

Widespread Net-Free Zone in Australia

Widespread net-free zone in the Gulf of Carpentaria (Australia) is a disaster for commercial fishers, fearing it might be too late to save their industry. While no closures have been made official by the Queensland Government, the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries has put together a map of potential areas in the Gulf to be classified as net-free zones. The map, which went public last month, has caused a great deal of stress amongst the current commercial fishing operators in the Gulf, who believe it is only a matter of time before they are shut down completely. "We are the low-hanging fruit in the Gulf commercial fishing industry and the idea of closing off our fishing areas is to appease the radical green groups that have infiltrated Queensland Fisheries Management. Shocked is probably not the right word for it... disgusted and mentally traumatized are better ways to describe it. This is a systemic problem coming from the Fisheries department and this is the same fight we have been having for the last 40 years, but just with different faces. In recent times, Queensland Fisheries are trying to manage the man, not the fishery itself". It is a common misconception about gillnet fishing. "We have all seen the photos of turtles and sawfish caught in nets with no explanation of where those photos were taken. That's not us. The only thing we catch occasionally that we do not use are catfish and we let them go alive.

It is believed that the Queensland government will soon close the whole of Albatross Bay to commercial fishing. "If the proposed closures go ahead, it will destroy the business without a doubt. To operate out of Weipa would be difficult because you would be dependent on the wet season and climatic conditions (if the proposed Northern closure was to go ahead). Ideas, to the Fisheries managers that could keep fishers operating in the proposed Northern zone... things like a grandfather clause where you leave the historical existing operator in place and have restrictions on the permit, were proposed. The permit would be on the man, not the business, and it could not be transferrable."

There are also generational fishing families in the Gulf with younger generations coming into the industry that we need to keep fishing and it should be their right to carry on the family fishing legacy and to supply the seafood consumer with some of the best wild-caught fish in the country. Queensland wild-caught barramundi will disappear from supermarkets and restaurants if net-free zones continue to be expanded in the state.

Queensland Fisheries monitors all licensed commercial fishing vessels 24 hours a day with satellite tracking, which is mandatory under the fishing permits. "We fish smarter, not harder. We target the time when we go fishing and we know through experience what time the barramundi and king salmon will be in a certain area. The fish are usually alive when we pull the nets in because they have not been caught up in them for very long."

Gulf fishing group will rally for its future. The Queensland government has faced pressure from UNESCO, as well as the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) to close off North Queensland waters to gillnet fishing. The state has already rolled out bans on the Great Barrier Reef and is in the process of negotiating compensation with commercial fishing operators on the east coast. UNESCO, threatening to put the Reef on its list of world heritage

sites in danger, recommended that additional gillnet-free zones be created in the Gulf to allow some species to “rest”. However, the commercial fishing industry in the Gulf says it wants to see the science behind the recommendation before the government starts to threaten its livelihood. “As an industry, we have never been against science. In fact, we advocate for good science, if it’s good honest science and it’s not what is classified as a “paid result”. We do not want manipulated science or science with data omissions. “This seems like a political stunt leading into the election for next year. It is all about appeasing the green groups in the cities”.

The recreational fishing industry would be next. The appetite of the Green Wolf (lobbyists) will never be satisfied. One radical green group has already highlighted the lack of restrictions in the recreational fishing industry, and they have put out a media statement to say that recreational fishing is next on their hit list. These green groups have used the divide and conquer technique and tried to pit the recreational fishers against the commercial guys. To some degree, it has worked but many are seeing that they will be next if they defeat the commercial fisherman.”

“We need to stand together against this madness”.