

NATIVE FISH POSITION STATEMENT

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this policy document is to set a broad framework for enhanced native fish management. However, the setting of any regulations, including bag, possession and size limits or closed seasons, will be subject to the development of a separate policy prior to each regulation review.

The Policy is broad in its scope and must consider the full range of impacts on the aquatic ecosystem that include, but is not limited, to cold water pollution, de-snagging, water extraction, irrigation off takes, fish barriers and land-based activities such as agriculture and forestry.

This Policy will seek to provide a natural resource management plan in which fisheries utilisation is a central part and promote all fisheries based on natural stocks are ecologically sustainable. This Policy also promotes the stocking of impoundments, wetlands and streams with hatchery reared fish for recreational fishing opportunities.

BACKGROUND

Native fish have suffered a significant decline in both population numbers and distribution since European settlement.

The Victorian *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* (FFG Act) was introduced to enable management and protection of flora and fauna species listed as endangered, threatened, or vulnerable. Unfortunately, most native species targeted by recreational fishers are either listed or nominated for listing under the FFG Act because of the declines.

Legislation covering the management of threatened fish species is the Federal *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act*. Therefore, DELWP and the Federal Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment are the responsible departments for managing most native fish stocks.

The Victorian Fisheries Authority also manages and implements native fish stockings and the general day to day enforcement of the current recreational fishing regulations associated with all native fish including some unlisted species.

The Murray Darling Basin Authority's Native Fish Recovery Strategy 2020 (next reiteration of the Native Fish Strategy) seeks to coordinate the rehabilitation of aquatic habitats and the recovery of native fish populations of the Murray Darling Basin (MDB) also identifies ongoing

management initiatives and implications regarding the future management of native fish species within the defined Victorian area of the MDB.

There are numerous reasons why there has been a decline in our native fish populations, such as obstruction to fish passage (dams/weirs), changes to water management, illegal fishing, introduced species and habitat degradation, stream habitat alteration and in general, environmental degradation. Obviously, habitat restoration and/or legislative protection are essential if this continuing decline is to be halted and eventually corrected.

THE VRFISH VISION FOR THE NATIVE FISHERY

The VRFish Vision is to restore and maintain the quality of fishing for all native fish species in Victoria, where a quality fishery:

- Contains wild, naturally recruited fish if ecologically feasible.
- Contains high quality stocked fish if natural reproduction is impracticable.
- Is subject to a sufficient enforcement presence to ensure protection of the fishery for the enjoyment of recreational fishers.
- Is maintained at an acceptable environmental standard (e.g. free of, noise, litter, disease, pollution and excess salinity and where artificially regulated is subject to acceptable environmental water allocation).
- Provides equitable access for recreational fishers.
- Provides fishing in an environment that is as undisturbed and free from barriers that prevent fish passage as is practically possible

If these objectives are met, VRFish believes that Victorian recreational fishers can look forward to productive recreational fishing opportunities and experiences for native fish species.

VRFish will actively pursue in-stream habitat restoration and/or legislative protection with all appropriate Government agencies/authorities to ensure habitat is not removed or damaged and will advocate for programs that will assist in the restoration of native fish populations within the context of what can be supported and achieved within our ever changing and altered environments, including through climate change.

NATIVE FISH MISSION STATEMENTS

VRFish will support the implementation of recovery plans and actions for FFG and EPBC Act listed native fish species that support recreational fishing opportunities to potentially ensure they are no longer considered endangered/threatened and therefore can support a managed and sustained recreational fishery. To this end, VRFish will continue to support measures which will result in the re-establishment and/or restoration of these species.

VRFish will advocate for the continued stocking of native fish for recreational fishing opportunities in identified impoundments, wetlands and streams.

VRFish believes all waterway and fish recovery plans need to have policies and actions that clearly articulate a defined process for addressing habitat and eco-system degradation, fish passage and enforcement of illegal activities as major recovery objectives.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

VRFish believes that any water capable of sustaining a productive and sustainable native fishery should be managed utilising ecosystem-based management principles to achieve this. We believe the guiding principles for productive and sustainable native fisheries are:

