

Fisheries management

Shepherding the seas

The International Operations Group of Fisheries Western Australia offers expert advice on issues of monitoring, control and surveillance

The modern environment of fisheries and marine management is complex and demanding. High-seas management, raised levels of technology, and state-of-the-art vessel operations all ensure that the monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS) of our precious marine resources needs to be of the highest standard.

The International Operations Group of Fisheries Western Australia is a dedicated and experienced team of professional compliance officers who undertake a wide variety of demanding tasks on behalf of the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA), Australia's Federal fisheries management agency. Group members possess a diverse range of skills and qualifications in the areas of fisheries management, MCS of capture fisheries, environmental management, education and enforcement techniques. All members have Maritime Masters qualifications of varying levels.

The group has been operating continuously since 1979. Officers regularly operate in such diverse regions as the warm waters of the tropics and the less hospitable waters of the sub-Antarctic. Patrols cover the Australian 200-nautical mile Fishing Zone (AFZ) adjacent to Western Australia, and the remote offshore territories of Christmas Island and Cocos Islands, as well as the Antarctic regions of Heard and McDonald Islands. They conduct aerial and surface patrols on vessels and aircraft supplied by the Royal Australian Navy, Coastwatch and the Royal Australian Air Force, as well as private charter vessels.

In-port inspection of foreign and domestic fishing vessels is also a primary task undertaken by the group. These inspections are conducted in ports

throughout Australia, covering the local tuna longline operators as well as the large-scale Japanese tuna fleet. Licence and logbook checks, pre- and post-fishing briefings, and freezer volumetric inspections are routine. More than 250 vessels are checked annually. In the 1980s, licensed Taiwanese pair-trawlers were also inspected on a regular basis in the northwest port of Broome.

International Operations staff operate in harsh and difficult conditions, using comprehensive occupational health and safety guidelines. The group has developed specialized equipment and procedures to operate effectively in extremely low temperature freezers aboard fishing vessels.

International Operations Officers have extensive experience in the volumetric estimation of fish catches in freezer holds. Their methodology allows for auditing of vessel catches that are subject to quota restrictions in situ, without compromising the quality of the product by removing it from the freezer. Monitoring of quotas can often be difficult in any fishery and, in many circumstances, can be the weak link in the chain when considering accuracy in the measurement of fishing effort. Volumetric surveys are ideal where the unload can not be supervised or measured, as is the situation with visiting Japanese tuna vessels.

Illegal fishing

Officers have been kept extremely busy since the late 1980s, with a constant influx of Indonesian fishermen illegally fishing within the AFZ. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) exists between the Indonesian Government and the Australian Government to allow traditional Indonesian fishermen to fish within the AFZ in an area off the northwest

coast. Nearly all the Indonesian vessels apprehended have been fishing outside this allocated area. The main target species for these vessels are trochus, trepang and shark (for fins).

In addition to the surveillance in the northern waters adjacent to the mainland, regular patrols are conducted to Christmas Island and the Cocos Islands in the northern Indian Ocean. As territories of Australia, each has a 200-nautical mile fishing zone and thus comes under the care and protection of the International Operations Group. Fishing vessels from other nations are occasionally found operating illegally within these waters. With the vast distance to mainland Australia and limited resources on the Islands, a successful prosecution becomes much more of a challenge for the group.

Another Australian territory coming under the watchful eyes of the International Operations Officers is that of the Heard and McDonald Islands. Situated below the Antarctic Convergence Zone and nearly 2,300 nautical miles southwest of the Australian mainland, the surrounding waters of these islands are home to the highly prized Patagonian toothfish (*Dissostichus eliginoides*).

Patrols have been made to the area since early 1998. Over the years, these patrols have resulted in the apprehension of

several illegal foreign fishing vessels. In January this year, a patrol to the region set out with several aims. Initially meant to maintain a surveillance presence in the area, the patrol created history by taking the first step in what will become an ongoing level of international co-operation and assistance. Liaison with French authorities has paved the way for future joint support and operations in the region.

