

**The environmental, social and economic impacts of large capacity fishing vessels commonly known as 'Supertrawlers' operating in Australia's marine jurisdiction.**

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

The threat posed to the long-term sustainability of Australia's small pelagic fisheries resource and marine natural heritage by large capacity fishing vessels commonly known as “supertrawlers” is multi-faceted and considerable.

In 2012, the then federal Labor government banned the supertrawler FV Margiris and any fishing vessel *over 130 metres*. The reasons for doing so were compelling and while this was a move in the right direction, this submission wishes to make the point that it is not some arbitrary length of the fishing vessel that is at issue here, but rather its capacity to inequitably and detrimentally exploit the fisheries resource and inflict serious damage on the marine environment.

For the purposes of legislative regulation, it is important that the term “supertrawler” should apply to any large-capacity commercial factory vessel (eg the 95 metre Dutch-based Geelong Star, formerly Dirk Dirk) which is equipped with freezing or other preserving facilities rendering it capable of taking a catch many times in excess of fishing vessels not so equipped.

For the purposes of legislative regulation, to arbitrarily identify trawlers over 130 m in length as warranting a protective ban creates a significant loophole and is inadequate as a measure toward effectively preventing serious degradation of the fisheries resource and the marine environment as intended.

Specifically, it needs to be acknowledged that smaller large capacity factory vessels (such as the Geelong Star) are equally capable of critically degrading the fisheries resource and inflicting substantial environmental damage to a similar degree as a larger vessel. Likewise, all such vessels should be subject to a permanent ban from operating within, or entering, Australia's marine jurisdiction.

**Economic Considerations & Resource Degradation**

This submission strongly recommends that commercial supertrawlers (like The Geelong Star) should be permanently banned from Australian waters because their level of contribution back into the Australian economy is not commensurate with the degree to which they exploit the resource.

The Geelong Star has permission to catch 16,500 tonnes of pelagic fish per year. (1) While factory trawlers like the Dutch-owned Geelong Star take vast quantities of Australia's fisheries resource, they deprive local smaller-scale commercial enterprise of the available resource and degrade the resource potentially to the point of rendering it permanently depleted and unsustainable.

I refer this committee's attention to the informed statements of Dr Daniel Pauly of the Fisheries Centre at the University of British Columbia.

As was reported in the Sydney Morning Herald of May 21 2015, (2) Dr Pauly has referred to the world's oceans as a “giant Ponzi scheme” of overfishing and, at the May 2015 TEDx talk in Sydney, he delivered some salient words of warning for Australia whose fisheries, he observed, are relatively well managed and have a comparatively small footprint when compared with the industrial-scale plunder of the planet's sea life.

Dr Pauly's message is that we need to keep Australia's fisheries this way via a proactive approach

which prevents damage before it occurs. In order to do this effectively, a permanent ban on largescale factory vessels like the Geelong Star is urgently needed before significant or irreversible damage is done.

Dr Pauly warned: "There is a tremendous pressure knocking at the door, saying, 'Hey, your resources are not kaput. Let us in to exploit them. ... The alarm bell for Australia – and it is a truly alarming bell – was in letting one big trawler, and perhaps more later, into the country."

In 2012, the then federal Labor government had banned the super trawler FV Margiris and any fishing vessel over 130 metres. However, Dr Pauly noted that the Geelong Star is capable of similar damage.

"They are both monsters," he said. "They can catch as much as 150 of your local boats in one go."

Dr Pauly said Australia had the option not to repeat the mistakes of countries like New Zealand, where foreign trawlers had contributed to a big ecological footprint (40.1 million tonnes compared with Australia's 15 million tonnes between 1950 and 2010).

He was also concerned also about the (then) Abbott government's decision to review the federal marine parks announced by Labor in 2012 and to lift restrictions on fishing in the reserves.

### **Impacts of “supertrawlers” on other fisheries.**

Large factory vessels like the Geelong Star take far more than a fair share, depriving local Australian economies and communities, and in the process present a serious threat to the longterm sustainability and viability of the fisheries resource. The threat is severalfold.

It includes the primary depletion of the resource. Large capacity fishing vessels which are equipped with on board factory freezing facilities, like the Geelong Star, are not operating on a level playing field. As has been noted earlier in this submission, vessels like The Geelong Star can take “as much as 150 local boats in one go”. The reason such vessels are drawn to Australia's marine jurisdiction is precisely because the resource has been comparatively well managed and is (not yet) seriously depleted by precisely such hyper-exploitation of the resource.

