

Plenty of fish in the sea? Not necessarily, as history shows

Written by Anna Clark, Australian Research Council Future Fellow in Public History, University of Technology Sydney



Ern McQuillan, Tuna Fishing at Eden, New South Wales, 1960. National Library of Australia

Australia has had tens of thousands of years of fisheries exploitation. That history reveals a staggering natural bounty, which has been alarmingly fragile without proper management. The current debate over the federal government's new [draft marine park plans](#) is the latest chapter of this story.

Early accounts described what we can only read today as some sort of fishing Eden. The sea floor off the west coast of Tasmania was carpeted red with crayfish. Extraordinary schools of Australian salmon swelled the beaches of southern Australia — from Albany right around to Port Macquarie. Mountains of mullet migrated annually up the east coast of the continent.

Colonial writers described huge hauls of fish, caught using nets they had brought over on the First Fleet. One catch in 1788 was so large, wrote David Collins, the colony's newly minted Judge-Advocate, that it actually broke the net. Collins speculated that if the haul had been landed, the entire catch could "have served the settlement [of over 1000] for a day".

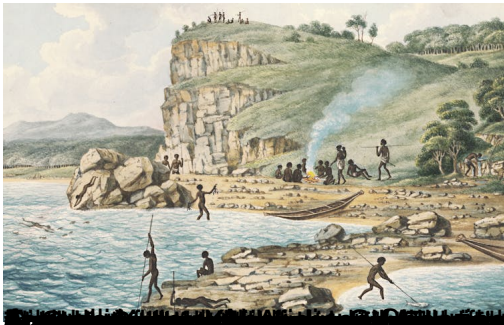
Like colonial fishers on the coast, inland explorers such as John Oxley were struck by the paradox of Australia's natural world. The land seemed barren and unsuited for pastoralism, he observed in 1817, yet the water teemed with life. In less than an hour, one of his party "caught 18 large fish, one of which was a curiosity from its immense size and the beauty of its colours," wrote Oxley. "It weighed entire 70 pounds [31kg]."

Indigenous fishing knowledge

For Indigenous people, seasonal mobility had both signalled and prescribed the times for fishing and its availability, forming a vital part of their management of local fisheries.

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Over-fishing concerns by the 1880s

By the mid-1800s, local fisheries near rapidly-growing cities such as Port Jackson and Botany Bay were already seeing the effects of [over-fishing](#). Practices such as “stalling” netted off entire tidal flats at high tide, and trapped everything behind a thin layer of fine mesh when the water retreated. Fishers picked out the larger fish such as bream, whiting and flathead for market, but piles of small fish were simply left to rot.

While the “net of the fishermen gradually increased in length”, noted Alexander Oliver, who was appointed to the 1880 Commission of Inquiry into the NSW fisheries, the “meshes decreased in width, so that nothing escaped, and bushels upon bushels of small fry — the young of the very best fishes — were left on the beaches”.

There were calls for greater regulation and fisheries management by the mid-19th century. Fish “are followed up every creek and cranny by their relentless human enemies”, and “perpetually harassed and hunted”, reported the 1880 Commission, which had been convened to investigate the poor state of the local fishing industry. It revealed an anxiety over stocks and sustainability that sounds eerily familiar today.

The fine-line between commercial exploitation and sustainability has been gingerly walked throughout Australia’s fishing history, sometimes catastrophically.

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