- **Stocking Programs** are guided by consultation forums between recreational fishers and Victorian Fisheries Authority which provide a forum for discussion on fish stocking regimes, fish population surveys, other related recreational fisheries management issues to implement an adaptive management regime for long-term stocking programs and monitoring.
- Victorian waters, **accessible to the public** for recreational fishing are the only waters to be stocked using Recreational Fishing Licence funds.
- **Cooperative and integrated management of waterways** by Catchment Management Authorities and Water Resource Managers that recognises the unique characteristics and therefore management requirement of individual waterways and catchments.
- The management of Victoria's native fisheries requires **more than just stocking**. Waterways must be managed by the principles of ecosystem-based fisheries management, to protect, maintain and enhance riparian vegetation and in-stream habitats, ensure that environmental and allocation flows are at natural temperatures and during natural flow timeframes, and guards against activities that pollute, introduce disease or physically alter stream environments to the detriment of the aquatic environment, and in some instances this may identify stocking of non-target native species to enhance the food-chain.
- That **instream barriers** allow unrestricted fish passage for both small and large native fish.
- **Appropriate regulations** to ensure the sustainability of stocks such as closed seasons, size, bag, possession limits and fishing gear restrictions.
- **Maintaining and improving legal recreational fishing access to native fisheries**. VRFish will actively promote to appropriate agencies the need to open up access to crown frontages, closed roads, wetlands and water.
- **Enforcement of regulations**, including meaningful penalties to deter offenders, a significant enforcement presence and publication of offender details.
- **Education** to enable a broad community appreciation and understanding of the value and fragility of our native fisheries. VRFish suggests this is an essential component within the context of all broad scale recreational fishing opportunities.
- **Recognition and promotion of the social, economic value and benefits** of quality native fisheries.

NATIVE FISH MANAGEMENT

VRFish will actively participate in the development and implementation of catchment management and fishery management plans. Through this VRFish will:

- Encourage the adoption of ecologically sustainable principles.
- Promote Ecosystem Based Fishery Management (EBFM) outcomes
- Encourage appropriate research into native fish and their habitat requirements.

- Support breeding and stocking programs within a waterway that promote the capacity to develop a self-sustaining breeding population.

VRFish fully supports the proposal to establish and re-establish **recreational fisheries for trout cod, Macquarie perch, silver perch, blackfish and eel-tailed catfish** in identified streams, wetlands and aquatic ecosystems in Victoria. When established these fisheries should be open to recreational fishing, subject to a closed season and appropriate regulatory controls (e.g. bag, possession and minimum size limits).

VRFish supports current and future proposals to stock and establish other native fish species endemic to Southern Victorian streams, wetlands and aquatic ecosystems for recreational fishing opportunities provided the concept is verified by transparent scientific advice and supports an EBFM approach such as Australian bass, estuary perch blackfish and others identified as appropriate.

VRFish will advocate for **appropriate management tools** for native fisheries (including freshwater crustaceans e.g. yabbies and spiny freshwater crayfish) such as closed seasons, bag, possession, size limits and permissible fishing gear to ensure ecological sustainability.

VRFish believes a fundamental component of VRFish's native fish management policy is the **delineation of native fish waters** into six distinct categories:

- Impoundments/Wetlands
- Self-Sustaining Streams and Aquatic Ecosystems
- Streams that require Supplementary Stocking
- Premier Lakes and Small Waters
- Special Conservation Waters
- Waters with Species Stocked outside their Natural Range

The following is a definition of each category:

Impoundments/Wetlands

Some native fish species will only breed in streams and on occasions impoundments and wetlands, Impoundments and wetlands that are not deemed to be self-sustaining should be stocked with hatchery produced native fish and should be managed as put and take multi species fisheries.

Self-Sustaining Waters

Self-Sustaining streams and adjacent aquatic eco-systems where natural reproduction of wild fish is sufficient to maintain ecological sustainability fisheries. Fish stocking that does occur should be to compensate for a lack of natural recruitment or in lieu of a catastrophic event, such as fish kills. To ensure that these waters remain viable, regular surveys must be undertaken to monitor the effectiveness of the management process. These waters should be subject to regular and intensive enforcement efforts.

Streams that require Supplementary Stocking

Streams that do provide access for angling, but do not provide the necessary habitat for natural recruitment to sustain a recreational fishery should be considered for stocking with native species of the same genetic strain as the resident population. These areas should be the focus for management actions to improve natural recruitment such as habitat restoration, barrier removal and environmental flows.

Premier Lakes and Small Waters

Small impoundments should be stocked for special purposes with hatchery produced native fish. These waters can include Family Fishing Lakes and those close to urban areas which are ideal for promoting fishing with families, children and persons with a disability.

Special Conservation Waters

Waters where threatened or endangered species can be stocked for conservation purposes to assist in the development of self-sustaining and catchable populations of FFG listed species (e.g. Macquarie perch, Trout cod, Eel-tailed catfish). Other management elements such as closed seasons and specific regulatory controls may also be applied to appropriate species.

VRFish will continue to advocate for the **stocking of native Victorian fish species in waterways outside of their current recognised distribution range**. These waters should be managed to promote recreational fishing and conservation opportunities and continue to be subject to appropriate regulatory controls.

