



Speech by

**DESLEY BOYLE**

**MEMBER FOR CAIRNS**

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### **CORAL REEF FINFISH FISHERY**

**Ms BOYLE** (Cairns—ALP) (12.20 p.m.): Today I would like to speak about the QFMA's draft management plan for Queensland's coral reef finfish fishery. It is indeed an unsatisfactory draft plan. I would like also to talk about the unsatisfactory process led by the QFMA in developing this plan and in consulting with fishers, particularly regional fishers.

Following a very unsatisfactory meeting between the QFMA and well over 200 local recreational fishers in Cairns recently, I have been besieged by phone calls and submissions from very angry fishers who do not believe that they have been fairly consulted at all. People feel as though their intelligence is insulted when a meeting is called a "consultation" and, in fact, it is a lecture. They know well the difference. They know well the difference between a session that is for information where perhaps questions and answers will be addressed and a consultation in which they will be encouraged to express their own views and, dare I say it—privilege amongst privileges—be actually heard and have their concerns noted. That is not what happened at the supposed consultation in Cairns.

I am pleased to say, however, that despite their despair and anger, many of these fishers were willing to attend at my office for a meeting—a re-run, if you like—at which they could on this occasion be fairly heard. Around 45 people attended my office and expressed various concerns about the plan, and it is these concerns that I wish to bring to the attention of honourable members this morning.

What is really important amongst all of the views expressed by these diverse people—who happen to be those who engage in recreational fishing—is that there is a consistency in their views about the draft plan and about what should, in fact, be the considerations of this Government in formulating an alternative plan. The main points that they wish to make are as follows. First, of course, the objective of the plan to protect the coral reef finfish fishery is absolutely and unconditionally endorsed by the recreational fishers. The draft plan itself, however, is not workable and is so full of holes that, in the view of all at the meeting, it should be scrapped. It can never, they say, reach its objectives.

The fishers make the point that, unless the fishery as a whole is considered, including commercial fishing impacts, then the plan is not only discriminatory but is also missing the point. They make the point that recreational fishers take less than 20% of the catch and, therefore, any real effects on the fishery must involve changes in the commercial sector. As presently written, the draft plan, they say, is blatantly discriminating against recreational fishers. It should be noted that about 50% of fish taken by recreational anglers are returned unharmed to the water.

The fishers argue that they have not been consulted properly and that part of the difficulty is that the QFMA appears to regard working through peak bodies with occasional consultations in Brisbane as sufficient. Individuals gave examples, dates and details of how they had tried to get copies of the draft plan and how these had been promised but not forthcoming.

The recreational fishers believe that for a long time now the QFMA as an organisation has not been performing well. Specifically, they believe that senior managers within the QFMA organisation need themselves to be given a serious performance review. Many at the meeting suggested that, in fact, the QFMA should be scrapped and that a single fisheries department should be re-formed. They also wish to make the point that the coral trout fishery is, on their own observations, in serious trouble—more so than is indicated by the scientific advice that has been given to the QFMA. They wish to act, along with changes to commercial practices, to protect the trout fishery and they strongly

recommend that consideration be given to the minimum allowable size being raised from 38 centimetres up to 42 or 45 centimetres.

The specific concerns that they expressed about the plan include that the bag limit cuts are not reasonable unless some limitations are also placed on commercial fishing operations. They say that all the present bag limits do is preserve the catch for commercial operation, whereas other States around Australia impose total catch limits. They are also concerned about the bar on filleting fish at sea, which they perceive as implying that recreational fishers are not trustworthy and, understandably, they resent this. Further, the bar on filleting is not workable as some fishermen will not be able to put unfileted fish on ice, and in the tropical heat this will be a problem. Alternatively, they suggest that a "skin on fillet" requirement would still allow the fish to be identified and, therefore, any catch limits to be policed.

The proposed closures within the draft plan are also not reasonable and would have particularly harmful effects on the charter boat industry, which is significant, particularly in the Cairns area with its large numbers of domestic and international tourists. Far better than a closure is to change the minimum size requirements, which would give those species additional full breeding cycles wherein they are not at risk. It is said, too, that the figures quoted in the report are flawed. We need good-quality scientific research on which decisions such as those proposed in the draft plan can be made, particularly research that takes account of commercial fishing practices and includes monitoring of the live fish export industry.

With regard to the coral trout fishery, many at the meeting expressed concern that, owing to the lucrative live trout export market and the preference of the Chinese buyers— people have remarked on the numbers of small trout on display in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan—undersized trout are frequently taken and exported. This is an important issue. Many of the fishers at the meeting said that the export process itself is not properly vetted either by Customs or Fisheries inspectors. Clearly, a review of the actual figures as compared to those given to the QFMA is required on this matter. The fishers suggested that there should be a check on every overseas consignment of live trout. They said that the present penalties are a farce. The high price in the dining rooms around the world makes the risk worth while. They suggested that perhaps forfeiture of the entire shipment would make the trade more honest.

The fishers are also concerned about the definition of "in possession". For example, does "in possession" mean per person on the boat? The wording "in possession" opens up a minefield. Does it mean that the average angler cannot hold more than the bag limit in his private fridge at home? Recreational fishers are frequently only in a position to go fishing on weekends, and even then the weather means that they can only go on some weekends. They recommend instead that total allowable catches are a much better way of managing limitations on output. They strongly recommend again that commercial fishing operations be required to keep detailed logs on the amounts and kinds of fish taken. Quotas for commercial fishing would see the recreational fishers very much happier about setting some limitations on themselves. They make the point, too, that recreational anglers contribute huge amounts of cash to the economy. They employ thousands of people indirectly and they help to maintain the fishery. As they say, they do not destroy what they enjoy. It is estimated around Australia that \$1 billion in sales tax is derived from recreational fishers.

In the end the meeting expressed unanimously no confidence in the draft management plan. It also expressed no confidence in the senior resource officer or officers from the QFMA involved in developing the draft management plan. These concerns, of course, have been passed to the Minister. I join with the fishers, however, in their requests that the plan should in the first instance be scrapped or, if not scrapped, at least very substantially redrawn; that on this matter and on other management plans they be given genuine consultation and respect for their knowledge and views; that there is better joint working in the regions between recreational and commercial fishers; that there is better quality and timely research; and that there are new ways of managing fisheries in Queensland.

In the end, of course, a Government's primary responsibility has to be to be on the side of the fish. Unless we do protect our fish, their habitat and our environment, then we have no recreational fishing to enjoy, we have no food on our table—which is most important—and no commercial industry. After all, fish and their habitat are finite resources. We must look after them if future generations are to enjoy them and to benefit from them as we do.

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