

Torres Strait Islanders – improving their economic benefits from fishing

- » Tropical rock lobster and finfish are the key species targeted by commercial Torres Strait Islander fishers.
- » Results from a survey undertaken by ABARE with islander and nonislander fishers in the Torres Strait indicate that islander fishers operate a very different enterprise from nonislander fishers. In particular, islanders operate on a much smaller scale and undertake less processing of their catch. This leads to islanders generally receiving a lower price for their product than nonislander fishers.
- » In the lobster fishery, islanders were performing at least as well as nonislander fishers in profit per kilogram of fish landed. In contrast, in the finfish fishery, islanders did not do as well as nonislanders, mainly because of their remote location and the small scale of their operations.
- » While commercial fishing cannot replace the income received by most islander fishers from the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme, through careful management by both governments and islander fishers themselves, it is possible that the financial returns to islander fishers can be improved.

the island way

- » Islander fishers operate a very different enterprise compared with nonislander fishers. While most nonislander fishers employ a large primary boat equipped with accommodation, processing facilities and tenders in tow, most islander fishers rely on a single small dinghy.

why islanders receive a lower price

- » The lack of processing facilities on islander boats helps to explain why islander fishers receive a lower price for their catch than nonislander fishers.
- » Nonislander fishers supply a snap frozen product to an exporter or to the domestic fish market. Islander fishers on the other hand supply a wet product to a processor – for example, a community freezer. More needs to be done with the wet product before it is ready for export or for domestic consumption.
- » Given that islander fishers are supplying such a different product, it is to be expected that they will receive a lower price.

impediments to islander fishing incomes

- » The small scale of islander fishers' operations may increase their costs per unit of output.
- » Whether a fisher is catching tropical rock lobster or finfish, the catch must be processed and in the snap freezer soon after it is caught in order to be of a high quality. A nonislander fisher can stay out for days catching fish because their boat is equipped with processing facilities. But an islander fisher must return to shore almost daily to unload their catch.
- » The extra travel undertaken by islander fishers increases fuel costs and reduces the time spent fishing, compared with nonislander fishers.
- » Both islander and nonislander fishers are confronted by the problems of operating in a remote region.
- » On most remote islands of the Torres Strait, there is at best only one fuel outlet and one retailer of fishing equipment. Also, there is little in the way of repair services and few options for marketing fish.
- » Nonislander fishers targeting finfish get around the problems of their remote location by buying fuel and equipment in Cairns and having it freighted to where they are operating. They also freight their catch to be sold on the mainland.
- » Nonislander lobster fishers operate mainly in the Western and Central reefs of the Torres Strait and can therefore regularly buy supplies from Thursday Island and sell their catch on Thursday Island. Some also use the mothership service from the mainland.
- » The small scale and inexperience of islander fishers makes it difficult for them to access freight services.

steps to improve the economic returns of islander fishers

- » It is not a solution for islander fishers generally to increase their scale of operation and add processing capacity to their business. The status of the fisheries would not sustain this. Nor would many islander fishers be able to borrow enough money for a primary boat, freezers, tenders and other equipment.
- » But there are many other ways in which the economic benefits of islander fishers can be enhanced. Governments have a critical role to provide islander fishers with the opportunity to increase their profits from fishing. And fishers themselves need to develop their business skills to improve their profits from fishing.
- » Table 1 reports options for improving fishing incomes with different fishers in mind. Some of the options are useful to all fishers, even those who are content to fish on occasional weekends, whereas other recommendations are only relevant for more active or large scale fishers.

table 1 options for improving the economic benefits of islanders from fishing

who benefits?	government policy actions	fisher actions
all islander fishers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 manage total allowable catch to increase stock 2 identify any impediments to competition 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 keep expense receipts 2 maintain equipment themselves
active islander fishers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3 consider options for a more flexible CDEP payment schedule 4 under an output quota option: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • remove limits on fishing methods • allow islander businesses to use nonislander labour 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3 budget and plan 4 deliver live product 5 form cooperatives to buy fuel and other supplies in bulk 6 consider model of primary boat with tenders in tow