

Victorian Abalone Fishery Report  
Prepared and delivered by Alice Marriott – 7 August 2014  
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After the 2 or 1 buyback of licences the Victorian fishery settled into a period as the jewel in the crown of Victorian fisheries – stable quotas, appropriate LMLs, stable production annually, licence fees and royalties fed a solid administration system.

By 2002 Victoria had enjoyed 13 years of stability, IUU was a problem dealt with, it is now in question again. The first Victorian abalone management plan was written by consultants, 2 ex-Directors of Fisheries and an Access Economics expert. That industry agreed plan laid out the biological parameters for quota setting, provided an extensive reporting mechanism and was the set of rules governing the fishery.

Victoria was innovative, tackling an electronic abalone model which was described in the management plan to be used as an adjunct to the additional prescriptive quote-setting mechanisms in the plan. The Central Zone fishery devised abalone catch measuring devices.

Co-management was recommended and agreed for the fishery – a council working within a budget under \$500k with separate office and admin staff and statutory committees for all fishery sectors functioned well for Victoria.

The Abalone Fishery Committee of the Co-Management Council provided expert advice to the Minister on quota-setting and any other matter appropriate. AFC was described in the management plan as the “cornerstone” of the Victorian abalone fishery. It’s independent chairman had free access to the minister and all recommendations were pre-approved by the Chair of the Co-Management Council.

The 5 year Victorian Abalone management plan was due for updating in 2007 and was begun by the Abalone Fishery Committee at that time.

About 2004, Victoria embarked on a Cost Recovery Regime, industry contentious, which eventually settled at fees of 7.25% of GVP beach price.

The abalone industry was strong and speculation at government level ( over- enthusiastic in reality) of huge hikes in values was rife, as individual unit transfers were legislated. The government wanted more than the substantial returns flowing from 7.25% of GVP. Hansard records proved the expectations of government were unrealistic, but the push for fee hikes dominated the government agenda.

The introduction of a new Prospective Cost Recovery System is very contentious, recently billing industry for 30% fee increases at a time when industry can ill-afford this. Additionally, the cost recovery is recovering increased fees with a condition of returning unused funds to payers, but the payers have as yet no defined cost base for transparency and will be constrained in their usage & co-option of government services, which will be potentially additionally separately charged.

The virus disease intervened in late 2005 in the Western zone fishery and spread to the Central zone fishery in 2006. The focus became survival. Markets were affected, processor intakes compromised their sales economics.

In 2008, at a crucial period the regulators made a decision to abandon the Fisheries Co-Management Council, so the **consultation pathways were broken**. The overdue management plan revision stayed on hold for 14 versions until 2014 and is recently released for public consultation.

Good fishery management was in tatters, the Western fishery was ruined, the Central zone less affected, but fearful, the Eastern zone relied on isolation. Industry begged government for help, but the Victorian government remained aloof. Tasmania responded appropriately with bio-security measures.

It is now appropriate to speak about departure from historical size limit and TAC setting procedures by Victoria. Successive rises in LML's over a period of about 8 years saw accompanying TAC drops. A highlight of this in the Central zone fishery was the excision of about 40% of the TAC from the Flinders region, which stocks would never grow through the new set size – it became known as “The Forgotten Land” and the divers turned effort towards the faster growing reefs of Gunnamatta Coast and Apollo Bay, with the inherent dangers of pressure on these resources.

A new director this year extended a trust olive branch to the Central zone fishery and agreed to return the appropriate areas to historical sizes, the condition being that Central zone log and manage their stocks. An increase of about 12% of TAC accompanied this plan. It is a milestone for Central zone after three years of talks. The only cloud is the withholding of compulsory levy collection for 3 years by the department – a severe effect on resource management and development. But, Central Zone has contributed more funding for self-management and will provide stock reports and collated electronic logger information.

Central zone Association holds an 85% mandate to support its actions and will deliver to its industry people and the regulators. It has also undertaken an independent audit. Most of the purveyors of unrest in the Central Zone have exited the abalone business and a new future of optimism is on foot.

I stress that this account is Central zone fishery specific, as no representatives from the other 2 zones were available to speak.

There is much work to be done in Victoria to restore a good level of certainty in the second most valuable abalone resource in the world – there are lessons for other jurisdictions and I encourage them all to interact and share knowledge, as we have heard in this place and will hear more of.

I am heartened by the positivity seen at the pre-convention workshop and will encourage Victoria further to engage. The lack of funding in Central zone is an impediment and Eastern zone does not contribute to compulsory resource levies – I hope this explains, but does not excuse the absence of other Victorians from this convention.

A summary of key issues

1. Cost Recovery
2. Creation of certainty in the Victorian abalone industry
3. Recreational issues from a large population (3.5million Melbourne an extensive watch area and no recreational catch count.
4. Restoration of co-management
5. The rebuild of a trust culture between industry and regulators.

This is an 11<sup>th</sup> hour presentation – due to efforts to encourage Victoria to attend. In the absence of information from a fishery which is well documented, I have presented this summary being conscious that Victoria suffers from division amongst the 3 geographical zones, but is solid on electronic data collection to better inform TAC setting. The restoration of statutory co-management in my view, would remedy some key issues, as it provided a forum for the 3 fisheries to contribute to better management outcomes.