

Official opening

Hon. Jon Ford JP MLC

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Thank you, and thank you all for coming here today and welcome.

Be aware, I am the Western Australian Fisheries Minister and you're about to get 5-10 minutes of me telling you how good we are over here. That is our way and we don't mind having a bit of a brag; we're not perfect but we're pretty close to it. I'd like to acknowledge Mr Ichiro Nomura, Dr John Glaister, Dr Fliti Theo, Mr Barry Haase MP, Dr Peter Rogers, is my executive director of the WA Department of Fisheries, Mr John Wilson, Australia Research and Development Corp, Mr Max Ball, who is the chair of the Western Australian Fishing Industry Council, the MG Kailis Group of companies, representatives from the Queensland's Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries, South Australia's Department of Primary Industries and Resources, Northern Territory's Department of Primary Industry, Fisheries and Mines, keynote invited speakers, my parliamentary colleagues, and ladies and gentleman, I'd also like to pay particular appreciation to Ken Colburn for coming here today and giving us that welcome, and I'd also like to thank Peter Millington and his team for putting on such a great show.

It's a pleasure to be here and on behalf of all Western Australians I'd like to extend a special welcome to all conference delegates, particularly those who have travelled great distances to be here today. I hope you enjoy your time in Western Australia and that you will come back again to enjoy this wonderful state and its wonderful natural assets that stretch right across the state including our diverse and spectacular fisheries and marine environment. When you do, no matter how far into the future, I'm certain that Western Australia will still be boasting of our ability to catch a fish for feed, the clean waters into which we can dive and marvel at the biodiversity of marine species, or simply the fish available at market for an affordable price – it didn't take me long to start into the bragging, did it? And if you are lucky enough to live in one of the countries which WA exports seafood, you will always be able to enjoy our lobster, prawns, scallops, Atlantic and finfish.

I say this because successive Western Australian governments in partnership with our fishing industry, our recreational fishers and our broader community have worked to ensure, in fact all of them have insisted, that WA fisheries can be counted among the best in the world. Of course ensuring that our fisheries and marine ecosystems remain healthy and productive is a result of good management underpinned by sound scientific research, and this vital management component is supplied by the WA Department of Fisheries and led by Dr Peter Rogers and western Australians are indeed fortunate to have Dr Peter Rogers' stewardship of our fisheries. Consequently I'm confident in stating that WA has a reputation as a world class fisheries manager.

In fact WA is a typical example of the importance of fisheries in communities throughout the world and why these fisheries are worth preserving for our future generations. In WA, as is the case elsewhere, our fisheries provide both industry and employment and a form of recreation and relaxation where families can drop a line together on a weekend and catch a meal. Our government has realized that by ensuring that WA fisheries are among the best in the world, we thereby guarantee income for

our producers' livelihood for our workers and contribute to the sustainability and uniqueness of our coastal and regional communities. Barry earlier told us just how extensive our coastline is and of course we have many, many communities that rely on the fishing industry around that coast.

Decisions about allocations, how much is fished and by whom is fundamentally a problem with sustainability. These decisions are made to ensure the long-term survival of our natural resources, but these decisions are more than a scientific theoretical exercise – these decisions affect economies, communities, culture, and individuals from workers who rely on the industry for their living wage to families who rely on fish as a healthy part of their diet. I'm pleased to say that in Western Australia I feel a strong sense of partnership between all of us who benefit from our fisheries.

When we have arguments about excess and allocation which I admit can be very robust and forceful from time to time – the arguments are always directed towards a sustainable outcome. What is sustainable? Is the science reliable? How to reallocate and maintain the sustainable catch? But fundamentally I'm proud to say that all of us – government, industry, recreation, all those sectors – are moving in the right direction.

I can give you one important initiative in Western Australia as an example: integrated fisheries management, or IFM, is a way of managing fisheries that enable a variety of user and interest groups, commercial fishing, recreation fishing, indigenous, conservationists, and indeed the wider community to plan together and share resources for the benefit of all Western Australians.

Even though the details hardly disputed, it has been welcomed and supported across government by all political parties as a better way of managing fisheries and fish habitats. IFM and the IFM strategy, which was launched in 2001, was believed to be the world's first at the time. Since then we have moved along considerably, the strategy has evolved into an active method of management. And IFM is well on its way towards implementation, with a draft allocation report for Western Australian's western rock lobster fishery, released for public comment in 2005. This is soon to be followed by a draft allocation report on the abalone fishery and after that, the west coast demersal finfish fishery. The WA Department of Fisheries is also preparing draft plans for government to consider how resource sharing sustainability issues can be addressed in the other WA fisheries.

