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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE
Marine Conservation
SPEECH

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Page 7268
Questioner
Speaker Truss, Warren, MP

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Mr TRUSS (Wide Bay—Leader of The Nationals) (15:20): The government's unilateral decree to lock up another 1.3 million square kilometres of our seas, more than doubling the number of marine reserves from 27 to 60, has nothing to do with sustainably managing marine environments or fisheries. It is just another empty gesture for the environment; but it is certainly a cruel barb for many coastal regions. This has a lot more to do with hooking a few Greens preferences at the next election or renting the Greens support for another week in this parliament than it has to do with anything about the environment—and that is the real catch. But it has real consequences for Australian commercial and recreational fishers and the regional communities which support them.

When 'lock it up!' is the government's approach to vast areas of Australia's territorial waters, is it any wonder that our supermarkets are overflowing with imported seafood? It is a remarkable fact that Australia imports a massive 72 per cent of the seafood we eat. For a vast island nation surrounded by sea, that is simply bizarre. We control much of the area of the planet's oceans. Australia's exclusive economic zone in terms of sheer scale is third in the world behind only the United States and France, yet we are not allowed to feed ourselves with our own fish. There is no doubt, of course, that we must conserve our oceans and be conscious of the breeding grounds and the seasons so that they can be sensibly harvested. Indeed, to swim or snorkel or dive on the Great Barrier Reef is one of the truly remarkable experiences of life. The wonders of our oceans and the reefs are truly awe-inspiring and they must always be preserved. Our fishing industry understands this only too well and is at the forefront of managing sustainable fisheries. Our recreational fishers and our marine tourism industries understand that the value of their entire industry is dependent upon having a sustainable environment, but they have been ignored.

The government's claim of consultation is a sham. Nor has there been any attempt to justify these new parks on the basis of science or transparent evidence. At no stage has there been fair dinkum feedback or a willingness to listen to the communities. Rather we have seen bureaucrats descend on communities and lecture people about what to expect. They have not been genuinely engaged in taking on board industry or recreational fishers or community concerns. In reality, the government has no appetite to negotiate on the details of its marine parks decree. The Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities has presented it to the people, the businesses and the community as a fait accompli, saying to take it or leave it. There is supposed to be a 60-day consultation period but in his media release on 14 June 2012 the minister said:

It's too late for people to say I want this line shifted or I want this zone painted a different colour.

The question now is very straightforward: do we go ahead with the most comprehensive marine park network in the world or do we not?

Minister, is there going to be a genuine consultation period or is there not? If your press release is relied upon, then the issues are all closed, and the government is not going to even listen to the concerns of people who are affected.

The extension of Australia's system of marine reserves according to the Pew Environment Group is a consequence:

... of a determined coalition of 15 Australian and international conservation groups ...

This coalition was made up of almost half foreign groups, funded from overseas and doing very little in their own countries sometimes about creating environmental and sustainable fisheries, but seeking to impose upon Australia an enormous addition to our environmental reserves.

Between them these sorts of people are opposed to virtually every element of human existence. They want to ban wild catch fisheries, yet they oppose virtually every aquaculture application that is ever proposed. They do not want us to eat meat, they do not want us to use farmed animals and they do not want us to harvest native

animals. They do not want us to grow crops because crops might use water or fertiliser or chemicals. Well, what are we expected to live on in this country if every hectare of sea and of land is to be declared a national park?

Over the last 30 years Australia has led the way in developing management plans for the sustainable use of our fishery resources. Since the introduction of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, all Commonwealth fisheries have been required not only to guarantee the sustainability of the targeted fisheries but also to ensure the sustainability of the impact of removing target stock on other species. This might be the impact of predators of that stock or the impacts of bycatch populations. A comprehensive investment by Australia in the use of bycatch reducing devices and innovative fishing practices to eliminate the interaction of iconic non-target species like sea birds, turtles and seals have now been adopted and recognised around the world as the best sustainable fishing practice.

We do not see the propaganda of the Labor government and the Greens showing images of whiting or flathead or prawns. Instead we have pictures of seals, manta rays, turtles and seahorses. No-one in the scientific community would suggest that these are being exploited by Australian fisheries or that they are at risk in any Australian jurisdiction. The reality is the Australian people were taken aback when the government chose its location for this great announcement. It was an aquarium with a backdrop of stingrays and coral and conveniently passing turtles. These species are not at threat. It will be no surprise to both coastal communities and recreational fishers that they have never targeted any of these creatures by their activities.

Mr Perrett: It is hard to get a camera through to the Coral Sea.

Mr TRUSS: If you go to the Coral Sea declaration, the eastern boundary of the declared closure adjoins waters that are heavily finished by foreign fishing vessels. We know that the presence of Australian vessels is something of a deterrent to fleets targeting our fish in our own waters. That has to be the case because the government has so downgraded surveillance of our fisheries that there is going to be no-one there to actually supervise and ensure that other countries simply do not take up the fish that we are seeking to preserve. With the level of surveillance we have on our waters at the present time, the only vessels that will be fishing in these new marine reserves will be those who are not Australian. Other vessels will simply come in and take the fish that we have nicely fattened up for them in our reserves and they will sell them on around the world. The government cannot have a credible reserve policy unless it also has an appropriate surveillance policy.

