

NT Recreational Fishing Sector Stakeholder Meeting

Findings Report

1. Introduction

This report presents the insights and perspectives gathered from a group of NT recreational fisher stakeholders. The group included representatives from the NT Government, associations and clubs, and fishing sector specialists. NT The meeting was held at the offices of the Amateur Fishermen's Association of the Northern Territory (AFANT) in Darwin on Tuesday, August 22, 2023.

The objective of the group was to inform the development of the questionnaire which will be used to survey recreational fishers with a focus on the Barramundi fishery.

The group discussion focused on a range of aspects related to recreational fishing, including advancements in electronics, pressure on fishery resources, regulations, biodiversity and fish populations, accessibility, perceived satisfaction, and NT policies. The group's insights provide valuable input for understanding the challenges and opportunities in the NT recreational fishing sector. These insights will be used to inform the development of the questionnaire for the recreational fishers' survey which is being undertaken during the next stage of the study.

2. Impact of Advancements in Technology

A key point of discussion was the influence of electronic advancements on fishing strategies. Participants acknowledged the direct and precise targeting capabilities of modern electronics, particularly in relation to Barramundi, a highly sought-after species and a focus of the study. It was noted that investments in electronic systems were prevalent among both dedicated and casual fishers, with some participants sharing experiences of purchasing and selling these systems post-competition. Additionally, the discussion highlighted the evolving nature of fish behaviour due to increasing fishing pressure and the need for continued adaptation in response.

Participants also noted the integration of high-tech equipment in tournaments hosted in the NT's key fishing zones.

3. Fishing Pressure and Impact on Resources

The group highlighted the significant pressure on fishery resources during events such as the Barra Nationals, an icon on the national fishing tournament scene, and the influx of 'Grey Nomad' tourists during the southern winter months. This increased demand on fishing areas, particularly the Daly River, posed concerns about over-crowding and its impact on the overall fishing experience.

In particular, the displacement of effort from popular fishing spots due to access restrictions was also discussed, leading to heightened competition for the remaining accessible areas. Lost access is causing confusion among fishers regarding fishing zones. Stakeholders expressed the need for clearer

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and user-friendly communication from the NT Government, particularly concerning greater clarity around the permissions required to enter Aboriginal land and waters for recreational fishing. It is noted that permission to fish in Aboriginal waters is provided via Recreational Fishing Permits administered by the Northern Land Council (NLC).

4. Regulations and Policies

The stakeholders discussed a range of views regarding recreational fishing regulations. While some participants found size and catch limits reasonable, there was unanimous support for the upper size limit for barramundi, as it safeguards the larger and more valuable fish. Selective harvesting practices were also discussed, with an inclination toward catch-and-release for Barramundi larger than 65cm. Licensing emerged as a topic of debate, with opinions divided between maintaining the current freedom of not requiring a fishing license for NT residents and suggesting that tourists should purchase licenses. A consensus was reached that all revenue derived from licensing should be reinvested into recreational fishing initiatives. There was also a view expressed that locals should not pay for licences whereas visitors to the NT should.

5. Biodiversity, Fish Populations, and Environmental Concerns

The group recognised the importance of fish abundance for a satisfying fishing experience. Discussions focused on shifts in fish behaviour due to boat traffic and the influence of weather patterns on fish populations. While fisheries management was credited for increasing fish abundance, concerns were raised about the perception of commercial fishing's impact. There was agreement on the need to address environmental challenges, including sea level rise and climate change, and the potential to restructure the fishery by buying out commercial licenses.

6. Accessibility and Infrastructure

Accessibility to fishing destinations was deemed crucial, with participants emphasising the unique Territory experience of navigating dirt roads and natural boat ramps. While acknowledging the importance of maintaining the Territory's rugged appeal, stakeholders expressed a desire for improved infrastructure in specific locations. The need to strike a balance between enhancing access and preserving the Territory's character was highlighted.

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7. NT Policies and Future Considerations

The group recognised the importance of well-defined policies in various areas. Suggestions were made to further codify the social and economic benefits of inshore fisheries policies. Water policy, including water extraction and wetland protection, was deemed essential to safeguard fish habitats. The stakeholders highlighted the role of the Amateur Fishermen's Association of the NT (AFANT) as a peak body representing recreational fishers and underscored the need for collaboration among major clubs to effectively voice concerns and ideas.

8. Overall Satisfaction and Reasons to Fish

Stakeholders were asked to rate their current satisfaction level with recreational fishing in the NT. Ratings varied among participants, ranging from 6 to 8 on a scale of 1 to 10.

The top three reasons nominated for recreational fishing by the stakeholders were:

1. Catching a large Barramundi (ideally 1 metre plus), which is uniquely NT.
2. Seeking the adventure and unique experience that only the NT can offer.
3. Embracing the risks associated with fishing in a dynamic environment, (crocs, sharks and tides).

