

Western Australia Rock Lobster



DATE CERTIFIED 3 March 2000;
recertified December 2006

SPECIES Rock lobster
(*Panulirus cygnus*)

FISHING METHOD Baited pots

COUNTRY Australia

LOCATION



The coast of Western Australia, from Cape Leeuwin (in the Margaret River area south of Perth) to Shark Bay, 1,000km to the north

FISHERY TONNAGE 10,750 tonnes

AS THE FIRST fishery in the world to be MSC certified, this one has had plenty of time to assimilate the benefits. “The main one has been market access,” says Dexter Davies, Executive Chairman of the Western Rock Lobster Council. “Major supermarket chains in Australia are now demanding MSC-labelled product, which puts us in a strong position.” In March, Aldi stores – the German-owned discounter with more than 200 outlets in the Australian states of New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria – announced it would be stocking 11 canned and frozen MSC-certified products in all its stores from July 2009.

Access to new markets, reduced tariffs and political influence

This surge of interest is new in Australia, but being MSC certified helped the fishery access European markets from the outset. “The EU imposes a tariff on Australian seafood going into Europe,” Davies explains, “and MSC certification was a very powerful tool in reducing it by half” – from 12 per cent to six per cent. The saving, on 1,500 tonnes of frozen lobster sold into Europe over three years, offset some of the costs of MSC certification.

“Representatives from the lobster industry went and lobbied the EU to allow them access,” Davies says, “and the fact that we had MSC certification was a strong bargaining tool. The negotiators could say, ‘Look, this is coming from an independently assessed sustainable fishery’. That counted for a lot.”

For the most part, however, this spiny, reddish-purple crustacean with long antennae is exported to China, Taiwan, the United States and Japan, generating Aus\$400 million (£190 million) a year – 20 per cent of the total value of Australia’s fisheries. When selling into these markets, the MSC connection brought a saving in time and effort that also cut costs – proving that it is not just a price premium that pays dividends. Four months after the Western Australia rock lobster fishery became MSC certified, the Australian government implemented its Environment Protection and Biodiversity

Conservation (EPBC) Act 1999, requiring businesses to be audited and EPBC certified in order to export seafood. “That Act was modelled on the MSC standard,” Davies says, “and because we were MSC certified already, we had done all the work. An enormous amount of those MSC costs would have been incurred anyway, just to get export certification.”

Reducing negative effects of global recession

This year, exports of lobster are generally in decline. “In a global recession, it is not something people have to eat,” says Davies – but here, too, MSC certification can help. “There is now a real necessity to expand into very diverse markets – in Europe, in the Middle East and some different product areas in the US. As you move into these more specialised boutique markets, they are looking for something to differentiate the product at a high price. In increasing these market opportunities, the MSC has played a useful role.”

Long-term management

Ecologically, the lobster fishery has always depended on “the magnificent predictive science we have had for 40 years,” says Davies, referring to a technique developed in the 1960s by biologist Bruce Phillips, allowing the catch to be predicted accurately four years in advance. By placing “collectors” (or artificial habitats) on coastal reefs, Phillips was able to count the pueruli, or lobster larvae, drifting in on currents from the depths of the Indian Ocean where *Panulirus cygnus* lays its eggs. “That allowed management decisions to be made four years in advance, which was a powerful tool,” says Davies.

Thanks to that, managers have identified “an unbelievably low count” of pueruli – due to environmental factors – and have cut fishing effort by 50 per cent to allow stocks to recover. “It’s a precautionary measure and still good management,” Davies says. “All we are doing is addressing the issue early.”

“Before certification, this fishery was sustainable because we said so. Now, all this wonderful scientific information is reviewed by experts around the world. We get an automatic peer review of how we manage our fishery”

Dexter Davies, Executive Chairman,
Western Rock Lobster Council