For as long as I can remember, I have been listening to claims by environmental extremists that the Great Barrier Reef is being destroyed, it is being ruined. They claim the crown-of-thorns starfish destroyed the whole Barrier Reef at least five times a year, if you listen to the media. The coalmining is going to destroy the reef, the ships running aground have destroyed the reef—all 2,000 kilometres of it. Captain Cook ran aground there. That must have destroyed the reef as well. The farmers, of course, are always destroying the reef with chemicals and fertilisers. The tourists destroy it, the dams and the urban development destroy it. The droughts, when there is not enough water for it, destroy it. When there are floods, it gets destroyed again. If you listen to the environmental groups, the Great Barrier Reef has been destroyed every year. You know, when I visit the reef, it is just as beautiful, magnificent and awe-inspiring as it has ever been—a true wonder of the world that needs to be looked after and needs to be carefully managed. But what this government is doing is in fact damaging the capacity to manage that area rather than enhancing it.

We all know that the Coral Sea declaration is not about protecting the environment; it is about green votes. In May 2009 the former Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts used emergency provisions in the EPBC Act that gave him the ability to declare a conservation zone.

The conservation zone provisions are meant to provide emergency protection over an area—protection from some sudden, unexpected, emergent threat—to give the minister some breathing space to consider what long-term protection might be needed. This move was a clear and obvious abuse of the act. There was no emerging threat. There was none. There were no applications for new fishing licences, no applications for mining. There was nothing. The minister did not even try to make one up. He just abused the act.

According to marine scientist Professor Ray Hilborn, from the School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences at the University of Washington, the motives for non-government organisations going into denial about the fisheries management in Australia are deplorable. He recognised our fisheries management as the best in the world. I have heard the Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities proudly boast that our fisheries management is the best in the world and I agree with him. But Australia has been subject to a relentless

antifishing campaign that is causing the doom and gloom myths from misrepresentations of overseas examples of inadequate fisheries management.

Hanging up a 'no-fishing' sign over so much of Australia's coastline is just another stunt so the Prime Minister can laud herself at the United Nations Rio Plus 20 conference in Brazil this week. She is now tired of lecturing Europeans on economic management. After all, with her \$174 billion deficits, she does not have much to boast about. On fisheries management we do have a lot to boast about, but the Prime Minister is going to overlook that and instead look to the massive increase in areas that are being locked up around Australia's coastline.

As I said before, we import 72 per cent of the seafood we eat, despite having one of the largest fishing zones in the world. In 2009-10 Australia produced 171,000 tonnes of seafood from wild catch. These statistics are stunning. By comparison, New Zealand's catch was 441,000 tonnes, from an area half as big as Australia's. They caught three times as many fish in an area half the size. Thailand catches 14 times more fish than we do, despite having a fishing area 10 times smaller than ours. So it is not hard to see that the government's marine park declarations have nothing to do with environmental management of our seas. We are exporting our demand for seafood to countries less concerned about marine management than we are. Australia harvests fewer than 30 kilograms of fish per square kilometre of its ocean territory, compared to a global average 20 times greater than that, at around 750 kilograms per square kilometre.

So we are not raping and pillaging our fisheries. There is no-one in the world that can match our management record, but there is a human cost. About 100,000 people are still left directly employed in the Australian fishing industry and 3.4 million people engage in recreational fishing each year. Senator Conroy confirmed in the Senate on Monday that these parks will have a significant impact on the recreational fisheries. In fact, recreational fishermen, in an area inside 100 kilometres from shore, will be shut out of a staggering 63,000 square kilometres. So the reality is that this will have an effect on fishermen, their families and their communities.

Labor is penalising the wrong people. Australian fishers have been doing the right thing, going about their business in a sustainable and environmentally conscious way. Now, all they are going to be offered is some more compensation. Some of these people have already had several lots of compensation. They have been moved from place to place. I acknowledge that sometimes it was at the hands of our government. But at least under our government \$250 million worth of compensation was supplied—not that that was much comfort to the families who had been so adversely affected.

But this government is now offering only about a third of that amount of compensation—we are told \$100 million—and yet the area to be affected is vastly greater. It is clear that there will not be decent compensation available to all those fishermen affected, let alone to the communities around Australia which have been adversely affected.

This is a policy response that is in search of a problem. The problem is not that Australian's waters are overfished. We harvest only 30 kilograms of fish per square kilometre. The global average, as I said before, is 20 times greater. We import so much of the fish that we eat. We are now going to import it from fisheries that do not have the standards of management that we have in this country. So, please, Minister, do not respond flippantly. Many families and businesses are affected. Some have already been hurt many times. The majority of fishermen have already left the industry, but there are many who will want to continue to work in this industry. We should certainly not be expected to continually increase our reserve areas just because environmentalists demand more and more and more.