

2. Background to the Audit Report

Australia's Great Barrier Reef is the largest complex of reefs and islands in the world and it supports the most diverse ecosystem known to man. Because of its unique status, the Great Barrier Reef was included on the World Heritage List in 1981.

The GBRMPA is responsible for the management of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, which lies within the World Heritage Area. The Authority operates under the GBRMP Act 1975 and is responsible to the Commonwealth Minister for Environment and Heritage.

The Authority's goal is to provide for the protection, wise use, understanding and enjoyment of the Great Barrier Reef in perpetuity through the care and development of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. In a multi-use environment, the Authority's primary responsibility is the conservation of the resources of the Great Barrier Reef.

A number of commercial fisheries operate within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The ECTF is the largest of these fisheries, with some 530 vessels accessing the General Use (light blue) Zones of the Marine Park. Historically, about 70% of all trawl activity in the fishery occurred in the World Heritage Area. The Fishery is managed under Queensland jurisdiction. However, as a result of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority's obligation under the GBRMP Act 1975, the Authority views itself as a co-manager of fisheries, where they occur in Marine Park waters.

The management arrangements for the ECTF had been under review by the administrators of the fishery and its key stakeholders since the mid-1990s, due to increasing fishing effort and decreasing viability of the industry. The Trawl Plan was introduced in November 1999. After extensive consultation, a revised Trawl Management Plan was introduced in December 2000, although the majority of the new provisions did not take effect until after 31 December 2000. The GBRMPA was party to the discussions culminating in the introduction of the revised management arrangements.

The GBR Ministerial Council, established in 1979, coordinates the Commonwealth and Queensland Government policy on reef matters at Ministerial level. At the Council's 28th meeting in October 1999, the Ministers agreed on a list of principles in relation to the draft Trawl Plan (see Section 3.7.1). Among other issues, it was agreed that the GBRMPA and the then Queensland Fisheries Management Authority (QFMA), now superseded by the QFS, would work co-operatively to develop an adequate reporting relationship so as to enable the Authority to report effectively to Council on an annual basis. This agreement was reflected in the Special Commonwealth Gazette of 26 September 2001, which states that "*the Authority will conduct an annual audit on the progress of the East Coast Trawl Fishery in achieving the objectives of the Fisheries (East Coast Trawl) Management Plan 1999 (as amended)*" (See Appendix 1 for the gazettal notice and Appendix 2 for the objectives of the Trawl Plan).

A secondary requirement for the assessment of fisheries in the GBR Marine Park lies in the key findings of the Australian National Audit Office. The ANAO, in its 1998 performance audit of the GBRMPA, listed amongst its key findings that "*the Authority (i.e. GBRMPA) does not have adequate data to determine whether it is achieving its primary objective of protecting, conserving and allowing for reasonable use of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park*". The Audit Report on the performance of the ECTF addresses this shortcoming for this fishery by identifying the data sources available for the management of the ECTF and examining the quality of these.

The preparation of this Audit Report by the GBRMPA is a separate process to the ecological assessment by EA under the EPBC Act 1999 of all Commonwealth and State fisheries with an export component. However, in order to ensure consistency in the assessment process, the audit

has applied the “*Guidelines for the Ecologically Sustainable Management of Fisheries*” developed by the Commonwealth (see Appendix 3). It is understood that the QFS took account of the issues raised in the draft Audit Report when finalising the ecological assessment of the ECTF. Similarly, EA considered the draft Audit Report during its public consultation on the ECOTF Assessment Report. Under the EPBC Act 1999, fishery assessments need to occur before the end of 2003.

The Audit Report only relates to the activity of the ECTF under the Authority’s jurisdiction (i.e. trawl activity within the Marine Park). Beam trawling, which occurs mainly in estuaries and inshore coastal waters outside the Marine Park, has been excluded from this report. The scallop fishery, which also occurs mainly outside the Marine Park, has been included, as the northern scallop beds lie within the southern part of the Marine Park. The Audit Report notes that the EA assessment of the fishery provides a full assessment of the ECTF, covering all sectors of activity (with the exception of beam trawling).

As the fishery occurs in the GBR Marine Park and given the World Heritage status of the GBR region, the Authority has been rigorous in its assessment of the performance of the ECTF after the introduction of the revised Trawl Plan. The audit has applied the world’s best management practices as a benchmark for the ECTF’s performance.

The Audit Report contains a series of recommendations, which, in the view of the audit, should be adopted by the QFS in order to meet best management standards. The recommendations are confined to the management of the ECTF within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. However, application of these to the wider fishery may assist in the overall management process. It should be noted that many of the issues identified by the GBRMPA have been recognised by the QFS as requiring remedial action and, in several instances, processes have been implemented to deal with these issues. Where appropriate, the audit endorses these processes through its recommendations.

The Audit Report has utilised a wide range of information, including the draft and final reports on the “*Status of the Queensland East Coast Otter Trawl Fishery after the First Effort Year (2001)*” (hereafter referred to as the “ECOTF Status Report – 2001”), the “*Ecological Assessment of the Queensland East Coast Otter Trawl Fishery*” (hereafter referred to as the “ECOTF Ecological Assessment Report”) and the “*Queensland Fisheries Resources – Current Condition and Recent Trends 1988 – 2000*” (hereafter referred to as the “Condition and Trends Report”). These documents were prepared by the QFS and have since been released publicly. In addition, relevant published literature was reviewed. Discussions were held between Queensland research and stock assessment staff, ECTF management staff and GBRMPA staff. Prior to the finalisation of the audit, the QFS was given an opportunity to provide comments on the draft Audit Report. This feedback, together with comments from two external referees, was considered in the finalisation of the Audit Report.