



# Rapid evolution is **the solution**

Recreational fishers have an important role to play in increasing the abundance and resilience of our fish stocks, says Andrew Rowland, leader of Western Australia's peak recfish organisation

By **Andrew Rowland**, CEO, Recfishwest

Changing environments, populations, technology and, increasingly, community values are all rapidly impacting on the fishing landscape. Such changes present huge challenges for the future of recreational fishing, but also opportunities. As a sector we need to become more agile, savvy and tenacious than ever to meet these challenges.

By providing innovative solutions such as stock enhancement, habitat restoration and artificial reef systems, we can help aquatic resource management evolve and future-proof against many of the challenges.

## **Adding stock to the resource**

Fish stocking has often been regarded as a last resort to rebuild stocks that have crashed, but it can also be a valuable management tool that helps the sector meet community expectations about how fish stocks should be managed. A strategic stocking program can help smooth variation in fish recruitment, ensuring stable and growing fish populations. In turn, this allows for consistent and stable fishing experiences. In years of good recruitment, no stocking may be needed; in years when environmental conditions suggest recruitment may be poor, stocking can

take a leading role in a management strategy. The benefits of stocking have long been evident in 'put and take' freshwater fisheries around the world. However, there is no reason why stocking programs cannot be applied to a broader range of estuarine and marine species.

Recfishwest's 'Snapper Guardians' program is a good example of how approaching fish stocking differently can result in greater community engagement and stewardship of important fish stocks, changed community perceptions and improved fishing experiences.

### Habitat enhancement benefits

By constructing artificial reefs we can create highly productive habitats and new fishing oases. This strategy is informed by science: artificial reefs have been shown to be more productive than natural reef systems and the ability to build reefs in specific locations to suit specific species makes them a vital fisheries management tool. When done well, purpose-built reef systems can benefit the community, industry, government, tourism, the environment and critically endangered fish stocks.

Increasingly, the energy sector is also showing an interest in enhancing habitats. Obsolete oil and gas industry infrastructure is being repurposed as reefs, for example in the Mexico Gulf. Giving these structures new lives as artificial reefs benefits the community enormously and should be embraced.

These types of projects, together with our sector's support of initiatives such as shellfish reef and seagrass restoration, not only provide fishery benefits but also improve our sector's environmental credentials. This credibility will be increasingly important if we want to do what we love into the future, in the face of shifting societal norms about animal welfare and the acceptability of fishing.

### Beyond sustainability

The benefits of recreational fishing to people's wellbeing are enormous. In an ever more urbanised society, recreational fishing experiences give people the opportunity to connect with the natural world, tap into their primal reward systems and engage with others. It is not just about catching a feed. This connection to nature means recreational fishers' attitudes are changing. Consciousness of environmental and conservation issues within the recreational fishing community continues to grow.

The economic dividends of recreational fishing are also substantial: recreational fishers in WA, for example, directly spend \$2.4 billion a year on fishing. Despite their economic and social importance, our fisheries have traditionally been managed using tools that focus on exploiting fish stocks to the edge of sustainability. Sustainability should be the starting point for fisheries management rather than the end goal.

It is critical we don't just settle for sustainable fisheries –

we want abundant fisheries. User groups need to work more closely together to achieve outcomes that lead to abundant fisheries. When we get bogged down in inter-sectoral stand-offs the resource suffers first, then all of us do.

There is also a pressing need to improve procedures and tools within the existing fisheries management system in Australia. We need to extend management plans and harvest strategies beyond the traditional concepts of a fishery's biology and commercial fishing economics. Such concepts are well understood and relatively easily applied to deliver positive outcomes against sustainability and commercial fishing economic targets; however, the same cannot be said in their application for recreational fisheries.

In most recreational fisheries, the data relied on under traditional management systems is the wrong type or it simply does not exist. Moreover, it is generally unclear what data should be collected to measure fishing experiences or how to best apply the limited data currently collected. We need to create a management system that is less subjective, more transparent, more inclusive, more reactive and less *ad hoc*.

### Turning value into valuable

One of the biggest challenges is a general lack of understanding as to what constitutes a quality recreational fishing experience. For some, catching Yellowfin Whiting on micro-poppers in south-west estuaries is what gets them going; for others, catching, tagging and releasing mighty marlin out wide on fish aggregating devices (FADs) is the ultimate. And others enjoy simply soaking a bait off the beach and maybe catching a herring or two.

We need a cultural shift in the mindsets within fisheries regulatory agencies if we are to truly optimise social outcomes from fishing activities. Understanding, quantifying and clearly articulating what recreational fishers value most and building this into management objectives is the critical first step.

To evolve in this direction, fisheries management needs to draw much more heavily on the expertise of social scientists, economists and the recreational fishing sector itself. As we establish clear social objectives, we will need to develop new tools to complement traditional management practices. This evolution will take time, it will require leadership and patience, and it will not be perfect the first time. However, we must start now if we are to effectively meet the desired outcomes of recreational fishers and maximise the benefits of recreational fishing into the future.

We live in a fast-paced world that is speeding up all the time. We need to not just meet these challenges and opportunities, but get ahead of them. We need to work smart and focus on solutions that benefit our sector, the community and the environment in the weeks, months and years to come. I, for one, relish that responsibility and challenge – bring it on! **F**

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Andrew Rowland,  
Recfishwest CEO, pictured at  
Whitford's Nodes Beach, WA.  
Photo: Craig Wells