

Crayfish hammered near Gisborne

by [Keith Ingram](#)

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Local representatives have expressed disappointment with part of the Sport Fishing Council's recent submission to the Ministry of Primary Industries. In the December issue of NZ Fishing News, they ask "How Healthy is Gisborne's crayfish fishery?" It's simple, it is not all bad. But recreational fishers do suffer from localised depletion of takeable lobsters in the near-shore waters to Gisborne.

Recreational fishers blame the concession enabling the commercial sector to harvest male crayfish at 52mm MLS (minimum legal size) during the autumn/winter season when prices are high. Meanwhile, the public's MLS remains at 54mm. As a result of known slow growth these sub 52mm males do not grow into the fishery during the spring moult and remain sub 54mm waiting for the next season, when commercial may take them. Because of this blatant inequity, the predominant male rock lobster fishery in the near-shore waters to Gisborne has been managed as a preference for a few commercial fishermen.

The New Zealand Recreational Fishing Council is concerned to hear of so much misinformation coming from within the sport fishing circles of the local club when it challenges the current management procedure and the use of commercial Catch Per Unit Effort data to manage the fishery.

CPUE per every commercial pot lift gives us valuable information, providing a good picture of the fisheries' health as the recreational sector's opportunity to catch rock lobster improves with high abundance. When the CPUE goes up, so do our catches. Likewise, when it drops, so do our catches.

The commercial TACC (Total Allowable Commercial Catch) in the CRA3 fishery is 260 tonnes, while the recreational and customary allowance is 20 tonnes each. We know that MPI currently estimates the recreational catch to be less than nine tonnes and sadly they do not have robust information on the customary take, but believe it to be less than 20 tonnes. We should remember that most customary permits are actioned using commercial vessels and many permits stipulate an MLS of 50mm to ensure that the permit can be filled.

Apart from the near-shore waters in dispute, the remaining CRA3 fishery is in reasonable condition when compared to the neighbouring fisheries either side. We believe this is a direct result of the large number of concession-size fish (sub 54mm) being taken out in area 910 of CRA3, with some estimates suggesting it could be as high as 60 percent of the TACC. Basically, the commercial fishery in CRA3 is only surviving because they can hammer the people's fish in the accessible near-shore waters from the marine reserve to the town basin. Is it any wonder local amateur fishers struggle to catch a feed?

Likewise, it is vitally important that we work with MPI and the commercial sector to manage this fishery using agreed management procedures and decision rules. This not only offers certainty to commercial but also gives the public a voice and, as the fishery rebuilds, so should their fishing opportunity. Sadly, the very existence of the concession operates against what should be seen as fairness and is the crux of the current inequity. As a result, it should be removed.

Yes, we hear the commercial threat "remove the concession, and we will fish year-round". It is a vocal threat from a few protagonists, when in all reality the commercial harvest peaks around the high prices – autumn/winter and the Chinese New Year in late January. The price of lobsters will dictate commercial fishing behaviour. Likewise, if commercial were to set pots within the high recreational user areas over summer it is likely pot losses would increase – something no respectable commercial fisher can endure.

Which is why, to restore equity in this fishery, the concession must go. Period . . . Or the Minister must introduce spatial separation and close the near-shore waters within three nautical miles of mean low water springs in the disputed area, to eliminate spatial conflict.

Finally, irrespective of what some local recreational voices of discontent might say, the NZ Recreational Fishing Council remains active and is the only approved recreational representative on the National Rock Lobster Management Group that offers advice on rock lobster fisheries to the Minister. Our representatives are very experienced advocates on behalf of the recreational sector and do punch above their weight. Yes, there are disappointments and frustrations, but we would like to assure the public and recreational fishers that we will continue to work in their best interests. Unfortunately, it's not cheap and the council only receives funding from its members. This also requires the support of amateur fishers and local clubs to ensure we can meet the costs associated with representation and advocacy at the highest level.

■ Keith Ingram is on the New Zealand Recreational Fishing Council and is a recreational representative on the National Rock Lobster Management Group