

Fish and Fish Habitat Protection

General Overview

The aquatic environment of Western Australia supports a range of outstanding recreational fishing, commercial fishing, pearling and aquaculture industries. These activities all depend upon a healthy environment for their continuing success. The Western Australian Government is committed to the conservation of the aquatic environment so that it may be used and enjoyed for generations to come.

The Fish and Fish Habitat Protection Program coordinates the agency's role in the protection of the marine estuarine and riverine environments as required by the Government's fisheries policy. To facilitate these activities on behalf of the wider community, a reference group of stakeholders was set up in the year 2000. This group incorporates representatives of the commercial fishing industry, recreational fishers, the aquaculture industry, the Aboriginal sector, the Conservation Council of WA, the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) and the Office of the Auditor General (OAG). The reference group provides input on fish habitat protection, ecologically sustainable development (ESD) and related activities of Fisheries WA.

Activities relevant at a bioregional level are discussed in the appropriate sections which follow. Progress towards statewide initiatives is reported below.

ESD Assessment of WA Fisheries

Fisheries WA staff have taken a lead role in the development of a national framework for reporting on fisheries within the context of ESD. The development of the ESD framework has been prepared at the direction of the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Aquaculture. Fish and Fish Habitat Protection Program staff are liaising with other State fisheries and environmental agencies to develop a framework which can address the issues of concern to all stakeholder groups.

During 2000/2001, a draft ESD policy document was developed to outline how ESD reporting and assessment will be implemented in relation to the *Fish Resources Management Act 1994* and associated legislation. In addition, the ESD framework has been further refined by the incorporation of a formal risk assessment analysis to determine the appropriate level of management response to issues raised by stakeholders. For medium- or high-risk issues that require specific management, a detailed report that specifies explicit objectives and performance measures must now be completed.

These ESD reporting methods are currently being used to complete the applications to Environment Australia on the sustainability of commercial fisheries to enable continued export of products past 2003. Draft assessment reports have been produced which relate to the major export fisheries including western rock lobster, Shark Bay prawn, Shark Bay scallop, Exmouth Gulf prawn, Shark Bay snapper and abalone.

The development of these ESD reports has relied heavily upon the information presented previously in the *State of*

the Fisheries reports and used in the annual Fisheries WA performance assessment.

To ensure that this reporting and assessment process is viewed by stakeholders as transparent, objective and robust, an appropriate third-party audit is needed for all fisheries (not only export fisheries). While the current fisheries assessments are subject to OAG audit, the possible extension of independent auditing to cover these new ESD criteria and their associated assumptions is currently being negotiated between Fisheries WA, the EPA and the OAG.

Fishcare WA

Community groups and organisations are encouraged to play an active role in the management and conservation of the State's fish and fish habitats through the State program Fishcare WA and the national Fisheries Action Program.

A review of the success of the national Fisheries Action Program and the State's Fishcare WA program has been completed. A total of 13 Fishcare projects valued at \$33,000, and five Fisheries Action Program projects valued at \$151,000, were approved for Western Australia in 2000/2001. This brings the total value of all projects funded in Western Australia under both programs to \$1,182,000 since 1996.

Two of the 13 new Fishcare WA projects provide benefits across more than one bioregion. These are:

- Aquaculture and farming (CBC Fremantle).
- Comparisons in habitats, age composition, growth and biology of tarwhine – Shark Bay and Perth waters (Murdoch University).

Other projects were regionally based and are described below in the relevant bioregion section.

Marine Reserves and Marine Planning

Fisheries WA continued working with CALM to implement the Government's marine reserves program. Both the Minister for Fisheries and Fisheries WA have a vital role in these processes. Fisheries WA manages fishing, pearling and aquaculture in all marine reserves. It also works with Environment Australia in the planning of marine protected areas in Commonwealth waters.

Areas of the waters of Western Australia may be reserved as fish habitat protection areas (FHPAs) pursuant to Section 115 of the *Fish Resources Management Act 1994*. These areas are vested in the Minister for Fisheries and may be established for a number of purposes including the protection of the aquatic environment, protection of fish, and education. Before an FHPA can be established a draft plan of management must be prepared and a public consultation process undertaken. Under this process, the Minister has wide powers to control or prohibit fishing activity, and may also make regulations to prohibit other human activities which may harm or alter the environment. The waters of the Abrolhos Islands, which have special significance for the rock lobster fishery and

conservation purposes, are reserved as an FHPA. During the year, the Lancelin Island Lagoon was set aside as an FHPA and the Minister released the draft plan of management for the proposed Cottesloe Reef FHPA. In addition, the draft plan for the proposed Miaboolya Beach FHPA was completed.

