THE VALUE OF COASTAL FISHERIES IN THE HUNTER-GREAT LAKES AREA

The Hunter-Great Lakes area extends from Harrington in the north to Newcastle in the south, and includes Taree, Wallis Lake (Forster/Great Lakes), Port Stephens/Tea Gardens and Newcastle. The area supports ocean fish trawling, ocean trap and line, lobster trapping, ocean hauling, a seasonal longline tuna fishery and a general estuary fishery.

A STRONG ECONOMY

The professional fishing industry contributes more than $83m to revenue annually and 727 full-time jobs to the Hunter-Great Lakes economy. 90% of residents believe the industry is important for their area and 87% feel it is also good for tourism, with locally caught fish a favourite among tourists and locals.

FRESH, LOCAL SEAFOOD

- 95% of Hunter-Great Lakes’ residents agree that it is important we produce our own seafood in NSW
- 77% want to know where their seafood comes from
- 96% believe buying local seafood is better for their local community.

COMMUNITY LIFE

The Wallis Lake, Port Stephens, Taree, Tea Gardens and Newcastle co-ops and fish merchants supply ice, donations and sponsorship to community and sporting groups. Hunter-Great Lakes professional fishers frequently join in life saving search and rescue missions. Local seafood is central to Christmas, New Year, Australia Day and Easter celebrations.

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Many towns dotted along the Hunter-Great Lakes evolved from professional fishing communities. Working harbours such as Nelson Bay, Newcastle and Wallis Lake remain important civic focal points and still identify with their fishing heritage. 76% of residents are concerned that a decline in the industry could lead to a loss of community identity.

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Professional fishers learn the skills of their profession by trial and error or through knowledge handed down through the generations. The researchers discovered one fisher family who had diaries spanning more than 100 years, documenting catches, weather and other environmental conditions for a lake system in the local area.

PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

The industry is highly regulated, and professional fishers must comply with a range of restrictions on when, where and how they can fish and the size of their catch. All fisheries must pass environmental impact assessments. Fishers themselves play an active role monitoring environmental conditions in their local area, and are often the first to sound the alarm about environmental damage or pollution events. Many fishers are also actively involved in looking after the marine environment, by picking up rubbish and taking part in habitat restoration projects.

RECREATION

The Hunter-Great Lakes area is a source of quality bait and 79% of recreational fishers from the area prefer locally sourced bait, even if it is more expensive. Jetties managed and maintained by the professional fishing industry provide popular infrastructure for recreational fishers and boaters.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

A team of independent social scientists and economists spent two years gathering this research data in their “Valuing Coastal Fisheries Project”, funded by the Commonwealth’s Fisheries Research and Development Corporation (FRDC). The researchers investigated the NSW professional fishing industry by:

- interviewing professional fishers, fishing families, community members, recreational fishers, local council staff and councillors, tourism organisations, seafood retailers, wholesalers and restaurant owners
- sending out an economic questionnaire to professional fishers
- conducting a random phone questionnaire of 1400 people living in NSW coastal communities
- conducting random and targeted phone questionnaires with fish co-ops, fish retailers and wholesalers
- conducting an internet survey of hospitality and tourism operators.
HOW DO PROFESSIONAL FISHERS CATCH WILD FISH?
They use
- estuary meshing of fish and prawns
- line fishing (catch includes Snapper and Kingfish)
- trapping of Mud crabs, Lobster and fish
- trawling or purse-seining (catch includes Flathead and Sardines and prawns)
- ocean (including beach) hauling (catch includes Mullet and Salmon)
- diving for Abalone and Sea Urchins.

For more information visit: masterfishermen.oceanwatch.org.au

MULTIPLE MARKETS
The Eastern Rock Lobster is very sought after and fetches a high price. The majority of Lobsters from the Hunter-Great Lakes area are sold locally or through Sydney Fish Market, ensuring the profits stay within NSW.

“What we do is we’ve got tanks inside, we just bring our lobsters in, put them in the tank and we’ll sell some of them to [local] restaurants and we also sell to my shop and locally. But most of them we consign to Sydney Fish Market through the co-op.”
Bob Monin – Lobster fisher (Port Stephens)

CO-OPS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES
Fishing co-operatives have been an important part of the Hunter-Great Lakes communities since 1945. Valued as a reliable source of fresh local seafood by residents they also serve as tourist attractions.

“What people love watching – they come down and watch the boats unload, they see what sort of fish are coming in, they see it getting wheeled over to the shops and they know there’s stuff going in there from the local fishermen. It’s a drawcard really. People love going to seaside ports and just watching – not only here but everywhere along the coast.” Grahame Lewis – Nelson Bay Co-op manager

ABOUT THE NSW LOBSTER FISHERY
The NSW Lobster fishery is a small but valuable fishery which operates throughout NSW. It is managed through the allocation of an annual allowable catch which is then divided amongst licence holders (quota).

The Eastern Rock Lobster (Sagmaraisus verreauxi) is the largest Rock Lobster in the world. Globally, it is also regarded as the best-tasting Lobster for its sweet, full-bodied flavour. This Lobster inhabits coastal waters all the way along the NSW coast. It hides under rocks or in crevices and comes out at night to eat small crabs, clams and sea urchins. Lobsters move between the offshore continental shelf regions in summer to shallower inshore rocky reef areas in winter.

Four other types of Rock Lobsters also live in Australia, but you can identify Eastern Rock Lobsters at a seafood retailer by the small plastic tag attached to its antennae, with a NSW Industry and Investment logo and a number. The Eastern Rock Lobster also has shorter antennae than other species.

• Eastern Rock Lobster (Sagmaraisus verreauxi)

TRAPPING THE LOBSTER
Commercial fishers catch Eastern Rock Lobsters using a weighted circular Lobster trap made of wood and wire, which has environmentally friendly measures such as a fish escape panel. The best Lobster harvesting months are July through to October. Early records show that a commercial Lobster fishery existed in NSW from 1873, and after World War II with the return of ex-soldiers, the fishery expanded significantly. Today the government controls Lobster fishing with a quota management system, which limits the amount of Lobsters that can be taken each year.

“It’s all about sustainability. My old man always used to say there’s always a difference between scratching your head and tearing your scalp off. There’s got to be that balance in the middle. You’ve got to be able to harvest what nature provides, but you’ve got to do it in a state where it replenishes itself. The moment you cross over that line, you’ve failed.”
Greg Parker – Wallis Lake Co-op Vice Chairman