

Hi Everyone

Over the past few weeks we have had a number of discussions with the NT Government on the boat registration/identification issue and we have also met with the Northern Land Council. At this stage we are waiting for a response from the NT Government to some proposals we put and I will provide you with an update sometime in the next week or so.

In the meantime, we need to start discussions on the important issue of possible new possession and size limits. Please note that this is an AFANT initiative, it is not something being proposed by the NT Government and we genuinely want to hear what people think so we can try and get some consensus on the issue.

### **Possible Changes to Possession and Size Limits**

I'm sure you are all now well aware of the revised recreational fishing possession limits and other regulations that came into effect in the Territory in January this year. You should also be aware that a number of changes related to the Daly River are currently being considered by the NT Government. These were widely circulated for comment by NT Fisheries earlier this year.

The changes implemented in January were on the table for a number of years. The first public submission phase of that exercise was conducted way back in September 2006 and the changes were under discussion a year or so before that. This means that we have not had a good look at our recreational possession limits and other regulations for about five years and it is now time to start thinking about any changes that we believe are now needed. Many ideas have been thrown up by fishers in the Territory over the past few years and, looking at some better biological and fishery data now available to us, a few concerns have emerged that we need to consider.

To get this process under way, we want to know what changes you think we should be looking at to ensure high-quality recreational fishing in the Territory well into the future. We will try and collate the various proposals and ideas that you put to us and then put these out to everyone for further discussion. Hopefully, we can develop proposals that have the support of recreational fishers so we can put them to the NT Government and have the regulations updated in much less time than it took for the most recent changes. You are welcome to raise any proposals or suggestions you wish and we will consider them but be aware that the long-term sustainability of our fish and fishery should be our prime focus.

A list of the current recreational possession limits is shown below for your reference.

General feedback from recreational fishers and indications from our work with NT Fisheries tell us that our recreational fishery is on the whole in good condition. However we are seeing increases in the amount of recreational fishing taking place in some locations and particular species in some areas may be in need of more protective regulations. For example, we think that this might be the case with golden snapper in the area around Darwin and perhaps around King Ash Bay in the Gulf.

As well as increasing numbers of fishers we now have much better technology to target fish, thus improving our ability to catch them in a broader range of conditions. GPS units, incredibly effective fish finders, online fishing forums and access to detailed weather forecasts are some of the “new technology” that is now available to us.

The recommendations we come up with from this process should be focused on ensuring that we avoid placing our fish and fishing at risk. It is much easier to put measures in place to avoid adverse fishery impacts than it is to reverse problems once they become obvious. With that in mind we have provided some discussion points below specifically relating to golden snapper and other reef fish as well as issues to consider on other species more generally.

Note that just because an idea is listed here, it does not necessarily represent AFANT’s views nor do we suggest it should be supported. We are simply providing you with some of the ideas that have been put to us by recreational fishers as examples of the things that might be considered to get the process started.

### **Golden Snapper and Other Reef Fish**

Golden snapper are slow growing and maturing. Males are generally not sexually mature until they are around five years of age and 47 cm, for females it is about 8 years old and 63 cm. These snapper spawn offshore but juveniles move into the rivers, creeks and estuaries and tend to stay there until they reach a reasonable size. In places like Darwin Harbour and the King Ash Bay area juveniles are heavily targeted by recreational fishers and adults are increasingly now targeted offshore in the area from the Peron Islands to Cobourg Peninsula. Like black jewfish, we now know that golden snapper are likely to be seriously injured by barotrauma (the impact on fish organs of being rapidly brought from deep water to the surface) and they are unlikely to survive if they are released after being caught in water deeper than 15 metres.

There is reasonable agreement among NT Fisheries researchers and managers and members of the Coastal Line Fishery Management Advisory Committee (AFANT is a member of this MAC) that some further measures are necessary to ensure sustainability of recreational fishing for golden snapper, at least in the wider area around Darwin. We also need to take into account that often fishing for golden snapper actually means fishing for snapper or reef fish in general and so any consideration of new regulations might need to apply to other snappers as well (and perhaps emperors, cod and possibly coral trout as they are also often taken when targeting snapper). How that would best be done to make it work is something to think about. I think it is likely that some changes will be introduced for this fishery so it is important that we have your views and ideas to take to the table.

