

South West Blue Swimmer Crab Research and Management Timeline

Cockburn Sound

1995: Gillnets removed: The use of commercial gill nets were stopped in Cockburn Sound and traps were to be used in place of the gill net as a more environmentally 'friendly' method that is less likely to retain untargeted species than gill net fishing. Trap fishing is seen as being less damaging to both the legal sized crabs, allowing them to be kept live for the developing live crab export market (Stevens 1995), and the discarded (undersized and ovigerous) portion of the catch, allowing greater survival for animals that are returned to the sea. The fishery was then managed through input controls which regulated fishing methods and gear specifications, seasonal and daily time restrictions, retainable species, minimum size limits and the number of licences.

1996 – 1997: Recreational crabbing surveys undertaken to determine catch estimates.

1999: A spawning closure in October and November was introduced. However, the principal management tool to ensure adequate breeding stock involved minimum size limits set well above size at sexual maturity (de Lestang et al., 2003a). This allowed crabs to spawn at least once prior to entering the fishery and under average recruitment was thought to provide adequate protection to breeding females. Commercial fishers operated from 1 December to 30 September, with a closed spawning season between 1 October and 30 November to protect the berried females that were present in the Sound in large numbers at that time of year.

http://fish.gov.au/reports/documents/johnston_et_al_2011.pdf

1999: Current: Blue Swimmer Crab monitoring : Monitoring of commercial blue swimmer crab catch and effort has been conducted by research staff since 1999. Commercial fishers were accompanied during daily crabbing operations throughout the fishing season and the day's catch and effort recorded.

2001 – 2002: Recreational crabbing surveys undertaken to determine catch estimates.

2001 – 2008: Fishery-independent sampling – Breeding stock: Blue swimmer crab research sampling was undertaken on breeding stock.

http://fish.gov.au/reports/documents/johnston_et_al_2011.pdf

2002 – 2004: Recreational crabbing surveys undertaken to determine catch estimates.

2002 – 2008: Current: Fishery-independent sampling –juveniles: Data collection on juvenile crab abundance was conducted between 2002 and 2008.

http://fish.gov.au/reports/documents/johnston_et_al_2011.pdf

2006: The Cockburn Sound crab fishery was closed to protect crab stocks that were significantly depleted due to fishing pressures and environmental conditions that resulted in poor recruitment.

Commercial fishers were prohibited from taking crabs in all waters of the Cockburn Sound Managed Crab Fishery, while recreational fishers were prohibited from taking crabs south of a line from Woodman Point across to Garden Island. The closure remained in place for the 2006/07, 2007/08 and 2008/09 season. Prior to the commercial catch decline, Cockburn Sound represented the second largest commercial blue swimmer crab fishery in Western Australia, with catches peaking at 362t in 1997/98.

The recreational sector of the fishery has been managed through bag limits, with catches between 18 and 23 t, representing between 5% and 15% of total catch (Sumner and Williamson, 1999; Sumner and Malseed, 2004; Bellchambers et al., 2005). Like commercial catch, recreational catch estimates in 2005/06 indicated they had also declined significantly to approximately 3 t (Sumner, unpubl. data, Department of Fisheries, Western Australia).

http://fish.gov.au/reports/documents/johnston_et_al_2011.pdf

Following the closure, research funding was granted to assess the reasons for the stock collapse and monitor the recovery of the crabs. The cause of the collapse and description of the recovery has been described in the following scientific paper:

http://fish.gov.au/reports/documents/johnston_et_al_2011.pdf

2008 - 2010: Improvement in strength of recruitment: A survey quantifying recreational catch and effort in the West Coast Bioregion was conducted over a two year period between July 2008 and June 2010. Since the closure of the fishery in December 2006, a modest improvement in the strength of recruitment was evident demonstrated through Fishery-independent sampling.

http://fish.gov.au/reports/documents/johnston_et_al_2011.pdf

2009, December: Cockburn Sound Reopened: Following a rebuilding of the Cockburn Sound crab stock, the fishery was re-opened to recreational crabbing for the 2009/10 season from December 15th 2009 to March 31st 2010. A precautionary management approach was implemented with several changes being made to management arrangements (see Johnston et al. , State of Fisheries Reports, 2010, 2011 , 2012) .

2010 – 2011: All of Cockburn Sound was again re-opened to recreational crabbing for the 2010/11 season from December 15th 2010 to April 30th 2011.

