TARFISH
Tasmanian Association for Recreational Fishing

December 2020

Rock Lobster Position

Getting It Right For Recreational Rock Lobster

Catching a rock lobster is an important symbol of the Tasmanian way of life.

TARFish stands by recreational fishers' rights to fair and protected access to the fishery now and for future generations.

Sadly, our prized rock lobster fishery has been subject to commercial overfishing, low recruitment, marine pests, habitat loss and climate change.

Declining rock lobster stocks state-wide have led to successive limitations being placed on recreational fishers in the form of reduced individual bag and possession limits, reduced boat limits, shorter seasons and the reduction in the two-weekend buffer between recreational and commercial season openings. Additionally, fishery closures due to the presence of biotoxins, have been used as proxy measures to further limit the recreational catch on the East Coast.

We all want an abundant fishery and we must prioritise returning it to a safe level.

We also want to fish where we always have – near our homes and shacks and where we can do it safely.

We don't want conflict with the commercial sector but we won't be strong armed into accepting less than our fair share. At our core, TARFish is an advocacy organisation for Tasmanians and the Tasmanian way of life on behalf of Tasmania's 100,000 recreational fishers.

Since 2015-16 the recreational rock lobster catch has been less than half of our allocation.

We want to make it easier for fishers to catch more of the Total Allowable Recreational Catch (TARC).

TARFish will work with recreational fishers, the State Government and the commercial sector to deliver on this policy which is based on our five priorities:

1. Abundant fish stocks
2. Healthy habitats
3. Fair and protected access to well managed fisheries
4. Safe, easy and inclusive access
5. Robust science and best practice

TOP PRIORITIES

1. **Return the rock lobster fishery to a minimum of 40% of unfished biomass**
2. **East Coast Catch Share re-balance for 2021-22 onward: recreational allocation not less than 80 tonnes or 50% of TAC whichever is the greater**
3. **No further cuts to individual bag, possession limits or season length**
4. **Recreational rock lobster only areas (spatial/temporal)**
5. **Increase translocation to 50,000 rock lobster p.a. focussed on Areas 2 and 3**
6. **Kelp restoration**
7. **Recreational licence fees only used to manage and support the rock lobster fishery**

Recreational Rock Lobster – what's the catch?

The Southern Rock Lobster (*Jasus edwarsii*) (rock lobster) are highly prized by Tasmania's recreational fishers with approximately 20,000 fishers purchasing rock lobster licenses each year. The largest of any recreational licensed fishery in Tasmania, in 2019-20 revenue was approximately $500,000 or 40% of a total of approximately $1.28m (Pearne, 2020) from all recreational fishing licences.

In 2019-20, recreational rock lobster fishers accounted for a state-wide harvest of 54.3 tonnes or 32% of a Total Allowable Recreational Catch (TARC) of 170 tonnes. This represents about 4% of the 1,221 tonnes Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for the fishery.

The TARC represents the Resource Sharing Arrangement for the fishery, agreed to by the Tasmanian Rock Lobster Fisherman's Association (TRLFA), TARFish and the State Government in 2005. This arrangement was subsequently written into legislation in the Fisheries (Rock Lobster) Rules 2006 Rule 8(2).

The TARC is based on 10% of the TAC and is maintained at 10% or 170 tonnes, whichever is the greater. A recent fishery report states, *"Estimated catches since 2015-16 have been equivalent to half or less of the TARC."* (Lyle, 2020)

At no time since the TARC was established in 2005 has the recreational sector caught its TARC with the maximum catch recorded as approximately 140 tonnes (Lyle 2020).

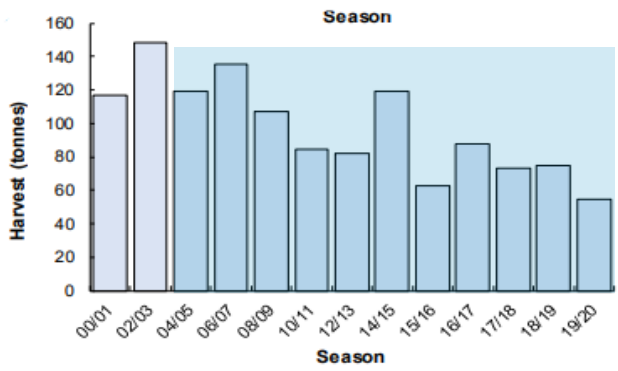

Figure 1: Tasmanian recreational rock lobster fishery estimated state-wide harvest (tonnes)

Declining rock lobster stocks state-wide have led to successive limitations being placed on recreational fishers in the form of reduced individual bag and possession limits, reduced boat limits, shorter seasons and the reduction in the two-weekend buffer between recreational and commercial season openings. Additionally, other mechanisms, such as fishery closures due to the presence of biotoxins, have been used as proxy measures to further limit the recreational catch on the East Coast.

