reason to manage our inshore fisheries with far more precision and caution.

Much better fisheries management and adequate control of gillnetting netting effort at a regional level is urgently required if grey mackerel and indeed our entire inshore fishery are ever to be managed in an ecologically sustainable way.

David C. Cook
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In NQ FISH & BOAT, December 2013

Attachment 2: Donald, D. Nov 2013. Sustainable fisheries management – dream or nightmare. p14, NQF&B. Mackay.

Sustainable fisheries management – dream or nightmare

By Dave Donald

Simple economics, common sense and 40 years of anecdotal evidence support the complete banning of netting for all mackerel species. Why hasn't it happened?

Imagine if people were able to write their own school or uni report cards. The world would be full of rocket scientists, brain surgeons and judges.

I can see editor Lee thinking, *Hey Dave, this is a fishing mag' not a fantasy publication*, and reaching for the delete button. (Note to ed: Just humour me for a couple more para's and all will be revealed!)

Back to our dream world! As ridiculous as the idea may seem, this scenario is actually happening every day – in halls of power everywhere. If we take the example closest to our hearts, have a gander on any relevant

state or federal website and there are fisheries bureaucrats giving themselves top marks for managing our resource on page after page.

For example, a species that was in trouble last year almost magically appears in the 'sustainable' category next time round. The department obviously has a cupboard containing appropriate utensils (i.e. wands) that can be accessed when anybody looks like scoring less than 90%. I'm reliably informed that the technique required to fix the figures involves waving the trick stick and uttering the incantation "Sustainable, sustaiiiinnnabbble!", while running briskly up and down the main corridor.

Funny? Yeah – if it wasn't so bloody serious!

Re-read Dave Cook's article from last NQ F&B for the perfect example of what I'm on about. But some of you will ask, how can these people who are paid handsomely to look after a public resource get away with 'fudging' the figures? And if they've got it so wrong, how come somebody hasn't pulled them into line?

Ah, readers, welcome to the real fantasy world, the world of politics, where good science or common sense has little bearing on what actually comes out of the publicity machine. Their spin doctors rely on the rule that if you broadcast misinformation for long enough then the public start thinking it's actually fact and the few that know the real truth get so frustrated with not being heard they go and do something else.

Those of us who invested hundreds of voluntary hours in the fisheries MAC and ZAC process know the above feeling very well. When a senior manager who spends most of his working days confined to an office or 4.5 star hotel informs you that he knows better than somebody like yourself who is actually on the water working in the area being discussed most of the year, something is not quite right. It's easy to imagine the same manager patting the head of a hospital patient who's just lost both legs after being hit by a train and telling him he'd be back at work next week!

Is it any wonder the majority of the fishers who gave their time and expertise in an effort to effectively represent recreational fishers in Queensland resigned from these committees in disgust? The futility of their efforts is perfectly illustrated in the abject failure of the Gulf of Carpentaria Management Plan to achieve even its basic targets.

Years of stakeholder consultation resulted in the 'set in stone' objective of a reduction to 65 Gulf barramundi licenses by 2005 and a full review of the Plan commencing in 2009. In 2013, there are still over 85 licenses and no review planned in the foreseeable future. How do they get away with blatantly ignoring their own rules?

And for a lesson in how **not** to apply common sense, we only have to look at the commercial fishing of the different mackerel species. Dave Cook's excellent articles on eastern coast grey mackerel have already highlighted how uncoordinated and haphazard current management of that particular fishery has been, but let's take a wider look at the four major species.

These days, officially, only grey mackerel can be taken by netting. The nets used can be up to 1800 metres long – that's nearly 2 kilometres by the way – just a tad under what is internationally recognized as a 'drift net', an indiscriminate fish and marine fauna killing machine that is banned in many countries. The most interesting thing here is that fisheries officers have no way of measuring these nets, a task that was deemed 'too hard' or technically impossible when the Gulf Plan was being developed. So reports of commercial fishers using up to three kilometres of net in our waters are not able to be proven.

Spotted mackerel were once able to be netted and huge amounts were taken from Bowen south to Moreton Bay, mostly using ring nets. I personally witnessed spotties being taken in Stanage Bay way back in the late 70's and was appalled by the numbers of fish that went through the net, sank to the bottom and died, as many as 25%. After species numbers collapsed about a decade ago, netting was banned.

When I lived in Yeppoon in the 70's and 80's, a couple of commercial line fishers became personal friends. They told of the time Spanish mackerel were netted on one of their major grounds north of Keppel Bay. The mackerel were then absent from this area for many years after. This observation gels with Dave Cook's example of the grey mackerel off Bowen and many other anecdotes stretching from Moreton Bay along Queensland's coast through to the lower Gulf.

Common sense would suggest that there is a major case here for the complete banning of the netting of offshore pelagic species, including all mackerel species. There's 30 years of history here, so why hasn't the evidence been comprehensively investigated? Even more important, why has offshore netting of mackerel

and other pelagic fish been banned in some coastal states of the USA? What has prompted this action? Isn't investigating these anomalies exactly the sort of job fish managers are supposed to do?

To a bloke, like me, who loves to eat mackerel, the message is very clear. Netted mackerel is very third class in the eating stakes and is often so unpalatable that it has been sold as pet food or dumped. Conversely, line captured mackerel that have been spiked, bled and ice brined rate about as good as fish gets and are absolutely wonderful out of a fish shop cooker. The premium price these fillets usually attract and the fact that the fishery produces no by-catch should make it a fish manager's dream. Why has the netted product been allowed to severely erode the viability of a sector that ticks all the sustainability boxes?

Weipa, in the 80's and 90's had around 20 line fishers working Spanish and grey mackerel within a couple of hours steaming from port during the months from May until November each year. A drum net vessel ran a massive monofilament wall through their major ground for the first time around 1996 and the amount of fish caught, most of them Spaniards, was so great, the fisher involved could not store the catch. Line fishers watched as tonnes of prime fish were dumped after the crew was overwhelmed by the numbers taken. That area has never been the same since with the result that only a handful of line fishers work Albatross Bay for a couple of months per year these days.

The irony of that incident is the regulations prohibit Spanish mackerel from being taken by net! What use are rules if they are not workable or enforceable? There has never been any motivation on the part of fisheries to even consider a solution to this problem. Whether grey, spotted or Spanish, just catch it and sell it, the more the merrier and the better the fiscal report at year's end.

I saw some of the largest spotted macks I have ever seen landed while down at Iluka earlier this year, some would have weighed close to 10 kilos. The species has been notably absent from Moreton Bay for some years but still turns up on the Gold Coast and as far south as Coffs Harbour. This distribution further supports the theory that the species is still avoiding the netted locations.

Careful perusal of some very hard to get fisheries data by Lindsay Dines has revealed that tailer could be another species that are avoiding nets by changing their movement patterns. Here again, fisheries common sense goes right out the window with NSW fisheries banning their netting but Queensland still allowing the practice.

What sort of a management regime allows such radical differences to happen concerning a shared resource? How can the same tailer need to be given protection on one side of the border but entirely sustainable when it's swum 100 metres north?

Now don't even get me started on barra – 14 licenses in NT and 400 odd in Queensland. Somebody has obviously got their management very, very wrong. Yet they're still marking their report cards: Queensland Barramundi Sustainability 100%. The magic wands have been working overtime!

Just think of it – the Smart State! Common sense, real science, managers who have the wellbeing of the fishery at heart, a government that recognizes the value of a public owned resource to all stakeholders. Now I really am in fantasyland!

Dave Donald
in NQ FISH & BOAT, November 2013