

# SMELLS A BIT FISHY



As the McGowan Government says the ocean's running out of fish, we jump on a boat and reel in the snapper. So who's telling the truth?



STEVE BUTLER



**W**AS \$2.4 billion fishing industry is in turmoil, claiming the State Government is to blame for trying to blind it with science.

But the problem is, behind the intensifying global question of whether to fish or not to fish, is an inexact science on assessing just how many fish are out there in the deep, blue yonder.

And other than sitting at a turnstile at the bottom of the ocean, it is difficult to see how the uncertainty can be allayed. That has ignited angry debate on WA shores, despite the fact that neither of the opposing factions can, or will, argue that the State's stocks of prized fish, such as dhufish and snapper, are not in need of some sort of replenishment.

WA's recreational fisheries sector — and related businesses who feared they may go bust — attacked Fisheries Minister Don Punch like a hungry herring into good burley when he released plans to ban fishing for more than 100 prized species for up to nine months a year for the next seven years.

Mr Punch argued, along with Premier Mark McGowan, that unless drastic measures to halve catch limits were taken, there would soon be no more fish to catch.

The fishers argued against the shock ruling, adamant there was a better way through different management tools. They claimed it would devastate the industry and lead to class actions against the Government.

But Mr Punch has remained defiant in the face of the heated criticism that even prompted him to turn off comment options on his social media channels.

He said a stock assessment in 2021 showed that one in five pink snapper and fewer than one in four dhufish remained in the breeding populations needed to replenish stocks. It equated the sustainability risk of WA dhufish as high, and to that of snapper as severe.

"The future of these iconic species is hanging in the balance," Mr Punch said. "The longer we wait to take management action, the greater the risk becomes to the sustainability of demersal stocks. If we don't act now, our children and grandchildren won't be able to fish for these species in the future."

"The decision to halve catch limits hasn't been made lightly, but ultimately this is what needs to be done. Ensuring the long-term sustainability of fish resources is essential to the ongoing viability of all businesses connected with the fishing industry."

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Dhufish filets cost up to \$80 a kilogram and pink snapper up to \$60 because of their fresh, clean and unique taste. Dhufish can grow to more than a metre and up to 25kg, while pink snapper can get to about the same length but only rarely to about 20kg.

Exacerbating the stand-off on catching them is the fact the State Government is working off a 2021 update from its most thorough recent stock

survey back in 2018 — four years ago. The latter was carried out through biological sampling to determine the age of the fish and the age structure of the population.

"This is a very complex, multi-species, multi-user fishery spread over a large geographical area and the science is also very complex," Redfishwest chief executive Andrew Roland said. "It's not always perfect and we need better data to make better decisions."

Further to that, Mr Rowland said his sector was blindsided by the Minister's proposals, claiming Mr Punch simply refuted 17 recommendations from an industry working group without discussion.

He said there still had been no explanation from Mr Punch as to why the recommendations would not result in a 50 per cent drop in mortality rates for the fish in question and deliver on biological, social and economic needs.

Recommendations included increased closures for dhufish and snapper fishing during key spawning periods and other measures including a decrease in bag limits, increased education campaigns on releasing fish and a reduction in the allowed number of baits and lures used per line.

"We don't understand why he has taken the nuclear option after all the hard work we put in,"

Mr Rowland said. "We want to play our role as active participants in the sustainability of this fishery as we always have and we've made that commitment to do that."

"We think what we've put forward is reasonable, measured and doesn't devastate this fishery and we want to continue to have a conversation around it."

"We already have the most expensive fishing licence structure in Australia and these would be some of the harshest rules in Australia. This moment is absolutely critical to the future of many people's livelihoods and the social fabric of some of our towns and there is a better way to do it."

His immediate predecessor Frank Prokop, who was in the chair for 14 years, was less diplomatic. Mr Prokop feared an explosion of mental health problems would emerge as a result of implementing either proposal.

"The Minister and the Premier have been disingenuous and grossly irresponsible in saying there won't be any fish... the data does not show that," Mr Prokop said.

"Their measures are unbelievably draconian and North Korean-style management. And when you reduce the effort, it will have secondary impacts and what if they then overfish whiting or squid? It will have a domino effect like the old woman who swallowed a fly."

"They've given the industry a choice between the firing squad and hanging. And that's not a choice."

Mr Punch denied other species were in danger of overfishing. He said 98 per cent of WA's fisheries were sustainable and able to be caught within "carefully calibrated" fishing regulations.

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But fishing sustainability is far from just an issue close to home.

A 2020 State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture report prepared by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations claimed there had been a "massive decline" in the health of global fisheries in the past 50 years.

It estimated that 600 million people worldwide relied on the fisheries and aquaculture sector for their livelihoods, but also stressed that there was no alternative to sustainability.

It revealed that total fisheries and aquaculture production reached an all-time record of 214 million tonnes in 2020 also said fish products were essential in the fight against hunger and poverty. But it warned that decreasing trends were cause for concern and demanded "effective and urgent" action to ensure all fisheries were sustainable.

