

Community attitudes towards Australian Fisheries Management

Stakeholder consultation report

Report prepared by **Essence Communications** for the
Department of Agriculture

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Contents

- 1 Introduction.....1**
- 2 Key findings2**
 - 2.1 Stakeholders are passionate about the fisheries industry 3
 - 2.2 Fisheries management is not an issue that is top of mind for the vast majority of
Australians..... 3
 - 2.3 Stakeholders believe the community has a predominantly negative perception of
the fisheries industry..... 4
 - 2.4 The industry is at a cross roads 5
 - 2.5 Stakeholders know who is trusted and have a different view about science and facts 6
- 3 Conclusions.....9**
 - Stakeholder support 9
 - Factual and emotional messaging 9

Figures

- Figure 1 Trust rankings 7

1 Introduction

In 2012/13 a Fisheries Research and Development Corporation (FRDC) project (Let's Talk Fish: Assisting Industry to understand and inform conversations about the sustainability of wild-catch fishing examined the role of community values, facts, emotions and communications concerning social licence in the seafood industry.

A recent desktop review undertaken on behalf of the department identified that there is a scarcity of market research available to better understand perceptions of fisheries management, specifically in the area of sustainability. This research program therefore sought to fill that gap and comprised n=27 focus groups with community members and n=1722 community responses to an online survey. Importantly, the department recognised the importance of industry stakeholders in the research to determine current attitudes, perceptions and expectations of the sustainable management of Australia's fisheries and seafood industries.

The stakeholder research comprised n=20 in-depth interviews with a range of stakeholders considered as 'significant others' that could offer a view of the environment in which we propose to be communicating and the opportunity for key messaging.

The following report outlines the key findings from the stakeholder research. Reports from the qualitative and quantitative programs have been submitted separately.

2 Key findings

The depth interviews with key stakeholders were entirely consistent with the key findings of the general public. In addition, views from all stakeholders were similarly consistent.

Overall there were six key findings relevant from the stakeholder's point of view:

- 1) Stakeholders carry great passion about the fisheries industry for managing the commercial potential but also for the environment.
- 2) Stakeholders agree that the fisheries management is not an issue that is top of mind for the vast majority of Australians
 - a) They generally feel it disconcerting that the public is as unaware and uninterested as they suspect them to be (and this research confirmed).
 - b) Many feel under siege by a noisy and aggressive minority, and find it alarming that they appear to garner an amount of credibility despite a lack of awareness of the facts.
- 3) Stakeholders believe the community has a predominantly negative perception of the fisheries industry.
 - a) Despite this lack of engagement and understanding of the industry, stakeholders believe that the community is more negative about the fisheries industry than positive.
- 4) Stakeholders do believe the industry is at somewhat of a crossroads internally –now is the time to unite, or suffer the consequences of a minority led uprising.
 - a) Stakeholders are universally positive about the potential of research such as this –to educate and raise awareness amongst the sector for the need to speak with one voice; to be more positive and vocal; to rally together to overcome the evident complexities.
 - b) A common view is that the industry is 'imploding' and that a peak body is a good start (despite reservations over cost).
- 5) Stakeholders have an accurate view of who the public do and don't trust, including the importance of science and facts.
 - a) This is perhaps one area that differences exist –the industry has tended to language that 'science and facts haven't worked', and that we must therefore fight fire with fire and 'win the hearts and minds'.
- 6) All stakeholders believe the role of communications is to educate and communicate –tell the story of seafood, right through the chain:
 - a) as much for industry stakeholders as for consumers
 - b) they further see social media as a key channel with which to communicate.

Each finding is discussed in more detail below.

2.1 Stakeholders are passionate about the fisheries industry

Stakeholders carry great passion about the fisheries industry for managing the commercial potential but also for the environment. Many stakeholders have been involved in the industry over many years (decades for some) and they feel very strongly about its role in Australia's history and culture. They speak passionately and articulately about the issues of image that have developed over time and of their concern for the future if something is not done soon to improve its positioning.

“There has been major change in the industry is the adoption of the National Guidelines for Fishing Harvest Strategies that happened in 2006. Increasingly recreational and charter fishing interests are merging, moulded by public perspective.”