Importantly, almost 75% of the recreational rock lobster catch comes from Tasmania's east coast (Areas 1-3).

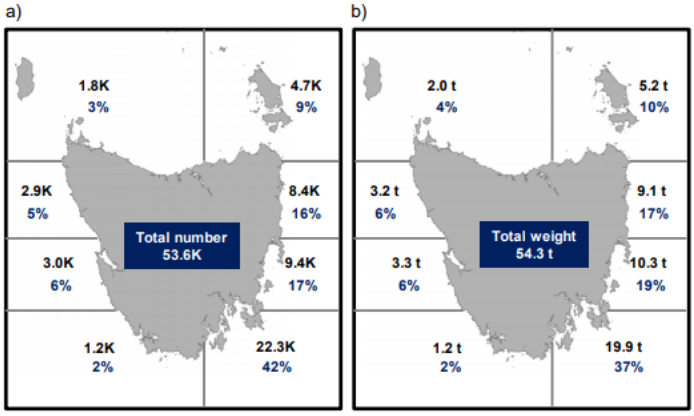

Figure 2: Tasmanian Recreational Rock Lobster Catch by Area 2019-20

In 2011, east coast stocks were assessed to have hit historically low levels attributed to heavy fishing pressure and low recruitment. In 2013, the East Coast Stock Rebuilding Strategy was implemented to rebuild stocks to 20% of unfished biomass by 2023. This included the establishment of the East Coast Stock Rebuilding Zone (ECSRZ). In 2016, it was determined that the TAC for the zone be split 21% to recreational fishers and 79% to commercial fishers based on historical fishing effort of both sectors. TARFish did not support the split then and does not support it now because it fundamentally disadvantages the recreational sector and the disadvantage only grows as stocks rebuild.

Getting it right for abundant rock lobster

The rock lobster fishery has ongoing and significant sustainability issues.

An interim biomass target reference point for the entire fishery has been set at 25% and is an extremely low level relative to those used in most fisheries (Hartman 2019)

The chart below shows that state-wide biomass is currently around 23% and is forecast to reach 26% in 2026.

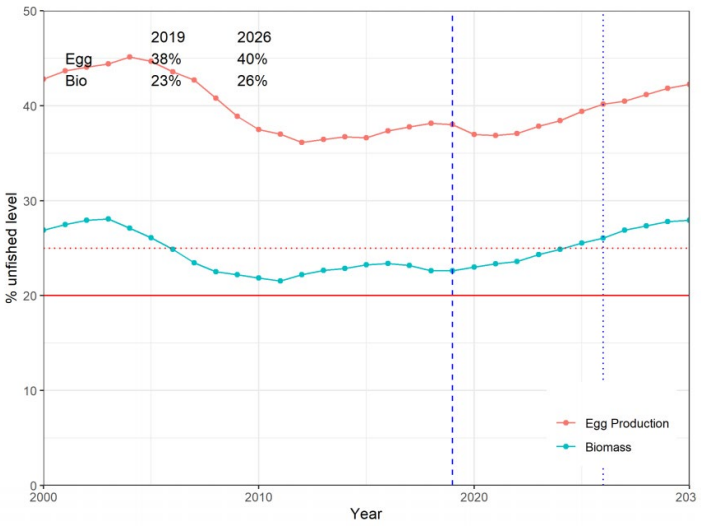

Figure 3: State-wide biomass taken from 2019/20 Stock Assessment

Recreational fishers have reported *"declines in daily harvest rates since the early 2000's (1.3 to 1.0 per day)"* Lyle (July 2020) reflecting the overall decline in the health of the fishery. This is supported by *"the trend in pot catch rates over the past decade (which) has been consistent with changes in rock lobster population biomass…"* (Hartman 2019)

This is further evidenced by the harvest (tonnage) by the recreational fishing sector that has shown an ongoing downward trend from a peak of around 140 tonnes in 2002/03 to under 50 tonnes in 2019/20 (Lyle 2020).