"Overfishing not only causes negative impacts on our resources and our ecosystems, but also reduces much needed food production and results in negative social and economic consequences," it said. "Given the livelihood and food security pressures in many developing regions, sustainability challenges need to

be addressed with measures that move beyond simple environmental protection targets." FAO recently launched its "Blue Transformation" strategy, designed to enhance the potential of food systems underwater and sustainably feed the world's growing population.

On the back of the FAO report, the WA-based Minder Foundation's Flourishing Oceans project claimed that humans were simply "removing fish from the ocean at a far greater rate than they can naturally replenish."

It said marine fisheries supported 260 million jobs worldwide and was worth an estimated \$232 billion.

"Without healthy fish stocks and marine ecosystems, the planet and future populations will suffer," it said.

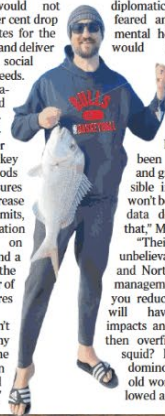
"Yet, many fisheries resources are being severely misused. This is due to insufficient, inappropriate or absent management, leading to overfishing. The ocean, and the livelihoods of coastal communities that depend on it, are being destroyed by short-term interests, rather than protected by a vision of long-term sustainability."

Late last year the project also released a Global Fishing Index to help assess the status of 1439 fish stocks across 142 coastal countries.

"There is a serious lack of knowledge — and data — about fisheries," it claimed. "Without this information, we cannot accurately measure, monitor or manage fisheries for sustainability."

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On releasing plans for the bans, Mr Punch argued that





“They’ve given the industry a choice between the firing squad and hanging, and that’s not a choice.”

Former Recfishwest CEO Frank Prokop

Allan Bevan from Shikari Charters catches a snapper with The Sunday Times on board. Below: Don Punch. Left: Paul Tuckwell reels in a snapper. Bottom left: Paul Rogers with a snapper at Jurien Bay. Main picture: Ian Munro

west coast demersal scalefish stocks were “not recovering fast enough under the 2010-2030 recovery plan”. But he declined to further outline what “fast enough” would be when asked by The Sunday Times.

He also refused to answer whether he has a conflict of interest as both Fisheries and Small Business Minister, despite claims that hundreds of fishing-related businesses will be forced to close if one of the two proposals are implemented.

Mr Punch declined an invitation to go fishing with veteran Fremantle fisherman Allan Bevan, who has run Shikari Charters for nearly 30 years, to get an anecdotal view of the fish in metropolitan waters. So the Sunday Times took Mr Punch’s spot.

Mr Bevan promised pink

snapper quickly and within minutes of rolling over some ground at the Five Fathom Bank on Friday morning, three rods were buzzing with three big ones.

Mr Bevan said his business, which attracts a strong international clientele, had already been devastated by closed borders due to the coronavirus pandemic and would be finished off by Mr Punch’s proposals.

“I’m a small family business and that will be the end of it for me,” said Mr Bevan, the 2004 Fisheries Minister’s award winner for innovation and development.

“I’m all for sustainability, but that’s not the case at the moment. I’d like to know what the department heads of research and fisheries have been doing to let it get to this state, if that’s what it is.”

While traditional angst remains between WA’s commercial and recreational sectors in relation to which should get how much of the annual allowed catch, the facts are that the proposed bans will hurt both.

WA Fishing Industry Council chief executive Darryl Hockey estimated individual operators would lose “hundreds of thousands of dollars each” as a result of the plan to halve commercial fishing’s current catch allowance. “There are some unforeseen circumstances in the way that we’ve proposed it and we think there are different ways of doing it,” said Mr Hockey.

“mad-keen” recreational fisherman Paul Tuckwell also said he had never

seen pink snapper so plentiful in metropolitan waters, including his recent 72cm catch from his kayak. The 45-year-old father-of-two said fishing was vital to his life balance.

“Ten years ago, I went 32 trips without catching a snapper,” Mr Tuckwell said.

“Now I only get out once every two months and I catch more now than when I went every weekend. It’s the only thing I do for personal pleasure, everything else is family and work.”

“My social group and friendships are mostly around doing that activity and it’s really good for your mental health to get away from all the other stresses in life. It’s keeping me happy and functioning well and while we have to fish sustainably, there has to be a better way.”

Mr Tuckwell said Mr

Punch’s proposals would be almost impossible to police as snapper would be an unavoidable bycatch of fishing for the species that will not be part of the ban.

Marmion Angling and Aquatic club president Ben Pascoe said his members were “bitterly disappointed” by the proposed changes.

Mr Pascoe also claimed Mr Punch had blatantly ignored key recommendations for alternative action.

“The opportunity to set this fishery on a secure pathway through proper reforms should not be missed and this discussion paper represents a complete failure of fisheries policy which destroys value rather than creates it,” Mr Pascoe said.

The public comment period on Mr Punch’s two proposed bans ends on September 16.





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