

5th September 2008

Dear Senator McEwen,

This is my submission to the inquiry for the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2008.

I am a professional marine biologist who specialises in the field of Aquatic animal health. I have undertaken several research projects on the health of fish on the Great Barrier Reef, and also studies of the impacts of recreational fishing methods on selected reef species. We have recently applied for permits for tagging research in the nearby coral sea on recreationally important apex predators (dogtooth and giant trevally) to try and determine key population biology data required for their management - ie. whether they move from reef to reef, whether the populations on the reefs closed to fishing actually do spawn there and contribute to recruitment on other reefs open to fishing and so on.

There was huge resistance from the Federal government bureaucrats in the Department of Environment and Heritage to our most recent permit application, even though one of the prime objectives for the existing closed ("green zone") reefs in the region is to set them aside for research purposes (to act as "control" areas for comparative purposes etc.). Feedback from them suggested that the problem was our need to utilise recreational fishing methods to capture the fish - even though this is well established as being the most targeted, efficient and humane method of sampling these fish if they are to be tagged and released in excellent condition (and remember, I am a specialist in the field of aquatic animal health, so unlike bureaucrats in Canberra I actually know what I am talking about when it comes to the effects of recreational fishing on fish health and fish populations in general). There was no formal risk assessment conducted, or even as far as I could see, any objective assessment of the permit application at all. It was simply flatly refused based on perceived risks that did not exist.

I have never encountered this sort of resistance to a genuine research proposal (which was formulated using best practice scientific methodology used overseas for study in green zones in collaboration with scientists from University of QLD, CSIRO and overseas institutions). I can only consider that the resistance must have been at least partially politically motivated, and that there is increasing unjustified resistance against recreational fishing that is being promoted by green factions who ultimately wish to see the end of all recreational fishing activity whatever the cost to our economy. The fact is properly managed recreational fishing is one of the few methods available for sustainably utilising marine resources, while contributing significant benefits to lifestyle, as well as the economy, at the

same time.

This is why I consider that there has not been enough risk assessment done with regard to the costs and benefits of green areas on the GBR. In virtually every other field of management, there are requirements to conduct risk assessments which utilise a scientific approach to evaluating risks related to certain activities (whether these be development of land or aquaculture leases, financial investment, imports of commodities, or recreational fishing) and objectively comparing these risks against the likely benefits of these activities. In the case of the GBR, surely one very large risk which must be factored into account is ocean acidification and sealevel rise as a result of greenhouse emissions. Surely the sort term effects of properly managed recreationl fishing pales in comparison to these huge threats which face the reef in years to come.

This is why I consider the unreasonable powers to inspect, and the application of criminal convictions against recreational fishers as a most unfair and unreasonable approach, especially as there are no lines on the water out there and you cannot be forced to purchase a GPS (or can you ?), or what happens when the batteries run out ? Remember, the fish are free to swim as they please from zone to zone too. Surely this is a sad joke, indeed, has anyone investigated whether it is actually consitutional ? If the implementation of the green zones cannot be fully supported on a scientific basis (and they can't), and a proper risk analysis has not been performed (and it wasn't), then surely there is a fundamental problem with this legislation and the government needs to urgently review this and put recreational fishing in perspective in the context of the real threats to the GBR, namely coastal runoff and climate change.

Surely the best defence against the effects of climate change and other real threats to the GBR will be to have people out there actually enjoying the reef, looking out for it and monitoring its health. If people aren't excluded, the reef retains its value to lifestyle, retains economic value and thus remains worth protecting. However if you alienate 25-30% of the population who go recreational fishing by bringing in unjustifiable and unreasonable laws against them, you only have yourselves to blame if the percieved value of the GBR drops and 25-30% of the population cease to care about the real issues affecting the GBR.

sincerely

Ben Diggles PhD
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