Trawling in the Great Barrier Reef

Information sheet 1

Supporting ecological sustainability in the Great Barrier Reef East Coast Otter Trawl Fishery

Trawling for prawns, scallops, Moreton Bay bugs and squid is a major commercial fishery in the Great Barrier Reef. Some 57 per cent of the total Queensland trawl fishery occurs within the Great Barrier Reef. Trawling is restricted to the General Use Zone and primarily occurs in about 5 per cent of the Marine Park.

What has been done to date in the trawl fishery?

Over the past decade, a number of significant scientific projects have been completed, including the Seabed Biodiversity Project, providing a much better information base for the fishery and its interactions with the Great Barrier Reef environment.

This very substantial information base has guided reviews of management of the fishery. As a result management practices adopted for the East Coast Trawl Fishery in the Great Barrier Reef over the last ten years have substantially reduced impacts on marine plants and animals. Changed practices include a marked reduction in the area available for trawling, substantial reductions in fishing effort and fleet size, the adoption of turtle excluder devices and other by-catch reduction devices and the implementation of a satellite-based vessel monitoring system.

The *Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report 2009* recognised that these responses have substantially addressed the risk of trawling to the Great Barrier Reef.

In order to ensure we can collectively manage any species or habitats that remain at risk of impact from trawling, and to ensure the industry remains sustainable into the future, we need to have a shared understanding of all the information available.

The current collaborative project

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA), Fisheries Queensland and the Queensland Seafood Industry Association (QSIA) are working in partnership on a project to bring together and review the available ecological information on the fishery. The collaborative project is called *"Ecological risk assessment of the East Coast Trawl Fishery in the Great Barrier Reef"*.

Given the information now available from a number of very significant recent studies, it is timely to gather this information together, review it collectively, and update our understanding of trawling and its interaction with the ecology of the Great Barrier Reef.

Key scientific information gathered through research projects over the last decade, including the Great Barrier Reef Seabed Biodiversity Project, by-catch studies and the latest fisheries data is being collated and then analysed by relevant experts and industry representatives.

The project aims to identify and prioritise any key remaining ecological issues that relate to the operation of the East Coast Trawl Fishery within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

The project is following an established and transparent process for the ecological risk assessment as was used to evaluate the NSW Ocean Trawl Fishery (Astles *et al*. 2009).

Given the work already undertaken within the Great Barrier Reef, unlike many other trawl fisheries worldwide, we expect the project to show that many of the risks from trawling in the Great Barrier Reef have already been substantially addressed (e.g. for marine turtles following the introduction of turtle excluder devices).

The project will help to ensure that any remaining trawl fishery related risks are identified so they can be addressed with industry to maintain a healthy, resilient marine ecosystem that will support a viable and sustainable fishery into the future.

The project will not commission any new research, rather it will bring together all the significant research that has been done over the last few years.

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Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
Queensland Seafood Industry Association
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Why are the GBRMPA, Fisheries Queensland and the QSIA involved?

Fishing is an important source of income for both Queensland coastal communities and the Queensland seafood industry, and fishing is one of the historical and legitimate uses of the resources within the Marine Park. Fishers acknowledge their role as stewards of a natural asset of national and international significance.

The GBRMPA is working collaboratively with Fisheries Queensland and fishers to help ensure all fishing activities in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park are consistent with the long-term protection and conservation of this World Heritage Area. This will in turn help address any concerns from the wider community about the impacts that fishing activities have on the ecosystem and the marine environment.

Fisheries Queensland as the manager of the Queensland East Coast Trawl Fishery is in a unique position to assist in understanding and assessing the ecological risks posed by the trawl fishery. Outcomes from the ecological risk assessment requiring a fisheries management response will feed into, and be addressed by, the current review of management arrangements for the East Coast Trawl Fishery.

The QSIA is the peak industry body representing the Queensland seafood industry. Members include professional fishers, seafood processors, marketers, retailers and other businesses associated with the seafood industry. The QSIA and the GBRMPA have formed a partnership to confront the challenges of climate change with the aim of ensuring a sustainable future for the Great Barrier Reef and the fishing industries that depend upon it. The partnership seeks to 'future proof' the industry while ensuring good environmental outcomes.

Recognising the shared goals of managers and commercial fishers, GBRMPA, Fisheries Queensland and QSIA are working together to ensure a sustainable future for the Great Barrier Reef.

How is the information going to be used?

The information will be used in a number of ways:

- Once completed, the project will provide a detailed picture which will help make the best available information more widely known and understood. It will help to communicate what we know about the trawl fishery and ensure that managers, scientists, industry and seafood consumers all share a common understanding.
- Any issues arising from the assessment will be examined to determine if a management response is required. These may then be considered by Fisheries Queensland in the current review of the trawl fishery management arrangements.
- The project may also help inform stewardship and co-management initiatives by industry and the promotion of a sustainable fishery among the community.
- Information from this project will inform adaptation planning to help ensure the industry remains viable in the face of future climate change.

Who is helping to put it together?

The joint project with Fisheries Queensland and QSIA is being coordinated by the GBRMPA and is being done collaboratively with input from industry, managers, scientists and others as the project progresses.

A scoping workshop was held in January 2010 with participants from the GBRMPA, Fisheries Queensland, QSIA, trawl industry and research. These groups are represented on the Advisory Committee to guide the project.

GBRMPA's Ecosystem Reef Advisory Committee and Fisheries Queensland's Trawl Technical Advisory Group are providing high-level advice and guidance. These committees will also advise on the best way of consulting with their stakeholders.

An independently facilitated expert workshop to validate the evidence and conduct a risk assessment will be held in August 2010.

How do I find out more?

To find out more please contact one of the following:

GBRMPA: email: info@gbrmpa.gov.au or phone (07) 4750 0700.

QSIA: email: qsia@qsia.com.au or phone (07) 3262 6855

Fisheries Queensland: email: edward.jebreen@deedi.qld.gov.au or phone (07) 3225 1842

References

Astles KL, Gibbs PJ, Steffe AS, and Green M, 2009. A qualitative risk-based assessment of impacts on marine habitats and harvested species for a data deficient wild capture fishery, Biological Conservation, 142(11): 2759-2773

GBRMPA, 2009. Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report 2009, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, Townsville.

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