VRFISH VICTORIAN RECREATIONAL FISHING PEAK BODY

TROUT (SALMONID) POSITION STATEMENT

Background

VRFish's 2013 Ernst and Young survey into the economic impacts of recreational fishing in Victoria showed that trout are the most widely targeted inland species by recreational anglers across the state. In an industry worth $7b annually, the economic importance of quality trout fisheries must not be underestimated. Trout fishing provides millions of dollars in tourism revenue to regional communities and supports thousands of jobs across Victoria.

The first VRFish Trout Policy was developed in 2008 through extensive member and angler input and public consultation. A review of the policy occurred in 2019 to ensure the document remained fit for purpose, and relevant to the current management of salmonids in Victoria.

Through analysis of VRFish survey data, and feedback of anglers both within the VRFish membership, the policy was updated to ensure it broadly reflected the current views of trout/salmonid anglers in Victoria.

Introduction

The purpose of this position statement is to set a broad direction for our trout fisheries in Victoria and recognise the diverse social values of trout anglers.

VISION FOR VICTORIA

The VRFish Vision is to maintain, restore and optimise quality trout fishing opportunities in Victoria through:

- self-sustaining trout populations (wild trout) where ecologically feasible.
- high quality stocked trout populations where natural reproduction is impractical or becomes inadequate to maintain adequate fish numbers.
- appropriate regulation and enforcement to ensure sustainability of the fishery for current and future generations.
- maintaining an acceptable environmental standard, (e.g. good water quality, good in-stream and riparian habitat, and is subject to acceptable environmental flows/levels and temperatures).
- providing anglers with their legal right to access crown land.
- providing angling in an environment that is as undisturbed as is practically possible.
- implementing adaptation and mitigation strategies to build resilience against climate change.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

VRFish endorses a weight of evidence approach to managing our recreational fisheries. Management of trout fisheries in Victoria should utilise the latest available scientific research, catch and effort surveys, citizen science, local angler knowledge and historical records.

VRFish will advocate for quality scientific research and best practice management of the fishery, to ensure sustainability of salmonid stocks and healthy waterways. Where gaps exist in such research, fisheries managers, in consultation with stakeholder groups, must demonstrate that they are utilising the best possible management strategies currently available to them at that point in time. Adaptive management shall be employed to enable ongoing best practice management.

Any waterway that has been historically recognised and is viable to maintain year-round populations of trout should be managed as the best recreational trout fishery possible.

The guiding principles for a quality trout fishery are:

1. Recognition and promotion of the economic and social values of Victoria's trout fisheries
2. Providing a diverse range of trout fishing opportunities and experiences for all recreational fishers
3. Catchment management strategies are adequate to support good water quality, water security, in-stream habitat, healthy riparian zones and livestock exclusion
4. Appropriate regulations and effective compliance programs are in place
5. Careful selection of genetically strong and diverse brood stock for stocking programs
6. Maintaining and improving legal angler access to trout fisheries
7. Anglers are engaged in trout fishery management and supported to participate in habitat restoration, stock enhancement and citizen science programs.

A partnership approach is taken with a range of stakeholders, such as the Victorian Fisheries Authority, Catchment Management Authorities, the Australian Trout Foundation and a range of other government and non-government agencies to deliver projects and programs benefitting Victoria's trout fisheries

MANAGEMENT

VRFish recognises that Victoria has a diverse range of trout fishing opportunities and experiences and are managed according to their classification as self-sustaining ('wild'), supplementary assistance or artificially sustained populations.

Waters currently managed as trout fisheries should be capable of producing an acceptable return of trout to anglers during average seasons assuming proper management. Trout fishery management resources should be appropriately allocated to ensure maximum returns on investment and prioritise the 'angler experience' when considering such investment options.

With the exception of seasonally managed family fishing lakes, resources shall not be directed towards waterways that have historically been or currently are, incapable of sustaining a year-round population of trout.

VRFish will continue to work with its partners and stakeholders to ensure an adaptive management approach is applied to trout fisheries in Victoria.

Stocking

Stocking programs are overseen by the Victorian Fisheries Authority and are developed through the direction and input of Victorian anglers at annual consultation meetings. VRFish and its membership will consult broadly prior to these meetings and will endeavour to provide delegates to each of the regional and metropolitan meetings to ensure the needs of Victorian anglers are being met in regard to trout stocking regimes.

VRFish now recognises the large amount of peer reviewed scientific literature that provides clear evidence in regard to the negative impacts that the stocking of hatchery fish has on wild, self-sustaining populations of trout. In light of these findings, VRFish believes that the stocking of hatchery fish in waters that are considered 'wild or self-sustaining', should only occur following depletion of stocks through natural disaster or similar catastrophic event.

