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## THE BEACH-SEINE FISHERY: A SACRAA PERSPECTIVE

### INTRODUCTION

Conflict between the 320+ year-old beach-seine fishery and the recreational angling sector is nothing new, with recorded incidents as early as the 1880's in False Bay. Since the late 1980's the number of incidents has steadily increased, and in the last few years, reports of confrontations have been frequent. While historically these confrontations would have been fairly small-scale and localized (e.g. within False Bay and immediate surrounds), these days due to enhanced connectivity between people all over the country and the ease of sharing information and views on social media, the reaction from the general public and anglers is gaining momentum and is usually accompanied by graphic pictures and wide spread condemnation. The underlying cause of this conflict is thought to be a combination of factors, namely that netters catch excessive amounts of what are considered by recreational fishermen to be angling species (Lamberth *et al.* 1994), that netters frequently operate with a total disregard for the regulations and their permit conditions, and that nets full of fish must be causing irreparable damage to what we know is a finite resource. While the verbal reactions in recent years have been varied and colourful, they are usually spontaneous and emotional, with the common denominator being a call for the banning of all beach-seine net fishing. The purpose of this article is to place the beach-seine fishery in context by comparing it with the other two sectors that share access to many of the same species and who rely on them either for financial gain (commercial linefishery) or for the complex array of reasons that define the recreational angler.

Beach-seine catch data was obtained from the DAFF Netfish database for the Western Cape and False Bay (2010 to 2014) and for KZN (2010 to 2013) and commercial linefish catch data was obtained from DAFF's NMLS (2010 to 2014) for the Western, Southern and Eastern Cape and KZN. No recent estimates of National recreational catch are available and information in this regard has been sourced from the literature including some of the National Linefish Survey studies conducted in the 1990's and a more recent study on the shore-based marine linefishery in KZN.

### KZN

A survey of the Durban-based beach-seine fishery was conducted from July 1993 to June 1994 (Beckley & Fennessy 1996) during which time 270 hauls were made. A total of 119 species of fish were recorded mostly belonging to the Families of small shoaling species (sardines, anchovies, mackerels and soapies). With the exception of strepie/karanteen and elf/shad, which comprised 1.42 and 1.03% of the catch respectively, all other species targeted by shore anglers, such as queenfish and kingfish (multiple species), queen mackerel, several barracuda species, southern pompano, stumpnose (multiple species) and blacktail comprised < 0.5% of the catch each. The results of the survey indicated that there was minimal overlap between beach-seine catches and other fishery sectors.

The beach-seine catch data from 2010 to 2013 indicated that the catch is still dominated by the smaller shoaling species, including sardine, red-eye, scads, mackerel and maasbanker. During the same period the reported catch for five linefish species, namely leervis/garrick, queen mackerel, king mackerel, spotted grunter and dusky kob was 24, 1126, 68, 33 and 293 kg respectively (Table 1). Although there is no indication in the data as to the level of under-reporting, it is assumed that this does occur as it is a common practice in the Western Cape and was acknowledged to occur in the study by Beckley & Fennessy (1996). Assuming a 30% reporting level for the linefish we can estimate total catch over the four-year period for the five species above as 80, 3753, 227, 110 and 977 kg respectively. The overlap between beach-seine catches and other sectors still appears to be minimal. A study on the KZN shore-based fishery from February 2009 to January 2010 (Dunlop & Mann 2012) revealed that five species (strepie, shad, blacktail, pinkie and Cape stumpnose) accounted for 75% of the catch by number and five species (shad, strepie, leervis, blacktail and bronze bream) accounted for 66% of the catch by weight. Number of anglers for the year-long period (three methods were used to estimate the range) ranged from 41 283 to 68 087. Total annual catch for the shore-based fishery was estimated at between 249 and 277 tons.

