



# Marine Life Society of South Australia Inc.

c/o Conservation Council of SA,  
Level 1, 157 Franklin Street,  
Adelaide, SA 5000, Australia  
[www.mlssa.asn.au](http://www.mlssa.asn.au)

[marinelifesa@adam.com.au](mailto:marinelifesa@adam.com.au)

**"Understanding, enjoying & caring for our oceans"**

27/2/08

Hon Rory McEwen MP  
Minister for Agriculture, Food & Fisheries  
GPO Box 2832  
Adelaide SA 5001

Dear Minister,

Thank you for your reply to our letter asking for full protection of the Western Blue Groper and the Harlequin Fish in South Australian waters.

The fourth paragraph is of concern, as we wish to contest the claim that "this species is not being targeted by this (recreational charter) sector."

It is assumed that "between September 2005 and June 2007", at least 63 fish were caught (& retained), meaning that, of the reported catch, almost three legal-size fish were being killed every month. It must be assumed that the Western Blue Groper (WBG) that were retained were of legal size (60-100cm). These fish would be in the age range 15-25 yrs, and, if charters are operating only within legal waters (away from Investigator Strait and south-eastern Eyre Peninsula), almost all would have come from western South Australia. In reply to the assertion that blue groper are "not being targeted", it is worth noting that if charter fishers visit a reef / "bommie" at Wedge or other Gambier group islands Isles; Investigator Group (Pearson, Ward, Flinders etc) or islands and reefs off southern Eyre Peninsula (e.g. Greenly, Rocky) or far west coast (St Francis Isles; Olive Island; Fowlers Reef), and fish for groper from a charter boat with the right tackle, they will likely catch one of these large, slow-moving, site-attached resident fish. Charter boats are well set up to do that - reach islands and reefs that were previous offshore refuges, and serially deplete populations of resident reef fish. There are dozens of magazines and web sites showing photos of gropers (many over 1m) being caught by charters in the locations listed above.

Even with small catches of the large, mature ("alpha") males and other large WBGs, charter fishers could serially deplete reefs of large WBG over time, and impact upon population structure and abundance. There is no knowledge of the sustainability of the current catches (reportedly 60 - 70 per year, plus ~30 released), and the precautionary principle is not being applied. A significant number of the reported number of groper released during that period September 05 to June 07 (31 fish), would likely have died, or suffered sublethal injuries. Extensive research has shown that large, slow-moving fish captured from > 10 m depth suffer barotrauma when pulled to the surface, and mortality can be 30-40%, or higher in similar reef fishes. If illegal-sized fish (> 100cm) are being caught and returned to the water (and there is photographic evidence to show that they are), if they subsequently die, then the prohibition on catching and killing WBG over 1m is not being adhered to by fishers in South Australia. There is strong likelihood that repeated charter trips to the same island groups will keep catching previously released (and previously injured) large groper, hence the likelihood of individuals over 1m dying becomes even higher over time.

MLSSA is a Member of  
The Conservation Council of South  
Australia  
120 Wakefield Street, ADELAIDE  
5000  
Ph (08) 8223 5155 FAX (08) 8232  
4782  
e-mail [general@ccsa.asn.au](mailto:general@ccsa.asn.au)



Patron - Dr Scoresby Shepherd AO  
Senior Research fellow, SARDI  
Honorary Associate, South  
Australian Museum

MLSSA supports the ReefWATCH  
initiative.



Recent research (see Shepherd & Brook 2007 on distribution & abundance of blue groper (J. Fish Biology 71, 1-22) has shown that fishing, estimated to remove 45% of local populations, contributed substantially to the west-east geographic decline in blue groper abundance on the central SA coast.

Although it is pleasing to note that under legislation, rock lobster fishers and S.A. marine scalefish fishers no longer have access to blue groper bycatch; unfortunately, both lethal effects and sublethal injuries due to bringing groper to the surface and releasing them would still likely be an issue in these sectors. One of the best ways to address this problem is to ensure that hotspots for blue groper populations in S.A. are fully protected from any reef fishing activity. One of several island groups that are significant in this regard, is the Investigator Group.

In 2005 an information paper prepared by Fisheries Manager Craig Noell found that there was a potential sustainability problem, due to increased by-catch and recreational catch. The FMC accordingly recommended:

- (a) access to blue groper should be removed from all fishing sectors, and
- (b) blue groper should be declared a protected species in all SA waters.

We note that in 2006 the Scalefish FMC approved full protection of the groper and PIRSA has so far failed to carry this out.

As for Harlequin Fish, that species very likely cannot sustain fishing without population impacts, as is the case of other large, long-lived fishes in the Serranidae family, with small population sizes. Harlequin Fish occur over a small depth range; are also at the edge of the geographic range in SA, and are fished wherever they can be found, because they are considered to be good eating. The low numbers recorded by charter boats is no indication that impacts are not occurring, because there are very few of these fishes on any one reef, and few Harlequin Fish in South Australia as a whole, compared with Western Australia.

We hope these points will be taken into account when considering full protection of these two threatened fish species.

Yours sincerely

Philip Hall

cc the Premier, Mike Rann