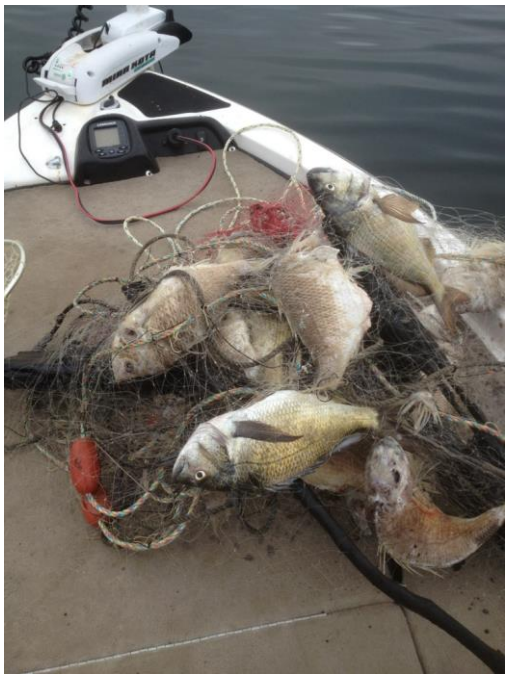
Recreational Gillnets in Tasmania – Fish for the Future

Bringing the fish back

Netting was banned in Georges Bay, St Helens in 2004, and although there was some initial opposition from old-timers who had been netting for decades, within a year everyone supported the no-netting rule because of the results.

"*People would come down here to have two days' holiday, they'd set their nets. If they didn't allow for, let's say the tide, weather conditions sometimes those nets weren't retrieved, so they were drifting around catching fish basically 24 hours a day. You know, there was a lot of fish being caught that were going to waste out there that no one was getting any benefit out of whatsoever. So now that the nets have gone, you know, it's unbelievable fishing now*." Michael Hayley

"*Fish stocks have improved a real lot since the netting was banned, since the netting was finished out of the bay. We get a lot of things here now, you even see big stingrays and stuff go past. Lots of those would have drowned in nets and stuff earlier on. We get to see a lot of those now." Alan Andrews*
(Stateline broadcast, 2005)



Shifting baselines

In the not too distant past, it was common for people to set a net and haul in a big catch. There was always plenty of fish, and usually a few different species. The extended family would have a feed and you'd have the next day covered too. However, those days are gone. The steady depletion of inshore reef fish around Tasmania has been observed by many who have been fishing or diving our coastline over the years. As the use of gillnets is the predominant fishing method in these areas, the link between depletion and gillnetting is intuitive, and at modern effort levels, inevitable. Not surprisingly, most other Australian states abandoned this fishing mode from the recreational sector many decades ago.

In 1996, the *State of the Marine Environment Report* suggested that "the depletion of local fish populations may be severe" and "gill-net use has the potential to deplete reef fish communities".

Bastard Trumpeter

The cause and effect relationship between gillnet use and the decline in inshore reef fish stocks in Tasmania is reflected in a recent IMAS report assessing historical abundance and size changes of five key fish stocks (Lyle and Tracey 2012; Frijlink and Lyle 2013). Of particular relevance has been the alarming depletion of the key netting target species – bastard trumpeter, of which stocks are at historic lows. The species is particularly vulnerable to net fishing owing to their tendency to move between reefs in small schools and their inability to swim backwards and therefore escape from nets[6]. Based on catch per unit of effort estimates provided by long-term Tasmanian fishers, the average number of trumpeter caught per net set has declined from 18 to 2 since the 1950s: **a** ninefold decline over 60 years (Frijlink and Lyle 2013). The report also noted the growing lack of size variation within the trumpeter population, indicative of poor reproductive success.

Blue Warehou and Banded Morwong

Populations of other reef species such as banded Morwong and Blue Warehou are also suffering historic lows (Hartmann and Lyle, 2011). While the decline of the latter is closely linked to overfishing by the deepwater trawling and netting in offshore Commonwealth waters, stock recoveries for Tasmanian inshore waters will be hampered by the netting capacity within the recreational sector. It is well understood among fishers that blue warehou survive very poorly from gillnet capture and, when present, are caught in large quantities (Lyle and Tracey, 2012). Such vulnerability to netting effectively also deprives anglers of a popular species.

While banded morwong are generally not gillnet target species, considerable numbers are caught unintentionally, with an 80% discard rate and little information available on post-release mortality (Lyle and Tracey, 2012). The *2009-10 Scalefish fishery Assessment* determined Banded Morwong to have "continually high harvest rates above the internationally recognised reference points for mature biomass". Also, the fact that it "depends on newly-recruited fish from the populations at a potentially unsustainable rate", incidental bycatch of Banded Morwong through recreational gillnetting is contributing to an alarming decline of this fishery (Lyle and Tracey, 2012; Hartmann and Lyle 2011).