2010, March: Recreational Fishing from Boat Licence (RBL) was introduced: that restricts catch to 20 crabs per powered boat when there are two or more people on-board holding Recreational Fishing from Boat Licences and 10 crabs if there is only one person on-board holding a Recreational Fishing from Boat Licence regardless of the number of fishers aboard. Restrictions also govern gear types that can be used to take blue swimmer crabs, along with localised spatial and temporal closures.

https://www.fish.gov.au/Archived-Reports/2014/Documents/2014_refs/Johnston%20et%20al%202013%20West%20coast%20Blue%20swimmer%20Crab%20Fishery.pdf

2010 – 2011: State-wide recreational boat-based survey undertaken: based on recreational fishing from boat licences.

2011/12: Easing of fishing arrangements: There was further easing of fishing arrangements for the 2011/12 crabbing season, with a decrease in minimum size of males and a season extension for the commercial and recreational sectors. The following management controls were in place:

- a 20% reduction in commercial pot numbers;
- a commercial size limit of 130 mm for male crabs and 135 mm for female crabs;
- a recreational size limit of 127 mm in place;
- a limited commercial season from 15 December 2011 to 15 June 2012; and
- a limited recreational season from 15 December 2011 to 31 July 2012.

2012/13: New management initiatives: As an outcome of a review into the management for Cockburn Sound, the following arrangements were implemented in December 2012 for this fishery:

- Maintenance of the commercial fishing season from 15 Dec to 15 June;
- Maintenance of the recreational fishing season from 15 Dec to 30 July
- Retention of the commercial size limit for male blue swimmer crabs at 130 mm CW;
- Maintenance of the current 20% pot reduction in the commercial fishery

https://www.fish.gov.au/Archived-Reports/2014/Documents/2014_refs/Johnston%20et%20al%202013%20West%20coast%20Blue%20swimmer%20Crab%20Fishery.pdf

2014: Cockburn Sound completely closed to recreational fishing: following research that found the crab stock in the sound was depleted due to environmental and biological factors. The Cockburn Sound fishery was voluntarily closed by commercial fishers in April 2014. A preliminary Harvest Strategy was determined for the Cockburn Sound Fishery.

[http://fish.gov.au/reports/Documents/Blue%20Swimmer%20Crab%20-%20Johnston%20et%20al.%20\(in%20press\)%20West%20Coast%20crab%20Final%20State%20of%20the%20Fisheries%202016.pdf](http://fish.gov.au/reports/Documents/Blue%20Swimmer%20Crab%20-%20Johnston%20et%20al.%20(in%20press)%20West%20Coast%20crab%20Final%20State%20of%20the%20Fisheries%202016.pdf)

http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/Documents/recreational_fishing/additional_fishing_information/cockburn_sound_crabbing_closure.pdf

https://www.der.wa.gov.au/images/documents/about/Cockburn_Sound_Management_Council/CS_MC_State_of_the_sound_marine_2018.pdf

2017 - 2018: Status of stock changed from ‘environmentally limited’ to ‘recovering.’

https://www.der.wa.gov.au/images/documents/about/Cockburn_Sound_Management_Council/CS_MC_State_of_the_sound_marine_2018.pdf

Geographe Bay

1996: Review of crab fishing in Western Australia: Minister for Fisheries responded to local concerns about crab catch shares between the commercial and recreational crab fishing sector by instigating a review of crab fishing in Western Australia.

1997, September: Release of management paper: The review resulted in the release of a management options paper in September 1997.

1998: Community consultation was undertaken on the management options.

1999, May: Temporary management arrangements for the commercial crab fishing sector in Geographe Bay were introduced: However, these arrangements were unsatisfactory to some members of the public and the commercial fishing sector. Subsequently, there was further discussion between the Department of Fisheries, Shire of Busselton, Western Australian Fishing Industry Council, the Recreational Fishing Advisory Committee and Recfishwest to consider a process for managing the differences of opinion. After these parties agreed that the way forward was through the Guidelines for Voluntary Resource Sharing process, the Minister supported their view and the Guidelines process for crab fishing in Geographe Bay was implemented. The process allowed those involved in the crab resource sharing debate to come together in a neutral setting, and with an independent mediator, develop a framework that satisfied the needs of each sector.

2000, May: The Geographe Bay crab mediation group met: for the first time and signed off on a settlement agreement in December 2002.

