

WRLF, an Alternative View

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In all the claims about “best available science” and “best managed fisheries” it is important to remember that our level of scientific ignorance about the oceans is still very high. There is much we don’t know and much we think know is likely to be found wrong in the future. The science is much less certain than it may seem to appear.

Populations of marine animals often fluctuate widely with natural variables in oceanic conditions. In particular lobster fisheries everywhere are especially variable due to their extended planktonic larval period.

Although the puerulus counts that are the basis for the proposed cutbacks have proved to be reliable indicators in the past, the current circumstances are unprecedented in several respects. This includes their fall to near zero level, a progressive decline for three years, a similar decline in a suite of other species which are normally also found with the puerulus collectors, coincidence with an unprecedented three consecutive positive Indian Ocean Dipole events and a high easterly (*i.e.* offshore) wind anomaly in the peak puerulus settlement period. All these conditions are outside the range of past experience and impose a high level of uncertainty in making future predictions based on past relationships.

Most importantly, the expectation of low juvenile recruitment following low puerulus counts is contradicted by the widespread and numerous observations of many fishermen. They are not only seeing unusually high numbers of small juvenile crayfish in many places but these are also often in locations where few or none are normally seen. In addition, plankton tows further offshore are also finding good numbers of earlier stage phyllosoma larvae of the crayfish. The only missing element is the puerulus numbers on the collectors just off the shore. The most reasonable explanation is simply a poor settlement close to the beach. This might well be due to offshore winds resulting in a lack of surf noise and generation of an offshore wind driven surface current both of which could inhibit near shore settlement.

That the abundant juveniles being observed are not being detected by the limited fishery independent surveys conducted by the department is unsurprising in view of the relatively limited sampling effort and adherence to specific randomly selected collecting locations. Juvenile crayfish are much more restricted to specific habitat than are adults and they will not venture far from shelter. The probability of catching many with a small number of randomly placed pots is poor.

Although fishermen could quickly prove the existence of abundant ongoing juvenile recruitment their real world observations are being dismissed. This is not good enough. Trying to run an industry worth several hundred million dollars on a single indicator of production three to four years later while ignoring clear closer term contradictory indication goes beyond poor management and into the realm of culpable negligence.

That no large scale tagging is being conducted is also inexcusable. Especially when results of the limited tagging which is being conducted strongly indicates much lower depletion by the fishery than is being used for management. Why is a meaningful tagging program not being conducted? Is it because the current limited results strongly indicate firm real world data would refute the modeled results now being used for management?

At the same time breeding stock remains abundant with some areas even being avoided by fishermen because too much of the catch there is large females which must be released. In addition there are many large areas which are not fished at all as fishers concentrate on the most productive areas with their already reduced number of pots and fishing days. Then too it should be borne in mind that recruitment is only

weekly correlated with breeding stock abundance.

The proposed restrictions on catch and effort in the WRLF to an unprecedented low level will wreck economic havoc on the fishermen, their families and entire coastal communities. This heavy economic impact is not a risk. It is a certainty, as it will come on top of earlier cuts that have already made profitability marginal and severely depressed the market for boats, licenses and pots. Most fishermen are now heavily indebted from borrowing to buy extra pots due to previous cutbacks and the value of these assets have sunk well below the price at which they were bought.

Although past reductions have been absorbed by what was a profitable industry, that margin no longer exists and the additional cuts that have been proposed will force many fishermen into insolvency. This will put even more boats and pots on an already depressed market further collapsing their values and will force banks to recall loans. The end result will be the nation's most valuable fishery delivered into the hands of a few cashed up investors at fire sale prices and an effective monopoly provided to the dominant processor.

Whether this is the deliberate aim (as is widely rumoured), or it is simply economic incompetence and utter unconcern for any misery inflicted is unclear. What is clear is that there will be devastating consequences for many, benefit for a few and at least *prima facie* grounds for investigation by the CCC.

Inflicting bankruptcy on hundreds of families and hardship on whole communities while claiming it is necessary for future sustainability of the industry is nonsensical. It is reminiscent of bombing villages with napalm in order to save them from the Viet Cong.

In view of the scientific uncertainty and the very real certainty of inflicting a great deal of human misery there is only one rational way forward. This would be to permit an economically viable level of effort/catch in the fishery and carefully monitor the results until a clear indication of depletion or recovery becomes apparent. Despite all of the waffle about maintaining sustainability of the resource this is a non-issue. Nowhere, never, has fishing exterminated any marine fish or invertebrate. Lobster fisheries everywhere are noted for large fluctuations in catch. Regardless of management, catches often collapse and they do recover. How much intensive management helps is difficult to discern. It may smooth out the highs and lows a bit but the benefit is debatable.

The worst that may happen by continuing to fish and monitoring the results is that a possible downturn might be somewhat more intensified and recovery more prolonged. Or it might not be. The overwhelming determinate will always be the random natural variables which affect recruitment success. All indication from the abundance of oncoming juveniles and abundant breeding stock is that no problem exists and the real condition of the stocks is excellent.

The industry really needs to decide for itself if they are willing to accept the assessment and restrictions advised by management or whether what they are seeing with their own eyes raises serious doubts about these. Then too there is the matter of careful consideration of the overall economic consequences of the proposed restrictions, not just on oneself but also on asset values, processors, markets and the communities in which you live. A clear vote of confidence or no confidence in management would be of great value whatever way is decided to proceed.

The industry is much better positioned than management to gather real world data and to conduct field research. It could do this much more cost effectively and should be assisted in taking responsibility for doing so. This is not unthinkable or even radical. It has been very successfully done in the Spencer Gulf prawn fishery and is widely used in New Zealand. Incidentally, they produce twice the total fishery catch of Australia with a shelf area 1/8 as large.

In a reduced fishery, recovery of management costs will mean an increasing share of this cost for each fisherman still remaining. Ever increasing costs for management has resulted only in ever decreasing production and profitability. This is a travesty of the very concept of management. If management costs were indexed to the resulting production and profitability of the industry you would see a huge change in attitude and approach by managers. There is a real opportunity in this regard to institute a legacy of major improvement over the entire renewable resource management sector.

A detailed accounting of management costs must exist in order to determine the amount that is to be recovered from the industry. This accounting should be examined by the industry to determine how your money is being spent and where savings can be effected.

We are facing a serious global recession with government on all levels running serious deficits. The productive sector is threatened with declining profits and retrenchments. The electorate is worried about their job, their mortgage and their cost of living. There is a very real possibility of increasing fuel prices and further decreases in demand for luxury items such as lobster. Beyond the immediate economic situation looms an end to the era of cheap abundant energy on which our whole economy and way of life is based. This is the worst of times to be closing down healthy industries as a precaution.

The WRLF is largely a Commonwealth resource and management is ultimately answerable to the Commonwealth. If current management is insistent upon euthanizing the industry, difficult questions will assuredly be raised in Parliament and will have to be answered.

In the end the real condition of the resource will become apparent. The abundant juveniles and breeding stock combined with effects of earlier catch reductions show strong indication of resulting in exceptionally abundant stocks. Imposing a clearly foreseeable economic disaster for dubious reasons which prove to be incorrect would be an avoidable tragedy for all involved.