

BYNOE HARBOUR AND SHOAL BAY CRAB STOCKS NEED PROTECTION

For more than three years, AFANT has been asking the NT Government to take action to stop the serious decline in mud crab stocks in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Heavy fishing pressure from commercial crabbers in areas around the Roper and McArthur Rivers have been making it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for recreational fishers to catch any crabs there. We were also concerned that falling commercial catches in the Gulf would see large numbers of commercial crabbers moving into waters close to Darwin such as Bynoe Harbour and Shoal Bay.

Fisheries Minister Kon Vatskalis put the issue to the Mud Crab Fishery Management Advisory Committee last year and the Committee reported to him on 7 July as he requested. No action was taken until mid-November when AFANT called on the Minister to release the draft changes to the fishery. The document was released for a 28-day consultation period but none of the new measures have yet been implemented.

In December 2005 we wrote to the Minister and, among other things, advised him as follows: “At present it is extremely difficult for recreational crabbers to catch crabs in the McArthur and Roper Rivers and other streams running into the Gulf and there are indicators that a number of commercial crabbers may move (or are moving) closer to Darwin as crabbing becomes more difficult in the Gulf. This could be exacerbated if current moves to secure sacred sites status for large areas of Blue Mud Bay are successful. Recreational crabbers are not responsible for the decline in crab stocks and we would expect the NT Government to protect the rights of recreational crabbers, particularly those closer to Darwin where stocks have not yet been subjected to the excesses of the commercial industry which have seen a major stock decline in the Gulf.”

In Feb 2006 we wrote to Chief Minister Clare Martin and told her, “...that we expected to see a number of commercial crabbers trying to relocate to areas closer to Darwin. Because recreational crabbers have not adversely impacted crab stocks and the fishery is still very good in waters around Darwin, Government needs to look at how to protect the interests of recreational crabbers here from pressure from commercial crabbers. AFANT’s view is that Bynoe Harbour and Shoal Bay should be closed to commercial crabbing. Also, some further measures should be considered to ensure that recreational crabbers are able to access a reasonable share of crab stocks in accessible areas in the Gulf such as the McArthur and Roper Rivers.”

Three weeks ago we began receiving advice from a range of people including recreational fishers and fishing tour operators that there had been a major influx of commercial crabbers into Bynoe Harbour and that there were more on the way to there and Shoal Bay. A number of these crabbers had been to the Gulf but failed to catch more than a few crabs. Although it is difficult to get the actual number of crabbers working in Bynoe, we believe it may already be as high as eight licences which equates to 480 pots — roughly the equivalent of 100 recreational crabbers — and they will be working their pots every day.

We have raised this as a very urgent matter with both Fisheries Minister Kon Vatskalis and Chief Minister Clare Martin and we are calling on them to reassure recreational fishers that they will not be disadvantaged by any increase in the number of commercial crabbers moving into Bynoe Harbour and Shoal Bay.

Bynoe Harbour, Shoal Bay and other waters in the Darwin area simply can't sustain this level of crabbing and we are currently facing a situation where crab stocks in traditional crabbing areas for recreational fishers around Darwin will be seriously depleted.

Recreational fishers have not played any part in the decline of crab stocks in the Gulf and it is neither right nor fair that they should be disadvantaged. One of the core objectives of the NT's Fisheries Act is "to maintain a stewardship of aquatic resources that promotes fairness, equity and access to aquatic resources by all stakeholder groups." Recreational fishers are entitled to expect that this will happen in respect of the mud crab fishery in Bynoe and Shoal Bay and AFANT has indicated that it is more than happy to work with the Government to implement effective measures to protect the quality of the recreational crabbing that we are able to enjoy in these areas.

You can help to protect our mud crab fishing by letting Government know how important it is for them to ensure that crab stocks are protected for recreational fishers. **An easy way to do this is to send an email to us at research@afant.com.au and we'll forward it to the appropriate people in Government for you.**

You can also phone or email your local MLA (see list below) or the office of the Fisheries Minister on 8901 4132 fax 8901 4134 email minister.vatskalis@nt.gov.au or the Chief Minister on 8901 4000 fax 8901 4099 email chiefminister.nt@nt.gov.au. You may also wish to write letters to the newspapers and raise the matter on talk-back radio.

Attached is a media release which AFANT will issue shortly.

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