2005, January: Commercial fishing moved: A Ministerial decision that removed commercial fishing for blue swimmer crabs in Geographe Bay was made in January 2005. Until January 2005, the Geographe Bay region was the southern most commercial blue swimmer crab fishery in the state.

http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/Documents/research_reports/frr158.pdf

2010, March: Recreational Fishing from Boat Licence (RBL) introduced: that restricts catch to 20 crabs per powered boat when there are two or more people on-board holding Recreational Fishing from Boat Licences and 10 crabs if there is only one person on-board holding a Recreational Fishing from Boat Licence regardless of the number of fishers aboard.

https://www.fish.gov.au/Archived-Reports/2014/Documents/2014_refs/Johnston%20et%20al%202013%20West%20coast%20Blue%20swimmer%20Crab%20Fishery.pdf

2010 – 2011: State-wide recreational boat-based survey undertaken: based on recreational fishing from boat licences.

http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/Documents/research_reports/frr258.pdf

Peel Harvey

1980's: Since 1980's several intermittent fishery independent research surveys were undertaken.

1995: Gillnet removal: Success with traps in the Cockburn Sound fishery led to a call by fishers in the Mandurah Professional Fishers Association, to trial trap fishing for crabs in the Peel-Harvey Estuary.

Peel-Harvey crab fishers were granted concessions in their gill net licences in late 1995 enabling them to use traps instead of their gill net concession.

1998 – 1999: Recreational fishing surveys were conducted.

[http://fish.gov.au/reports/Documents/Blue%20Swimmer%20Crab%20-%20Johnston%20et%20al.%20\(in%20press\)%20West%20Coast%20crab%20Final%20State%20of%20the%20Fisheries%202016.pdf](http://fish.gov.au/reports/Documents/Blue%20Swimmer%20Crab%20-%20Johnston%20et%20al.%20(in%20press)%20West%20Coast%20crab%20Final%20State%20of%20the%20Fisheries%202016.pdf)

2007 – 2008: A more comprehensive recreational survey in the Peel/Harvey Estuary was conducted: A more comprehensive survey of recreational fishing in Peel-Harvey covering fishing from boats, shore, canals, and houseboats was conducted.

https://www.fish.gov.au/Archived-Reports/2014/Documents/2014_refs/Johnston%20et%20al%202013%20West%20coast%20Blue%20swimmer%20Crab%20Fishery.pdf

[http://fish.gov.au/reports/Documents/Blue%20Swimmer%20Crab%20-%20Johnston%20et%20al.%20\(in%20press\)%20West%20Coast%20crab%20Final%20State%20of%20the%20Fisheries%202016.pdf](http://fish.gov.au/reports/Documents/Blue%20Swimmer%20Crab%20-%20Johnston%20et%20al.%20(in%20press)%20West%20Coast%20crab%20Final%20State%20of%20the%20Fisheries%202016.pdf)

http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/Documents/research_reports/fr258.pdf

2007, August: Interim management measures introduced: to include a seasonal closure to both commercial and recreational fishers in the Peel-Harvey Estuary for the months of September and October to protect pre-spawning female crabs.

2007, November: Recreational bag limits changed: From November 1 2007, the recreational bag limits in the West Coast bioregion were reduced to 10 crabs per person and 20 crabs per boat.

http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/Documents/research_reports/fr258.pdf

2007 – 2011: Four year project undertaken: to determine recruitment and spawning stock levels of crab population in the Peel-Harvey Estuary and where the status of stocks has changed considerable in the past decade.

http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/Documents/research_reports/fr258.pdf

2010: Recreational and commercial agreement: In 2010 an agreement was made between the recreational and commercial sectors for a voluntary no-take of legal-sized females between November 1st and March 1st by commercial fishers to protect the mated pre-spawned females during this period. Although the minimum legal size is set at 127 mm CW for males and females,

some commercial fishers voluntarily prefer to retain females of 130 mm CW and above for marketing and sustainability purposes.

http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/Documents/research_reports/frr258.pdf

2010, March: Recreational Fishing from Boat Licence (RBL) was introduced: A Recreational Fishing from Boat Licence was introduced that restricts catch to 20 crabs per powered boat when there are two or more people on-board holding Recreational Fishing from Boat Licences and 10 crabs if there is only one person on-board holding a Recreational Fishing from Boat Licence regardless of the number of fishers aboard.

https://www.fish.gov.au/Archived-Reports/2014/Documents/2014_refs/Johnston%20et%20al%202013%20West%20coast%20Blue%20swimmer%20Crab%20Fishery.pdf

2010 – 2011: State-wide recreational boat-based survey undertaken: based on recreational fishing from boat licences.

http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/Documents/research_reports/frr258.pdf

2011- 12: Easing of fishing arrangements: There was further easing of fishing arrangements for the 2011/12 crabbing season, with a decrease in minimum size of males and a season extension for the commercial and recreational sectors. The following management controls were in place:

- a 20% reduction in commercial pot numbers;
- a commercial size limit of 130 mm for male crabs and 135 mm for female crabs;
- a recreational size limit of 127 mm in place;
- a limited commercial season from 15 December 2011 to 15 June 2012; and
- a limited recreational season from 15 December 2011 to 31 July 2012.