Given that we already have a five-fish possession limit for golden snapper but that all other snappers sit within the general possession limit of 30 fish (which means it is technically possible to have 30 tricky snapper or stripies or even red emperor), this raises a number of possibilities and questions. For instance:

- Could we simply reduce the possession limit for golden snapper to two or three and would it solve the problem?
- Should we consider individual possession limits for other snappers and emperors?

- How could we get recreational fishers to stop fishing for golden snapper in deeper waters once they have caught their possession limit (or as many fish as they wish to take) recognising that most released fish will likely die from barotrauma impacts.
- Should we look at different regulations for more heavily fished areas such as around Darwin and maybe King Ash Bay?
- Should we look at minimum, maximum or maybe slot size limits for golden snapper, other snapper and/or emperors?
- What about a limit of say four snapper between 30 and 50 cm but only two over 50 cm? That might allow both the harbour and offshore fishers to still get a feed.
- Should we look at reducing the general possession limit from 30 fish to say 15 or 20?
- Could we improve the situation if we set a combined possession limit for the more desirable fish like snapper — say a combined limit of 10 for any combination of snappers, emperors and coral trout for example?
- Should we have some form of boat limits on snappers such as we do for mud crabs so that there is a limit on catches regardless of the number of people on board?
- It has even been suggested that we should look at closed seasons for reef fish in some specific areas where they aggregate.

There are a range of possible actions we can take and we would be interested in your views on these and any others you might come up with. Keep in mind that we will almost certainly need to make some changes for reefies in general and golden snapper in particular to protect stocks in the Darwin area and we will need the advice of fisheries scientists and managers to ensure that those changes we do propose will have the desired result.

### **Other Possible Changes**

As I said earlier, over the past few years recreational fishers have been suggesting a range of changes to regulations that they think should be considered. Some of these suggestions are listed here and we are open to any others (or comments on the ones listed).

- Setting a maximum size limit (say 90 or 100 cm) for barramundi.
- Reducing the barramundi possession limit to 3 (or even 2) fish Territory-wide.
- Reducing the minimum size limit of barramundi to 50 cm.
- Put in a boat limit of 2 or 4 barramundi.
- Put in size limits for a range of different fish, not just barramundi.
- Reducing the general possession limit to 15 or 20 fish.
- Limiting the maximum number of any particular species in possession to a maximum of 10.
- Making the possession limits apply in your place of residence (that is, the limits would apply wherever you are including at home).
- Put a possession limit of 3 on threadfin salmon (there are concerns that we are seeing significantly reduced numbers of threadies these days).
- Put a possession limit of 5 on blue salmon
- Put a possession limit of 10 on bream.
- Put a possession limit of 5 on mangrove jack.
- Put a possession limit of 5 on parrot/tusk fish.
- Put a possession limit of 10 on javelin fish.

- Put a possession limit of 5 on trevally of any species.
- Put a possession limit of 5 on queenfish of any species.
- Put a possession limit of 2 on longtail tuna (in recognition that they are now a recreational-only species).
- Put a possession limit of 5 on tuna of any species other than longtail.
- Put a possession limit of 1 on sailfish (in recognition of their sport and game fish status).
- Put a possession limit of 1 on marlin (in recognition of their sport and game fish status).
- Put in an overall boat limit of three times the personal possession limit when three or more people are on board (as it is for mud crabs).

There may be other ideas you think we should consider so please let us know. We will develop a paper based on your feedback that can be distributed widely for further discussion so please get your comments to us in the next couple of weeks.

### **Current Size and Possession Limits**

- A general personal possession limit of a total of 30 fish including the species listed here.
- Barramundi minimum size 55 cm, possession limit of 5 except Mary River where it is 2.
- Mud Crab minimum size 13 cm across carapace for males and 14 cm for females, possession limit of 10 per person with boat limit of 30 when three or more on board.
- Black jewfish possession limit of 2.
- Spanish mackerel possession limit of 2.
- Golden snapper possession limit of 5.
- Sharks possession limit of 3 of all species with no take of sawfish, spartooth shark and northern river shark.
- Cherabin and /or redclaw combined possession limit of 30.
- Tropical rock lobster possession limit of 10 per person with boat limit of 30 when three or more on board.
- Molluscs possession limit of 10 liters in shells.
- All cod over 1.2 meters must be released unharmed.
- No take of giant clams.
- Bream, prawns, octopus, cuttlefish, squid, baitfish (mullet, whiting, garfish, pilchards, sardines, herring), sea urchins and starfish are exempt from the general possession limit.

We look forward to receiving your ideas on this important issue.

Regards



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