

Inquiry into the changing economic environment in the Indian Ocean Territories

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Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories
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Submission by Nyall Ledger

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Contact Details

Name **Nyall Ledger**

Beche de Mere (Sea Cucumber) Fishery – Cocos (Keeling) Islands

1 Australian Government and Service Delivery Agreement with the Western Australian Department of Fisheries

The Australian Government has entered into a service delivery agreement with the Western Australian Government's Department of Fisheries to provide specified services in relation to the fisheries of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Christmas Island.

Currently the Australian Government department with responsibilities for these territories is the Attorney General's Department (Territories West Branch, Territories and Native Titles Division).

2 Applications for Developing Fisheries in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands

On **July 30, 2004**, applications closed for requests made by the Western Australian Department of Fisheries for expressions of interest relating to exploring commercial fishing opportunities in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.

3 Nyall Ledger

Nyall Ledger of Cairns, Queensland, is an experienced beche de mer operator having previously been involved in the beche de mer industry in the Torres Strait. In 1997 he wrote to Ms Blasket, the Deputy Administrator for the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, expressing an interest in developing a beche de mer fishery in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.

Nyall Ledger has visited the Cocos (Keeling) Islands to undertake a review of the beche de mer resources in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. During this trip Nyall Ledger undertook

a physical survey of the locations where beche de mer were to be found and a review of information provided in a previous 2002 report on beche de mer.

In response to the calling of requests for the development of commercial fisheries in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands by the Western Australian Department of Fisheries he, submitted an expression of interest for the harvesting beche de mer.

4 Western Australian Department of Fisheries' letter of June 10, 2005

On **June 10, 2005**, Nyall Ledger, was advised in a letter from Fisheries WA of the following:

“At this time, the Committee (this being the Developing Fisheries Assessment Committee of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands has supported your application to initially explore beche de mere fishing on CKI and will be recommending the grant of an applicable Exemption. Your proposed harvest of 50 tonne per annum is also considered to be within sustainable limits”.

“You should note, however, that at this stage the approval to fish will only relate to lollyfish and that the approval will include a requirement to fish in a way which does not result in localized depletion (the details of which will be developed in conjunction with yourself to ensure a practical outcome)”

“However the arrangements under which you will operate will be designed to encourage exploration and quantification of the stock abundance and distribution of some of the ‘high value’ beche de mer species known to occur on CKI”.

The letter of June 10, 2005 was from P P Rogers, Executive Director, the Western Australian Department of Fisheries.

Note:

From the time that applications closed July 30, 2004 to the date of the Western Australian Department of Fisheries' letter of June 10, 2005 was in excess of 11 months. This was just a foretaste of what was to come.

5 Dr Jamie Seymour's Stock Survey for the Cocos (Keeling) Islands beche de mer

To comply with the Western Australian Department of Fisheries letter of June 10, 2005, specifically the following points:

“You should note, however, that at this stage the approval to fish will only relate to lollyfish and that the approval will include a requirement to fish in a way which does not result in localized depletion (the details of which will be developed in conjunction with yourself to ensure a practical outcome)”

“However the arrangements under which you will operate will be designed to encourage exploration and quantification of the stock abundance and distribution of some of the ‘high value’ beche de mer species known to occur on CKI”.

Nyall Ledger, contracted Dr Jamie Seymour, of the School of Marine and Tropical Biology, James Cook University, Queensland, one of the world's foremost marine scientists, to review the findings of a previous report (2002) on the beche de mer of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. Following a visit to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in June 2006 he produced the report: “**Stock Survey for the Cocos (Keeling) Islands beche de mer**”. This report confirmed Nyall Ledger's own observations, that there existed commercial quantities of the beche de mer, referred to as red fish, were in existence.

The conclusion of this report was:

“When the Western Australian fisheries offered the first license for beche de mer they set a quota of 40 t of lollyfish with a “no take” limit set on all other species, primarily as no data existed to formulate a realistic quota for the other commercial species. Presently, most beche de mer fisheries operate on a 5-7.5% of the total biomass take quota. Based on these limits at least 9 of the 14 species of beche de mer found at Cocos (Keeling) Islands could be commercially harvested at a level that would make the industry commercially viable. These include, but are not restricted to Lollyfish, leopard fish, Surf redfish, Green fish, White teatfish, Black teatfish, Pink Lollyfish, Hairy blackfish, Deepwater redfish and Golden sandfish”.

Nyall Ledger made available a copy of this report to the Western Australia Department of Fisheries. You will note that Surf redfish and Deepwater redfish, commercially valuable beche de mere, were identified by Dr Seymour, and confirmed Nyall Ledger’s previous findings as to these species. These were found in locations identified in the previous 2002 research report on beche de mer. Dr Seymour’s findings did not confirm the results of the 2002 research report.

6 Department of Fisheries Report on the feasibility of the bêche-de-mer fishery at the Cocos (Keeling) atoll - November 2007

The Western Australian Department of Fisheries’ letter of June 10, 2005 stated:

“You should note, however, that at this stage the approval to fish will only relate to lollyfish and that the approval will include a requirement to fish in a way which does not result in localized depletion (the details of which will be developed in conjunction with yourself to ensure a practical outcome)”

“As with the fishing strategy for lollyfish, the details of how this exploratory fishing will be integrated into your overall operation will be developed in

conjunction with yourself, to ensure a practical approach. Provision of this information will, however, be critical to any consideration of future access to the commercial fishing for high value species”.

