



**Australian Underwater Federation- Queensland
Spearfishing Commission**
Spearfishing – Safe Sustainable Selective Seafood

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Via email – ec.sen@aph.gov.au

**RE:- SUBMISSION TO SENATE INQUIRY: ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION AND
BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AMENDMENT (BIOREGIONAL PLANS) BILL 2011**

The Australian Underwater Federation (AUF) is a representative body that operates from the national to the local level and covers the sports of spearfishing, scuba diving and underwater hockey. The AUF as an organization provides rules for spearfishing competitions, record keeping, codes of conduct and importantly, representation to government and other community groups.

Australian Underwater Federation – Queensland (AUFQ) is the Queensland branch of the AUF. Each sport is represented by various commissions and I am writing on behalf of the AUFQ Spearfishing Commission.

The AUF through the national and state Chairs and the Presidents of local spearfishing clubs in Cooktown, Cairns, Townsville, Mackay, Gladstone and South East Queensland are doing their best as volunteers to promote spearfishing in Queensland waters. We are also aligned with recreational fishing organizations such as Recfish Australia.

We are aware that the Federal Government of Australia has commenced a process of bio-regional planning which includes considering zoning proposals for the Coral Sea.

The Coral Sea which is a vast area and considered by many as one of the last frontiers. People travel from all over the world to fish, dive and spearfish these waters. We are also aware that minority 'Green' groups like the WWF and PEW are pushing for a total 'lock out' of these areas. While we have faith in government and the democratic process that this is unlikely to occur the AUFQ Spearfishing Commission feels it is very important that we express the views of the Spearfishing fraternity and the importance to us of retaining access to the Coral Sea for our activities.

We do not consider groups with agenda's like that of PEW and WWF as 'conservationists' since conservation implies sustainable use - 'preservationist' is probably a more appropriate term. In 2008 the PEW foundation proposed a total fishing closure of over 1 million square kilometres of the Coral Sea and in 2009 the Commonwealth Government responded by declaring a Coral Sea Conservation Zone.





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While the peak recreational fishing and diving groups represent a broad cross section of the community we often lack the resources that are available to funded industry and preservation groups, relying instead on the limited pool of volunteers who give up their time for the future of the sport - yet the views of our membership is no less important.

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The AUF promotes spearfishing as being 'SAFE SUSTAINABLE and SELECTIVE':-

Safety

While safety is an important consideration in all forms of recreational fishing it is particularly important to educate and promote safe practices when spearfishing. Some of the ways the AUF as an organisation promote our safety message is by having a safety code that is provided to new members, providing safety equipment to clubs and training members on how to use it (oxyviva), discussing safe diving practices at meetings, and reviewing safety messages and how best to promote safe practices.

This has initiated the 'Spear Safe' campaign which will see widespread promotion of safety in the sport to the spearfishing community as a whole, including addressing the culture in the sport and training for participants.

Sustainable

Spearfishing as a form of fishing is very ecologically sustainable and doesn't produce bycatch. Spearfishers are limited in where and when they can hunt, with factors like visibility, depth of water and strong currents limiting where and when you can spear. These factors combine to limit the potential impact the sport can have and ensure the conservation of our fisheries resources.

Selective

'Selective' is the way in which AUF members participate in the sport, taking only enough fish for your immediate needs and respecting the marine life encountered.

In the future 'SAFE SUSTAINABLE SELECTIVE' will continue to be a major focus for the AUF with the SPEARSAFE review of safety in the sport continuing and the ongoing promotion of sustainable and selective practices both within the organisation and in the sport generally.





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Sustainable Spearfishing in the Coral Sea

The Coral Sea is one of the best fishing and spearfishing locations in Australia and the world. It is renowned for clear, deep water and the abundance and large size of Dogtooth tuna, pelagic fish and healthy shark populations.

The Coral Sea has been proposed for a sanctuary by an international conservation groups like WWF and PEW. The AUFQ Spearfishing Commission and many recreational fishers and spearfishers believe that this proposal is unrealistic and will severely impact on our activity.

In order to make a difference and provide some facts about the Coral Sea and the low impact of selective spearfishing we are working with scientists from James Cook University on biology of Dogtooth tuna, Sharks and catches of fish.

The Coral Sea is a huge expanse of reefs and it should not be 'locked up'. There are very few human visits and these are high value economically and socially for tourism and charter boat operators, fishers and some SCUBA divers. Australia has a multi-billion dollar recreational fishing industry and the new generation of fishers and spearfishers want to continue to sustainably access the amazing fish and marine life of the Coral Sea.