2012/13: Easing of fishing arrangements: There was slight easing of fishing arrangements for the 2012/13 crabbing season, with a decrease in minimum size limit of females for the commercial sector to 130 mm (all other season arrangements remained the same).

https://www.fish.gov.au/Archived-Reports/2014/Documents/2014_refs/Johnston%20et%20al%202013%20West%20coast%20Blue%20swimmer%20Crab%20Fishery.pdf

2009 - 2014: Department of Fisheries surveys: direct surveys generating recruit, residual and breeding stock indices, along with data on the general crab population, were conducted.

2014 – 2015: Ongoing annual commercial catch rates estimated.

2015 - 2016: State-wide blue swimmer crab survey conducted.

2016: Peel Harvey fishery became MSC certified: The Peel-Harvey Estuary blue swimmer crab fishery became the world's first combined recreational and commercial fishery to achieve sustainability certification by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). The MSC certification means

that the Department of Fisheries' management, compliance and research efforts supporting these fisheries are in line with the global gold standard. See Johnston et al., 2015b for full details.

http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/Documents/wamsc_reports/wamsc_report_no_3.pdf

http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/Documents/management_papers/fmp273.pdf

Swan/Canning

1998 – 1999: 12 month recreational fishing survey undertaken: A 12-month survey of recreational fishing in the Swan/Canning Estuary Basin between August 1998 and July 1999 to estimate the total recreational blue swimmer crab catch. Survey results were compared with commercial catch during 1998/99 financial year.

https://www.fish.gov.au/Archived-Reports/2014/Documents/2014_refs/Johnston%20et%20al%202013%20West%20coast%20Blue%20swimmer%20Crab%20Fishery.pdf

2005, July: Voluntary Fisheries Adjustment Scheme introduced: The scheme resulted in the number of licenses in the Swan/Canning River (Area 1 of the West Coast Estuarine Fishery) being reduced from 4 to 2 in July 2005.

2008: Voluntary Fisheries Adjustment Scheme: A further commercial fishing licence was removed from the fishery.

2010, March: A Recreational Fishing from Boat Licence was introduced that restricts catch to 20 crabs per powered boat when there are two or more people on-board holding Recreational Fishing from Boat Licences and 10 crabs if there is only one person on-board holding a Recreational Fishing from Boat Licence regardless of the number of fishers aboard.

https://www.fish.gov.au/Archived-Reports/2014/Documents/2014_refs/Johnston%20et%20al%202013%20West%20coast%20Blue%20swimmer%20Crab%20Fishery.pdf

2010 – 2011: State-wide recreational boat-based survey undertaken: based on recreational fishing from boats licences.

http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/Documents/research_reports/frr258.pdf

2015 - 2016: State-wide blue swimmer crab survey conducted.

Where now?

2018, October: Review of Blue Swimmer Crab Fisheries across the entire south west was announced: via the release of a discussion paper about potential management arrangements for the Lower West Coast Blue Swimmer Crab Fisheries that would provide increased protection for spawning Blue Swimmer crabs— *'Fisheries Management Paper No. 288 – Protecting breeding stock levels of the blue swimmer crab resource in the south west.'*

<https://recfishwest.org.au/news/breaking-news-crab-review/>

<http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/About-Us/News/Pages/South-West-blue-swimmer-crabs-up-for-discussion.aspx>

<https://recfishwest.org.au/news/breaking-news-crab-review/>

[Busselton Dunsborough times - Tourism operators back bigger crab size limits](#)

[Mandurah mail - Government buyback of Peel Harvey estuary commercial fishing licences welcomed](#)
[Bunbury mail Government to buyback Peel Harvey commercial fishing licences big boost for recreation](#)

[WAFIC - Commercial industry lead way Peel Harvey](#)

<https://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/Pages/McGowan/2018/10/Peel-Harvey-election-commitment-to-improve-recreational-fishing-underway.aspx>

<https://recfishwest.org.au/uncategorized/restoring-the-balance-the-1st-step-to-bigger-better-crabs/>

2018, October: Recfishwest welcomed the review: after calling for it for the past decade. Recfishwest undertook community consultation via an online survey to ensure the community had an opportunity to express how they want their crab fisheries managed and protected into the future. The online survey was accessed by 3,961 fishers and Recfishwest also undertook additional consultation with a range of stakeholders.

