

Fact Sheet: Commercial Fishing

Region

North Coast, Gascoyne Coast, West Coast, South Coast, Indian Ocean Territories

Summary

Where do you get your seafood?

Do you catch it, or is it handed over the fence by your fishing obsessed neighbour or do you buy it from your local fishmonger or supermarket?

If the latter is true, you are not alone. More than eight out of ten Australian's buy the majority of their seafood, and as people's lives become busier, demand will continue to rise.

The seafood industry is Western Australia's third most important industry after mining and agriculture. It is a vibrant industry that generates over half a billion dollars of economic activity in the state each year, employing thousands of people. It underpins the economy of many coastal towns, providing wealth and employment, and at times of the year when there is little other economic activity.

Commercial fishers, wholesalers and processors work together with the retail, restaurant and catering industry to supply fresh seafood to communities across the state and to interstate and overseas markets. The fishing industry includes the collection and sale of marine products such as shells and aquarium fish.

The industry consists of a dynamic network of skilled businesses that work under strict regulation, often in partnership with government to ensure sustainability of fisheries. The Kimberley fishing industry is rising to the challenge of ensuring that fresh seafood is available not just along coastal settlements, but throughout Australia.

A sustainable industry

A viable commercial industry depends on a healthy ecosystem. The industry has recognised the challenges in making fisheries healthy and sustainable, leading many of the changes introduced to improve environmental performance.

These businesses use some of the most environmentally sound technology available, such as world leading bycatch reduction devices, and operate under stringent controls regarding fishing times, seasons and equipment. The industry is constantly striving to improve its environmental performance and contributes millions of dollars, largely via annual commercial fishery access

fees, to research and compliance programs. The sustainable reputation of the whole Western Australian seafood industry depends on fisheries being viable, profitable and sustainable.

Whilst commercial fishing strives to ensure that everyone can enjoy fresh local seafood, commercial fishing can have some undesirable environmental impacts, particularly in places with a reputation for poor fisheries management. These can include unintentional catches of non-target species that cannot be sold (bycatch), overharvesting of species placing pressure on fish stocks, pollution from wastes including motor exhausts and rubbish, and disturbance of seabed habitats from fishing gear ('ghost fishing'), which is the unintentional capture of species, trapped or entangled in lost or discarded fishing equipment.

However nowadays, most impacts are managed and minimised by fisheries management strategies and through various industry driven initiatives designed to improve environmental performance.

A typical fisher(man)

Research that has profiled commercial fishers in Australia, shows commercial fishers are mostly males aged between 45-55 years that have been in the industry for a long time, many second or third generation fishers. They work long hours during the fishing season – more than 60 hours per week and have limited options to retraining for industries outside commercial fishing, and a limited desire to undertake such retraining. In many cases, the operator runs a small family business, rather than large, industrialised 'corporate' businesses, relying on high levels of local knowledge and skills learnt over many generations. In the Kimberley today, this remains true.

Interestingly, the majority of fishers surveyed indicate they have strong links to place. Whilst commercial fishing is obviously an economic pursuit, there are strong personal reasons for being a commercial fisher, including job satisfaction and a defining sense of social identity.

The Kimberley fishing industry

There are 13 commercial fisheries operating in the Kimberley region managed and regulated by the Department of Fisheries.

The Kimberley Gillnet and Barramundi Fishery targets barramundi and threadfin and is considered a small 'lifestyle' fishery. In 2013, 52 tonnes of barramundi were caught. To catch barramundi, giant threadfin and other non-target species, commercial operators fish over tidal mudflats and associated gutters and inside a restricted number of rivers using monofilament gillnets. Nets are set and retrieved from dinghies and fish are processed onboard a mothership. The fishery adheres to a number of regulations including gear restrictions, size limits and seasonal closures, to protect spawning fish.

The Northern Demersal Scalefish Fishery generally operates with two to three fishers onboard

and is the Kimberley's largest fishery, in terms of the amount of fish caught. The target species are goldband snapper and red emperor, although saddletail snapper, spangled emperor and a number of cod species are also caught. Fish traps are currently the primary method of fishing, although some line fishing is undertaken.

The fishery has been operating under a detailed and sophisticated management regime since 1997 using a comprehensive set of rules that include effort allocations, gear restrictions and area closures. Each of these has been refined through time, and is subject to regular reviews to achieve the overall aim of sustainable management.

Some of the other fisheries that operate in the Kimberley include the Mackerel Fishery, the Kimberley Prawn Fishery, Northern Shark Fishery, Pearl Oyster Fishery, the Mud Crab Fishery and the Beche-de-Mer Fishery. An Indigenous trochus export fishery also operates from One Arm point with Commonwealth export approval.