Catch data for the commercial linefish sector in KZN shows a total of 56 tons of kob (primarily dusky and squaretail, but maybe some snapper as well) and just over 8 tons of yellowtail (most likely predominantly giant but probably includes some of the other two species, namely greater/amberjack and longfin/tropical) for the period 2010 to 2014 (Table 2). Comparable data for the same period for the recreational ski-boat fishery is not available but by all accounts the catch would be dominated by a combination of gamefish (king & queen mackerel, leervis and a variety of tuna and kingfish) and bottomfish (rockcods, redfish, poenskop, dusky & squaretail kob and geelbek).

There is far more overlap between the recreational and commercial sectors than there is with the beach seine fishery in KZN, and the impact of the latter on the recreational fishery must be seen as negligible. Using leervis as an example, the beach-seine fishery caught (corrected for under reporting) 80 kg between 2010 and 2013, while the recreational shore-based fishery accounted for between 33 and 37 tons (13.5% by weight of total catch; Dunlop & Mann 2012) in the year-long period between February 2009 to January 2010. The annual catch of leervis by KZN recreational ski-boat anglers is in all likelihood also substantial and would far outweigh any incidental catch by the beach-seine fishery. When one considers that leervis are also caught in large numbers by boat, shore and estuary anglers around the rest of the country, the minimal impact of the beach-seine fishery is clear.

## **WESTERN CAPE**

The catch data for five selected linefish species (giant yellowtail, silver kob<sup>1</sup>, white stumpnose, shad and white Steenbras) caught by beach-seine in the Western Cape (West Coast and False Bay) from 2010 to 2014 is presented in Table 1. Both reported and corrected values are provided. According to DAFF, levels of under-reported catch vary amongst species and a correction factor needs to be applied to the reported values (Stephen Lamberth, DAFF Inshore Resources Research, Pers. Comm.). It is estimated that for the five species mentioned above, 90, 50, 4, 40 and 1% are actually reported. This has been verified by researchers who monitor the catches and then compare their data to submitted returns from the netters.

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<sup>1</sup> Estimates from DAFF are that < 1% of these will be dusky kob in False Bay and approximately 10% will be west coast kob (*Argyrosomus coronus*) from St Helena northwards.

Of the five species, yellowtail is the most dominant catch with almost 265 tons being accounted for over the five-year period (average 53 tons/year). As for the other four species, 39.7 tons of silver kob, 94.5 tons of white stumpnose, 22.2 tons of shad and 67.5 tons of white steenbras were caught. Commercial linefish catches in the Western Cape alone for yellowtail over the same period were almost 825 tons (3.1 times more than the beach-seine), with 160 tons of white stumpnose (1.7 times more than the beach-seine) and almost 10 tons of kob (4 times less than the beach seine; Table 2).

### **Yellowtail**

Combined commercial catches from the Western, Southern and Eastern Cape and KZN for yellowtail from 2010 to 2014 was almost 910 tons, which is almost 3.5 times the catch by the beach seine sector. Recent data on recreational catches for yellowtail is not available, but some long-term data supplied by DAFF (Table 3) showed that from 1988 to midway through 2009 the recreational sector (shore, boat and spear) accounted for a combined 834 tons. Over the same period commercial fishers caught 12 220 tons and the beach-seine fishery caught 983 tons. A comparison shows that at this National level, the commercial sector catches by far the most yellowtail (87%), with the beach-seine and combined recreational catches contributing 7 and 6% of the total respectively. A similar comparison from 1985 to 1992 for the False Bay fisheries alone (Table 4) showed that the beach-seine fishery accounted for 77% of the yellowtail caught followed by the commercial linefish (21%) and recreational shore (2%) fisheries (Lamberth *et al.* 1994). It is interesting to note that the average beach-seine catch from 1998 to 2009 was 45 tons/year and from 2010 to 2014 it was 53 tons/year. Average commercial catches for yellowtail from 1988 to 2009 were 568 tons/year and from 2010 to 2014 were 182 tons/year, a substantial decrease. Although recreational catch data from the 2010 to 2014 period is not available, it may be feasible to assume that like the beach-seine catches the recreational catch has also increased. There are more vessels on the water (boats, kayaks/skis and jet-skis) and the advances in tackle (stronger rods, braid and more effective artificial lures) means that yellowtail can be more effectively targeted.