In June of 2015, the SA Fisheries Minister Leon Bignell publicly voiced the SA state government's concerns that The Geelong Star could breach the state's catch regulations. An ABC news report of June in this year (3) recorded the minister, referring to the Geelong Star factory vessel, stating:

“I have very serious concerns about its impact on our fisheries, particularly our quota-managed sardines and our recreational game fishing industry... South Australia has jurisdiction for managing sardines in all waters off SA [and] this means that sardines are a no-take species for all vessels off SA in the small pelagic fishery."

The minister said he doubted the Geelong Star would be able to avoid breaching the state's fishing restrictions. "There is a strong likelihood of significant incidental by-catch of sardines and this could adversely affect the integrity of the quota arrangements," the minister said.

### **Impacts on Australia's Recreational Fishery & Associated Industry**

As the Geelong Star has moved through Australian waters it has generated community concern, unrest and outcry reflecting the considerable threat such vessels pose to the sustainability of the fisheries resource, the wider health of the marine environment and the wider sustainability of

Australia's domestic community economies.

Something of the threat posed by large commercial factory vessels like the Geelong Star to the recreational fishing sector (and the considerable flow-on tourism and economic activity associated with the recreational fishing sector) was expressed in a report run in *Fishing World* magazine of May 2015. (4)

The magazine report records that; “Local anglers are concerned the Geelong Star will cause localised depletion of bait stocks off Bermagui and other areas and put at risk the winter tuna and shark sport fisheries. Research indicates that recreational fishing contributes significant economic activity in regional communities such as Bermagui.

“Commercial fishing operations like the Geelong Star think they have precedence over the recreational fishing sector,” ARFF (Australian Recreational Fishing Foundation) MD Allan Hansard told *Fishing World*.

“The Government needs to step in and assess the relative worth and benefits of both sectors. We would argue strongly that the Geelong Star is putting at risk many millions of dollars of revenue for small coastal communities. If this boat removes baitfish off these ports, then the game fish will simply head out far offshore to find food. That means anglers won’t be able to access the fish and the money they would have otherwise spent in places like Bermagui, Portland, Jervis Bay and a whole range of other towns up and down the coast will not be spent. Regional economies will suffer as a result.”

Hansard said it was time the federal Government and AFMA recognised recreational fishing as a major stakeholder in the fisheries resource sector and managed the nation’s fisheries accordingly. “Our concerns about this style of fishing on fish stocks, recreational fishing and the broader community are real, and have largely been ignored to date by the approvals process,” Hansard said.

### **Small Pelagic Fishery Management & Regulation Issues**

In June of 2015, the Federal Government’s Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) disbanded the Small Pelagic Resource Assessment Group (SPFRAG), the only Government committee that specifically provided scientific advice on the management of Australia’s Small Pelagic Fishery (SPF) and the Geelong Star “supertrawler”.

This decision in-itself appears to warrant investigation, scrutiny and re-assessment.

The *Tasmanian Times* of 09.07.15 recorded that Members of the SPFRAG committee had previously been prevented by the terms of their membership agreement from speaking publicly about AFMA management problems in the Commonwealth’s Small Pelagic Fishery which stretches in a 200-mile wide band right around Tasmania and the southern half of Australia. The publication recorded that the: “AFMA’s decision to disband the committee allows them to speak freely for the first time.”

I refer this Senate Standing Committee's attention to The *Tasmanian Times* report (5) and the concerns expressed in it by the former members of the disbanded SPFRAG committee. The following are selected excerpts from that report:

Jon Bryan and Graham Pike have been members of the SPFRAG committee for the 10 years since it was formed. “We believe that this is a critical time for this fishery and the worst time for a scientific advisory committee to be abolished,” Jon Bryan said.

“There are a whole series of serious problems associated with the management of this fishery and the operation of the Geelong Star. For example, there is no scientifically justified mechanism to prevent localised depletion of fish stocks having unacceptable impacts on recreational fishing and the welfare of seals and dolphins is not being properly protected.”

“We were independent voices. We pointed out conflicts of interest and other governance issues to AFMA and have basically been ignored”, Graham Pike said. “AFMA has learnt nothing from the Borthwick inquiry two years ago and has failed to implement the recommendation that AFMA introduce enhanced transparency arrangements into their processes of governance and decision making.”

*The Tasmanian Times* report continues:

*The Australian stocks of small pelagic fish are among the last healthy stocks left anywhere in the world. Once huge populations of these species in other parts of world have been drastically overfished. These fish are vitally important to the marine environment and for recreational fisheries around the southern Australian coastline.*

“Much of the overfishing in small pelagic fisheries around the world has been caused by supertrawlers such as the Geelong Star,” Jon Bryan said. “Another supertrawler, the Margiris, a sister ship of the Geelong Star, was banned from fishing in Australia by the Labor Government in 2012. The Federal Court of Australia found that the Environment Minister at the time was justified in imposing the ban on environmental grounds”...