“They have been doing this for 20 years, managing the size of the stock, but are too scared to shout about the well managed industry.”

“The value of the fishermen has degraded over the years, as a consequence of what environmental and green groups have portrayed the industry as.”

Stakeholders were keen to participate in the research, agreeing willingly and with an interest in the key areas to be discussed. Many commended the department for undertaking this research; that it was much needed, potentially long overdue and provided a timely signal that the government is aware of the need for improvements.

Stakeholders clearly want to see the fisheries industry flourish - and they are committed to a sustainable industry. They understand the importance of a sustainable industry from both a commercial fishing perspective and the environment. They believe they have the right balance to achieve the two and that this is not clearly communicated nor does the community understand it.

Many stakeholders describe the role of the fisheries industry and its management in terms of stewardship – they recognise that it is a natural resource, a renewable resource that they look after on behalf of Australians.

“They don't pitch the message more broadly to the consumers. They focus on the regulator role, where they could focus more on the role as stewards of the resources.”

2.2 Fisheries management is not an issue that is top of mind for the vast majority of Australians

Stakeholders agree that the fisheries management is not an issue that is top of mind for the vast majority of Australians. In fact, not only were stakeholders consistent in **their** view of Australia's fisheries management, they all described the same attitudes, opinions and behaviours of the broader community. All were very well informed and acutely aware of the community's view of fisheries management and strongly reiterated the key findings of the broader market research program.

Many agree that those close to the coast or in regional towns have a greater understanding of the industry and what it means. And more specifically how it is managed.

“People who live on the coast have a better understanding of fishing industry issues, but city dwellers not so much.”

They also understand that it is a largely invisible industry with few obvious indicators for those not living closer to coastal areas.

“Even though it is a natural resource, the harvesting is underwater so it is hidden.”

Stakeholders are very close to their local communities but also, with many having years of experience in the sector have a comprehensive understanding of the broader community and how attitudes have changed over time. Stakeholders are acutely aware of the lack of engagement they see with the fisheries industry by the Australian community. They believe the community has little or no knowledge of the industry and how fisheries are managed. Given their passion and commitment to the industry, most are quite concerned about this and feel it disconcerting that the public is as unaware and uninterested as they understand them to be.

They believe their industry lacks the same level of profile and support that other primary industries have been able to develop. They refer to the MLA and the pork industries and commend them on what they have done for their industry. With this point of comparison, the lack of community engagement is even more difficult to swallow.

“You can see what other industries have done to band together to really engage and show what we’re good at.”

2.3 Stakeholders believe the community has a predominantly negative perception of the fisheries industry

Despite this lack of engagement and understanding of the industry, stakeholders believe that the community is more negative about the fisheries industry than positive. They believe that environmental and sustainability messaging against fisheries has resonated with the community and they largely believe what has been said.

“The public are generally negative about the Australian fishing community, and their view is that fishing activities have a negative impact on resources. This is because of campaigns around certain species and their management, for example the Commonwealth shark fisheries.”

Many stakeholders recognise that the community is generally taking cues about the industry from those that are often the loudest. They feel under siege by a noisy and aggressive minority, and find it alarming that the community appears to place an amount of credibility with these organisations despite their lack of awareness of the *facts*.

“In years gone by fishermen were heroes, brave men who braved the elements. Now they have been demonised by green groups as greedy opportunists who pillage the oceans.”

“They are shaped by perceptions of the trawler issue and campaigns over the years run by NGOs have influenced them, they think commercial industry is big and not well managed.”

“Most would be surprised to know how well regulated and well managed the industry is, because industry haven't told them.”

Many believe that the absence of information about how Australian fisheries are managed means that the community is largely informed by what is happening in international fisheries industries. They note that this is unfair and that there are many aspects of the Australian fisheries industry that makes it a much more positive and sustainable industry. Stakeholders are unsure if the community recognises the vast difference between how Australia manages fisheries compared to our neighbours.

“The general public are easily swayed to what is reported in the media, and think that overseas examples of issues apply to Australia.”

They note that money is seen by the general community as a key motivating factor for the way the industry works – they're not aware of the governance and sustainability measures in place that ensures fisheries aren't depleting the oceans stocks.

“They don't understand the role of government; think money is a factor – if there is money to be made this will overcome sustainability or environment concerns.”

