In the Shoes of the Fisher: Commercial Fishers and the Tasmanian Marine Protected Area Policy Journey

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INTRODUCTION

Located south of the Australian mainland and separated by a stretch of water known as the Bass Strait, Tasmania is the nation’s only island State. The vast majority of the State’s population—approximately 475,000—reside on or very close to the 5,400 km of coastline, and Tasmania is renowned for production of high quality seafood—abalone, rock lobster, scallop, scalefish, kelp, giant crab, and a small commercial dive industry harvesting sea urchins and periwinkles.1 Tasmania boasts unique physical and biologically diverse ocean and coastal environments; on any day one can encounter open sandy beaches, majestic sea cliffs, rocky reefs, small bays, extensive dune systems, and shallow estuaries, and discover species such as the endemic handfish, seadragons, basket stars, seafeathers, penguins, great white sharks, whales, and dolphins.2

The difficult, indeed wicked task besetting the Tasmanian Government (and indeed most if not all governments in industrialised coastal nations) is finding a balance between maintaining the lucrative commercial fishing industry and protecting the State’s precious resources and habitats.3 One

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tool in the suite of management instruments is the designation of regulated, spatially delimited areas known generically as marine protected areas (MPAs). 4

Analysis of the Tasmanian MPA policy journey over the past two decades tells an interesting story, one replete with challenge, conflict, electioneering, and inertia. For over 20 years, successive state governments and opposition parties have committed publicly to the imminent designation of MPAs if elected, but dragged their heels once holding the reins of power, despite conclusive data indicating significant declines in commercial fish stocks and the need for expedient decisions regarding marine resource and habitat protection in State waters.

The identification, inclusion and ranking of stakeholders is one of the keys to the complex issue of resource protection, and as such there is much utility in analysing the Tasmanian MPA policy process through the lens of stakeholder theory in order to find out why the process has moved so slowly. There are particular elements of stakeholder theory that provide a valuable setting against which to tease out the political motivations of key participants in the marine management field, and the problems that come with expansion of the stakeholder arena in the contemporary policy milieu. 5 In socio-economic analyses of commercial fishers’ attitudes to marine resource management it is also imperative that policy developers and decision makers be made aware of deeply rooted, socio-psychological elements such as history, tradition, and lifestyle, and the influence that these phenomena have on fishers’ attitudes toward marine protected area proposals.

Interwoven with stakeholder status and attitudes are the types of policies that directly affect commercial fishers. In the context of the Tasmanian MPA policy experience, there is a body of evidence that supports Lowi’s thesis that “policy causes politics.”6 The arguments involved in the

4. The preferred definition of “marine protected area” as intended in this article is: “any area of sea or ocean—where appropriate in combination with contiguous intertidal areas—together with associated natural and cultural features in the water column, within, or on top of the seabed, for which measures have been taken for the purpose of protecting part or all of the enclosed environment.” H. Nijkamp and G. Peet, Marine Protected Areas in Europe. Report of a study within the BioMar Project commissioned by the LIFE program of the Commission of European Communities, AIDEEnvironment, Amsterdam, March 1994, in J. C. Day and J. C. Roff, Planning for Representative Protected Areas: A Framework for Canada’s Oceans (Canada: WWF, 2000). This definition reflects the generic nature of the term “marine protected area,” and the multitude of similar terms with the same implications, for example, marine reserves, marine parks, marine management areas and habitat protection zones.