Fisheries regulations may also be used to limit or prohibit fishing in specific locations to enable people to observe a part of the marine environment which is not affected by fishing. These areas are often established at the request of local communities and are described as reef protected areas (RPAs). Reef protected areas exist at a number of locations around Western Australia including Cowaramup Bay, Esperance Jetty and Yallingup Reef. In July 2000, the *Kunmunya* and *Samson II* wreck sites near Point Samson were closed to all fishing and set aside as an RPA.

Marine Environments

Successful collaborations between Fisheries WA and industry, community and other stakeholder groups continued throughout the year to ensure the protection of fish and fish habitat. Major achievements were as follows:

- Fisheries WA has been contributing to the implementation of the Report of the National Taskforce on Introduced Marine Pests through membership of the National Introduced Marine Pests Coordinating Council. This work has included the development of an interim protocol for the management of introduced marine pests associated with vessels entering Australian waters illegally. This is a growing issue and Fisheries WA has worked closely with AQIS and other relevant Commonwealth agencies in the development of the policy.
- During the year, Fish and Fish Habitat Protection Program staff consulted with all stakeholders to develop a comprehensive set of guidelines for the establishment of FHPAs. The guidelines outline a process which enables community groups to initiate the establishment of FHPAs and other protected areas.
- A Fisheries Management Paper on fish protection measures was completed (Bunting 2001). This report outlines the breadth of legislative and administrative arrangements that Fisheries WA uses to protect fish and their habitats.
- The Minister introduced an order to protect coral from recreational collectors in Western Australian waters.

West Coast Bioregion

Environmental Management Overview

A number of projects which will give greater protection to fish and their habitats were advanced in the west coast bioregion during 2000/2001. This included further progress on marine protected areas, including planning for the proposed Jurien Bay Marine Park and the management of the Abrolhos system.

In April 2001, the Minister established the Lancelin Lagoon FHPA. Fisheries WA worked with the Marine Conservation Society of WA to set aside this marine protected area. In addition, in June 2001, the Minister released the draft plan of management for the proposed Cottesloe FHPA. Fisheries WA is working with the Cottesloe Reef Protection Society on this project. Both of these areas were identified by community groups who considered them important for educational purposes and expressed a willingness to take a lead role in their stewardship.

Management of the Abrolhos Islands continued to be progressed with the assistance of the Abrolhos Islands Management Advisory Committee in accordance with the approved management plan released in December 1998. Significant progress towards the management plan strategies was made in the following areas:

- Fisheries WA conducted a public workshop to assist in developing a research project to study the health of the Abrolhos reef system and the impacts of human activities on the reef.
- A major reef health baseline data project has been developed to provide a strategic approach to the conduct of reef health science initiatives at the Islands. This project is an important precursor to the sustainable use and development of the Islands and surrounding waters.
- With the assistance of funding provided under the Natural Heritage Trust, environmentally sensitive public moorings were installed at the Abrolhos Islands. These facilities will enable the general public to access dive sites without damaging the environment.
- With the assistance of Fisheries WA, the WA Maritime Museum completed an extensive survey of the historical sites on Beacon Island.
- A plan for sustainable tourism at the Abrolhos Islands was released. The aim of the plan is to improve public access to the islands while protecting the environment.
- A review of the land conservation values of the Abrolhos Islands was completed.
- A full registry of fishing industry moorings was completed.
- Work has commenced on the draft bycatch action plan for the Abrolhos Islands and Mid West Trawl Managed Fishery.



Fish and Fish Habitat Protection

Four new Fishcare WA projects were funded in the west coast bioregion. These were:

- Geographe Bay marine environment (West Busselton Primary School).
- Jurien Bay snorkel trail (Jurien District High School).
- Bunbury Back Beach reef survey (Reef Diving Association).
- Impact of humans on bottlenose dolphins in Cockburn Sound (Murdoch University).