When considered at a regional level, biomass remains at critically low levels in Areas 1-3 which includes the ECSRZ.

Light blue shading shows ECSRZ (approx. boundaries)

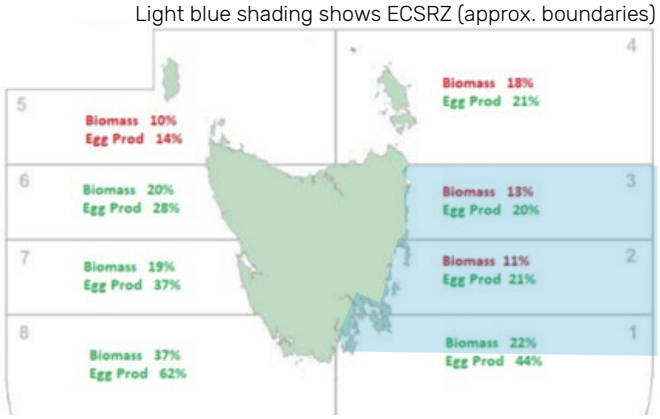

Table 1 shows current (2019) and forecast percent of unfished biomass and egg production for 2023. The current rate of recovery indicates that

	2019		2023	
Area	Egg prod	Biomass	Egg prod	Biomass
1	43%	20%	48%	25%
2	23%	11%	25%	17%
3	22%	14%	29%	19%

Table 1: Percentage of unfished rock lobster biomass and egg production

It is concerning that Area 2 is not forecast to meet the 20% unfished biomass level until at least 2025 under current management controls and TAC.

TARFish believes the fishery in this region is at very high risk.

State-wide, TARFish's primary consideration is returning the Tasmanian Rock Lobster fishery to a sustainable level.

Getting it right for abundant rock lobster

	1.	2.	3.
WHAT	**Total Allowable Catch (TAC) that prioritises the return of the rock lobster fishery to sustainable level**	**Increase the speed of stock recovery through direct intervention initiatives, particularly for the ECSRZ**	**Fish size limits that aid stock recovery**
HOW	• Reduce Total Allowable Catch (TAC) to a level that allows the interim target reference point to be achieved by 2023. • Develop a state-wide harvest strategy that prioritises the return of the rock lobster fishery to a minimum of 40% of unfished biomass. • Finer -scale management of fishery through regional-scale harvest strategies sitting within the state-wide strategy.	• Increase translocation program to 50,000 rock lobster per annum with primary focus on Areas 2 and 3 to achieve interim target reference point of 20% of unfished biomass by 2023 • Support for novel initiatives that aid stock recovery (e.g. puerulus harvest and on-growing from aquaculture operations). • Support research that aims to identify methods to increase stock recovery	• Minimum size increase for females in Areas 5 and 6 (North Coast) • Minimum size increase (both sectors) in East Coast Stock Rebuilding Zone (ECSRZ) • Size limits, both lower and sex specific, with primary aim of aiding stock recovery.

Getting it right for healthy rock lobster habitat

Recreational rock lobster fishers rely on healthy habitats to ensure the ongoing sustainability and abundance of fish stocks.

TARFish has identified two major threats to habitat:

1. Marine pest – *Centrostephanus rodgersii*; and
2. Climate change

Expanding urchin barrens caused by Centrostephasus Rodgersii (Centrostephansus) have destroyed a significant amount of Tasmania's east coast reefs which is predicted to increase without sustained action to manage it.

The risk to the rock lobster fishery from loss of habitat, particularly kelp beds, from Centrostephanus is high and is likely to disproportionally affect recreational rock lobster fishers due to its dominance on the Tasmanian East Coast where most of the recreational rock lobster effort occurs.

There are two key management challenges associated with Centrostephanus: (1) reducing the risk of ongoing destruction of kelp beds; and (2) rehabilitation of urchin barrens back to kelp beds.

A range of initiatives have already been implemented to control the growth of urchin barrens including commercial harvest and diver culling as well as rock lobster catch reductions and rebuilding of lobster stocks through translocation.

