

FISHERIES — ABALONE

Grievance

MS L. DALTON (Geraldton) [9.48 am]: My grievance today is to the Minister for Fisheries and I thank the minister for taking my grievance today. The Geraldton coast has long been known for its abundance of seafood and supports a multimillion-dollar commercial and recreational fishing industry. The Geraldton coast is part of the west coast bioregion, which extends from Black Point, east of Augusta, to the Zuytdorp Cliffs, north of Kalbarri. This incorporates all islands within the zone, including Rottneest, Carnac, Garden and Penguin Islands.

The west coast zone is known for a variety of commercially and recreationally important species. This includes finfish such as snapper, dhufish, pink snapper herring and mullet, as well as shellfish like abalone and rock lobster. Recreational fishing in this region contributes to the massive \$2.4 billion recreational fishing industry. This is a result of not only economic activity created by local avid fishers but by the thousands of yearly visitors to our coast.

The particular seafood I want to talk about is abalone. Personally, this delicacy is not one I have eaten much of, but I know many people in my community absolutely love it and especially love the opportunity to go out and get a feed. However, in recent times this has been denied them due to the area being closed. Within the west coast zone of the recreational abalone fishery, fishing is permitted between mid-December and mid-February, but not for the area north of Moore River to the northern extent of the west coast zone at the Greenough River mouth. This area has been closed for abalone fishing since 2011 as a measure to protect declining population after a mass mortality event that was the result of a heatwave. All documentation and signage displayed the message “Closed until further notice”.

My constituents can understand restrictions and closures for sustainability purposes to protect and restock our precious marine species, but a growing number of people from my electorate question why this area has been closed for so long and why the area between Moore River and the Greenough River mouth is treated differently from the rest of the west coast zone. Although it is unfortunately not formatted correctly to be tabled in Parliament, my office has received a copy of an informal petition with 85 signatures calling for the opening of this area to abalone fishing. Residents have also asked about the research to show evidence that the populations of Roe’s abalone and other species have not returned. I understand that monitoring the species was occurring regularly up until the last assessment in 2019, which resulted in a recommendation to close the area indefinitely.

If the population has not recovered since 2011 and other factors are impacting abalone between Moore River and Greenough River, what action is the government taking to improve conditions and the population? What can the minister tell me about abalone fishing between Moore River and Greenough River in the west coast zone? Could there be some genuine consideration to see whether the area can be reopened, not just because it is a highly valued recreational activity in the community and offers a wonderful day out for families, but also because the opportunity to gather abalone, in addition to other seafood, in a coastal town would provide an economic boost to the tourism industry of the midwest, bringing those who adore the sweeter, smaller Roe’s abalone to our region to enjoy the many other attractions that Geraldton is known for?

MR D.T. PUNCH (Bunbury — Minister for Fisheries) [9.51 am]: I thank the member for the grievance and for her superb advocacy of recreational fishers in her electorate. I have met with a number of people up there on my visits and heard firsthand the importance of recreational fishing to that community. There are, of course, some 700 000 recreational fishers in Western Australia. It is a very popular pastime. It is an intergenerational pastime; grandparents take their grandkids out fishing for the experience. Some are very avid fishers; some are light-touch fishers. Either way, 700 000 fishers means that sustainability has to be one of the considerations—“the” consideration—for government in its decision-making. We take that responsibility very seriously, and occasionally we have to make serious decisions that impact on people’s access to the resource so that we can have certainty of fish for the future. We have had to make those decisions recently about the demersal species in the west coast area. In many respects, we have had to address the sustainability issues left by our predecessors, who took the easy way out and went after a popular vote rather than deal with that fundamental sustainability. We support recreational fishing. We are very passionate supporters, and that is why we have supported the fish aggregation device program, which will be operating in the member’s area, to attract large pelagic fish and help people switch their fish. We have funded artificial reefs, including seven artificial reefs across WA, with one in Kalbarri, just to the north of the member’s area. We have also funded boat ramps and upgrades to support trout stocking to try to improve inland fishing.

Abalone is a very unique recreational opportunity. It is highly valued and there are some 17 000 abalone licence holders in the state. Two-thirds of those are based in the metropolitan area, so there is a lot of pressure. Fishing for abalone in the metro area is open for only four to five days a year, with a one-hour fishing window, which highlights the sustainability issues. Ninety-nine per cent of the fishing is done by people wading offshore onto the intertidal reef, so it is a unique experience. With productive abalone fishing locations on the doorstep of a major city, it has to be managed well. In fact, it is probably the most tightly controlled of all fisheries for very good

reason, and that is to ensure sustainability. It is one of the few remaining sustainable fisheries for abalone on the doorstep of a major city.

It has been a fairly good couple of years. The fishery is highly susceptible, though, to marine heat waves and environmental conditions, and that goes to the heart of the issue that the member has raised. In 2011, we experienced an extreme marine heat wave event, followed by several years of above-average temperatures. It was estimated to have wiped out over 90 per cent of Roe's abalone north of Moore River, so it was an extreme impact. As a result, all fishing had to be closed after that catastrophic event. Research over the following five and a half years showed no natural recovery in the northern stock. There have been some novel approaches to help recover the stock through translocation to help establish new populations. Those projects did show promise, but there have been ongoing warmer sea surface temperatures.

The last assessment of the northern stock was undertaken in 2013, as the member mentioned, and it showed that stock was still depleted. However, we will soon be undertaking monitoring of the northern stock to provide an updated stock assessment. I know that the member has been contacted by constituents and that the informal petition has been lodged with the member, so clearly people are asking for more action to be done to see what we can do to improve it. Although the area that the member has raised is part of the western coast zone for the recreational abalone fishery, it has remained closed. Constituents now want the area to be managed in a way that is consistent with the management in the metropolitan area. There are abalone on limited reef platforms across that area. I am pleased to say that we are going to act on the member's request. She has advocated very strongly and we are going to act.

I have arranged for the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development to look at the area as part of a planned assessment of the northern stock. That work is scheduled to take place in the coming months. DPIRD is acting quickly and will inform potential arrangements for the 2024–25 season. Like the member, I understand the importance of this fishery to recreational fishers and I very much would like to see the area reopen to recreational abalone fishing. We have to make sure that the sustainability is there, and that will inform the decision-making. However, we are keen to do whatever we can to make sure that people in those areas can enjoy the experience of catching abalone and having a very special feed. As I said, the much lower population along that coastal stretch will be taken into consideration. DPIRD will be engaging with Recfishwest on the matter during the first half of 2024–25 with a view to providing access when the 2024–25 season opens later in that year.

We are very cognisant of recreational fishing opportunities. We have to manage them sustainably. We always will fish for the future, because the children of today will be the adult fishers of tomorrow, teaching their children to fish. At the forefront of every fisher's mind should be sustainability, because it is a collective issue for all of us. We will act on the abalone issue. The department will undertake that assessment. We will talk with Recfishwest. The member can give her constituents certainty that they have been heard. We are acting, and will continue to act, and will provide further advice on completion of the assessment. Thank you for the grievance.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Thank you, member and minister. I love the fact that you were both within your seven minutes. That was great.