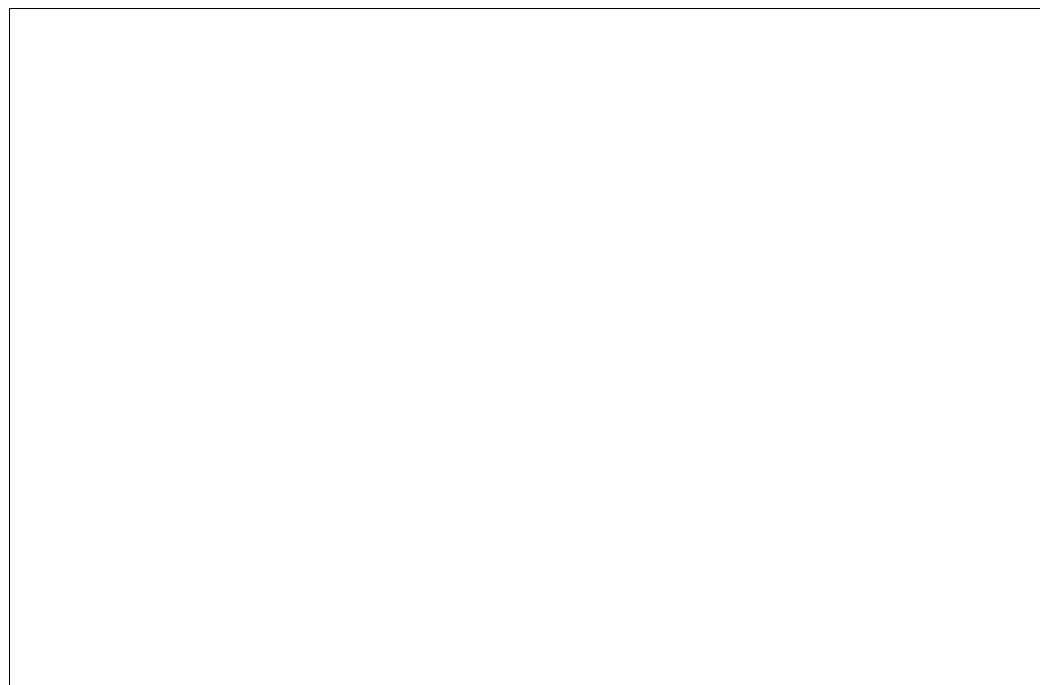
Only two licensed Australian trawlers are permitted to fish within the AFZ of these islands. However, in recent years, other nations have fished illegally in the area.

Once again, the distance from the mainland and the extreme weather conditions prove hazardous to operations conducted by the group in this region.

Specialized boarding procedures, equipment and techniques have been developed by officers to ensure safe and effective outcomes.

Prosecution

Two Australian Navy patrols to the area resulted in three illegal foreign fishing vessels being apprehended and prosecuted. Regular patrols to this remote area are now being undertaken using a civilian chartered vessel. Illegal fishing activity in the region appears to have lessened due to the much publicized apprehension of the three fishing vessels



and the presence of International Operations Officers in the region.

Although surveillance and compliance issues appear at the forefront of the group's duties, these highly trained officers are equipped with a diverse range of skills and experience. In situ delivery of education services to fisheries-related personnel in neighbouring countries has also become an expanding function of the group.

While enforcement and subsequent prosecutions can be seen as a deterrent to breaches of fishing laws, education and awareness can often help to deter the initial illegal action. The result is a saving of time, effort and costs for all concerned, as well as the protection of natural resources.

In Indonesia, in May 1999, the first stage of Project Wakatobi was completed. The three-month operation took place in the Tukangbesi Islands group in southeastern Sulawesi. International Operations officers trained 53 Marine Park Rangers in basic marine skills and MCS techniques to be used in the operation of the newly established Wakatobi Marine National Park. Officers also provided community development assistance by training and advising locals in the construction of fish aggregating devices (FADs) and the initial development of seaweed mariculture projects.

As an alternative to apprehension and prosecution, the project aims, in two ways, to try and reduce the number of Indonesian fishermen coming to fish illegally in Australia—first, by ensuring the sustainability of local fish stocks, and second, by developing alternative income generating opportunities for the fishermen. Funding for the first stage was provided by AusAID. Further funding is being sought to continue the project.

The International Operations Group also delivers 'in-country' Fisheries Prosecution Workshops on behalf of Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) for surveillance and fisheries officials of member nations. Countries benefiting from the group's expertise include Fiji, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia. Topics

covered during these training courses include :

- Regional (Pacific) Fisheries Law
- Distant-water Fishing Nation (DWFN) Operations
- Longline fishing
- Purse-seine fishing
- DWFN vessel construction
- Illegal reef platform fishing - use of sodium cyanide and explosives
- Boarding procedures
- Evidence gathering
- Basic search techniques
- Note-taking techniques
- Preparation of acceptable written statements
- Giving evidence in court
- Catch calculations and freezer capacities (volumetrics)
- Design and supervision of an apprehension boarding scenario
- Design and supervision of a mock fisheries prosecution trial.

As the world's marine fishery resources come under greater pressure, the need for effective management will become even more vital. The International Operations Group of Fisheries Western Australia is well equipped to not only meet the world's current demands of MCS and training, but the future expectations as well.

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