

## **Media release: fishers, tourism operators and conservationists join forces over increased trawling in the Northern Territory**

Representatives from the commercial fishing industry, recreational fishers, tourism operators and conservationists have today come together to express concerns regarding the impacts of finfish trawling in the Northern Territory.

Following questions asked by the NT Opposition in last Thursday's parliamentary estimates hearings, the groups have joined forces to raise concerns about the sustainability and environmental impacts of finfish trawl fishing, and the impact on other commercial and recreational fishers.

Since 2012 there has been a large increase in finfish trawling in the NT demersal fishery. Trawling is also being trialled in the Timor Reef area. Concerned fishers complain that the rise of finfish trawling in the north has occurred by stealth. They are calling for greater transparency in management, proper assessment of by-catch and habitat impacts, fishery independent data to inform setting of allowable catches, and an independent review with stakeholder and public input.

Amateur Fishermen's Association of the Northern Territory Executive Officer Tristan Sloan said:

"The trawl fishery, especially the trial fishery in the Timor Reef, has removed tonnes of fish species deemed at risk by the Northern Territory Government due to serious sustainability concerns over the future of the fish stocks. This includes Mangrove Jack, Golden Snapper and Black Jewfish. Last year recreational anglers underwent significant reductions in bag limits in order to preserve these fish stocks. It seems hypocritical that the government will allow this trawl fishery to remove large amounts of these fish species without appropriate checks and balances.

"Another issue being raised increasingly by recreational anglers is the large amount of coral and soft sponges being removed from the seafloor during trawling. This habitat is crucial for fish species and the overall health of these ecosystems. The Timor Reef fishery trawl trial is being put forward as a mid-water trawl fishery and trawlers should not be running their nets this close to the bottom; it is a direct violation of the permit conditions for the Timor Reef trial trawl fishery.

"These commercial fisheries have until recently operated using trap and line fishing methods, which are known to have fewer issues with bycatch of these fish species and habitat damage than trawl gear. AFANT would like to see a total review of this trawl fishery with greater community consultation and transparency."

Second generation commercial fisherman Paul Franklin said:

"Since we got rid of the last of the foreign trawlers in 1990 the tropical snapper fisheries have operated using mainly trap and line methods. We are concerned that the introduction of trawling to the NT demersal fishery in 2012, and now into the Timor Reef fishery, has not been accompanied by an appropriate level of science, scrutiny or management review.

"By using trawl nets instead of hooks or traps, they are destroying the ecology of all reef species.

"We share the same unloading point as these large trawlers and are noticing change out of nets which contain holes and some corals attached.

"I am speaking out because I believe we have something special here in the NT and I think it's worth saving for future generations."

Tourism industry operator Stephen Compain, Director of Arafura Bluewater Charters said:

"In the past two years the NT Fisheries Department has implemented new closures and new bag and vessel limits. This was due to sustainability concerns and the decline in fish stocks including golden snapper and black jewfish. It is very disturbing to see new trawl licences in the demersal fishery being issued."

"The tourists we take out ask our crew why they are subject to new vessel and bag limits when the trawlers are operating catching the same fish."

Fisheries scientist and campaigner with the Australian Marine Conservation Society Josh Coates said:

"AMCS is concerned about the impacts that finfish trawl fishing could be having in Northern Territory waters, such as damaging habitat, and harming target and bycatch species and protected species like dolphins.

"Worldwide experience has shown the use of bottom trawl gear for fishing can lead to habitat damage to the sea floor, unsustainable catches over short periods of time and the accidental catch of vulnerable marine species.

"Globally, we have seen poor management lead to rapid overfishing and fishery collapse in other bottom trawl fisheries.

"Given the risks to fish stocks and the environment it is inexplicable that the government has allowed this fishery to expand rapidly without proper consultation or scrutiny. We are deeply concerned about the lack of transparency in what is essentially a new Australian trawl fishery that has started in NT waters.

"Low levels of observer coverage in the NT demersal fishery and disparities in the bycatch reporting between independently observed and non-observed fishing trips give us little confidence that these trawl boats are operating sustainably.

"It is time for the Australian and Territory governments to ensure there is the proper level of public scrutiny, scientific research supporting decision making and precautionary, independent management." Mr Coates concluded.

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