VRFish does not support illegal stocking of trout. Adherence with regulations and translocation policies must be followed.

Management Categories

An important component of VRFish's trout management policy is the classification of trout waters into five distinct categories:

1. Artificially Sustained
2. Supplementary Assistance
3. Self-Sustaining (wild)
4. Specially Managed Waters
5. Mixed Fisheries (trout and native fisheries)

The following is a definition of each category.

Artificially Sustained Trout Fisheries (largely impoundments but includes some important rivers)

These waters are capable of supporting trout in significant numbers, are accessible to large numbers of anglers and because they have insignificant spawning opportunities and/or are subject to very high angling pressure they are unlikely to be self-sustaining. They can in turn be divided into two sub-categories:

- Lower Angling Pressure Waters

It is important that the fish yield per angler per day (CPUE) is acceptable. This will mean stocking takes place in line with catch rates and trout populations and may not be required more than once per year. Management opportunities are available to offer anglers the

opportunity of taking larger fish, for example, through the stocking of some triploid populations, brood stock etc. However, it is stressed that catch rate is equally important. Some waters may respond better to fry or fingerling liberations if conditions are worthwhile.

- Higher Angling Pressure and Small Waters (such as Family Fishing Lakes)

In many waters close to urban areas, with limited natural food supplies and high angling pressure, at least some fish stocked must be of takeable size for the return to anglers to be meaningful, as it is unlikely that the fish population will survive through warmer seasons to grow on. This will require intensive monitoring and management and at times will require stocking more than once per year. Any fishery that proves inefficient to be maintained, taking into account angling pressure, catch rate and water quality, must be reviewed and re-evaluated via consultation with stakeholder groups.

Trout Fisheries Requiring Supplementary Assistance

These waters support significant natural reproduction or have the potential to support such reproduction. In these waters, natural reproduction may not be sufficient to maintain a viable population due to angler pressure or environmental factors. Hence, they will require some form of management assistance to achieve and maintain a quality fishery.

It is of prime importance that any supplementary stocking is supported by scientific data and consideration is given to implementation of other management techniques (i.e. closures, reduced bag limits etc.). In addition, any assistance must not be restricted to the stocking of fish (fry/fingerlings or yearlings) but consider all options, in particular the implantation of eyed ova, spawning bed improvements etc. In any artificial supplementation, it is desirable that ova or fry etc. comes from high quality wild stocks.

It is now widely accepted amongst fisheries managers that the stocking of hatchery reared trout into rivers can negatively impact self-sustaining (wild) populations of trout, ultimately affecting the quality of a fishery (population, size, catch vs effort). VRFish believes that these impacts must be taken into account when considering supplementary assistance.

Self-Sustaining (wild) Trout Fisheries

Self-sustaining trout fisheries are those waters where natural reproduction of wild fish is sufficient to sustain a viable recreational trout fishery. These waters are considered to be among the highest quality trout fisheries.

Through the Wild Trout Fisheries Management Program, it has been concluded that stocking hatchery bred fish into wild trout streams is not an effective management tool. With the increasing effects of climate change, some wild trout populations in Victoria are subjected to ‘boom and bust’ cycles relating to water availability and temperatures. Research has shown that wild trout populations in Victoria are surprisingly highly resilient and strong recruitment can occur upon return of favourable conditions. Additionally, fishing pressure was assessed as low.

Management should be focussed on habitat restoration and improvement of catchment management practices to build resilience in wild trout populations and support the rebound of populations following the return of favourable conditions. Regular surveys to

monitor trout population should be undertaken to better understand and track boom and bust cycles, with results accessible to anglers.

Specially Managed Waters
These waters are recognised by anglers for their unique qualities as a trout fishery. These waters may be subject to customised regulations and be managed to maintain the unique values identified by anglers. Some waters may not require additional regulations, but a classification or branding may achieve the specific objective. Examples of specially managed waters are likely to be the tailrace rivers, and impoundments that support fast growth rates and are capable of producing trophy sized salmonids. Family Fishing Lakes are specifically managed to provide easy and safe fishing opportunities for children and their families, with stocking occurring to coincide with school holiday periods.

Mixed Fisheries (native fish and salmonids)
Well-designed mixed fisheries have the opportunity to provide recreational fishers with a diverse range of fishing experiences throughout the year. Increasingly, some waterways are becoming more marginal as a trout fishery due to increasing water temperatures over warmer months. Management as a mixed fishery can enable quality trout fishing opportunities during the cooler months. Increasing on-water access, particularly on reservoirs, is required as trout may be restricted to deeper and cooler sections of the waterway.