Victoria currently has several waters where important listed native fish species have previously been stocked outside their natural range or are currently stocked annually. In many instances these stockings are currently supporting recreational fishing opportunities, and on occasions self-sustaining and highly valuable populations. The Yarra River population of Macquarie perch and the Wimmera River population of Eel Tailed catfish are two examples of self-sustaining and populations of valuable listed and threatened species.

VRFish believes the management of native fisheries in Victoria need to be adaptable to the changes in the ecosystem health of waters and waterways and should be supported through appropriate monitoring and transparent scientific advice. This should also be supported by angler diary logbook programs to monitor and collect important information on the performance of our native fisheries.

CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT

Restoration and/or legislative protection to prevent illegal removal, alteration or destruction of aquatic habitats and to promote healthy aquatic ecosystem rehabilitation is one of the most essential components of this policy. To achieve this, VRFish will liaise closely with Catchment Management Authorities, DELWP, Water Authorities and the Victorian Fisheries Authority, to ensure the environmental health of Victoria's rivers, waters and wetlands is maintained.

VRFish and its regional representatives must become actively involved with agencies responsible for the planning and implementation of improvement works on waterways in their regions.

VRFish believes that properly managed catchments are the most crucial issue to maintaining quality native fisheries and that a multi-agency approach for the management of Victoria's waterways would ensure a sustainable native fishery.

VRFish will:

- Actively support the re-vegetation of riparian lands adjacent to waterways subject to agreed recreational fisher access availability
- Actively support re-snagging programs to provide and enhance in-stream woody habitat.
- Actively support the removal of unnecessary in-stream barriers and/or creation of fish-ways.
- Actively support the programs that reduce salinity of waterways.
- Oppose any activities that threaten to pollute waterways or physically alter waterways in a detrimental fashion (e.g. sewage discharge, eductor dredging, gravel extraction, woody habitat removal etc).
- Actively support improved management options for reducing the loss of native fish at water off-takes (fish screens).
- VRFish will work to reduce fish kills by actively working with water storage managers to ensure that allocation and environmental flows deliveries, are of appropriate quality, quantity and timing, and the maintenance of a minimum water level in impoundments consistent with their value as a recreational native fishery.
- VRFish will develop other policies with the view of creating stronger legislation to preserve and protect fish habitat in Victoria.

MANAGED WATERS

Maximising the quality of all Victorian fisheries has been recognised as a priority by VRFish. Part of the process to achieve this is the identification of waters according to their fish assemblage carrying capabilities (i.e. Impoundments and Wetlands for multi species fisheries, self-sustaining waters, supplementary stocking waters, special interest waters and special conservation waters).

It is important that quality native fish waters are ecologically capable of producing an acceptable return of fish during average seasons assuming proper management and providing that the fish taken legally do not compromise the ongoing sustainability of the fishery.

- VRFish recognises that there are streams as well as wetlands and impoundments that are suitable for management as multi species fisheries. There are some streams that have been altered to the extent that they are no longer suitable for native species but are suitable for other species. These streams should be managed according to the species that survive there.

- VRFish supports the continuation of native fish stockings in Victorian public waters (waters that are accessible to the public for recreational fishing) by Victorian Fisheries Authority as determined by stakeholder consultation processes.
- Other stakeholders should be permitted to stock private waters at their own expense with appropriate species provided they comply with all current guidelines and protocols. Private Waters are defined as farm dams, domestic water storage, any man-made lake not open to public access.

PRIORITY SPECIES

Several of Victoria's native fish species have become subject to organised illegal activities with many suggesting the current Fisheries regulations and associated court penalties being received by those apprehended are not truly reflecting the value of the fish or are not providing a sufficient deterrent. Murray Cod is just one example. VRFish strongly suggests it would be highly appropriate to list species subject to organised illegal fishing activities as "Priority Species" in the Fisheries Act 1995.

HATCHERY MANAGEMENT

VRFish believes that efficient, productive hatcheries producing high quality, genetically sound fish for recreation angling is essential to the maintenance of quality fisheries in Victorian waters. Good hatcheries must:

- Be free of disease and be regularly inspected and accredited by the Victorian Fisheries Authority.
- Obtain eggs and milt from wild fish for restocking wild fisheries.
- Use the most genetically 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. fingerlings through to yearlings).
- Be situated and managed in such a way as to minimise pollution and/or disease risk to/from neighbouring waters.
- Be capable of maintaining stocks through natural catastrophe situations (i.e. droughts, floods, etc).

VRFish believes that all stocking programs must be validated through monitoring and research that identifies survival, growth rates and returns to recreational fishers.