Rock lobster naturally predate on long spined sea urchins and there is potential to contribute to control the marine pest through growth of large rock lobster populations in shallow coastal reefs.

A further risk to rock lobster habitat is climate change and specifically warming coastal waters and current changes. According to scientists from the CSIRO and the Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS), the sea surface temperature off Tasmania's east coast is warming at a rate of 2.3C per century — equating to roughly four times the global average. In addition, the East Australia current (EAC) is arriving in Tasmania earlier, more often and pushing further south. It is not yet clear what impact the changes will have on the rock lobster fishery specifically however the ongoing loss of kelp habitat is of significant concern.

	1.	2.
WHAT	**Support for direct intervention actions to reduce impact of Centrostephanus on rocky reefs**	**Actively support habitat restoration programs**
HOW	• Active participation in development of a Centrostephanus mitigation and management plan and its implementation.	• Actively support and participate in kelp restoration projects • Partner with like-minded organisations to support and lead habitat restoration programs

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Getting it right for fair and protected access

Tasmania's recreational rock lobster fishers are rightly seeking to ensure that their access is fair and protected for the long term.

Heavy fishing pressure, particularly by the commercial sector over an extended period, low recruitment, climate change and marine pests have resulted in the rock lobster fishery reaching dangerously low levels of unfished biomass. This has resulted in tightening management controls applied to the recreational sector over an extended period despite the sector entitled to catch only 10% of the TAC and catching around 4% in reality.

Current management controls to limit the recreational catch unfairly limit fishers from catching their allocation.

Specifically, this relates to limiting catches on the east coast predominantly through catch share arrangements, bag, boat and possession limits, season length and transit provisions together with proxy control measures such as season closures as a result of biotoxin.

Further, there are no controls, other measures or initiatives specifically designed to assist recreational fishers to increase their access to their allocation through re-distribution of effort away from the east coast or from rebalancing catch share arrangements.

The current management of the fishery is fundamentally flawed, piecemeal in its approach, unclear in its objectives and does not demonstrate how the recreational sector is valued and enabled in decision making.

	1.	2.	3.
WHAT	**Protecting recreational access to the Rock Lobster Fishery**	**Sound and transparent decision making**	**Licence fees used to manage & support the fishery for the benefit of recreational fishers**
HOW	• No reduction in TARC • No further cuts to bag & possession limits or season length • East Coast Catch Share re-balance for 2021-22 onward: recreational allocation not less than 80 tonnes or 50% of TAC whichever is the greater • Reinstatement of two-weekend buffer for season opening including ECSRZ	• Statement of reasons provided for fishery management decisions • Management decisions do not fundamentally undermine the long-term security of the fishery for Tasmanians • Rock Lobster Management Policy (RLMP) that protects recreational access and demonstrates value of recreational sector • New Fisheries (Rock Lobster) Rules based on an RLMP	• Removal of 'base fee' applied to entitlements after first entitlement purchased • Licence fees only used to support the rock lobster fishery for the benefit of recreational fishers • Published annual reporting on licence fee expenditure

Getting it right for safe, easy and inclusive access

The TARC for recreational rock lobster is currently 170 tonnes. In 2019-20, recreational rock lobster fishers accounted for a state-wide harvest of 54.3 tonnes or 32% of a Total Allowable Recreational Catch (TARC) of 170 tonnes. This represents about 4% of the 1,221 tonnes Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for the fishery.

Over time, recreational fishers have had access to their allocation limited by management controls that prevent catching rock lobster in their preferred fishing areas and therefore reducing safe, easy and inclusive access to the fishery.

It is important to recreational fishers that ongoing management of the rock lobster fishery actively considers and facilitates safe, easy and inclusive access

	1.	2.	3.
WHAT	**Enabling fishers to catch more of the TARC**	**Fair access to available stocks to all participants**	**Facilitating safe and convenient access to fishery**
HOW	• East Coast Catch Share re-balance for 2021-22 onward: recreational allocation not less than 80 tonnes or 50% of TAC whichever is the greater • Extending seasons and opening a winter season • Remove artificial season limits from biotoxin closures • Change transiting rules for West Coast	• Individual season limits that protect fair and reasonable access for all participants • Improve access to West Coast fishery through provision of all-weather boat ramps • Finer scale management of TARC	• Implementation of recreational rock lobster only areas (spatial/temporal)

Sources

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