Other inshore reef fish

In the absence of stock assessments for inshore reef species such as boarfish and jackass morwong, anecdotal reports of declines similar to those experienced for bastard trumpeter suggest that a ban or moratorium on net fishing would be prudent and long overdue. While fishery level impacts from this effective form of capture may have been absorbed at very low effort levels, declines in key species over recent decades demonstrates that recent and current fishing effort, both real and latent, clearly transcend what can be sustainably absorbed by inshore reef fish populations. While the use of recreational gillnets to remove escaped Atlantic salmon has merit in minimising the potential impact of these exotic species, a study conducted in 2010 reported that only 7% of fish caught in gillnets were Atlantic Salmon (Lyle and Tracey, 2012).

Based on their impact on inshore reef fish, gillnets are not an appropriate method of capture for recreational fishers and effectively negate a potential recovery in these stocks for the benefit of anglers, divers and other resource users. There are also likely to be significant ecosystem-level impacts by the maintenance of these once abundant species at very low levels, which are yet to be documented and understood.

Unwanted

Recreational gillnets catch too many of the wrong type and size of fish. Of almost 174,000 fish estimated to be caught in gillnets in 2010, over 61,700 fish were unwanted and thrown back dead, or dying (Lyle and Tracey 2012).

Undersize, poor eating, damage to the fish, exceeded bag limits, and protected species are the key reasons for not eating more than 61,700 fish caught in gillnets in 2010.

Unprotected

It is estimated that each year hundreds of protected penguins, seabirds and sharks are caught in gillnets and killed (Lyle and Tracey 2012). Some are caught in ghost nets - nets that get away during bad weather or are forgotten - and end up in a current or reef system for weeks or months, entangling fish, birds, sharks and mammals until finally they are washed up on a beach somewhere.

Unnecessary

"*When I was younger my family was right into gill netting, over the years it was obvious to see the impact on the fishery. The uncontrollable by catch is also a concern. It wasn't all that uncommon to catch penguins.... Not ones you could release.*

My grandfather also caught a white pointer many moons ago which was also dead.... While not protected back then and not all that common netting doesn't discriminate... By species or numbers. I can remember hauling in over 50 snotty trevalla one morning.... That's a lot of fish for one family!

Around 10 years back I convinced my old man to change, now he fishes with line and hook, catches what he needs for a feed and heads home. This form of fishing will see our fish stocks stay at a healthy level for many years to come. I'd be very keen to see the removal of netting from tassie waters." Pat

http://www.sportsfishtasmania.com/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?f=16&t=15365

Recreational gillnets aren't necessary to catch a feed, but they are a huge threat to the future of our fishing and our marine life in Tasmania. Commercial, game and recreational fishers, conservationists and bird lovers, are all concerned that this out-dated practice is taking an unnecessary toll on our fisheries. Continuing to use gillnets is only succeeding in taking away the ability of our kids and our grandkids to catch a fish or see a penguin.

Proposal

Protect our kids fishing future by phasing out all Tasmanian recreational gillnets within 12 months of the 2014 Scalefish Management Plan Review

References:

1. J.M. Lyle And S.R. Tracey (*2012), Recreational Gillnetting In Tasmania – An Evaluation Of Fishing Practices And Catch And Effort.* Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies, University of Tasmania, Private Bag 49, Hobart, Tasmania 7001.
2. Klaas Hartmann and Jeremy M. Lyle (2011), *Tasmanian Scalefish Fishery - 2009/10*. Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies, Fisheries Aquaculture and Coasts, Private Bag 49, Hobart, TAS 7001.
3. Stateline, Broadcast: 18/02/2005, *St Helens Fishing*. http://www.abc.net.au/stateline/tas/content/2005/s1306043.htm
4. Frijlink, S.D. and Lyle, J.M. (2013). Establishing historical baselines for key recreational and commercial fish stocks in Tasmania. IMAS internal report. 119p.
5. Hickford, M.J. and Schiel, D.R. (2008). Experimental gill-netting of reef fish: Species-specific responses modify capture probability across mesh sizes. *Journal of Experimental Marine Biology and Ecology*, Vol 358: 163-169.

Fish for the Future

The following groups and stores want fish for the future and sustainable fishing for our kids. We endorse the call for an immediate phase out to recreational gillnetting in Tasmania.

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