

The Garrett Interview

Promise to consult

***Fishing World* first requested an interview with federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett back when the Rudd Government took power back in 2007. Repeated requests to his office over the past few years finally resulted in a face-to-face appointment with the former Midnight Oil frontman in his Parliament House office on Monday, February 8. *Fisho* editor Jim Harnwell headed down to Canberra for an exclusive interview with the man who controls much of our fishing future.**

Fishing World: Thanks for meeting with me, Minister. Will you ban recreational fishing in the Coral Sea?

PG: The interim conservation zone that I've declared while we continue the assessment doesn't affect recreational fishers. My expectation is that there'll be extensive consultation with all the stakeholders and then we'll make a final decision on the shape of any future arrangements in the Coral Sea. Until that time there won't any additional view other than to say that under overall marine planning in Commonwealth areas ... recreational fishing opportunities will be given very serious consideration.

FW: Considering this is an election year, when do you expect an announcement to be made about what you plan to do on the Coral Sea issue.

PG: That will depend on how long the consultations go on. I've extended the consultation periods in some other processes because we want to make sure that people do have a really substantial opportunity to think through and understand the planning processes and give us feedback. So I'm not going to put a timeline on it. We just need to work through it and give everyone an opportunity to be heard.

FW: Do you think the Coral Sea has the potential to be an election issue?

PG: I don't think so. The understanding about the marine planning processes and also what we have done up to this point in time with the Coral Sea is now better understood by fishers generally, as well as by the public, and I've always said that we do want to hear from people and fully understand all the issues.

FW: The politics of this sort of issue are challenging, as I'm sure you'd agree. If, for instance, you do completely close the Coral Sea, you will alienate the fishing sector. If you don't close it, the anti-fishing green groups won't be too happy with you. Are you trying to work out some sort of compromise deal to placate both groups?

PG: It's really important to say that I'm not looking to placate anybody. The right thing for a minister in my situation to do is to look very carefully and clearly at the advice that they receive, understand the issues thoroughly and take note of the various stakeholders, even when the stakeholders are in disagreement with one another. Having done that, I'd need to come to a view about what the best decision is in the national interest. That includes everybody's interests. It's not only rec fishers, it's not only conservation group - it's actually the national interest about these areas generally. My expectation is that you need to be mindful that where there's a balance point, if it's sustained by the information and advice that you've got, then that's good governance. It's not about who has or hasn't shouted the loudest, it's coming up with the best policy solution to the issue and striking a balance where you can.

FW: By "balance point" you mean coming up with a compromise?

PG: Well, it may be a balance between the competing views that are being put which has got the policy substance underneath them. It's important for the minister in all of these cases to look past the day to day issues and see what the long-term issues are going to be and see what sort of decisions need to be made in regard to long-term sustainability. That's long-term economic sustainability, that's long-term occupational sustainability (and it's) long-term ecological sustainability - they're the kind of issues we have to balance up.

FW: Anglers are concerned that you consulted exclusively with two green groups - Pew and the ACF - regarding the Coral Sea Conservation Zone. Is that the case? And if it is why didn't you consult more widely?

PG: The Coral Sea decision is an interim decision. It's a decision to permit consideration of the issue. People should be aware that within the assessment process there are significant opportunities for consultation. My expectation is that everybody who needs to be heard will be heard.

FW: Have you had any overtures from recreational fishing groups to meet with you and talk about this issue?

PG: There's a range of requests out there for us to come and participate in meetings and so on. What I would say is that we are very aware of the issues that rec fishers have put forward and we are quite mindful of how important these issues are to them and that their views will be taken onboard.

FW: Would it be fair to say that organisations like the Pew Environmental Trust are better equipped and resourced to lobby someone like you than perhaps recreational fishermen? After all, Pew has billions in American oil money behind it. How do rec fishers compete with those huge international lobbying organisations?

PG: Ministers and governments have got to come to a view about what's being put to them. In my case, I look at the merits of what's put to me, the advice I get from the department and on an understanding of the issues (which I believe is an important thing for a minister to have). The size of the lobbying effort shouldn't be a factor in the decision making process.

FW: Talking about that point of making a decision based on the information that you've got and the advice that your advisers are giving you, the recent mako shark controversy was described by one of your officials as having "minor" impact on recreational fishermen. That obviously wasn't the case. Would you agree that the Government could do a better job in understanding recreational fishing issues, considering it's an activity enjoyed by millions of Aussies? What sort of measures would you like to see implemented so rec fishing issues are better understood at departmental and political levels?

PG: I don't know about this particular comment and I don't know where it was made or who made it so I'm not going to respond directly to that. What I would say is that we can always open up to processes to greater participation and involvement and that's one thing I've done since I've become minister. And I think our track record speaks for itself in that regard. I'm very open in making sure that everybody has an opportunity to be heard. Even if they hear a comment from an official that they don't like, that doesn't reflect the decisions that I'm going to make. I'm also very aware of the number of people who have a huge affection for fishing. It's the biggest recreational pastime in Australia and I'm very aware of that. It's absolutely the case that (recreational fishing) views are going to be heard and that I will be aware of those views.