“You know they say that trawling is bad, but the public still like to eat prawns.”

2.4 The industry is at a cross roads

Stakeholders believe the industry is at somewhat of a crossroads internally. They describe many years of disconnect and a lack of collaboration across the industry. They understand that there are many players within the industry and quite a few complexities that make the landscape somewhat difficult to navigate however they believe they all have the fisheries industry interests at heart and there are many opportunities to work together.

A common view is that the industry is 'imploding' and that a peak body is a good start (despite reservations over cost). All describe the same lack of coordination in the stakeholder environment:

“Management of fisheries is an extremely complex business, in fact we couldn't have made it any more complex with Commonwealth ownership of the resource, and multi-jurisdictional regulations, Aboriginal traditional lands; as well as the many fishing sectors types- e.g. Wild catch, recreational, agricultural (farmed) commercial.”

“There have been efforts in the past - Government money into forming one group that have fallen by the wayside when funding stops.”

“Within and between industry do not get on, there is no peak body for the commercial industry; multitude of associations and groups speaking independently.”

Some describe more positive relationships within their state or territory however from an Australian-wide and industry-wide perspective, all agree now is the time to unite. There is a growing sense of urgency to act in the near future driven primarily by recent media coverage and local community protests around the trawlers. Many feel that this level of community angst towards the fisheries industry has not been seen before:

“It’s the negative publicity of the trawler – it was unprecedented exposure for the industry.”

“The media are only interested in stories that are sensationalized. They are not interested in telling the public anything that is factual, and only publish contentious issues, rather than the good stories. The super trawler issue for example, the facts got in the way of a good story.”

They feel that if they don’t unite now, they will suffer the consequences of a minority led uprising where the squeakiest wheels have the greatest impact. Given the already negative perception they believe the community has, they worry that the industry may not be able to sustain further attacks.

Stakeholders are universally positive about the potential of research such as this and how it might contribute to some action and progress. They are looking for it to educate and raise awareness amongst the sector for the need to speak with one voice; to be more positive and vocal; to rally together to overcome the evident complexities. They note specifically the need for an overarching peak body to bring them together.

“There needs to be a commitment from industry to market the actual performance of the industry. But not having an effective peak body with cash that is driven to achieve this is a hindrance.”

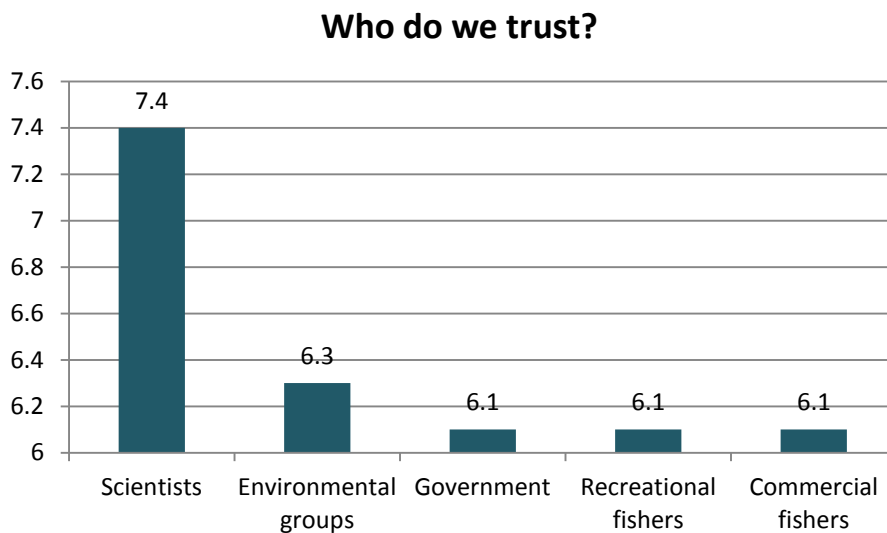
2.5 Stakeholders know who is trusted and have a different view about science and facts

Stakeholders have an accurate view of who the public do and don’t trust and essentially identified the same trust ladder as the community.