For spearfishers the Coral Sea is an area where not many get a chance to go, but for those who are fortunate it's some of the most fantastic diving you'll get a chance to do. Clear water, lots of sharks, and the opportunity to target large 'once in a lifetime' game fish like dogtooth tuna and wahoo. However, the declaration and review of the Coral Sea Conservation Park is of concern to all spearfishers.

Extreme environmental groups such as PEW and WWF are well funded and have the resources and connections to access and lobby the ministers and departments in Canberra that will determine the process. However, we have faith sanity and democracy will prevail.

Spearfishing in the Great Barrier Reef and Coral Sea

We are very fortunate to live in Queensland and enjoy clear water and eating quality seafood such as Coral Trout and Spanish Mackerel all year round. However, for every blessing there is a disadvantage. In Queensland, and particularly the GBR, a boat is essential for travelling the large distances of 20-50 Nm to reach clean water and coral reefs. The weather is also a major limiting factor with prevailing winds of 15-25 knots restricting most boating activities.

The tourism campaign that promotes Queensland as "Beautiful one day and perfect the next" unfortunately does not ring true if you are a spearfisher. Spearfishing is very restricted by weather conditions. While you may have perfect visibility and abundant fish one day the wind can then howl for the next 2-4 weeks curtailing any attempts to get out to the reef and spearfish.





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The GBR extends over 2300km from Torres Strait to Bundaberg and if you include the Coral Sea there is over 1 million square km of water and over 2900 reefs and over 600 islands.

All spearfishers aspire of going to the coral sea but for most of us it will remain a distant dream. For many divers in Queensland it is a once in a life chance to get onboard a charter boat and actually visit or hunt for the incredible 'once in a life time' blue water behemoths.

Very few private boats are large enough to travel the 150-400 Nm to the Coral Sea reefs. An estimated 10-15 charter boat trips carrying a total of 100 – 200 spearfishers travel to the Coral Sea each year. However, if spearfishing was totally excluded it would be devastating to the sport as a whole. It would be a massive loss to all spearfishers from Australia and internationally who want the opportunity 'one day' to dive in the deep blue oceanic waters, in a foreign environment and pit their wit, skills, strength and fitness against a truly inspiring and mighty fish.

Scientific and community research

Scientific research supports the view that spearfishers catch a tiny proportion of the fish landed each year - less than one percent compared to that caught by recreational and commercial fishers. Fishery indicators, such as catch per unit effort (CPUE) and average weight, of fish landed by spearfishing have remained stable over time. From records kept during spearfishing competitions, catch rates of 0.09 to 2.57 fish (0.3-3.9kg) per diver hour have been reported.

A recent study of spearfishers in the GBR reported catch rate was 1.08 fish per hour and the mean size of target fish caught by spearfishers was 1.95kg (Frisch et al 2008). The research compared line and spearfishing methods and concluded that, in general, spearfishing was found to be much more selective than line fishing, both in terms of species and size of the fish landed. As a result, the total number of undersized, undesirable or protected fishes captured by spearfishers was far less than the number captured by line fishers.

According to the National Recreational and Indigenous Fishing Survey (2003) the annual effort for diving in Queensland was 46,904 hours in 2001 of which 37,110 hours was Spearfishing.

A recent survey reported that 84% of people agreed that Spearfishing is a sustainable and selective use of marine resources and 89% of people agreed that in general spearfishers are more environmentally conscious than they were in the past.

Bio-Regional Planning and Outcomes Sought

The AUF support sustainable and responsible use of our oceans resources.

We are of the understanding that the Bio-Regional planning process will result in multiple use zonings including a mixture of protected waters and areas open to fishing.

The Coral Sea has been identified as an area for further assessment meaning there is likely to be new zonings implemented.





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Outcomes Sought

- The consultation process will be carried out in an open manner.
- We request that the AUFQ be consulted prior to zoning decisions being taken that will impact upon spearfishers.
- That decisions are based on scientific requirements and that all scientific evidence used to justify a position or decision be independently peer reviewed.
- Democratic processes should followed when determining Bio-Regional Plans and such plans should be open to full scrutiny of the Parliament of Australia.
- The Government seriously consider and implement the recreational fishing industries policy objectives as detailed in "Recfish Australia Marine Protected Area (MPA) Policy (2007)"

<http://www.recfish.com.au/docs/policy/Recfish%20Australia%20MPA%20Policy%2021%20September%202007.pdf>

- The AUFQ supports the Amendment Bill. Decisions regarding Bio-Regional Plans should not solely be left in then hands of the Minister and the 'absolute power' of the Minister with respect to bioregional plans should be removed. Democratic processes should followed when determining Bio-Regional Plans and such plans should be open to full scrutiny of the Parliament of Australia.

We are happy for this submission to be made public.

Yours Faithfully,

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AUFQ Spearfishing Commissioner