So in terms of yellowtail (at a National level), the commercial fishery is the sector responsible for most of the catch with the beach-seine and recreational fisheries most likely accounting for substantially less but similar catches.

### **Silver kob**

The silver kob is not one of the main target species in the beach-seine fishery, but when the opportunity presents itself some substantial catches can be made. A prime example of this was the haul at Sunrise Beach in October 2014 – a catch that was widely shared on social media and which caused outrage amongst the general public. From 2010 to 2014, the commercial fishery in the Western, Southern and Eastern Cape accounted for almost 1 080 tons of kob (predominantly silver; average 216 tons/year; Table 2), which is 27 times more than the beach-seine catch (39.7 tons; average about 8 tons/year) for the same period. Commercial kob catches from KZN were not factored into the above comparison as they would have comprised dusky and squaretail kob and not silver kob. So although the beach seine fishery accounts for more kob than the Western Cape commercial fishery alone (due to other preferred and more available target species), at a National level the beach-seine catch is insignificant by comparison. Interesting is that historically for the False Bay fishery alone, from 1985 to 1992, it was the commercial sector that caught most of the kob (80%) followed by recreational shore anglers (18%) with beach-seines catching only 2% of the total (Lamberth *et al.* 1994; Table 4). Once again recreational data is unavailable for a direct comparison for the 2010 to 2014 period, however a survey of the linefishery between Still Bay and Kei Mouth from 1994 to 1996 (Brouwer & Buxton 2002) showed that recreational ski-boats caught approximately 410 tons of fish/year, with the main target species being silver kob (followed by hake, geelbek and a variety of redfish). Factoring in that recreational ski-boats west of Still

Bay and shore anglers in the Western Cape (and occasionally the Southern Cape & parts of the western Eastern Cape) will also catch silver kob, it is highly likely that the recreational fishery accounts for significantly more silver kob per year than the average 8 tons/year caught by the beach-seine fishery in recent years.

As a point of interest, dusky kob may account for 1% of the kob caught by the Beach-seine fishery each year, i.e. about 100 kg on average. When estimates of 200 tons/year of dusky kob are stated for the recreational fishery (Heemstra 2004), it is clear that the net fishery has by comparison a negligible impact.

### **White stumpnose**

The commercial linefish catch of white stumpnose for the 2010 to 2014 period was 160 tons (average 32 tons/year) compared to the 94.5 tons (average 19 tons/year) by the beach-seine fishery (Tables 1 & 2). These values are somewhat different than the estimated (National) annual catches prior to 1994 mentioned in Griffiths *et al.* (2002), which were 147 tons/year for commercial linefishers (4.6 times more) and 12.5 tons/year for beach-seine fishers (0.7 times less). Pre-1994 estimates for the recreational shore fishery were 40 tons/year, just over twice the annual amount recorded by the beach-seine fishery in last 5 years. When False Bay is considered in isolation, between 1985 and 1992, the commercial sector caught 85% of the white stumpnose catch compared to the 12 and 3% contributions by the beach-seine and recreational shore fisheries respectively (Lamberth *et al.* 1994; Table 4). Comparisons between these data is difficult due to the almost 20-year gap. While both the commercial and beach-seine sectors now account for a combined 51 tons/year (2010 to 2014), there is no way of knowing how much the recreational sector has caught. Given the apparent increase in annual catches for the beach-seine fishery and decrease in the commercial sector when comparing pre-1994 estimates to the 2010 to 2014 data it is impossible to know whether the recreational catch has increased or decreased since the pre-1994 estimates.