Western Australia was also one of the first states in Australia to respond quickly to the to the Commonwealth Australian government's call to meet the challenge of ecologically sustainable development and developing national standards for ESD reporting. Western Australian Fisheries Resources Management Act 1994 already has in its objectives the application of ESD and all its fisheries.

As a responsible agency, the Department of Fisheries plays its part in the WA government's sustainability strategy because it has an effective regulatory system, the technology and resources for monitoring and reporting, as well as strong cooperative partnerships with industry in the community. Our government operates from a strong science base, with robust historical data and sound fishery monitoring regimes.

The caring for fish in their environment, ensuring the allocation of fish resources equitably, is not an easy task especially when there are such diverse fish stocks distributed across a massive area of continental shelf along our state's 12,000 km coastline. The Department of Fisheries also has to administer over 35 commercial fisheries that are designated in law as major fisheries and 15 fisheries that are under various management regimes. In addition, recreational fishing is an increasingly popular pastime in WA with about 1/3 of our population who will drop the occasional line or net, and if those international guests will notice we Australians have an obsession with the coast, as I said, in my electorate, although my electorate isn't as big as Barry's, it's 1.97 million square km. There are only 67,000 people who live in that. All the rest live on the coast. Of course all those people also have an interest in how WA fisheries are managed. We

are working with all of our fishery user groups to ensure we have plenty of fish for the future, since the advent of ESD reporting and fisheries management, every impact on the state's fish stocks or their environment has to be system reported. This requires a new approach and new management strategies based on cooperation on the sharing of knowledge across jurisdictions in Australia, and between and within sectors.

In fact, our sustainable fisheries can even be a valuable marketing tool. A sound fisheries management framework for the commercial sector allows scope for innovation and evaluating that enables WA to keep pace with an increasingly competitive international market. Many of our commercial fisheries consistently encourage market development and trade prospects using the powerful marketing and economic benefits provided by a sustainable fishery. More exposure to international markets with a good product that can be promoted as clean and sustainable can only help promote WA and provide yet other benefit of industry cooperation across all sectors.

Some of you will be aware of our western rock lobster fishery which is the most valuable single species managed fishery in Australia worth between 150-300 million Australian dollars a year. This lobster fishery was one of the first fisheries in the world to be certified as ecologically sustainable by the UK-based Marine Stewardship Council. To achieve this certification required considerable and real cooperation between fisheries management and industry. Rigorous measures have been put in place to make sure the rock lobster industry can be sustained while meeting the increased demand for this valued crustacean. The western rock lobster managed fishery might be the only one in WA to be certified by the MSC at this point, but there are many other fisheries in our waters are fishing sustainable. For example, our fisheries have received many excellent third party report cards for their sustainability from the Australian government. Under the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, a total of 29 WA Fisheries have been assessed and passed, thus achieving certification for export approvals.

Key to ensuring the sustainability of our fisheries has been resolving the critical issue of how our stocks are allocated. As Minister of Fisheries in WA, I have overall responsibility for determining and overseeing the processes, timelines and final decisions on allocations for user groups.

In Western Australia there's been a need to identify use of fish by indigenous people for customary purpose within its approach to integrated fisheries management. As a result of an extensive program to recognize and include indigenous people in the protection, sharing and use of fishing resources, allocation of fish for customary fishing has been recognized as a priority in the IFM process. In thinking about allocation of fish resources we need to appreciate that particular fish stocks are valued differently by different communities and fishing sectors, for example some finfish species such as the Sampson fish, have a low commercial value but are highly prized by the recreational community for their size and finding abilities, so much so that international tourists travelling to Perth for the specific purpose of catching one of these fish, and we actually encourage any sporting nation that comes here to go and try and catch them before they come in place, because it's at an advantage.

The same can also be said in the international sphere where a species such as a whale shark which is of iconic tourist value in Australia is a source of food in another. This is an example of a complex resource sharing issue arising from different community values. Other species such as WA dhufish are iconic species for both the recreational sector and the commercial sectors, prized for their eating quality, size, and value. However, I'm very keen to say that the commercial fishing industry, recreational fishers, charter operators and indigenous fishers work together on allocation and resource sharing issues.

