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## Fishing for votes wrong tack

West Australian, Perth



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**TREVOR WHITTINGTON**



The Cook Government's demersal "reform" package is not fisheries management.

It's fishing for votes at the expense of the 2½ million West Aussies who never step on to a sports-fishing boat loaded with the latest eco sounders.

And like most of this Government's environmental crusades, the rhetoric is heroic, the delivery is sloppy, and the consequences fall squarely on the people who don't have a big boat parked in their driveway.

Let's start with the political hype.

The Premier wants you to believe WA's snapper and dhufish are "on the verge of extinction".

Not "under pressure", not "at risk", not "depleted" — nearly extinct.

Anyone who has spent five minutes thinking about the ocean knows that's nonsense. Marine biologists don't use "extinction" for a wild-caught fishery stretched over a thousand kilometres.

Dhufish aren't Tasmanian tigers. They're slow growing, vulnerable and under pressure — but invoking extinction is nothing more than a scare campaign designed to soften up the public for a political decision that ignores the department's own advice.

And it is a bad decision — breathtakingly bad.

The West Coast Zone will now become an exclusive recreational playground for a small, well-connected slice of the population after a conveniently timed 21-month

closure. A miracle of biology so perfectly aligned with the election cycle that only a politician could dream it up.

We're meant to believe that two summers of rest will somehow fix a breeding problem that takes two decades for dhufish to recover. It's not science; it's political fairy dust — the kind Cabinet hopes will drift gently over the ballot box in 2029.

But here's the most staggering part.

Fisheries Minister Jackie Jarvis has wiped out the entire commercial sector on the West Coast — the very people who put local fish on the tables of the 2.5 million West Aussies who don't own a boat.

Gone. Bought out. Handed over.

All so the Government can tell the 10,000 hunter-killer rec fishers with their high-powered toys that they "saved the dhufish", while quietly gifting them exclusive access to 1000km of coastline.

Nothing in the Premier's speech mentioned the mums and dads who rely on commercial fishers because they can't — or simply don't want to — chase dhufish or snapper halfway to Africa.

Instead, we get the Government's Marie Antoinette moment: let them eat basa!

Imported. Frozen. Cheap. Welcome to the future: Local Fish for the Few.

Meanwhile, the so-called "recovery closure" for recreational fishers isn't a penalty — it's a two-year

holiday. And when they tow their boats north — because of course they will — the Government knows exactly what's coming. That's why they've quietly halved the commercial catch in the Pilbara, Kimberley and Gascoyne.

Not because stocks are failing, but because thousands of Perth boats are about to hit regional towns like a biblical plague. And wait for the pub arguments when the locals realise their fishing grounds have been sacrificed to keep the metro vote happy. No doubt the local tyre shops will do a roaring trade.

This is what the Government calls "science-led management".

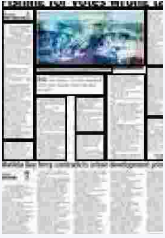
Then comes the enforcement joke.

The same Government that has cut DPIRD's budget year after year now expects the agency to enforce real-time rec catch reporting, enforce spatial closures, run tag systems, check boat limits and oversee buybacks — with no new money.

The Auditor General warned back in 2022 that DPIRD couldn't enforce the existing recreational rules or even work out how much the rec sector was actually catching. Nothing in this package fixes that. It simply adds more rules to a system that can't enforce the ones it already has.

And here's the bit no one in Cabinet wants to say out loud.

When the West Coast Zone reopens in 2027, the stocks will



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not have recovered — not even close. With WA adding 60,000 people a year — including hundreds more future hunter-killers — and with the commercial sector gone, the only option left will be to shut down the rec sector properly. Not a two-year holiday, but permanent closures.

And this is where Recfishwest’s new alliance with the Greens will come home to bite them.

The Greens were instrumental in convincing the Minister to axe the northern trawl fishery — a fishery not under stock threat and responsible for much of WA’s affordable fresh fish. But the rec lobby shouldn’t kid

themselves. The Greens don’t do “temporary”.

Their endgame is full closure of the West Coast Zone.

When you start swimming with the Greens, don’t be surprised when they decide you’re the next bycatch.

This isn’t a recovery plan. It’s a plan put forward by a minister out of her depth — unable to understand or unwilling to follow the scientific advice — backed by a Government that still hasn’t worked out who the real problem is.

Spoiler alert: It’s not the commercial fishers or the dinghy fishers. It’s not the beach fishers.

It’s the high-tech

hunter-killers — who you’d assume a Labor Government wouldn’t be bending over backwards to please — yet here we are.

And in the end, the public will pay for it the only way they can — at the fish counter, staring at \$100 per kilo for dhufish that only a tiny metro elite will ever get to eat.

No doubt the Government won’t return to test the waters on how this “cunning plan” worked out until well after the next election.

**Trevor Whittington is chief executive of WAFarmers**

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**The Cook Government’s demersal reforms benefit the few.** Illustration: Don Lindsay