### **Elf/shad**

The elf is not a commercial linefish species so only beach-seine fishers in False Bay and recreational anglers are allowed to catch them. Beach-seine permits for the west coast do not allow the catch & sale of this species. The five-year beach seine catch from 2010 to 2014 was 22.2 tons (average 4.4 tons/year) (Table 1) from False Bay. According to Dunlop & Mann (2012), elf contributed 20.2% of the shore-based fishery in KZN per year or between 50 and 56 tons/year. A conservative estimate of the total catch by recreational anglers is probably in excess of 200 tons/year if the rest of the country is taken into account. In other words the beach-seine fishery catches about 2% of the total when both sectors are combined. Hardly a significant contribution. Historically, prior to the commercial moratorium on elf, the commercial sector between 1985 and 1992 caught 48% of the total catch in False Bay compared to 42% by shore anglers and 10% by beach-seines (Lamberth *et al.* 1994; Table 4). So even 30 years ago the beach-seine fishery had minimal impact on the species compared to commercials and recreational.

### **White steenbras**

Prior to 2001 when a ban on catching and selling white steenbras was placed on the beach-seine fishery, the species formed an important albeit infrequent component of the catch. Although not part of the regular catch (up to 86% is the Southern mullet; Lamberth *et al.* 1994), successful hauls of white steenbras could be substantial both in terms of numbers and weight. Over a two-year period (January

1991 to December 1992) as many as 2 768 white steenbras were kept by the net fishery. Prior to 1960, the beach-seine fishery was responsible for the majority of white steenbras mortality, after which recreational shore catches increased and ultimately exceeded that of the beach-seine fishery (Bennett 1993). When purse-seine vessels moved into False Bay in the 1970s and early 80s they were responsible for sporadic, but substantial, annual catches, with almost 300 tons landed in 1982 (Penney 1991). The majority of these fish were adult fish and it is likely to have contributed significantly to the overall stock decline (Penney 1991). Purse-seining was subsequently banned in False Bay after 1982. Between 1985 and 1992, the beach-seine and shore based recreational fisheries accounted for 40 and 59% respectively of the white Steenbras caught in False Bay (Lamberth *et al.* 1994; Table 4). Up until approximately 1990 the net fishery caught up to 25% of the overall National catch (Bennett 1993) at which time the total recreational catch was approximately 28 000 fish Nationally (Bennett 1993). From 1994 to 1996, Lamberth *et al.* (1997) estimated a total recreational shore fishery catch for the south west coast alone of 39 000 white steenbras (86 tons) annually. So historically it appears that overexploitation in both recreational and commercial sectors (beach-seine and purse-seine) was to blame for the stock decline, with commercial catches dominating pre-1960 and recreational catches dominating post-1960 (Bennett 2012).

A ban on catching white steenbras was imposed on the commercial sector in 2001 in an attempt to save a severely over-exploited species, however, according to the Netfish database, between 2010 and 2014 a total catch of 675 kg was still submitted in returns (Table 1). Assuming that 99% of catches for this species are not reported (Stephen Lamberth, Pers. Comm.), the corrected catch over the period is 67.5 tons (average 13.5 tons/year). There are, however two sides to this story. According to DAFF, the net license holders claim to return all these fish but submit them in their catch returns to help demonstrate the health/abundance of the species in False Bay. While the return of some of the catches has been observed (e.g. estimated 4 tons caught at Simonstown in 2013), DAFF on the other hand believes that most are still kept (e.g. when fisheries officers are not present) and that the majority remain unreported. One incident at least supports this view, namely a substantial catch of large adult fish at Macassar in June 2013 that was kept and does not appear on the submitted catch returns. The truth may lie somewhere in between, but even if half the corrected catch (i.e. 34 tons) has been kept from 2010 to 2014 it will still have a significant impact on the species.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The three underlying causes of the conflict between the beach-seine and recreational (including members of the public who are not fishermen) mentioned in the Introduction can now be evaluated based on the review provided above.