FW: Would the Government consider dedicating significant areas of Commonwealth waters exclusively to recreational fishing, based on the success of the rec-only areas in NSW and Victoria?

PG: The Commonwealth planning process is mainly about trying to establish a framework where we can identify where appropriate mixed use areas would be and what areas are required for higher levels of protection, for example, MPAs and the like. Commonwealth waters are generally not places where there's large amounts of rec fishing - most of the rec fishing in Australia happens in the estuaries or along the coast, in state waters effectively ...

FW: Three miles (where Commonwealth waters start) isn't that far out to sea, Minister.

PG: Oh no, I know that people do go out there. So our task is to make sure that we get the mix of measures right in the Commonwealth waters. That'll be the thing that drives the decision making.

FW: So there's no avenue for having in that mix places that are rec only as opposed to general use?

PG: The process is still underway. The assessment consideration process is at different stages around the place and if organisations are bringing forward ideas and proposals, such as this one, they will be very closely listened to.

FW: The bioregional process that's currently underway around the country will probably result in more marine parks where we can't fish. Would the Government consider legislating to ensure a form of compensation for rec fishers disadvantaged by these zones? Compensation could include rec-only zones, artificial reefs, stocking programs, catch & release only areas and so on. What are your thoughts on that as a measure to assuage or compensate anglers who could no longer go into areas they have traditionally fished?

PG: The processes for determining the planning and whether the Commonwealth would provide any additional support are pretty clearly set and it's a process that would be rigorously adhered to. Obviously we'll look at the planning process impacts once the process is concluded. I don't want to speak into a process that's still underway. It wouldn't be appropriate of me to provide a whole lot of responses to those kinds of questions until such time as I've got the advice in front of me on the basis of the conservation process that we've got out there and underway. I would say that I think it is appropriate for consideration to be given to some recreational fishing activities taking place in adjunct to or in association with some protective regimes. I wouldn't express it with any extra level of specifics than that - not because I'm trying to get around the question - but because it wouldn't be appropriate because we've got an existing process around bioregional planning in place.

FW: I guess I could decipher that for my readers as you saying that if people during the consultation process say that if area A is closed, we'd like area B to be designated as a rec-only area or whatever, that you would look at that?

PG: Well, we'd listen to what they are saying. We're not going to start to committing ourselves to making artificial reefs in areas at this point in time. That's absolutely not appropriate. What is appropriate to do is to have the best, most open and thorough consultation that we can and listen really carefully and take notice of the views that people bring forward.

FW: Would you consider working with your colleague Tony Burke, the federal Fisheries Minister, to legislate that all billfish, including striped marlin, and other important species such as barramundi, be considered rec only, considering their status as iconic game species?

PG: That's a question that would have to be considered by Mr Burke.

FW: What's your understanding of the southern bluefin tuna issue? Do you think these fish will be listed under the CMS treaty, like the makos? If so, would responsibly managed rec fishing continue to be allowed?

PG: Again, this is Mr Burke's area of responsibility.

FW: The proposed LNG plant in the Kimberley is being very strongly opposed by various groups in the Kimberley, including recreational fishermen I've been to the Kimberley quite a few times fishing and it's an awesome area ...

PG: ... Sure is.

FW: I guess the question is why would you even think about putting in an LNG plant in such an area?

PG: The reason why it's being considered as a potential site is because in the past whenever there's been a proposal for one of these major developments they've always been considered in isolation. That's meant

that you've ended up having ad hoc developments take place in different parts of the coast line. We felt very strongly that you need to have a much smarter way of looking at how to look at dealing with those potential developments, seeing that there maybe ought to be something such as a common user site or a common hub for the processing. The last thing I want to see is a whole series of industrial developments stretching along the Kimberley.

FW: So you'd screw up one area and leave the rest?

PG: I can assure people reading this that the assessment of the proposal that you are referring to will be absolutely comprehensive and vigorous.

FW: Returning to the Coral Sea: the Pew organisation has admitted that there's no data to indicate that this area faces any immediate environmental threat and that rec fishing would have minimal impact on biodiversity. Given the fact that it's healthy, a lot of fishermen can't really understand why you would even consider closing it. After all, there's no real reason to close it, apart from one American-based organisation saying it would be really good to do so.

PG: Again, I'll take the advice from the department on the basis of the consultation that we'll have. I'm not listening to any one organisation any more than any other. And I'm not entering into a public discussion about the merits of one organisation's view or the other, by the way. Pew's views carry no more weight than any body else's views on this issue.

FW: Thanks for your time, Minister.

PG: No worries.