STOCKING METHODOLOGY

To achieve optimum survival rates, VRFish supports and recommends:

- Responsible harvesting from ponds.
- Monitor oxygen levels to match the receipt water
- Temperature acclimatisation of fish prior to release.
- Suitable release techniques - fish should never be just thrown in.
- Releases in rivers, streams, wetlands and impoundments should be as close to aquatic habitat as possible as native fish need to acclimatise to different oxygen levels when first released from transport vehicle holding containers.

- Releases should be occurring at a time when predation by birds and other fish is minimised.
- The use of local fishing groups to assist with releases of fish should be encouraged.

EDUCATION AND INVOLVEMENT

- VRFish believes that all recreational fishers should have access to the 'Recreational Fishing Guide' when purchasing a licence, which explains the various regulations.
- VRFish believes that Fishcare Victoria, local fishers, fishing club and association volunteers are valued to help promote and foster a partnership between fishers, fisheries managers and catchment managers
- VRFish believes that the current practice of issuing information sheets is applauded and should be continued.
- An education program targeted at 'released fish survival' should also be provided.
- Further education and awareness activities should be undertaken to improve the knowledge and understanding about threats to our native fish populations.
- Recreational fishers should be encouraged to become involved and volunteer their time to projects that improve native fish populations and the habitats they rely on.

ENFORCEMENT

- VRFish believes that Enforcement should be coupled with a recreational fishing education program.
- VRFish believes that Fisheries Officers and VRFish representatives should address the fishing community explaining the rationale behind various regulations and practices.
- VRFish believes that an effective enforcement effort is reliant on Fisheries Officers (FOs) who are not diverted into other non-enforcement work.
- VRFish believes that the current level of enforcement staffing is inadequate given the value of recreational fishing. VRFish recommends that a review be carried out into the enforcement of the recreational fishing sector.
- VRFish believes that enforcement should provide 24/7 coverage, but be specifically targeted at the major periods for fishing activities i.e. weekends, long weekends, public holidays and other critical periods such as opening and/or closing days and spawning times. General enforcement officers and their associated vehicles should be visible to the general public as this can often deter illegal activities.
- VRFish believes that Penalty Infringement Notices (PINS) currently apply to a number of fisheries offences. VRFish supports PINS for less serious offences, but believes that the penalty for regulatory offences should be sufficient to prevent non-compliance. The VRFish policy is that all fines should reflect the cost of enforcement and the damage done to the fishery. All enforcement revenue should be returned to assist funding of the enforcement branch.
- VRFish believes that substantial minimum penalties for major offences will provide a worthwhile deterrent (e.g. in the case of large scale poaching). VRFish recommends that some current penalties are not commensurate with the potential illegal gain, therefore there needs to be a greater deterrence in the form of monetary and court related penalties.
- VRFish believes that verifiable information, including nature of offence, date and time plus description of individual(s) and registration numbers of vehicles or boats,

should be solicited from the angling public to assist Fisheries Officers investigations. This should be promoted via appropriate literature advising the public of basis information needed and reporting to 13 FISH (133 474).

- VRFish believes that the publication of offender details and names of offenders should be publicised as a further deterrent to reoffending.

CLIMATE CHANGE

It is acknowledged that Australia has a changing climate, with periods of prolonged drought and other varying climatic conditions. Given the potential risks and uncertainties of climate variability, VRFish supports strategies and policies that have specific timeframes and objectives that are adaptive and reviewed and therefore can be adopted as the knowledge and understanding of climate variability evolves.

- VRFish believes that policies and strategies should be adapted as the understanding of climate change evolves. It is noted that Victoria's water temperatures and water quality parameters have the potential to change; this will also require a re-evaluation and review of the current Protocols for Translocation of Fish in Victorian Inland Public Waters and the current rationalisation of stocking of native fish outside their natural range.
- VRFish will encourage appropriate research into the likely impacts of climate variability on the relative suitability of Victorian waters for native fish. This should be in conjunction with exploring alternative rearing techniques and stocking programs.
- VRFish will promote the adoption of its Fish Recovery and Relocation Protocol whereby Victorian Fisheries Authority, other appropriate agencies and volunteers instigate the recovery and relocation of threatened and/or listed native fish species from drying waters that are highly valued for recreational fishing and conservation.

ACCESS TO RECREATIONAL FISHING WATERS

VRFish believes that recreational fishers should have reasonable legal right of access to all fisheries in public waters.

VRFish will work with authorities to ensure that fishing and associated camping activities are maintained in Parks and Reserves and Crown Water Licensed Frontages.

VRFish will encourage managers of public impoundments to maximise fishing access to wetlands and impoundments.

VRFish will work with private landowners to ensure legal public access to public waterways through public lane ways etc is maintained.

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