

DAFF sets West Coast Rock Lobster quota higher than recommended

The Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries' (DAFF) has decided to set the West Coast Rock Lobster (WCRL) total allowable catch for the 2016/17 fishing season at significantly higher levels than recommended by fishery scientists as ecologically and economically sustainable, alarming WWF-South Africa.



Derek Keats via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Instead of reducing the total allowable catch (TAC) by a third, as recommended by its own scientific working group in line with the department's recovery plan, DAFF announced on 17 November 2016, that the total allowable catch for WCRL will remain unchanged for the upcoming season. This, in WWF-SA's view, puts the fishery at risk of imminent collapse and puts coastal livelihoods at risk.

Unrealistic to expect the stock to recover

Said John Duncan, head of WWF-SA's marine programme: "Effective fisheries management must be predicated on sound processes and accurate science. It is unrealistic to expect the stock to recover if the TAC remains at current catch levels when it is clear this same level of effort has resulted in a continued decline in the resource to date. The department is simply compounding the problem for future years, history has shown that short-sighted fisheries management can only lead to the destruction of both the resources and the communities that depend on them."

The WCRL fishery provides livelihoods for many small-scale fishing communities in the Western and Northern Cape but the WCRL resource has declined dramatically over the last 50 years as a result of overfishing – and stocks are at an all-time low – an estimated 2% of their pre-exploitation levels.

The past five years have seen WCRL stocks decline in overall abundance by around 20% as a result of rampant poaching and ineffective management of the fishery with the fishery now provisionally listed on the Southern African Sustainable Seafood Initiative's (SASSI) red-list. The most important commercial fishing area from Hout Bay to Danger Point (known as super area 8+-) has suffered a decline of approximately 50% in the same period.

Resource recovery plans?

What makes DAFF's announcement particularly hard to understand is that it flies in the face of the department's

commitments to help the fishery recover. Just earlier this week the department told a parliamentary briefing that the WCRL resource was severely depleted and highlighted that it was implementing resource recovery plans, in order to achieve gains that will make a significant positive contribution to food security and alleviating coastal poverty. However, this recent decision brings the department's sincerity into question.

These recovery plans were developed and adopted jointly by DAFF, WWF-SA, and fishery stakeholders, who have been working closely together for more than 1.5 years, investing significant time and resources to build a recovery path that all stakeholders stand behind

This is not the first time that the department has ignored their commitments to sustainable management of this resource. In 2012, the former minister, Tina Joemat Pettersen, also ignored scientific advice and the department's agreed-upon recovery plan and set an unsustainably high catch for the 2012/13 season.

As a result of challenges from WWF-SA, she subsequently publically committed to following the recovery plan and, in a press release, the department indicated that regulations to make this decision legally binding were being prepared for gazetting. These commitments now seem to have been forgotten.

Fisheries Conservation Project

In an effort to address some of the key challenges facing the fishery, WWF-SA has been working with the department and all of the fishery stakeholders to develop a joint Fisheries Conservation Project (FCP) with commitments to develop an effort control plan and to ensure that scientific advice is followed in setting catch and effort limitations.

This had been adopted by both the scientific and management working groups within the department. As part of this process, there have been difficult negotiations at numerous multi-stakeholder meetings held by DAFF scientists and resource managers which had resulted in agreements on issues such as effort limitation and TAC reductions in light of the shared concerns about the state of the fishery.

Duncan said: "In the light of these interactions with the department, the minister's decision to ignore both the agreed-upon effort limitation plan and total allowable catch reduction required by the recovery plan is thus immensely concerning for all stakeholders. It would appear that decisions are being made without regard for the Department's own resource managers and scientists".

Significant economic implications for SA fishing industry

"This decision will also have significant economic implications for the broader South African fishing industry as seafood buyers, both local and global, are increasingly required by their customers to sourcing only seafood which comes from well-managed, sustainable sources."

The failure to follow scientific advice is likely to raise alarm bells for organisations such as the Marine Stewardship Council

(MSC) which assesses the department's ability to sustainably manage other South African fisheries such as the hake trawl fishery which is currently certified by the MSC (an international fishery eco-label).

As a consequence of this announcement, WWF is seeking an urgent meeting with the minister to ensure that he is fully apprised of the consequences of the decision in terms of the long-term impacts it will have on the wellbeing and livelihoods of people who significantly depend on this resource.

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