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TROUT TURN TAIL IN WAKE OF HAMISH

Fishers will struggle unless they diversify, as cyclones displace reef fish populations

Red coral trout (above), found in the southern sections of the Great Barrier Reef, fetch high prices in South-East Asia.

When these parts of the reef were damaged by Cyclone Hamish, fishers had to move their vessels further north. The coral trout here (top) are larger and darker – characteristics not embraced by the lucrative live-fish markets of South-East Asia.

Cyclones have brought Queensland's coral trout industry to its knees, with many fishers still struggling to recover from 2009's Tropical Cyclone Hamish when Cyclone Yasi hit earlier this year.

One of those affected, commercial fisher and business broker Shaun Hanson, says the stock just disappeared after Hamish and hadn't returned to normal when Cyclone Yasi hit. It has pushed some fishers out of business.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has recently released a report on the impact of severe weather on Queensland's Coral Reef Fin Fish Fishery. The report notes that Tropical Cyclone Hamish was so severe that it damaged a quarter of the reef. The turbulent waters destabilised its fragile ecosystem and triggered an estimated 30 per cent decline in live coral trout catch rates.

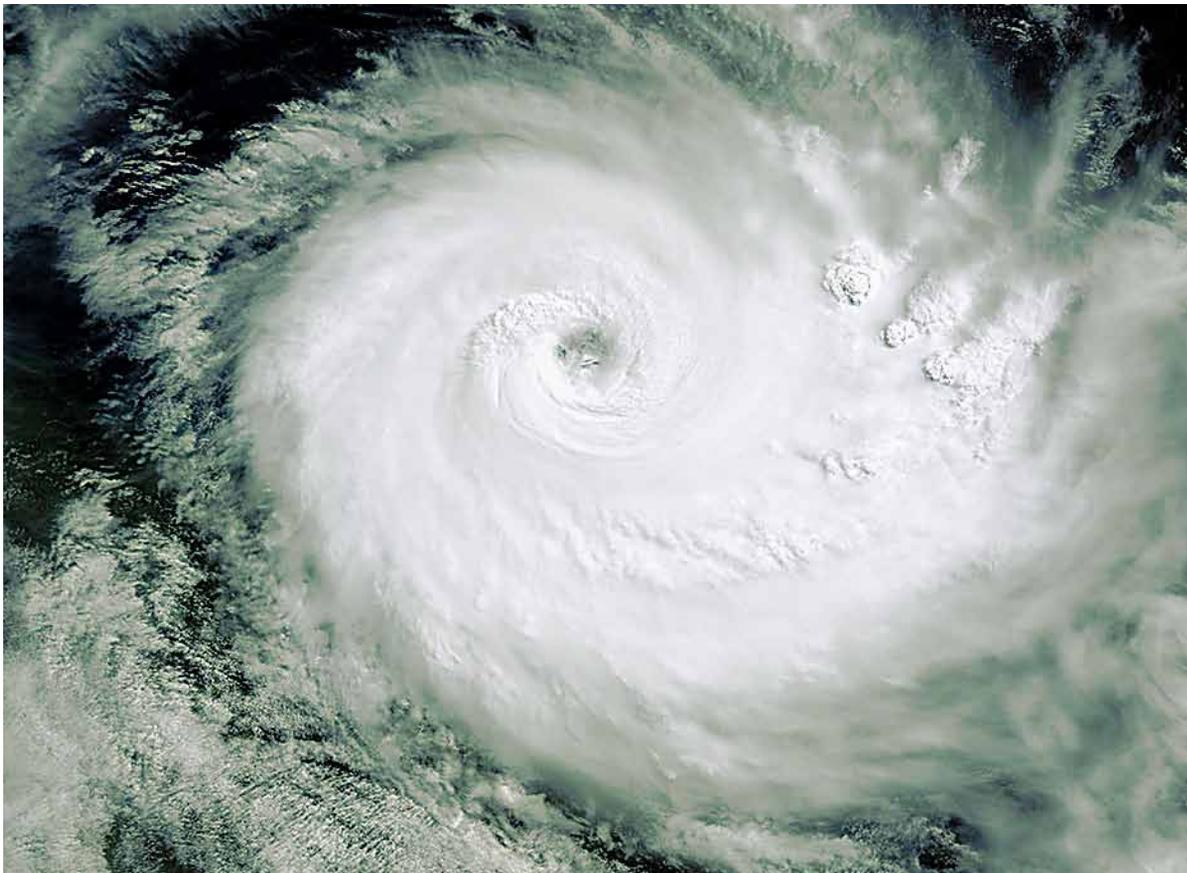
Live coral trout are highly sought after by commercial fishers, fetching on average \$40 to \$50 a

kilogram in the lucrative South-East Asian market. Shaun Hanson, a commercial fishing veteran of 30 years, says some commercial fishers relied heavily on live coral trout, but catch rates plummeted after the category 5 cyclone, Hamish, in March 2009.

He says he was fortunate to have a diverse fishing business, which provided some protection from the slump in coral trout. His business includes commercial fishing, a retail outlet and Queensland Fishing and Trawler Brokerage, a company that leases and sells fishing vessels, which he operates with two other partners.

Switching from coral trout to prawns and Spanish Mackerel kept his business afloat. He says others who relied on a single species (coral trout) have struggled or gone out of business.

He also estimates that the number of people interested in leasing fishing quota is down about 60 per cent post-Hamish.



Satellite image of the category 5 cyclone, Hamish, which hit Queensland in March 2009.

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Shaun Hanson's belief that Hamish inflicted greater damage to the coral trout industry than Cyclone Yasi is shared by Andrew Tobin, a senior research fellow at James Cook University.

Andrew Tobin is the author of the report *Adapting to change: minimising uncertainty about the effects of rapidly changing environmental conditions on the Queensland Coral Reef Fin Fish Fishery*.

His study was funded by the FRDC, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and the Fishing and Fisheries Research Centre at James Cook University. It concluded that catch rates of coral trout were most impacted in the southern parts of the Great Barrier Reef, an area considered the most productive and profitable for fisheries.

Catch rates fell 30 per cent and languished at these levels for at least nine months following the cyclone.

"Seventy per cent of the annual production of coral trout comes from the southern third of the reef," he says. "This is where Hamish had its greatest impact.

"It appears the behaviour of the fish changed as a result of the cyclone and the physical damage caused to the reef, but why this behaviour persevered is difficult to understand."

Some fishers believe that the reef damage forced coral trout to look elsewhere for food, but this theory has not yet been studied.

The small, red coral trout found in the southern, impacted regions of the reef are in high demand in the South-East Asian live-fish market. Further north, coral trout tend to be larger and darker in colour, two characteristics not embraced by this market.



Coral damage caused by Cyclone Hamish on the Great Barrier Reef.

Fishers who responded to the changed conditions by moving their vessels north struggled to find markets and match the profits generated from live coral trout. Many did not have the facilities aboard their vessels to fillet and freeze fish as they had focused solely on the live-fish market.

The industry's experience since Hamish suggests that those who expand their catch to include several fish species that appeal to the domestic market have a better chance of surviving future cyclones.

"Selling live coral trout into a very restricted marketplace such as the South-East Asian live-fish trade has turned a nice profit for fishers while the going was good, but acts as a serious impediment to profitability when things go 'pear-shaped'," Andrew Tobin says.

"There are a lot of opportunities to market high-quality wild-caught fish within Australia, although these markets need to be nurtured for the long term and not seen as an emergency relief option." **F**