- **Netters catch excessive amounts of what are considered by recreational fishermen to be angling species.**

The beach-seine fishery has been in existence for more than 320 years. Although recreational angling has been around for a long time as well, it has only increased in popularity (exponentially so) in the last 70 years. The net fishery has been targeting and catching the same species long before they became important in the catches of recreational angler and can therefore not be considered to be “angling species” (Lamberth & Bennet 1993). While net catches in False Bay may comprise a significant proportion of the total catch by all user groups in False Bay for white steenbras (both historically and more recent if the fish are not returned or levels of under-reporting are to be believed) and yellowtail, at a National level the beach-seine fishery does not catch a disproportionate amount of fish. While the image of a net

full of fish is not easy to stomach for some, the catches do need to be considered in context when compared to annual catches of the same species by both the commercial and recreational sectors.

- **Netters frequently operate with a total disregard for the regulations and their permit conditions.**

This is a justifiable concern and is an issue that needs to be addressed by DAFF. Many netting operations cannot be monitored due to the lack of manpower with the result that operators will on occasion keep both undersize fish as well as species their permits forbid them to (e.g. white steenbras). Although Section 28 notices (in terms of the MLRA and which provides powers to have a license cancelled, revoked or suspended if license conditions are contravened) have been issued in the past, this process can only be followed if the operators are caught in the act. The process is also slow and, some think, subject to corruption. A case in point is the Section 28 issued to an operator in June 2013 for an illegal haul of white steenbras. Two years down the road and there has been no discernible progress. The rights holder still receives a license each year and continues to operate.

Another concern is the level of under-reporting, which means that DAFF have no accurate record of species and quantities being caught and can therefore not manage the fishery based on factual records. There were 120 rights holders on DAFF's 2013 net register for the Western Cape, and yet between 2010 and 2014 only 80 rights holders submitted catch returns. So there is a large proportion not submitting returns at all and those that do frequently under-report catch, particularly of so-called linefish. Each of these occurrences is reason for sanctions in terms of Section 28 of the MLRA and yet this does not seem to be enforced.

While large catches of yellowtail and silver kob (e.g. Sunrise Beach October 2014) may not sit well with most spectators, the operators in False Bay are within their rights, provided undersize fish are returned. If they do not do so we urge you not to get involved directly but to take steps necessary to document the evidence (time, date, location, time/date stamped photos, license numbers of participating vehicles and vessels) and then pass it on to us to take it further. The outrage over white steenbras catches is fully justified as steps have been taken to ban netters from catching them. Once again try and document the evidence and pass it on to us at SACRAA.

- **Nets full of fish must be causing irreparable damage to what we know is a finite resource.**

Much of the damage that caused the collapse of stocks of so-called linefish such as silver kob and white steenbras occurred over the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with all three sectors (commercial line, beach-seine and recreational) contributing to their demise. The continued catching of white steenbras by the beach-seine fishery is of great concern, and an understandable source of conflict with the public, but their catches of kob, yellowtail, white stumpnose and elf are justified in terms of the fishery and do not represent a major proportion of the National catch by all sectors combined. It is also acknowledged that the purse-seine fishery, particularly in the 1970s and early 80s had a significant impact on resources, and the old favourite of recreational anglers, the "inshore trawlers" also had an impact and continue to do so when species such as yellowtail, kob and white stumpnose are concerned (e.g. estimates are that inshore trawlers caught up to 14 tons of white stumpnose annual pre-1994; Griffiths *et al.* 2002). One must bear in mind, that with estimates of marine recreational anglers being anywhere from 300 000 upwards, our sector does catch a substantial number of fish each year and must bear responsibility as well for contributing to the past, and in some cases continuing, decline of certain species.

One important aspect that came out of this exercise was the fact that there is no recent data on either National recreational fishing catches or effort. This has been recognised by fisheries researchers as being a massive problem as it means the sector is being regulated with very limited or no knowledge of the amount of fish being caught or the levels of effort directed at the resource. A National economic survey of the recreational fishery, funded by SACRAA, is currently being initiated by Rhodes, which will provide an indication of the economic value of the recreational sector as well as estimates of the number of anglers and levels of effort involved. Once these numbers become available it is SACRAA's intention to look at the possibility of funding a follow-up survey to estimate total catch (by species) that should be able to assist in better understanding the recreational sector and allowing for management based on hard facts.

