

TASMANIAN CONSERVATION TRUST
SUBMISSION ON THE
POLICY DOCUMENT AND FISHERY
DEVELOPMENT PLAN
FOR THE

Tasmanian Abalone Fishery

TO THE SECRETARY
DEPARTMENT OF PRIMARY
INDUSTRY AND FISHERIES
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SUBMISSION:

Introduction

In both biological and economic terms, the Tasmanian abalone industry has so far proved to be a major success and is probably one of the world's model fisheries, at least in this context.

This state of affairs seems likely to continue under the proposed Draft Fishery Management Plan and Policy Document. However there is still room for improvement in the management of this fishery, both to ensure the ongoing sustainability of the fishery and to maintain the natural values of Tasmania's marine environment.

The Tasmanian Conservation Trust (TCT) Submission aims to suggest areas where the management of the Tasmanian's abalone fishery can be improved to changes to the Draft

Independent Survey of Abalone Stock

While catch effort data suggests that the abalone fishery is at least being maintained, the TCT is concerned that there is no method of stock assessment operating independently of the fishery itself. Since divers are likely to target reef areas that are well populated with abalone and ignore reefs that have been overfished or where abalone are naturally more scarce, it is not unreasonable to suggest that catch effort may not be as accurate a method of determining the health of the abalone stock as could be hoped for, and may in fact suggest that stocks are larger than they are.

The TCT recognises the difficulties of independent survey techniques, but believes that recent work on abalone stocks elsewhere in Australia give some hope that an economic independent survey might be possible.

Extra Pressure on the South East Coastline

With changes in the structure of the abalone fishery have come changes in the fishing behaviour of divers. In Particular, Tasmania's south east coast appears to be more heavily targeted while the west coast is experiencing less fishing pressure.

With so much pressure being placed on the same part of the coast there is a real danger that this part of the coast may become overfished. This situation needs to be monitored closely and consideration given to implementing some kind of zoning system if it appears that stocks along this part of the coast are becoming overfished.

Marine Reserves

The long term health of the Tasmanian abalone fishery may depend on increasing the knowledge base about shallow reef ecology. For example, the population of a species of sea urchin, *Centrostephanus rodgersii*, has greatly increased over recent years in the waters off the north east coast of Tasmania. This may be part of a natural cycle or may be a long term effect resulting from the fishing of crayfish or abalone. If it results in long term changes to the plant communities of shallow rocky reefs then it has the potential to pose a direct threat to the abalone fishery itself. Further research is warranted to ensure that long term damage is not occurring to the shallow rocky reef marine communities of Tasmania.

Sizeable marine reserves can act as useful baseline areas to assess the impacts of fishing as well as offer vital insurance against mistakes in fisheries management. The TCT also believes that Marine Reserves offer many benefits apart from those that relate directly to fishing activities and supports the concept of a comprehensive system of marine reserves in Tasmanian waters. If such a system was created it would be a major step towards ensuring that marine species, ecological processes and other natural values were protected.

Unified Abalone Fishery

The TCT believes that the “stunted abalone” fishery of Bass Strait should be managed as part of the State’s overall fishery. Minimising numbers involved in the abalone fishery will simplify management and reduce the likelihood of poaching.

Conclusion

Given the success of the Tasmanian abalone fishery, future changes to its management are more likely to be refinements than wholesale modifications. Protecting the sustainability of the fishery must be a priority and there is room for much more research to ensure that the stock can continue to support the fishing effort.

It is to be hoped that the continuing entry of large investors into the industry will not change its character so that short term economic concerns outweigh the longer term ecological concerns, and that there continues to be adequate economic return to Tasmania from this valuable resource.

The TCT believes that all Tasmanian fisheries should to recognise the need for more marine reserves and the need for a system of representative marine protected areas which will provide a many benefits to fishers as well as the wider community.