FUNDING

VRFish believes that ongoing investment into this important fishery should continue to be reviewed to ensure the quality of trout fisheries are maintained and improved, and that sufficient funds are invested into building capacity within the sector, to ensure appropriate management, monitoring, enforcement and education can occur.

EDUCATION

The impacts of climate change are increasingly affecting the viability of many of the waterways that currently support populations of trout. Increasingly longer periods of intense heat and low rainfall are pushing maximum water temperatures up higher throughout the Victorian summer period. More than ever, it is extremely important that anglers understand these impacts on our trout fisheries and alter their fishing habits and improve handling techniques.

VRFish is committed to communicating the latest research and delivering education programs and products to ensure that trout fisheries remain sustainable for future generations.

REGULATION
The setting of regulations, including bag and size limits or closed seasons, will be subject to the development of a separate policy document prior to each salmonid regulation review.

ENFORCEMENT

The current level of Fisheries' enforcement staffing is deemed inadequate given the physical area officers are expected to actively patrol, and the intrinsic value of Victoria's recreational

trout fishery. Its protection, via an enforcement presence, should reflect the significant contribution that the Victorian trout fishery brings to the State's economy.

HATCHERY MANAGEMENT

An efficient, productive hatchery system producing high quality, genetically diverse fish for recreational fishing is essential to maintaining a quality trout fishery in Victoria. This system should be owned and operated by the Victorian Fisheries Authority.

A quality, fit for purpose hatchery should:

- Be free of disease and be regularly inspected.
- Obtain eggs and milt from wild fish when restocking wild fisheries.
- Use the most suitable source of eggs and milt in other situations.
- Have the facilities and capability to produce fish of several different size classes for release (i.e. eyed-ova through to yearlings).
- Be situated and managed to minimise pollution and/or disease risk to/from neighbouring waters.
- Be capable of maintaining stocks through natural catastrophic conditions (i.e. droughts, floods, fires etc.).
- Have an approved and accredited quality system in place
- Keep and maintain accurate records of genetic information.

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

Broad-scale intensive agriculture, clear fell logging of native forests, the ever-increasing urban sprawl, and now the impacts of climate change, have all had dramatic landscape-scale effects on the health of Victoria's waterways and fisheries over many decades. Catchment Management Authorities, Government Agencies, and volunteer environmental groups are working increasingly harder every year to reverse the damage these processes have had on the Victorian landscape. VRFish is committed to developing and building relationships with all of these groups and the many angling clubs and associations across the state, such as the Australian Trout Foundation (ATF), to deliver meaningful projects that actively improve fish habitat and build healthy ecosystems.

To this end, VRFish will:

- Actively support re-vegetation projects (through programs such as DELWP's Angler Riparian Partnership Program), and the sustainable removal of undesirable non-native vegetation (such as Salix spp.) by Catchment Management Authorities.
- Actively support programs to reduce salinity of waterways.
- Oppose any activities that is likely to pollute waterways or physically alter waterways in a detrimental fashion (e.g. untreated sewerage discharge, eductor-dredging, gravel extraction, woody habitat removal, the construction of instream barriers, dams and weirs, and poor land management practices.
- Advocate for acceptable stream flows and reservoir levels through the allocation of environmental water, especially at crucial spawning times and periods of low in-flow.

Impacts of trout on threatened species

VRFish recognises that trout are an introduced species and much of the understanding of Victorian freshwater ecosystems has been with trout present since the late 1800's. VRFish will ensure an appropriate balance is achieved between conservation of native species, and the immense social and economic benefits of Victoria's trout fishery.

VRFish is committed to working with partner agencies and the Australian Trout Foundation to support the recovery of threatened species such as the Spotted Tree Frog (*L. spenceri*), and the Barred Galaxias (*G. fuscus*).

ACCESS

VRFish believes that trout anglers should have reasonable legal right of access to all public trout fisheries. VRFish will:

- Work with authorities to ensure that trout fishing is maintained on public/crown land, and that suitable access points exist.
- Encourage managers of public impoundments to maximise angler access, provide safe boat launching facilities, and suitable fishing infrastructure and amenities.
- Work with private landowners to maximise legal public access to public waterways through public laneways and easements.
- Liaise with CMAs and other management agencies to ensure angler access is identified and maintained as a high priority when implementing riparian land rehabilitation fencing projects, and any other process/project that may impact access to waterways.

VRFish respects the right of landowners to restrict access to waterways across privately held land. VRFish also supports the right of managers of public impoundments or National Parks to enforce severe penalties for littering or otherwise degrading these areas.