“The Geelong Star is currently operating secretly in Australian waters. Basic information about where it is operating and what it is catching is hidden from public scrutiny,” Graham Pike said.

“How can the public have confidence in the management of this fishery or the Geelong Star if basic information is not available? We don't even know exactly where or when the seals and dolphins were killed,” Jon Bryan said.

### **Unacceptable impacts on wildlife and Australia's marine natural heritage**

The impact that large capacity factory freezer (supertrawler) vessels like The Geelong Star clearly have on the marine environment is simply unacceptable to anyone who holds genuine regard for: our natural heritage; for Australia's protected wildlife; for the humane treatment of animals, and for upholding the intent and value of our nation's legislation.

It is known that as of September 18 2015, the factory trawler, the Geelong Star, had killed at least nine dolphins and four seals. It is a fairly safe bet that the *actual* number of protected marine mammals which have been destroyed by the factory trawler while in Australian waters is significantly in excess of this publicly quoted number.

Given the fact that seals and dolphins are protected marine species within Australia's marine jurisdiction, it is simply unacceptable that supertrawlers like the Dutch-owned Geelong Star can continue to destroy these protected species, making a farce of Australia's legislation intended to conserve the nation's marine heritage for the benefit of all Australians now and into the future.

The fact that the species known to have been destroyed by The *Geelong Star* are recognised as intelligent mammals particularly makes their *avoidable* and deplorably inhumane deaths worthy of condemnation by all Australians. I say these deaths were *avoidable* because supertrawler vessels

like The Geelong Star simply should not be operating in Australia's marine jurisdiction in the first place.

These iconic marine species (seals and dolphins) are invaluable aspects of the living natural heritage of all Australians now and into the future. We, as Australians, carry the legacy of tragic mismanagement of our wildlife in the extinction of the thylacine. We need to heed such compelling lessons of our own history. Our wildlife, including our marine wildlife represent an immensely valuable aspect of Australia's eco-tourism sector and our valuable tourism opportunities into the future. Supertrawlers which destroy our iconic, protected marine wildlife should be permanently banned from Australia's marine jurisdiction as a matter of utmost priority.

Our marine wildlife is already under significant stress from multiple factors including marine debris, specifically plastics, which are known to be having a devastating impact. Banning supertrawlers from Australia's marine jurisdiction would play a valuable role in helping to redress the balance which at the moment is stacked dangerously against our invaluable protected marine wildlife. As we know, entire ecosystems are liable to collapse when any single component part is damaged beyond recovery.

The Australian Government Department of Environment "protecting Whales and Dolphins" website (7) states that:

Australian waters are home to 45 species of whales and dolphins. The protection of these species domestically, regionally and internationally is a priority for the Australian Government ... The Australian Government is also working with state and territory governments and marine industries to better manage the impacts on whales and dolphins from fishing, oil and gas exploration, entanglement in marine debris, and the growing interest in whale and dolphin watching.

Under the EPBC Act all seals and sea lions occurring within Australian waters are listed as **marine species** (EPBC Act 1999; section 248). (8) It is an offence to kill, injure, take, trade, keep, or move any member of a listed marine species on Australian Government land or in Commonwealth waters without a permit. Three species of seal are also listed under the EPBC Act as **Vulnerable** (section 178), which provides additional protection.

The Dutch-owned *Geelong Star*, caught four dolphins and two seals in its nets on its first outing in Australia. The factory-freezer vessel was forced to suspend fishing in May when it killed another four dolphins and two seals, which Environment Minister Greg Hunt then called "unacceptable and outrageous". (9)

However, by September The ABC was reporting that the Geelong Star's toll on Australia's protected marine wildlife had increased to nine dolphins and four seals.(10)

It is not clear how many of Australia's protected marine mammals the floating factory vessel has actually killed since then but for anyone who genuinely cares about Australia's natural heritage, or about the humane treatment of animals, or about the upholding of Australian legislation, it remains a matter of huge concern.

The obvious and most effective way of avoiding this continued deplorable destruction, the over-exploitation and potential collapse of Australia's valuable fisheries resource, the undermining of the nation's valuable recreational fishery/tourism sector and the many local economies that depend on this sector directly or indirectly, is to ban all large capacity factory fishing vessels (also known as supertrawlers).

I urge this committee to recommend that ALL large capacity fishing vessels (otherwise known as supertrawlers and including such class of vessels measuring less than 130 metres in length) be permanently banned from entering or operating in Australia's marine jurisdiction.

## **References**

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