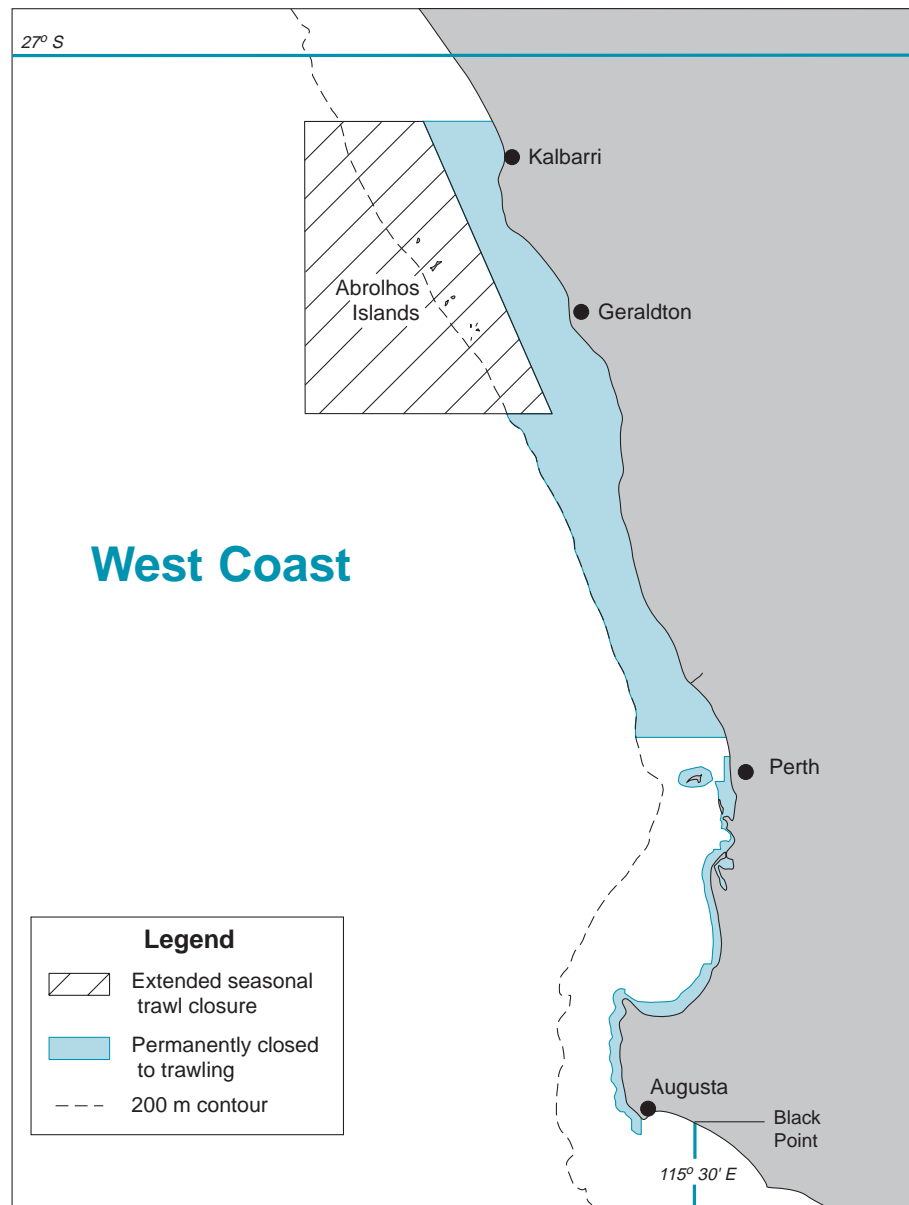
Fish Habitat Protection Overview

On the west coast, marine habitats are largely protected from any physical impact of fishing by extensive closures to trawling, the only permitted fishing method which can

significantly affect the sea floor. Essentially, all seagrass habitats are protected, with trawling limited to sand areas inhabited by target species such as scallops (West Coast Habitat Protection Figure 1).

In addition, habitat protection is provided by specific FHPAs, RPAs and marine parks in sensitive areas (West Coast Habitat Protection Figure 2).

During 2000/2001, the establishment of a dedicated two-man field operations team in the Abrolhos Islands enhanced service delivery and public awareness of important environmental issues in this remote location. Patrols of the RPAs continued with an educative focus, but with some apprehensions for illegal fishing activities. Island schools were visited to present talks to the children, and a newsletter was commenced to provide an update on



WEST COAST HABITAT PROTECTION FIGURE 1

Map showing areas of permanent and extended seasonal closures to trawl fishing in the west coast bioregion.

fisheries issues to Island fishers during the season. Advisory and logistical support was also provided to a major media visit in April 2001 to help showcase the Abrolhos.

Voluntary air service protocols were implemented, and airstrip maintenance carried out, to ensure visitor and passenger safety. Camp, jetty and aquaculture lease inspections were conducted to ensure standards were being maintained. A mooring register was completed, as were interim discussions to remove and identify hazardous moorings. The agency itself installed environmentally sensitive moorings in key anchorage areas to minimise benthic habitat damage while supporting responsible diving by ecotourism operators. Officers also continued to provide a sea rescue support and emergency management role.

Officers completed on-site training with the WA Maritime Museum in the duties of a Historic Shipwreck Inspector. Visits from WA Museum staff were also facilitated, and field assistance provided to research projects including studies on seabird diet and nesting patterns, finfish research, RPA habitat studies and sea-lion and seal study.

An outbreak of noxious daisies at East Wallabi airstrip was quickly destroyed to preserve the environmental integrity of this important island.

A high level of community consultation continues, with input from the various user groups and specialist committees.



WEST COAST HABITAT PROTECTION FIGURE 2

Map showing current and proposed areas of protected fish habitat in the west coast bioregion.

