



Southern Rock Lobster - A Proud and Successful Fishery

The Southern Rock Lobster Fishery encompasses the states of South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria. The early 1870's saw South Australian locals begin catching Southern Rock Lobsters with hoop nets in shallow coastal waters. Fishermen sold these rock lobsters in the state capital, Adelaide and Kingston in the State's south-east, where they were expected to ask no more than two shillings a dozen off the jetty. Meanwhile, in Tasmania the Southern Rock Lobster fishery has been contributing to the State's fishing industry since the 1860's.



The Lobster Vessel Mollie R tied up at Constitution Dock, Hobart in the 1950's

Victoria's commercial industry also dates back over 100 years. The introduction of beehive shaped pots early in the 20th century replaced the hoop nets. This then lead the way for Victorian fishers to expand their operations into deeper waters further offshore and to islands in the treacherous Bass Strait and later the East coast of Tasmania.

In South Australia the first commercial pots were used in 1899, and from the turn of the century, small industries emerged in different parts of the State at Kingston, on Kangaroo Island, and in the now famous fishing port of Port Lincoln - the unofficial capital of Australian Seafood.

Management of the fishery effectively commenced in the late 1800's with a Royal Commission on fisheries in Tasmania in 1882, which lead to the introduction of the Crayfish Act 1885 (Winstanley 1973). This Act introduced

the first size limits and prohibited the taking of spawning female Southern Rock Lobster in the state.

In January 1945 a group of 28 Southern Rock Lobster fishermen from Kingston, in South Australia agreed to form the South Australian Fishermen's Cooperative Ltd (SAFCOL). Not long after this, a factory was opened at Beachport to process rocklobster tails for export to America. This was perhaps the single most important development in the history of the industry, leading to rapid growth and substantial investment in gear, boats and onshore facilities including slipways and transport.

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In the years after World War II there was a rapid expansion in the overseas markets for frozen tails and whole cooked lobsters and as a result, the industry continued to develop. Vessels became more sophisticated with the addition of radios, echo sounders and pot haulers increasing their efficiency and safety.

Through the fifties the importance of managing the stocks of lobster became apparent and statistics on catches began to be collected. However, there were no restrictions on the number of vessels that could operate in the fishery and it wasn't until the late 1960s that fisheries managers begun promoting the idea of 'limited entry' where the numbers of fishing licences would be restricted. The move to the then-novel idea of 'limited entry' occurred in both the Southern Rock Lobster and the Western Australian Rock Lobster fisheries at about the same time and these fisheries were among the first in the world to adopt such a practice. It was these visionary managers, led by Bernard Bowen in Western Australia and 'Mick' Olsen in South Australia that provided the necessary basis for sustainable fisheries that we take for granted today.

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Within the limited entry framework, the fisheries also started to be managed through regulations designed to control fishing effort, referred to as 'input' controls. These included setting a maximum number of pots that can be used in a fishery, closed seasons, and total protection (no-take) of female lobsters carrying eggs (known as 'berried' females).



The Vessel Zena moored at the Gulch, Bicheno (TAS) in the 1950's with Cauls and pots in the foreground.

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In the latter half of the 20th Century participants in the rock lobster fishery began to appreciate the importance of research to better understand the biology of Southern Rock Lobster. Fishermen began paying levies based on the Gross Value of Production (GVP) of the fishery and matched with government funding have seen a substantial investment in research to better understand the breeding and life cycle of Southern Rock Lobster. Understanding the 'how, what & when' of rock lobster reproduction is very important to managing lobster stocks, as it is for all marine species that are commercially fished.

Around the turn of the century fisheries management began to not only utilize input controls, but also began to introduce 'output' controls. Output controls are better known as quota management where a Total Allowable Commercial Catch (TACC) is set for the fishery. The TACC is broken into units of weight e.g. 1 unit = 5.5kg. These units are known as individual transferable quota units (ITQ) and are owned or leased by licensed commercial rock lobster fishers. As output controls become more widely used, the need for retaining many of the input controls

is being examined since, if the quantity taken is directly controlled by catch limits, the need for many input controls becomes redundant. This process of re-examining the way in which the fishery is best managed to ensure sustainable lobster stocks is another phase of the evolution of fisheries management and, in this case, recognizes the need for management arrangements that support flexible fishing practices and hence enhances the economical viability of operators. However, the critical issue of ensuring the biological sustainability of the rock lobster stocks is always at the heart of any management arrangements.



Making beehive pots out of teatree saplings at Bicheno in 1952.

Speaking of rock lobster pots (other countries call them traps) the type in the southern rock lobster fishery are a domed shape (known as 'beehive'), constructed with a metal frame with strips of timber such as tea tree saplings, or wire or mesh netting, on the sides and top. There is a neck at the top of the pot where the lobster can enter and across most fishing jurisdictions escape gaps are used on the sides close to the bottom where undersize lobster and other unwanted species (called by-catch) can escape from. When fishing in areas where seals are prominent, steel rods that protrude into the neck area of the pot are inserted to deter nosy seals looking for a quick and easy feed of lobsters.

Trade in live exports of rock lobster has been growing since the early 1980's and now accounts for the majority of shipments out of Australia. Direct flights and being kept in a controlled temperature environment enables rock lobster to be landed in premium condition at international destinations, mostly in Asia.

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Getting gear ready for the start of the fishing season in the 21st century.

The 1990's saw the introduction of the term Ecological Sustainable Development (ESD), defined as 'using, conserving and enhancing the community's resources so that ecological processes, on which life depends, are maintained, and the total quality of life, now and in the future, can be increased'. Fisheries management agencies based their policies, programs and legislation to protect and conserve the natural environment (and resources) so as to promote and support ESD. Each of the States previously noted have very detailed management plans for their rock lobster fisheries that are reviewed regularly.

With the Commonwealth as well as State and Territory Governments committed to managing their fisheries based on ESD principles and guidelines Australia has become highly regarded internationally for the ability to manage fish stocks sustainably. To be able to export any marine species out of Australia, fisheries must be able to demonstrate compliance with the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act 1999*.

Moving into the 21st Century Southern Rock Lobster has become regarded internationally as one of, if not the, premium fine dining seafood experience, deserving its title as the '*the Finest in the World*'. Chefs from the leading restaurants of Asia, Europe and the USA praise it for its unique attributes of firm texture, sweet and delicate white flesh. In China, where Southern Rock Lobster is described as "having much fame", it is paid the highest compliment by being called the 'Dragon Shrimp'.

From the 'pot to the plate' the Southern Rock Lobster industry treats this premium seafood with the greatest of care. The ultimate financial return is paid for a healthy and live product and all handling, transport and storage procedures are based on quality assured best practice procedures.

The Australian Southern Rock Lobster underscores, what is by any standard, a highly successful fishery, it is in fact, a fantastic good news story based on a sustainable and renewable resource.



Using a winch and pot tipper makes for safe and efficient fishing operations.

Annually the fishery generates in excess of \$200 million in export income for Australia. It generates thousands of jobs in regional Australia and not only across the supply chain (harvest, process and export) but in all the ancillary businesses that provide services to the industry.

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