



# Waters muddied over Swan River crabbing



**PAUL MURRAY**

Since the earliest days of the Swan River Colony, the estuary's crabs have been highly prized and sold to an eager market. Swan River crabs are generally held to be bigger and sweeter than their more famous cousins from Mandurah.

Put simply, Swan River crabs are the Rolls-Royce of west coast crustaceans. One of our treasures.

But Fisheries Minister Norman Moore has decided he will stop their sale through the compulsory acquisition of the river's last commercial fishing licence.

This is the first time a government has forced the handover of fishing in a WA waterway exclusively to amateurs. Commercial fishing in the Leschenault estuary was closed on a voluntary basis after the last seven fishermen gave in to pressure in the late 1990s.

"I do not believe there is a problem with stocks," one of them, Emanuel Soulos, said at the time. "There is enough fish for all of us, but the recreational sector think we take too much. This sort of thing is happening all over Australia."

Coming after the Carpenter government's closure of the metropolitan fishing zone threw up to 200 commercial fishermen out of work, Mr Moore's Swan River decision has created new uncertainties in the industry. It has denied access to a unique WA delicacy to seafood lovers who do not have the ability to catch their own crabs. This breaks the unwritten law that our seafood resources are shared between commercial and recreational fishers.

Most people do not catch their own fish. Why should the Government favour those who do, other than for the reasons of populist politics?

From all accounts this has been a bumper season for Swan River crabs, so it does not appear that pressure on stocks is the reason for the move, even though there is a

continuing ban in the depleted Cockburn Sound. Mr Moore threw no light on the reason for his decision when he announced it. "In the mid-1970s there were 25 licences for commercial fishing in the Swan and Canning rivers," Mr Moore said.

"Ongoing adjustment schemes have seen commercial fishers voluntarily surrendering their licences and the number of remaining licences fell to four in 2004. Further voluntary adjustment schemes resulted in the surrender of three of the four remaining licences in return for compensation. Currently, one licence remains. I have now determined that a compulsory buy-back scheme will be implemented to complete the phasing-out of commercial fishing in the Swan and Canning rivers."

There are good reasons to believe that the Swan River closure is just pandering to the recreational fishing lobby, which has long agitated for the commercial fishermen to be ousted.



**Norman Moore**

Back in 2003, Recfishwest complained to then fisheries minister Kim Chance about the proportion of Swan River crabs being taken by the four commercial fishermen.

"In all the other West Coast estuaries the catch of crabs is dominated by the recreational take," the lobby group told Mr Chance. "Given the accessibility of estuaries for recreational pursuits, this seems to us to be a reasonable outcome."

"However, the commercial take of crabs in the Swan-Canning is three-quarters of the total. This is the reverse of the situation in



the other estuaries and particularly unbalanced, given the high population of the Perth metropolitan area.

“During recent years the number of crabs caught by recreational fishers has significantly declined at the same time that there has been an increase in the focus of the remaining four Swan River commercial fishers toward targeting crabs.”

By the time the 2005 State election came around, Labor upped the ante with a policy — curiously announced just a day before the poll — promising to ban commercial fishing in the Swan and Canning rivers and Cockburn Sound.

The WA Fishing Industry Council was outraged, claiming that none of the bans was ever mentioned in its extensive discussions with Labor.

“The recreational sector can quote whatever figures they like in regard to the number of people who throw in a line, but the facts are that eight out of 10 West Australians buy their seafood from fish markets, supermarkets or when they go out to eat at restaurants and fish and chip shops,” WAFIC’s Graham Short said.

“The problem is people really don’t equate buying fish with the fact that a professional fisherman has had to catch it for them.”

The political bias towards the recreational

lobby is clearly demonstrated by the new rules in the West Coast demersal scalefish fishery, running from north of Kalbarri to Augusta, which cut the commercial catch by half.

Despite Fisheries Department researchers demanding a 50 per cent drop in the recreational catch, little has been done to achieve it.

Bag and boat limits are overwhelmed by more and better-equipped vessels and the catch is increasing.

The Perth Writers’ Festival might seem a strange place for this issue to be thrashed out, but that was the case on Sunday when American writer Mark Kurlansky, author of *Cod*, *The Big Oyster* and *Salt*, discussed the pressures on fishermen.

“Put bluntly,” Kurlansky told a questioner, “if you ask me if I would close a fishery to commercial fishing in favour of recreational interests, I would say no.”

Kurlansky put more value on a professional’s livelihood as opposed to what he described as the “entertainment value” of the recreational fisherman.

Obviously, he’s not in politics.

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