



Australian Government
Australian Fisheries Management Authority



**HAND COLLECTABLE WORKING GROUP
MEETING NO. 6**

CHAIRS SUMMARY

10 DECEMBER 2012

PEARLS BUILDING, THURSDAY ISLAND

CHAIR: MR JOHN POLLOCK

The 6th meeting of the Torres Strait Hand Collectables Working Group (HCWG) was held on 10th December 2012 at the Pearls Building, Thursday Island.

Major Outcomes

- 1) The CSIRO sandfish experimental fishing survey results from Warrior Reef were presented to the HCWG, these showed signs of stock recovery in the area.
- 2) The results of the CSIRO Reef Gardens project were presented to the group, it was noted that the final report will be made publicly available.
- 3) The group considered the current restriction on use of hookah diving equipment in the Beche de Mer fishery. It was agreed that an options paper should be progressed utilising data from recent hookah diving (by permit) in the fishery.
- 4) The group recommended to the Torres Strait Fisheries Management Advisory Committee (TSFMAC) a 5 tonne catch trigger for an individual species from the 'other species' basket which currently has an 80 tonne Total Allowable Catch (TAC).

Fishery Update: Beche de Mer, Trochus, Pearl shell

In 2012 there was continued harvest of a number of the lesser valued Beche de Mer species. The 15 tonne TAC set for 2012 in white teatfish fishery was fully utilised in January 2012 by one operator. The table below (Table 1) below shows other targeted species during 2012 included deepwater redfish (2417 kg), blackfish spp. (1705 kg) and prickly redfish (998.2 kg). Other species also collected included golden sandfish and stonefish.

(Note-The catches of sandfish can be attributed to CSIRO's *Sandfish Experimental Fishing Survey* conducted on Warrior Reef during March).

Table 1: Torres Strait Beche de Mer catch for 2012 (source: AFMA docket book database).

| Species | Number Harvested | WWG (kg)# |
|---|------------------|-----------------|
| White teatfish | 12053 | 15667 |
| Prickly redfish | 713 | 998.2 |
| Blackfish | 3278 | 1704.56 |
| Sandfish | 3940 | 2061.6 |
| Deepwater Redfish* | 6043 | 2417.2 |
| Golden Sandfish | 369 | |
| Stonefish | 554 | |
| TOTAL | 26950 | 22848.56 |
| * density estimate used 0.4 (estimate/ not published) | | |
| #WWG = Wet Weight Gutted | | |

Current research on the once overfished black teatfish fishery and sandfish fishery indicate that stock abundance is rebuilding. Managers and stakeholders should consider long-term management arrangements that promote optimum utilisation of these fisheries whilst maintaining sustainability.

There were no documented catch reports from the pearl shell fishery or trochus fishery for the 2012 season.



Reef Gardens Assessment Update

The HCWG noted the progress of the *Reef Gardens Assessment* research project which had just been finalised by CSIRO. This project collated information in the hope of assisting traditional owners in identifying suitable locations, and stocking rates for reef gardens of valuable hand collectable species including sandfish, black teatfish and trochus. There were two types of gardens were identified throughout the study, 'Breeding reefs' and Grow-out reefs'. The final *Reef Gardens Assessment* report will be made publically available shortly.

The HCWG was particularly interested in the potential for re-stocking and ranching of high-value species of Beche de Mer such as sandfish. The group noted that the concept of reef gardens will be a topic of conversation at future meetings and that this research will play a key role in future management discussions for hand collectible fisheries in the Torres Strait.

Sandfish Experimental Catch Survey

Experimental catch surveys for sandfish were carried out on the Warrior Reef in March, 2012 by CSIRO. In total 2,062 kg of sandfish were harvested by a small number of Islander fishers using standard commercial fishing practices over a limited period. The average catch rate observed throughout the study was approximately 87kg per fisher per day. Although this harvest rate was less than half the observed catch rates of the commercial fishery in the early 1990s the study showed some promising signs of recovery for the sandfish population on Warrior Reef.

The group acknowledged the good work conducted by CSIRO and agreed that it would be beneficial to conduct further survey work (either experimental fishing surveys or the conventional transect surveys) in the coming years to support/ validate the results of this work.

Sea Cucumber Species Guide

Tim Skewes and associates from CSIRO have developed the framework for a Sea Cucumber Species Guide providing photo identification of Beche de Mer species, identifying characteristics, species distribution and environmental and habitat preferences. It was noted that a pre-proposal to fund printing and extension of this work was presented at the recent Torres Strait Scientific Advisory Committee (TSSAC) meeting. If this pre-proposal is successful through the TSSAC process then the HCWG have agreed to provide input and feedback to CSIRO throughout the development of the guide.

Opportunities for Collaborative Research

At the recent series of Torres Strait Treaty meetings (22-25 October 2012) representatives from the National Fisheries Authority (NFA) expressed interest in investigating opportunities for collaborative management and research initiatives between PNG and Australia within the Torres Strait Protected Zone (TSPZ). The Beche de Mer and Prawn fisheries were identified as priority areas for investigating collaborative opportunities.

An update on items discussed at recent bi-lateral meetings was provided to the HCWG with the group noting the synergies in the research needs of both AFMA and NFA and the potential for collaborative research in Torres Strait hand collectable fisheries.

Changes to 'other species' basket TAC

The HCWG also noted that a Protected Zone Joint Authority (PZJA) decision to remove blackfish and deepwater redfish species from the current 80 tonne 'other species' TAC and



introduce individual 5 and 25 tonne TACs respectively is yet to be finalised. These changes will be progressed to the PZJA for decision in the coming months.

The group agreed to recommend to the TSFMAC that a 5 tonne trigger limit be imposed for the 'other species' basket which currently has a competitive TAC of 80 tonne. Triggers will be monitored post-season. If the trigger is met a request for management advice from the scientific member of the HCWG (which in this instance would be Tim Skewes of CSIRO) will be sort.

Review of Developmental Hookah permits

The group discussed the developmental hookah permits that were active during the 2011 and 2012 Beche de Mer fishing seasons and potential options for future management of the fishery. It was decided that the group would require more information than that which was currently at hand and a more in-depth review of the recently expired developmental permits before a decision could be made. AFMA will be progressing this in early 2013.

Black teatfish TAC implementation

The implementation of a 15 tonne TAC for the black teatfish fishery which was initially planned to be implemented in September 2012 is now planned for opening in September 2013. The group discussed the challenges of implementing this initiative and eventually decided that the recommendation from the 2011 HCWG meeting to open the fishery in 2012 will remain the same with the hope of opening the fishery in 2013.

Catch Monitoring

There has been increasing concern among the HCWG regarding the current lack of compulsory catch reporting from the TIB sector, particularly with the potential increase in effort for high valued species such as black teatfish. This is further supported by recommendations from the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (SEWPaC) Wildlife Trade Operation (WTO) requesting improvements in reporting mechanisms in the Beche de Mer fishery.

Compliance Update

There have been no known domestic or foreign compliance issues relevant to hand collectable fisheries since the last HCWG meeting.

Towing of Traditional Inhabitant dories on non-traditional inhabitant TPC

The Chair advised that this group could not make a decision on a request from one of the non-traditional processor/ carrier license holders to be permitted to tow traditional inhabitant dories. However the HCWG could support a process or a way for the request to be formally assessed. QDAFF representative Ian Jacobsen explained that as the licensing delegate Queensland Fisheries would be assessing any licencing requests and that a request in writing would be the best way forward in this case.

Next Meeting

The next meeting of the HCWG is due to be held early in the 2013-14 financial year.

