

Lakes and Coorong, South Australia



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DATE CERTIFIED 13 June 2008

SPECIES 'Callop' or golden perch (*Macquaria ambigua*), yellow-eyed mullet (*Aldrichetta forsteri*), mulloway (*Argyrosomus hololepidotus*) and 'pipi' or cockle (*Donax deltooides*)

FISHING METHOD Nets (mesh, swinger, hauling and drum); plus cockle rakes, drop lines and longlines

COUNTRY Australia

LOCATION



The Coorong lagoon, Lake Alexandrina and Lake Albert near Adelaide, South Australia; and the coastal waters of the Southern Ocean adjacent to it, extending 150km south from Goolwa Beach to Kingston jetty

FISHERY TONNAGE n/a

IN THE HEARTLAND of the Ngarrindjeri – an Aboriginal people descended from the Yaraldi, whose archaeological footprint is everywhere in the Lakes and Coorong region – the place names are as evocative as the landscape: Narrung, Mundoo Island, Tauwitchere Island, Pelican Point, Snake Pit.

Management in line with the environment

The two lakes (Alexandrina and Albert) and the 3km-wide Coorong lagoon, separated from the ocean by a ribbon of dunes 140km long, comprise one of the most important wetlands in Australia. Declared a National Park in 1966 and listed as a RAMSAR wetland of international importance in 1985 its fragile ecology depends on a mix of freshwater from the Murray River and sea water from the ocean, and the fishery draws upon three distinct ecosystems.

"If one species is seasonally quiet in, say, the freshwater component, which is the golden perch, the guys can move into the estuarine system where there is mulloway and mullet," says Garry Hera-Singh, Chairman of the Southern Fisherman's Association. "Some fishers will go out and fish for pipis," he adds, meaning cockles, hand raked from the surfline of the Southern Ocean beaches. Approximately 600 tonnes are harvested per year, compared to 100 tonnes for each of the other species.

This rotational harvest is the main reason why the fishery is sustainable. "The fishers are not flogging the guts out of any one species," Hera-Singh says. Secondly, licenses are limited to just 32 fishers using traditional low-impact methods. For them, as well as the fish, the rotational harvest guarantees a secure future. "If there is a flood of one species on the market, and the price drops, they can move to another," Hera-Singh explains. "That way, they can get a reasonable return for their effort on another product that probably isn't so abundant but higher in value"

Economic benefits

Since achieving certification, reasonable returns have not been a problem. "I'd say we are commanding premiums of 30 to

50 per cent more for produce carrying the MSC label," Hera-Singh says. "It is way above average because there are so few MSC-certified products in Australia." In the past 12 months, he has seen a "substantial increase" in demand, primarily from restaurants and hotels whose customers are suddenly demanding sustainable seafood.

"I'm getting calls from all over Australia," Hera-Singh says, "asking 'What product do you have and how much is it going to cost?' We catch such small volumes, I can tell them the fishery is more focused on niche markets that are clearly prepared to pay a premium."

In a community where fishing and its related services (processing, transport, retail and food service) keep 100 people employed and account for 60 per cent of household income, MSC certification has brought clear economic benefits – but have there been environmental gains? "Our fishery was well managed before," Hera-Singh says, "and we have constantly improved and modified our fishing practices over decades with only sustainability in mind. We knew that, if you are impacting on bycatch and juveniles, there is no future. What we lacked was quantitative data about these impacts. We needed some bums on our boats to count the discards and the bycatch."

Research and funding

The fishery therefore applied for funding to implement a bycatch study, and the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation (FRDC) obliged with a two-year grant. "One reason why they were interested in funding us," Hera-Singh says, "was that we were seeking a bycatch study to help us achieve MSC certification. The federal research body said, 'That is an excellent initiative for small community-based fisheries in Australia.'"

The study was already under way when certification took place. However, data from it will help the fishery fulfil a condition of certification requiring it to "provide evidence of the composition and magnitude of the bycatch" and establish monitoring programs "for any key bycatch species determined as a result of the FRDC project". The two are symbiotic; each benefits the other.

“ In the Coorong, we have the best-practice fin-fish fishery in Australia – an amazing thing to be proud of, and a shining light for other fisheries here to follow. With MSC recognition, we can one day take the uncertainty out of buying Australian seafood that is environmentally safe ”

Neil Perry, Chef and Director, Rockpool restaurant group, Australia



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“ The reality is that most westernised fisheries are not managed on biological or sustainability criteria, but to give one sector a bigger slice of the pie than others. The main reason why we pursued MSC certification was to defuse the politicisation of fisheries management and establish a purer model ”

Garry Hera-Singh, Chairman, Southern Fisherman's Association