Through IFM, and other initiatives, the WA government has created the framework for all their stakeholders to approach each other amicably, in good faith and to help

resolve these issues together. But cooperation between domestic governments and stakeholders is not the only way we can work together to ensure the sustainability of our resources. It is vital we work together internationally both as fisheries managers and trading partners. Last year while visiting Britain and Norway, and through talks with the European members of the fishing industry and fishing managers, I concluded that many of the European nations were so busy dealing with resource sharing issues across international jurisdictions that they had not been able to focus on resource sharing between their commercial and recreational sectors. This isn't called having a go at the European nations. Over here of course, because of our environment, we haven't had to deal with international jurisdiction issues seriously and that may be the reason we are having a problem with our international resources at the moment because nationally we haven't focused on that seriously enough. But it gives an example – of course you will all be aware of how the environment plays an important role in how we envision we focus on our fisheries and how we manage them

This conference, like its FishRights predecessor in 1999, is therefore the perfect opportunity for everyone to come together in a spirit of goodwill, to think out loud, to share our problems our views and our solutions to the issue of sharing our fish stocks.

Sadly, it is the case that international cooperation can be undermined by the scourge of illegal fishing, an issue that affects many countries including Australia. Western Australia is a relative isolated part of the world and is facing a massive increase in illegal fishing within our northern waters. These foreign fishing incursions into Australian waters reflect the current international experience where wild catch fisheries of many countries are being pushed through the limit through illegal fishing on the high seas. Illegal fishing is a grave matter and one I feel most strongly about. When reports were being made in late 2005 that more than 20 illegal vessels a day were being sighted in our Western Australian northern waters I was so concerned that I raised the issue as a matter of national importance. In fact, I'm advised that a number of our northern fisheries are facing extinction in the next 3-5 years at the current rate of depletion.

Our government and the government of the Northern Territory joined forces developed a joint strategy to tackle head on the illegal foreign fishing in Australian waters. This plundering threatens the livelihoods of commercial and traditional fishers who depend on the sustainability of our fisheries. We have and will continue to push for a national cooperative approach to the serious problem. But increasingly, our government has had to divert resources to its fisheries in the northwest because illegal fishing activity has become a daily occurrence and is now a major threat to the sustainability of our fish stocks.

So how do we share and protect fish resources? It really is a complex balancing act, and with so many different players and so much at stake, and if it is not done well, we lose our fish. If we do not work together nationally and in concert with our neighbours to taking urgent and immediate protect some of our threatened fish stocks, then perhaps soon it will be too late. There is an enormous complexity and difference in resource sharing issues worldwide; however, it is my belief that cooperation and negotiation focused on sustainability and underpinned by scientific research may well be the key to all of them.

I say this based on the premise that sharing the fish is not an issue of whose cultural and economic need is the greatest; it is about making sure fish and fish habitats are protected. Natural resource management across the world is rapidly changing in the face of population growth, technological advances, climate change and the subsequent high demand for resources. The issue of allocating shares of a natural resource is one of paramount and increasing interest to all of those involved in fishing and fisheries management. It is complex, but achievable. Under the Western Australian Department of Fisheries 5 year strategic plan, it can be seen that we are meeting challenges to

ensure sustainable fisheries resources, integrate fisheries management with the broader principles of ecosystem based management while applying ESD principles, facilitate equitable access to fish resources and encompass fisheries research and management into the evolving state-wide natural resource management framework. This has been achieved through blending science with practical experience with fisheries management with fishes, indigenous, commercial, and recreational.

This conference will assist in advancing new ideas. Together, we will advance ways to preserve the natural resources that our communities have come to rely on. I hope that all conference participants will benefit from its focus on a broad spectrum of allocation issues, presented by speakers from all around the world, representing government, the fishing industry and those with a stake in fisheries, fishing, and the marine environment.

You have the opportunity during this conference to gather information from 90 world class presenters and contributing your own ideas through the plenary sessions and workshops. You have all come with the intention to help resolve fit resource allocation issues and to look for ways of increasing international cooperation the sake of developing and maintaining sustainable fisheries world wide. When one species is exploited to extinction, there will be an inevitable search for another fish to grace the table and so the cycle will continue unless we all develop proactive strategies to ensure that we fish for the future.

Remember sharing the fish is about protecting fish and fish habitats so we can all have our piece of the pie, particularly for our future generations. You have a great amount of exciting work from now until the conference concludes on Thursday, so I wish you all a productive and enjoyable few days.

Once again welcome, and thank you all for your contribution to this important conference. It is with great pleasure that I officially declare the Sharing the Fish 2006 Conference open.

Thank you very much.