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**Table 1** Summary of beach seine catches (kg) for Western Cape (2010 to 2014) and KZN (2010 to 2013) for selected species.

	Year										Total	
	2010		2011		2012		2013		2014			
<b>Species (Western Cape; 2010 - 2014)</b>	Reported	Corrected	Reported	Corrected								
Yellow tail ( <i>Seriola lalandi</i> )	75840	84267	29866	33184	42442	47158	25221	28023	64886	72096	<b>238255</b>	<b>264728</b>
Silver kob ( <i>Argyrosomus inodorus</i> )	4416	8832	4614	9228	4813	9626	3901	78802	2092	4184	<b>19836</b>	<b>39672</b>
White stumpnose ( <i>Rhabdosargus globiceps</i> )	517	12925	1727	43175	730	18250	272	6800	534	13350	<b>3780</b>	<b>94500</b>
Elf ( <i>Pomatomus saltatrix</i> )	558	1395	700	1750	3960	9900	2230	5575	1448	3620	<b>8896</b>	<b>22240</b>
White steenbras ( <i>Lithognathus lithognathus</i> )	43	4300	537	53700	86	8600	3	300	6	600	<b>675</b>	<b>67500</b>
<b>Species (KZN; 2010 - 2013)</b>	Reported	Corrected										
Leervis ( <i>Lichia amia</i> )	24	80										
Queen mackerel ( <i>Scomberomorus plurilineatus</i> )	1126	3753										
King mackerel ( <i>Scomberomorus commerson</i> )	68	227										
Spotted grunter ( <i>Pomadasys commersonnii</i> )	33	110										
Dusky kob ( <i>Argyrosomus japonicus</i> )	293	977										

**Table 2** Summary of commercial linefish catches (kg) from Western Cape, Southern Cape, Eastern Cape and KZN for selected species from 2010 to 2014 (\* kob species not differentiated in catch returns).

Species (Western Cape 2010 - 2014)	Year					Total (kg)
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	
Yellow tail ( <i>Seriola lalandi</i> )	103947	105620	94411	186280	334251	<b>824509</b>
White stumpnose ( <i>Rhabdosargus globiceps</i> )	19733	31995	46427	45583	16348	<b>160086</b>
Kob* ( <i>Argyrosomus</i> spp.)	591	213	570	4373	4105	<b>9852</b>
<b>Species (Southern Cape; 2010 - 2014)</b>						
Yellow tail ( <i>Seriola lalandi</i> )	543	2678	2232	14268	731	<b>20452</b>
Kob* ( <i>Argyrosomus</i> spp.)	324510	241629	132091	88489	82560	<b>869279</b>
<b>Species (Eastern Cape; 2010 - 2014)</b>						
Yellow tail ( <i>Seriola lalandi</i> )	1093	7133	18556	22463	7079	<b>56324</b>
Kob* ( <i>Argyrosomus</i> spp.)	51287	35902	52600	42715	17777	<b>200281</b>
<b>Species (KZN; 2010 - 2014)</b>						
Yellow tail ( <i>Seriola lalandi</i> )	649	1218	1042	2025	3264	<b>8198</b>
Kob* ( <i>Argyrosomus</i> spp.)	16295	13971	13594	7604	4916	<b>56380</b>

**Table 3** Yellowtail catches (tons) by sector from 1988 to mid-2009.

Yellow tail (1988-midway2009)		
Sector	Catch (tons)	% Contribution
Commercial linefish	12220	87
Beach Seine (False Bay)	983	7
Recreational Boat	625	4
Recreational Shore	88	1
Spearfishing	121	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>14037</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 4** Percentage contribution to total catch for selected species by the beach-seine, commercial line and recreational shore fisheries in False Bay from 1985 to 1992.

Species	Beach-seine	Commercial line	Recreational shore
Yellow tail	77	21	2
White steenbras	40	1	59
White stumpnose	12	85	3
Elf	10	48	42
Silver kob	2	80	18