



4 April 2011

Bill Lussier  
Manager Marine Fisheries  
Fisheries Victoria DPI  
GPO Box 4440  
Melbourne VIC 3001

Dear Mr Lussier,

The Victorian National Parks Association strongly supports the Department of Primary Industries' precautionary approach in introducing a 12-month Fisheries Notice for the immediate protection (catch and keep) or possession of the endemic large wrasse species Eastern Blue Groper (*Achoerodus viridis*) and Western Blue Groper (*Achoerodus gouldii*) for all fishing methods in, on, or next to Victorian waters.

The VNPA also supports the development of a longer-term permanent protection arrangement, which is formed through a thorough but non-lethal (observational surveys) population and distribution assessment of both species over the next 12 months, as well as consultation and input from all stakeholders. We suggest that the funding for the assessment could be sourced through the Recreational Fishing Grants program.

Evidence gathered through VNPA's Reef Watch program concurs with DPI's reports of increased sightings of blue groper in some parts of eastern and central Victorian waters. The program has been actively seeking volunteers to report sightings and collect photographic images for species identification. Sightings have been recorded and images collected during the Great Victorian Fish Count and by individual divers and professional photographers over the past few years. In particular, blue groper populations have been observed in both Barwon Bluff and Beware Reef marine sanctuaries.

Reef Watch has assisted the Museum of Victoria to verify the presence of Western Blue Groper in Port Phillip Bay, which had not previously been documented in Museum records. In addition, the VNPA would be prepared to submit the Reef Watch observational blue groper data if requested, to inform protection measures for the current Fisheries Notice proposal and future long-term protection initiatives.

Historical and scientific evidence (as outlined in the DPI letter and in other publications<sup>1</sup>) suggests that blue groper were once more common in parts of Victorian waters and their numbers were reduced by commercial fishing and recreational spear fishing. This is the case in all states in which the species occurs. In states where restrictions have been put in place, as in NSW for the Eastern Blue Groper, the population has been able to recover to a point that is now thought to be stable.

The biological characteristics of blue groper that make them vulnerable to depletion from fishing methods include being slow growing with late age of sexual maturity, long-lived (>15yrs) and large-sized, and because of their territorial behaviour. Both species are listed under the IUCN red list as:

- Western Blue Groper (*Achoerodus gouldii*) – Vulnerable and decreasing population trend, with 60-90% declines over the past 20 years (since at least the 1990s) in at least a third of its range due to fishing based on current low abundance in almost all of its range.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For example: Edgar, G (1997) *Australian Marine Life the plants and animals of temperate waters*, Reed Books, pg 474

<sup>2</sup> The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, *Achoerodus gouldii*, sourced from <http://www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/187520/0>

- Eastern Blue Groper (*Achoerodus viridis*) – Near Threatened and stable population trend. The major threat to the species is listed 'as with most large labrid species, larger adults are relatively rare with a habitat restricted to coastal reefs. This species is endemic to south-eastern Australia and has a limited geographic range. It was subject to intense spearfishing prior to 1960, and is still subject to recreational and minor commercial line fishing in Victoria'.<sup>3</sup>

Blue groper are a popular attraction for recreational SCUBA divers and snorkellers. The establishment of marine sanctuaries in New South Wales for blue groper (and other species) has enabled the animals to mature and grow to over a metre in length. If both blue groper species were able to increase in population numbers, size and distribution, they could become a tourism drawcard in Victoria as well.

Blue groper also have an important ecological role in reef communities and have the potential to assist in reducing the growing problem of sea urchin populations in Port Phillip Bay if afforded better protection. Patches of urchin barren habitat also occur in the Cape Howe and Beware Reef areas, as well as infestations of long-spined urchin (*Centrostephanus rodgersii*), with local blue groper populations playing a potential role in controlling further spread.<sup>4</sup>

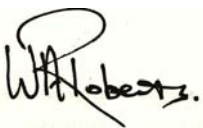
The Reef Watch program has produced an identification card that lists blue groper as of conservation concern. This card has been produced specifically for divers and snorkellers, but could be easily adapted for fishers, to provide information and encourage compliance with any new fishery rules for blue groper.

The VNPA welcomes the opportunity to comment on this proposed Blue Groper Fisheries Notice and supports DPI's precautionary approach to the management of this species. Both Simon Branigan, VNPA's Marine and Coastal Project Officer ([simonb@vnpa.org.au](mailto:simonb@vnpa.org.au); 9341 6508) and Reef Watch Coordinator Wendy Roberts ([wrobert@museum.vic.gov.au](mailto:wrobert@museum.vic.gov.au); 8341-7446) are happy to provide any further information or data that may be sought to inform current and future blue groper fishery management decisions.

Yours sincerely,



Simon Branigan  
Marine and Coastal Project Officer  
Victorian National Parks Association



Wendy Roberts  
Reef Watch Coordinator  
Victorian National Parks Association

---

<sup>3</sup> The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, *Achoerodus viridis*  
<http://www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/187572/0>

<sup>4</sup> Edmunds M, Mustoe S, Stewart K, Sheedy E and Ong J (2010) *VNPA Nature Conservation Review: Marine Conservation Priorities and Issues for Victoria Appendices*, Report to the Victorian National Parks Association. Australian Marine Ecology Report 405, Melbourne pg 8.