

Steam trawling on the south-east continental shelf of Australia
An environmental history of fishing, management and science
in NSW, 1865 – 1961

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Abstract

As many of the world's fish stocks are fully or over-exploited there is an urgent need for governments to provide robust fisheries management. However, governments are often slow to implement necessary changes to fisheries practices.

The will to govern is an essential factor in successful marine resource management. Studies of historical documents from State and Commonwealth fisheries authorities involved in the steam trawl fishery on the south-east continental shelf of Australia illustrate different expressions of intentional management and how a more ecological responsible view has emerged.

Motivated by Sydney's insufficient supplies of fish, the objective of early fisheries management in the state of New South Wales (NSW) was to improve the industry. Driven by state developmentalism, efforts were focused on increasing the productivity of already existing coastal fisheries through fisheries legislation, marine hatching and marketing.

As this failed, an alternative development vision emerged of exploiting the untouched resources on the continental shelf, which at the time were believed to be inexhaustible. During 1915 to 1923 the NSW Government pioneered steam trawling on the shelf through the State Trawling Industry with the aim of providing the public with an affordable supply of fish. Although an economic failure, the State Trawling Industry paved the way for a private steam trawling industry. The industry expanded throughout the 1920s until falling catch rates of tiger flathead forced the industry to scale down and reorganise.

A Commonwealth fisheries research organisation was established in 1937 to aid industry growth, but shortly afterwards marine scientists began challenging the development driven fishery policy. Instead they advocated sustainable resource management based upon scientific recommendations.

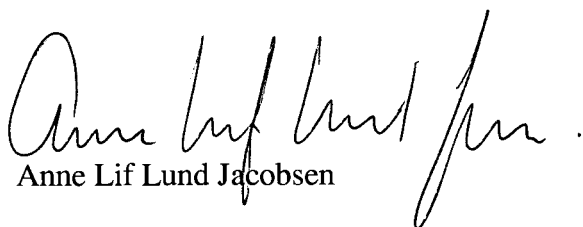
The Second World War provided financial relief for the industry, as the Royal Australian Navy leased the ageing trawler fleet for minesweeping. After the war a complex system of overlapping State and Commonwealth authority evolved. Different management objectives and lack of legislative framework blocked conservation efforts.

Fazed by evidence of depletion of stocks in the post-war period and unable to pass legislation for fishing in extra-territorial waters, the NSW Fisheries Branch used market reform to regulate the industry. Increased costs and changes in species composition of catches caused by overfishing forced the steam trawling companies to gradually close down between 1954 and 1961.

The history of the management of the steam trawling fishery shows the considerable difficulties associated with implementing responsible resource management in a multi-governmental system and the power of bureaucracy in policy decisions.

Declaration

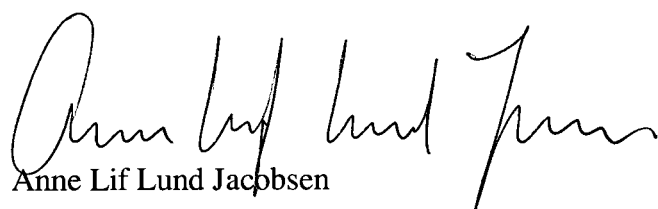
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