<https://recfishwest.org.au/media-release/have-your-say-on-crabs/>

http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/Documents/management_papers/fmp288.pdf

http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/Documents/other/public_comment/fmp288-summary.pdf

2018, November: Public consultation period for review was closed.

2018, November – December: Recfishwest position made clear: Various interviews were conducted on ABC radio where Recfishwest's CEO Dr Andrew Rowland, made Recfishwest's position known.

2018, December: Recfishwest submitted proposals: to the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development based on community survey feedback.

<https://recfishwest.org.au/news/thanks-for-the-overwhelming-response-on-crabs/>

<https://recfishwest.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Recfishwest-Submission-on-Lower-West-Coast-Blue-Swimmer-Crabs.pdf>

2019, August: Outcomes of the Blue Swimmer Crab Fisheries was announced by the Minister for Fisheries.

A three month closure is now in place from 1 September to 30 November each year in coastal waters, rivers and estuaries from the Swan and Canning Rivers to Minninup Beach (about 15km south of Bunbury) for commercial and recreational fishing. Bag limits have also been updated.

As an outcome of the review, the State Government will start a process to buy back commercial fishing licences in Cockburn Sound, Warnbro Sound and the Mandurah to Bunbury Developmental Crab Fishery. Following the buyback process, commercial fishing in these areas will be closed to help protect the breeding stock.

For the full details regarding the changes and what it means for you, please see:

<https://recfishwest.org.au/news/what-the-blue-swimmer-crab-changes-in-perth-and-the-south-west-mean-for-you-2/>

Fact file

Blue swimmer crabs represent the most important recreationally fished inshore species in the southwest of WA in terms of participation rate.

Recreational fishing for blue swimmer crabs in Western Australia is managed through a series of input and output controls.

Blue swimmer crabs attain legal size at approximately 12 – 16 months.

Blue swimmer crabs become sexually mature below 100 nun carapace width. The legal minimum size range varies between 127 - 135 nun carapace width in the fisheries of the West Coast Bioregion - well above the size at sexual maturity (86-97 nun carapace width depending on the fishery).

As with commercial fishing, the principal management tool employed to sustain an adequate breeding stock involves maintaining minimum size limits well above the size at sexual maturity.

The spawning period is restricted to spring/summer, whereas in more tropical waters spawning occurs year round.

Majority of the commercially and recreationally fished stock is concentrated in the coastal embayments between Geographe Bay (in the south) and Port Hedland (in the north).

Boundaries

The Cockburn Sound (Crab) Managed Fishery encompasses the inner waters of Cockburn Sound, from South Mole at Fremantle to Stragglers Rocks, through Mewstone to Carnac Island and Garden Island, along the eastern shore of Garden Island, and back to John Point on the mainland.

The Warnbro Sound (Crab) Managed Fishery includes Warnbro Sound itself and adjacent waters, extending from Becher Point to John Point.

The West Coast Estuarine Fishery encompasses the waters of the Swan and Canning Rivers and the waters of the Peel Inlet and Harvey Estuary, together with the Murray, Serpentine, Harvey and Dandalup Rivers.

The Mandurah to Bunbury Developing Crab Fishery covers the waters south of the Shoal water Islands Marine Park (32°22 '40" S) to Point McKenna near Bunbury (33°18' S), and offshore to 1150JO' E. The fishery is further divided into two zones. A single northern zone (Area 1) 80-pot exemption authorises crab fishing in a specified area of Comet Bay between 32°22 • 40" S and 32°30' S. A single southern zone (Area 2) 120-pot exemption authorises crab fishing in the waters between Cape Bouvard and the southern boundary of the fishery. The area separating the 2 zones (waters between 32°30' S and Cape Bouvard) is closed to commercial crab fishing.

The Geographe Bay commercial crab fishery was officially closed on 21 January 2005 to reduce conflict between the recreational and commercial fishing sectors and commercial fishing in the Leschenault Estuary at Australind ceased in 2000.