ANGLERS ACTION GROUP
SYDNEY · NORTHSIDE INC.

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7th June 2005

The Honourable Ian MacDonald, MLC
Minister for Primary Industries
Level 30 Governor Macquarie Tower
1 Farrer Place
Sydney, NSW, 2000

Dear Minister,

As stated in a November 2001 letter to AAG secretary by former Fisheries Minister Eddie Obeid, the model for the marine park processes used in NSW was based on the GBRMP model: "The NSW approach to marine parks is based on the successful Great Barrier Reef Marine Park model. This approached is enshrined in the ground-breaking 1997 NSW Marine Parks Act, which aims to provide high levels of protection for our marine environment whilst also permitting sustainable multiple use within our parks". This statement may be true as far as the process for site selection is concerned, but the NSW model does not allow for evaluation into the effectiveness of closed areas with respect to fisheries, either before, during or after the site selection process. Yet we see that some closed areas of the GBRMP are being opened to line fishing for this purpose. The question of the effectiveness of marine parks is also being studied in some areas in Western Australia, such as the Abrolhos Islands.

AAG has received a report that at the RFSTEC in Coff's Harbour in June 2005 you supposedly stated you were looking into ways of examining the effectiveness of marine parks and no-take zones, and we presume this in relation to fish stocks.

Many pundits of marine parks attempt to convince fishers into the benefits of marine parks by pushing the notion that it is fishers that will benefit from closures in marine reserves. This notion is based on the concept of population dynamics for land animals being applied to the marine environment, and basically means areas surrounding closed areas will act as sinks as fish move from the closed areas to those surrounding it.

Many fisheries managers and marine biologists are now expressing skepticism of the claims of the benefits of marine reserves to fisheries. They state that there are actually few studies that have addressed the issue adequately. They say it is too difficult to

create a closure that would boost more than one or two fish species at a time because of the varying dispersal patterns of various fish species, and one size of a marine reserve won't be suitable for all species.

They also recognize difficulties in measuring the effects of marine reserves on fisheries and fish yields of adjoining areas, and there are two reasons for this dilemma. Firstly, there are no rigorous control sites, or sites which allows fishing that are in all other aspects equivalent to closed areas. This is necessary for the evaluation into the effectiveness of the closures. Secondly are the natural biases in the methodology. The exclusion areas that are selected for protection are, either by accident or design, those that tend to have higher fish populations than surrounding sites, and when comparisons are made with outside areas a bias is inherently present.

There is also the drawback that most research programs on the benefits of marine reserves are setup after the site has already been designated, rather than being part of the site's planning process. This makes the selection of adequate control sites difficult.

Our questions to you regarding this issue include:

- Does one of the purposes of marine parks and exclusion zones in NSW include the protection and enhancement of fisheries? If not, then what are their purposes?

- If it is, then what part did science play in determining the benefits to fisheries of site selection in marine parks and exclusion zones in NSW – or was it merely based on theoretical assumptions?

- If NSW DPI (Fisheries) science does suggest beneficial marine parks having a beneficial effect on fisheries, then will these publications be made available for public scrutiny? Will the stated beneficial effects on fisheries for particular areas selected for exclusion be made public? If not, then why not?

- Are you, or your Department, looking at methods of examining the effectiveness of marine parks to fisheries? If you are, then what methods of research are being considered?

- Will the effectiveness of marine parks to fisheries, including inconclusive results, be stated and incorporated into five year reviews of marine parks? If not, then why not?

- Will the results, no matter what they may be and including inconclusive results, be incorporated into any review into the effectiveness of marine parks into fisheries? Could they be used to modify the exclusion areas in the future, or are these set in stone when once declared?

- Will the results be used to modify the process of site selection for marine parks in general, and exclusion zones in particular? If not, then why not?

- Why aren't potential study areas and related programs be part of the site selection process? Could this process be incorporated into the process for future marine parks? If not, then why not?

- If it is found that marine parks do not have a beneficial impact on fisheries, will there be a review of the marine park process in NSW? If not, then why not?

Marine parks can be used as a tool to protect biodiversity, and also for scientific reference areas. But to claim they would enhance all fisheries is unjustified at this point in time. This raises a number of issues in the process of the creation of marine parks and site selection of exclusion zones, and their continued monitoring and evaluation. Also brought into the equation are the agendas of those pushing for greater and greater exclusion zones, and making claims that it is the recreational angler that will benefit the most from marine parks. There is just not the empirical data available to support these claims.

Yours sincerely

Phil Ingram

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