



about Australia

the Australian seafood industry

- Australian fisheries operate in one of the world's cleanest environments. Australia spans a number of climatic zones and encompasses aquatic environments that can be broadly divided into open ocean, benthic reef, estuarine and inshore area, and freshwater habitats.

Australia contains one of the most diverse marine faunas in the world because of its geographical isolation from other continents and wide range of habitat types that encompass tropical to sub-Antarctic waters. The diversity and cleanliness of aquatic environments means that Australia is able to supply a vast array of delicious seafood products to the world.

The commercial fishing industry is the fifth most valuable Australian rural industry after beef, wool, wheat and dairy. About 600 marine and freshwater seafood species are caught and sold in Australia (under about 300 marketing names) for local and overseas consumption. Australia is one of the largest producers of abalone and rock lobster, and Australian south sea pearls are considered the most valuable in the world.

In addition to commercial seafood production, an estimated four million Australians fish for pleasure, making fishing one of Australia's largest recreational activities.

The early days

Prior to colonisation, Indigenous Australians and visiting South-East Asians used Australia's marine and freshwater resources for food and trade. A wide range of fishing technologies

were used including nets, hook and line, spears and fixed and moveable traps.

Following British settlement in 1788, commercial use of fisheries resources expanded. Whaling and sealing provided Australia's first major marine industries and largest export commodity until 1834. The utilisation of marine mammals, turtles, pearl oysters and inshore species such as prawns, crabs, rock lobsters and fish dominated fisheries until the 1920s.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the fishing industry began to target additional species and use of new fishing methods. Until mid-century, sea mullet was the most common commercial fishery, followed by barracouta.

It is only within the past 40 years that commercial operations for fish, crustaceans and molluscs really developed, mainly in eastern and southern Australia. During this time, Australian fishing activities have diversified through the development of new fisheries and fishing technologies.

Australian fisheries

Australia has the world's third largest fishing zone covering 11 million square kilometres and extending up to 200 nautical miles

out to sea. Despite this impressive size, Australian waters tend not to be as productive as those in many regions, and Australia only ranks 52nd in the world in terms of volume of fish landed.

Production focuses on high value export species such as lobsters, prawn, tuna, salmon and abalone. Western Australia, Tasmania, South Australia, the Commonwealth fisheries and Queensland are the largest producers in terms of the gross value of fish. Australian waters contain over 150 fisheries and many of these operate on a multi-species basis.

Australia has developed significant Patagonian toothfish fisheries in remote Australian waters in the Southern Ocean and a high seas longline capacity on the west and east coasts, targeting high quality tuna and swordfishes.

Aquaculture

Aquaculture is the farming of fish and other aquatic animals and plants in marine and freshwater environments. Aquaculture is now one of Australia's fastest growing rural industries. Currently more than 60 species are being farmed including pearl oysters, edible oysters, salmonoids, southern bluefin tuna, mussels, prawns, abalone, barramundi, yellowtail kingfish, and freshwater finfish.

Aquaculture commenced in Australia in the late 1800s. However, modern aquaculture in Australia accelerated in the late 1960s. The value of the industry has increased markedly over the years and this trend is likely to continue with significant investment in research to develop culture technology for new species.

Production¹

Australian seafood production in 2006–07 was 240 000 metric tonnes (Mt) which was down from the 279 000 Mt in 2004–05. However, the gross value of Australian seafood production rose by 5 per cent from 2004–05 to \$2.18 billion in 2006–07. This rise in production value reflects the trend towards the production of high value species, such as Atlantic salmon.

The value of 'wild caught' seafood still dominates the Australian fishing industry, making up around \$1.4 billion (66 per cent) of total seafood production in 2006–07. Aquaculture production in 2006–07 was 59 700 Mt valued at \$793 million—a 7 per cent increase from 2004–05.

However, over the last decade to 2006–07, aquaculture production has more than doubled from 20 800 Mt to 59 700 Mt, whereas 'wild caught' seafood remains relatively stable over the decade despite a decline in tonnage since 2004–05. The dramatic rise in the value of aquaculture in percentage terms indicates a longer-term trend, which suggests the sector will provide the major impetus for medium to long-term growth in the value of Australia's seafood production.

Australian exports of fisheries products fell by 3.4 per cent to \$1.49 billion in 2006–07. Exports account for 68 per cent of the measured total value of Australian seafood production, but have fallen, in gross terms, by 3 per cent since 2004–05.

Seafood exports are dominated by five key products: rock lobster (\$463 million); pearls (\$314 million); abalone (\$246 million); tuna (\$162 million); and prawns (\$94 million) Combined these make up \$1.3 billion or 86 per cent of total seafood exports.

In 1990–91, just over half of Australia's exports of seafood products went to Japan. During the 1990s, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the United States became more important destinations for Australian product. In 2006–07, Hong Kong was Australia's highest value export market for edible fisheries products (\$447 million) and Japan (\$306 million) was the second highest. From 2004–05 to 2006–07, the gross value of seafood exports to Japan fell by 20 per cent, from \$380 million to \$306 million, whilst the gross value of seafood exports to Hong Kong rose by 25 per cent to \$447 million.

Fisheries management

Australia's federal, state and territory governments manage fisheries on behalf of the Australian people through consultation with the fishing industry, scientists, economists and other user groups, such as those that represent traditional fishing, recreational fishing and the environment. These management processes are used to implement controls, such as limits on catch or effort levels, and regulations regarding fishing methods in order to manage Australia's fisheries in a sustainable way.

Australian fisheries are administered according to the principles of Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD). ESD frameworks consider the sustainability not only of the target species, but of the broader marine environment, as well as economic and social sustainability.

Australia is a world leader in sustainable fisheries management. The Western Rock Lobster Fishery was the world's first Marine Stewardship Council certified fishery.

Protection of the marine environment

In order to protect the quality of the marine environmental quality, Australia has instigated a number of initiatives to minimise impacts from fishing and other activities. Many of these initiatives originally stemmed from Australia's Oceans Policy, which establishes the principles and the planning and management approaches necessary to pursue the ecologically sustainable development of Australia's marine resources. Others have been undertaken in response to international commitments, such as those under the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization's Committee on Fisheries, and the United Nations General Assembly.

Australia's fisheries and environmental legislation, as well as policy initiatives, strongly support efforts to protect the environment. Threat abatement plans, by-catch action plans, marine protected areas, national approaches to aquatic animal health issues, marine pest incursion risk analyses and environmental assessments of fisheries management arrangements have been developed to identify and deal with priority environmental issues.

Note: Unless otherwise stated, all dollar amounts are in Australian dollars. The term 'billion' means 'a thousand millions' (one billion therefore equals 1 000 000 000).

Further information

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries
and Forestry
www.daff.gov.au

Australian Fisheries Management Authority
www.afma.gov.au

Fisheries Research and Development
Corporation
www.frdc.com.au

Bureau of Rural Sciences
www.brs.gov.au

For fact sheets on other aspects
of contemporary Australia, go to
www.dfat.gov.au/geo/australia

¹ Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics, 2008,
Australian Fisheries Statistics 2007, Canberra

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Satellite imagery © Commonwealth of Australia,
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Western Australia coastline.