Trust ladder

- 1) Scientists
- 2) Environmental groups
- 3) Government departments
- 4) Recreational fishers
- 5) Consumers
- 6) Commercial fishers
- 7) Media
- 8) Government – politicians

They recognize that scientists and environmental groups are at the top of the ladder and find this to be the conundrum that they are dealing with in attempting to influence perceptions. Stakeholders are perhaps not as aware of the importance that the community places on scientists in comparison to environmentalist as outlined in the results from the quantitative survey.

Figure 1 Trust rankings

Stakeholders are much more supportive of the role of politicians in the industry noting in particular that Senator Colbeck is clearly a strong advocate for the industry and considered a good operator.

Stakeholders understand the role of science and facts in the debate but feel the emotional message from environmental groups has dominated. Stakeholders themselves see the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation; the Marine Stewardship Council and the CSIRO as the independent advisors that the community should also view in this way.

“Assessments of sustainability in Australia occur on a regular basis - is this known? We need more measures of credibility for our CSIRO.”

This is perhaps one area that differences exist between what the industry thinks and the community thinks. The industry has tended to use language that ‘science and facts haven’t worked’, and that we must therefore fight fire with fire and ‘win the hearts and minds’. While they recognize that science plays a key role in their business, they believe that efforts to engage the community using facts and figures have been unproductive.

“In comparing the industry to other primary industries, fishing has a strong reliance on science, but relationships with industry partners not as strong.”

They believe that despite the facts being put out there, they have not resonated with the community at large. They think that the environmental groups and squeaky wheels have presented an emotive story and this has had more traction than their efforts.

“Environmental groups are not interested in validating or accepting the facts – just take the super trawler debate on social media- a qualified response doesn't have any weight. Mass campaigns are a challenge as there is no proper debate around facts, and the government has finite resources, cannot fight back.”

“We need to understand why scientists are important, we want them to be independent, but they are not normally good communicators, so would not have them deliver the message.”

The role of communications is to educate and communicate.

All stakeholders believe the role of communications is to educate and tell the story of seafood, right through the chain. They believe that the story has not been well told in the past – that the lack of interest and potentially more negative attitude toward the industry is the result of a failure to be proactive and engaging in the way information is provided to the community.

“From an early age, we learn how to cook a steak- not so for fish. Why not?”

“In terms of positive ecological impact - fishing catches the product naturally, very low carbon and water and ecological footprint , not using fresh water , not removing topsoil, no fertiliser.”

They are also respectful of the importance of engaging the community given that they are the owners of the resource (despite their disinterest).

“Industry does value what the general public thinks, because they dictate your access to the resource, because they influence the politicians. They need to understand and value the resource.”

They accept that there is not one area that is responsible for this education and communication program. They agree that there is a role for government and industry in working together to communicate the regulation, quality and industry standards as well as to build confidence and pride in the industry.

“Education is a joint role - science report science, government report management. This is because the science that underpins the management. Industry should show leadership and stewardship of the resources.”

“The Government role needs to change as community is becoming more circumspect about where food is coming from.”

“The key message should be to celebrate the successes of regulatory management with industry to build the confidence between government and industry.”

Stakeholders acknowledge that the education and communication program would be just as much for the industry as it is for consumers noting that it would assist with uniting the industry and in speaking with one voice but also to raise its profile, build confidence and highlight its importance to Australia, our culture and our economy.

Stakeholders also see a strong role for social media in the education and communication program noting that this has been an effective tool for other voices to be heard.

“Social media” junkies capture and harness this media, more so than fishing industry has embraced.”

3 Conclusions

There are two clear conclusions as a result of the stakeholder consultation:

Stakeholder support

There is clearly strong support and advocacy from the industry to engage the community on the fisheries story. They believe it is a good story and that the squeaky wheels have distracted the community from the genuine facts that tell of a proud, high quality, well managed and sustainable industry.

Stakeholders agree that a lack of unity within the industry has not helped present a strong and positive message however they believe that the timing is right for the industry to speak with one consistent and positive voice.

Factual and emotional messaging

Stakeholders believe that a more emotional message is required to engage the community largely based on a failure to engage to date using science and facts. With the community research indicating that there is much room for the factual information and advice from the industry and government.

At Essence we believe that science and emotion both have a role to play and that we have to do both. It is not that facts have not delivered to date; in our opinion, it is that the facts have not been told in a compelling narrative for consumers.