

Unmanaged is Untenable - can we afford not to manage our fisheries?

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Early in my career whilst working in the Gulf of Carpentaria I had the chance to move from my boyhood home of Sydney to Brisbane. Over a couple of years I had the rare opportunity to regularly fish Sydney Harbour, Moreton Bay and the NW Gulf. The contrasts between the three were astounding. To compare, in Sydney I'd seen my catches decline dramatically over two decades. Fishing Moreton Bay was like turning the clock back. Whilst fishing in the Gulf was like fishing on another planet – an expanse of ocean brimming with unscarred fish.

These dramatic differences in catch could be simply explained by the relative fishing pressures – Sydney had become crowded, and many who fished the shores of its harbour kept all they caught. Moreton Bay was the playground of a still young city (that was yet to have even late-night shopping), whilst the Gulf was just too remote to attract other than the die-hard angler.

Simply put, people made the difference. More fishers equal less fish.

This tale is simply to emphasise the point that our coastal fisheries are highly vulnerable to overfishing – they need to be managed. Consequently, recent reports of Boating and Fisheries Patrol officers being instructed not to work weekends and nights as a government cost-cutting measure (Courier Mail 1 May 2010) is particularly concerning. The Boating and Fisheries Patrol is very much at the 'sharp end' of fisheries management.

Research and management strategies are of little value without commensurate commitment to education and enforcement. This is a very shortsighted decision by government, and certainly not one in the public interest.

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