



tasmanian conservation trust inc

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**RE Environmental Assessment of the Tasmanian Abalone Fishery under the
*Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999***

I am writing to comment on the Tasmanian abalone fishery as it relates to environmental assessment under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

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 regard to sustainability and effective management. A sophisticated system of area management and reporting greatly assists in managing the stock and ensuring compliance with the quota management system.

As a member of the Abalone Fishery Advisory Committee (Ab FAC) I have to say that problems are generally addressed in a timely manner as they become apparent, and the TCT supports the export approval for this fishery at this time.

Nevertheless there are still areas of the fishery that could be improved.

As with most fisheries, catch data is closely related to fleet behaviour and this can mask developing problems with stock. More fishery independent data on the status of abalone stocks would be very useful.

Some areas appear to be in danger of being over fished, and elements within industry are pushing for reduced size limits to maintain catch in some areas. As the fishery has shifted from an owner-operator model to one based on contract divers, there has been an increasing incentive for fishing to occur in more

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accessible waters, particularly those off south east Tasmania, and fishing pressure has increased accordingly. It is to be hoped that pressure to relax catch limits will be resisted and that the fishery will continue to be managed in a conservative manner to protect stocks and the long term viability of the fishery.

There remains a lack of information about the ecological impacts of the abalone fishery (as well as other fisheries) and climate change on Tasmania's inshore rock reef ecosystems. Adequate and representative no-take marine protected areas can be used to assess these impacts. There is an urgent need to introduce a system of such reserves in Tasmania's marine environment.

While the Tasmanian abalone fishery is well managed, it is currently facing a major threat as a consequence of the Tasmanian rock lobster fishery. Over the last 20 or so years, the rock lobster fishery has removed practically all rock lobsters large enough to prey on *Centrostephanus rodgersii* urchins from shallow rocky reef areas along the east and south east coast. As a consequence, urchin numbers have exploded and extensive urchin barrens have formed as grazing urchins remove the large macroalgae that normally cover such reefs.

Urchin barrens do not support significant populations of either rock lobster or abalone, so both the abalone and rock lobster fisheries are becoming effectively excluded from an increasing area of the marine environment.

While climate change and other factors may have some influence on the expansion of urchin barrens, there is no doubt that the major cause is the removal of large rock lobster by fishing activities. Currently, it appears that the only realistic solution to this problem must involve changes to the management of the rock lobster fishery which will lead to a rapid increase in numbers of rock lobster large enough to prey on *Centrostephanus* urchins. To date, the Tasmanian Government has taken no useful action to deal with *Centrostephanus* urchin barrens or the threat they pose to Tasmania's two most important wild fisheries.

While the abalone fishery can be seen as being managed successfully and responsibly in isolation, it faces a major threat from expanding urchin barrens that have developed through the mismanagement of the Tasmanian rock lobster fisher. Marine protected areas, more research and a fisheries management system informed by ecosystem level interactions are needed to properly assess and manage the *Centrostephanus* issue and ensure that the Tasmanian abalone fishery continues to be successful into the future.

Yours sincerely

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