In May 2006 the Western Australian Department of Fisheries commenced a survey of the beche de mer in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. The first knowledge that Nyall Ledger had that such a survey was being undertaken was when Dr Seymour arrived on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and discovered such a survey was being undertaken. The Department of Fisheries survey commenced in May 2006, but the report was finalized in November 2007, **a time frame of approximately 16 months. So much for the spirit of the Western Australian Department of Fisheries’ letter of June 10, 2005.**

Nyall Ledger requested a copy of the Department of Fisheries report from:

Western Australian Department of Fisheries

Territories West Branch, Attorney General’s Department.

Both departments refused to supply the report. So much for the spirit of the Western Australian Department of Fisheries’ letter of June 10, 2005.

It is also interesting to note, that Rachel Green, of the Western Australian Department of Fisheries, who Nyall Ledger had been communicating with on the beche de mer issues, was informed of Dr Seymour’s report. The findings of Dr Seymour’s report however were not incorporated in the Western Australian Department of Fisheries report.

7 Freedom of Information Requests

Nyall Ledger initiated a Freedom of Information enquiry through the FOI officer at the Attorney General’s Department, and the FOI officer of the Western Australian Department of Fisheries, This FOI officer of the Attorney General’s Department

promptly evaluated the EOI request and promptly supplied a copy of the Western Australian Department of Fisheries' report from the Territories West files. **In her opinion there was no reason for Territories West not to supply a copy of the Western Australian Department of Fisheries' report.**

The primary recommendation of the Western Australian Department of Fisheries' report was:

“The primary recommendation of this report is that commercial harvesting of bêche-de-mer does not occur at the Cocos (Keeling) atoll”.

This recommendation was completely opposite to Dr Seymour's recommendation.

8 Conflicting Reports

Nyall Ledger contacted the Department of Fisheries to obtain an explanation as to how such widely differing views could be possible. As a result of the pressure from Nyall Ledger the Western Australian Department of Fisheries requested Dr Tim Skewes, CSIRO, an expert on beche to mer to examine the two reports and produce recommendations.

9 Tim Skewes (CSIRO Marine and Atmospheric Research) A Review of recent Cocos Island sea cucumber stock surveys - August 2008

In October 2008 the Department of Fisheries forwarded Tim Skewes August 2008 report to Nyall Ledger.

In Tim Skewes report the following statement was made:

“Based on the population biomass estimates from the 3 reports, lollyfish is very abundant at Cocos Island, and could potentially be fished at considerable levels (100 t/yr landed weight, or more); however, this species is probably not considered commercially viable at this stage. Some other populations of sea cucumbers, based on the stock estimates from the 3 surveys, could probably form the basis of a small take. Other species that appear likely to be fishable include leopardfish and pinkfish, though initially at modest TACs (< 5 t). A fishery harvest strategy could also include a very small take of greenfish, deepwater redfish and prickly redfish (1 t), based on the reasonable likelihood of significant populations, to facilitate the collection of exploratory fishery data for these species. Other possible fishery species would be subject to a more thorough stock assessment, including surf redfish and brown sandfish”.

10 Subsequent Events

Since receipt of the Skewes’ report (October 2008) Nyall Ledger has made numerous contacts with the Western Australian Department of Fisheries in attempts to move this project forward, but with no success

11 Comments

11.1 Although the Australian Government, through Territories West Branch of the Attorney General’s Department, have a service delivery agreement with the Western Australian Department of Fisheries, there appears to be no formal monitoring system as to the progress of projects that have been placed with the Department of Fisheries of Western Australia by Territories West.

112. Through contact with Territories West Branch there has been no appreciation as to the importance of the time frame in advancing projects that will result in economic and social benefits for the community of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.

- 11.3 There is a reluctance to release any information by Territories West Branch, even when the FOI officer of the Attorney General's Department could see no reason for the release of information
- 11.4 The lack of commitment of the Western Australian Department of Fisheries to the spirit of its letter of June 10, 2005
- 11.5 The unacceptable time frames relating to this project:

July 30, 2004 to June 10, 2005 – Closing of applications for developing fisheries, to receipt of letter from Western Australian Department of Fisheries

May 2006 to November 2007 - Field work in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands to receipt of the Western Australian Department of Fisheries' report.

November 2007 (Western Australian Department of Fisheries Report to August 2008 (date of Tim Skewe's report)

Time Skewes report of August of 2008 to the date of this submission, no action taken

Form July 2004 to March 2009, 4 years 8 months have elapsed with no economic development occurring.

This is a damning indictment of the Attorney General's Department, the Minister for Home Affairs, and the Western Department of Fisheries in relation to the development of sustainable industries in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. Rather than being proactive, inactive, seems to be the key driving factor.

In relation to the former Animal Quarantine station, Nyall Ledger and others, have been attempting to gain access to this unused facility for many years, with no success from the Australian Government, Territories West. It is with surprise to be informed that Wylie and Skeen, contractors for the Rumah Baru project, have easily been given access to this facility.

If public meetings are to be held in Canberra in relation to this Inquiry Nyall Ledger would be happy to travel to Canberra to answer any questions.