



Victorian Southern Rock Lobster Fishery

Introduction

The southern rock lobster (*Jasus edwardsii*) fishery is Victoria's second most valuable commercial wild harvest fishery after abalone. The species is highly valued by members of the recreational diving community who either fish for rock lobsters or simply view them in their natural habitat.

In 2001/02, commercial catch was valued close to \$AU21 million. Post-harvest processing, marketing and live exportation has considerably enhanced the value of the fishery.

Species

The southern rock lobster (*Jasus edwardsii*) is found on coastal reefs (to depths of 200m) from the south-west coast of Western Australia to the south coast of New South Wales, including Tasmania. They are also found along the New Zealand coastline.

The southern rock lobster is distinct in that it is a rich red/rusty colour when taken from the water, which is intensified through the cooking process. A small number of *Jasus verreauxi*, which are green in colour, are also caught in eastern Victoria. The same management arrangements apply to both species in Victoria.

Management authority

Fisheries Victoria, a division of the Department of Primary Industries (DPI), is responsible for the management and compliance of the southern rock lobster in Victoria through the *Fisheries Act 1995* and *Regulations*.

Commercial fishery

Southern rock lobsters have been harvested in Victoria for more than 100 years. Over this time management arrangements have been refined to contain effort creep in the fishery, and to afford the fishery a sustainable future.

There has been a significant capital investment in the rock lobster fishery by the commercial industry in the form of vessels, fishing equipment and processing facilities. The Victorian commercial rock lobster fishery is an important source of direct employment (for commercial fishers and crew) in regional coastal centres, and it also supports a number of auxiliary industries including processors, transporters, exporters, port authorities and boat chandlers.

The commercial fishery is divided into Western and Eastern zones, reflecting a natural change in rock lobster density and habitat between the two zones. A limited number of commercial Rock Lobster Fishery Access Licences (RLFAL) are issued in each zone. In 2002, there were 139 licences, 85 in the Western zone and 54 in the Eastern zone.

The commercial fishery is primarily managed through a quota management system (QMS) with a total allowable commercial catch (TACC). Other management measures include legal minimum lengths, closed seasons, restricted pot numbers and fishing gear regulations that define the size of rock lobster pots and escape gaps.

The 2003/04 Total Allowable Commercial Catch (TACC) was:
Western zone – 450 tonnes
Eastern zone – 60 tonnes

Southern rock lobster



Commercial rock lobster fishers and rock lobster pots

Fishing method

The catching sector has developed effective fishing practices and equipment, and efficiently provides an excellent landed product. The fishery is based on the daily setting and retrieval of baited rock lobster pots. Circulating tanks, seawater sprays or wells in boats are used for keeping rock lobsters alive and in premium condition.

There are more fishing boats, crew and processors associated with the rock lobster fishery than any other State fishery.

Management planning

The goal of management is to ensure the sustainability of the southern rock lobster resource whilst maximising access and utilisation opportunities. In acknowledging the level of economic and social value the species provides to the Victorian community, the southern rock lobster has been recognised under the *Fisheries Act 1995*, as a 'priority species'. The only other priority species in Victoria is abalone. Extensive rules and regulations govern the harvest and possession of priority species to ensure the ongoing sustainability of the resource.

In June 2003 the Rock Lobster Fishery Management Plan (RLFMP) was released, developed under the *Fisheries Act 1995*. The plan was developed under Victoria's co-management framework, which involves extensive industry, community and stakeholder consultation. The purpose of the RLFMP is to:

- specify the policies and strategies for managing the rock lobster fishery;
- formalise management within a framework of ecologically sustainable development (ESD); and
- establish arrangements to manage the commercial and recreational catch at levels that prevent overfishing and allow stocks to rebuild to reduce the risk of lower abundance in the future.

Copies of the plan are available on the DPI website:

www.dpi.vic.gov.au under the Fishing & Aquaculture section.

Co-management

The Fisheries Co-management Council (FCC) Rock Lobster and Giant Crab Fishery Committee (RL&GCFC) is the cornerstone of co-management for the fishery. The RL&GCFC provides expert advice to the Minister including TACC setting and fishery performance monitoring. The RLFMP clarifies co-management roles for TACC-setting through the establishment of an open TACC Forum and an annual meeting between RLFMP holders, managers and Fisheries Officers.

Research

DPI Research & Development Queenscliff Centre is the primary research facility for Victoria's southern rock lobster. There has been a considerable investment in rock lobster research to assist the management of the resource. A broad spectrum of information is used to model the behaviour of the resource and more recently the concept of risk assessment has been introduced. The current stock assessment is based on a sophisticated model that is fitted to data on catch weight and number, catch rates and the sizes of lobsters in the catch. It includes biological information such as growth, reproductive characteristics and mortalities. The model enables projections of future stock biomass.

The status of the rock lobster resource in Victoria is different in each zone. Catch rates are perceived to be relatively stable in the Western zone and have increased steadily in the Eastern zone.

Commercial rock lobster fisher tagging a rock lobster for research purposes





Product and distribution

Southern rock lobster are generally sold whole and are available live, fresh, cooked or frozen (tails are also available if the market dictates). All southern rock lobster are sold at a minimum carapace length of 110mm for males and 105mm for females. A closed season between 1 September to 15 November is imposed to protect stock while they are at a vulnerable spawning stage. Fishers and processors have the capacity to hold live lobsters during this period to ensure a continual market supply.

Victoria is well placed to service domestic and international markets with a premium product. Technology has been pioneered to transport the product in optimum, live or fresh condition. Much of Tasmania's catch is processed and distributed through Victoria sea and airfreight terminals, which makes Victoria an epicentre for southern rock lobster processing and distribution. Victoria maintains a competitive advantage boasting:

- a highly established transport and export infrastructure with direct links to numerous overseas markets in Asia, Europe and the United States;
- a progressive Government with a mandate to manage the fishery sustainably;
- an innovative post-harvest sector;
- some of the cleanest coastal waters in the world; and
- a species that is highly prized on the world market.

Commercial rock lobster pots



Photographs: DPI and R. Sthradher

Export accreditation

The Victorian southern rock lobster fishery is currently being assessed under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. The industry is striving to satisfy the guidelines for a demonstrably ecologically sustainable fishery in order to be granted a five year export exemption. This will allow trade to be exempt from normal export controls.

Further Information

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Copies are also available from the website:
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