9. Other Comments

During the discussion, stakeholders highlighted a range of other issues:

- They emphasised the importance of addressing issues related to feral animals and plants that are affecting the area.
- Preserving the integrity of Darwin harbour is a top concern, as they want to ensure its continued beauty and ecological health.
- Environmental protection is a key focus, and they are keen to find ways to balance this with maintaining access for everyone.
- Allocating resources fairly among recreational, commercial, and charter sectors is another aspiration, aiming for a balanced approach.
- They want to make sure that wetland habitats are preserved and that effective regulations are in place for rivers.

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- Supporting junior angling initiatives is seen as an investment in the future, passing down the tradition to younger generations.
- Participants acknowledged the challenges posed by climate change and they want to address this head-on.
- Negotiating access agreements is also high on their list, and they are keen for the NT Government to take the lead on this.
- Reducing bag limits as a means to promote responsible angling and conservation was raised.
- A significant increase in fishing related research efforts to fill data gaps is a priority to make more informed decisions.
- They see value in angler diaries for recording observations and trends in the ecosystem and feel that this would be supported.
- Improved communication from the government about fisheries initiatives is sought for better clarity.

10. Conclusion

The stakeholder group discussions provided a good understanding of the trends, challenges, and aspirations within the NT recreational fishing sector. The insights provided valuable input for policy-makers, fishing organizations, and conservation groups to collaboratively shape the future of recreational fishing in the Northern Territory. By addressing the concerns and leveraging the opportunities highlighted in this report, the NT can continue to offer a unique and sustainable fishing experience for both locals and visitors.

11. Summary

This report documents the outcomes of a meeting involving NT recreational fisher stakeholders. The meeting aimed to inform the development of a questionnaire for a forthcoming survey targeting recreational fishers, focusing on the Barramundi fishery. Held on August 22, 2023, the discussion brought together government representatives, fishing sector experts, and association members. A number of key aspects of recreational fishing were discussed, providing valuable insights into challenges and prospects in the NT's fishing sector.

Insights from the discussion included:

- Impact of Technology: Modern electronics' influence on fishing strategies, especially concerning Barramundi, was a central point of discussion. Participants acknowledged the

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precise targeting capabilities of these technologies, while also noting the evolving fish behaviour due to increased fishing pressure.

- **Fishing Pressure and Resource Impact:** The group highlighted the strain on fishery resources during events like the Barra Nationals and the influx of tourists. Overcrowding in popular fishing areas, such as the Daly River, raised concerns about its impact on the fishing experience. Access restrictions led to displacement of effort, causing competition for accessible spots.
- **Regulations and Policies:** Views on fishing regulations varied, with unanimous support for an upper size limit for Barramundi. Licensing and revenue allocation from it stirred debate, with suggestions to reinvest such revenue into recreational fishing initiatives.
- **Biodiversity, Fish Populations, and Environment:** Discussions centred on shifts in fish behaviour due to boat traffic and climate patterns. Although fisheries management was credited for enhancing fish abundance, concerns arose over the perception of commercial fishing's impact. Addressing environmental challenges, including sea level rise and climate change, was deemed necessary.
- **Accessibility and Infrastructure:** Stakeholders emphasised the importance of accessible fishing destinations, balancing infrastructure improvement with preserving the Territory's unique character.
- **NT Policies and Future Considerations:** Well-defined policies were seen as crucial, especially regarding inshore fisheries and water policy. Collaboration among major clubs was highlighted as vital through peak body representation.
- **Overall Satisfaction and Reasons to Fish:** Satisfaction levels varied among stakeholders, with catching sizeable Barramundi, seeking adventure, and embracing the challenges of fishing in a dynamic environment being the top motivations.

Participants shared other aspirations during the discussion:

- Addressing feral animal and plant issues affecting the area.
- Preserving Darwin harbour's integrity and ecological health.
- Balancing environmental protection with access.
- Equitable resource allocation among sectors.
- Preserving wetland habitats and effective river regulations.
- Supporting junior angling initiatives for the future.
- Addressing climate change challenges.
- Negotiating access agreements and reducing bag limits.
- Increasing research efforts to bridge data gaps.
- Valuing angler diaries for ecosystem insights.
- Improving government communication about fisheries initiatives.

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12. Final Conclusion

The insights gathered from this discussion provide an important perspective of the NT recreational fishing landscape. Participants highlighted challenges related to technology's impact, fishing pressure, regulations, biodiversity, accessibility, and policy needs. This summary report underscores the passion of NT's recreational fishing community and their dedication to preserving the unique environment while ensuring sustainable practices.