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The Hon. Melissa Horne
Minister for Fishing and Boating
Level 22, 1 Spring Street, Melbourne,
VIC 3000

Thursday 16 July 2020

Dear Minister,

Re: Spider crab protection measures

On behalf of the Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) we would like to congratulate you on your new appointment as Minister for Fishing and Boating. We look forward to working with you in your new capacity under these portfolios. We also commend the efforts of the Victorian Government in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic for what is continuing to be a challenging year.

The VNPA have been a community voice for protection of Victoria's unique natural heritage for over 67 years. VNPA is an independent, non-profit, membership-based group, which exists to protect Victoria's natural environment and biodiversity through the establishment and effective management of national parks, conservation reserves and other measures.

In the marine and coastal space there a number of issues we work on relevant to your portfolios of fishing, boating and ports, and in your capacity as the local member for Williamstown including:

- Local and state-wide marine and coastal biodiversity, and fisheries policy;
- Marine citizen science project such as the Great Victorian Fish Count and Oyster Watch;
- Proper funding, planning and management of marine protected areas such as Jawbone Marine Sanctuary, Williamstown;
- General conservation of marine wildlife, including iconic species such the spider crabs, and marine habitats, especially in Port Phillip Bay.

We write to you in your capacity of Minister for Fisheries, regarding the relatively recent and intensive harvesting of spider crabs on popular piers in Port Phillip Bay, the heart of the world renowned and loved annual spider crab migration (as featured by David Attenborough on Blue Planet II, and many other ocean documentaries). Each autumn/winter between the months of April-July, the spectacular spider crabs come in to the shallows to undertake their annual moulting, attracting thousands of visitors to witness this marine spectacle.

Unfortunately the 2019/2020 spider crab migration events saw for the first time a steep increase in intensity of crab catching from the Rye and Blairgowrie Piers which until this time was unprecedented. The sheer volume of crab fishing, combined with the nature of the fishing practices, and the high number of water users observing the crabs from above and below water is causing huge public health and safety and environmental issues.

The 2020 event saw a further escalation of crowds of people fishing with nets, using chicken carcasses as bait, which littered the seafloor (80 within a small areas), damage to marine life and marine litter from fishing gear, crab pots being dropped people in the water, and on marine life - all confined to a small area from a single section of pier.

This is causing significant public health, and safety, and environmental concern from audiences at the local, state, national and international level, and has gained wide media coverage in [The Age](#), [Channel 9 News](#). Additionally, it is to a potentially significant risk to emergent eco-tourism on the Mornington Peninsula, and given the hardships faced due to Covid-19, there is great value in protecting such an incredible tourism drawcard to Victoria's economy.

The VNPA, along with representatives from the community groups Spider Crab Alliance and Spider Crab Melbourne who represent divers, fishers and other water users and concerned community, have been meeting and working with the Victorian Fisheries Authority, and recognise the work to date that is currently being undertaken in the education space, and the satellite tagging of spider crabs about to commence. However our concerns remain, that these actions do not address the concerns and risks that the last two years have seen, and without intervention, the 2021 event will be an even greater hazard.

We ask for your intervention on this issue for additional spider crab protection measures to be put in place, specifically **a period of no-take between the months of April-July, coinciding with the peak spider crab moulting times.**

Additional spider crab protection measures are supported by local and state-wide groups, The Spider Crab Alliance, and Spider Crab Melbourne, 32,000 petition signatories, statements of position from 50+ local businesses, industry representatives and educators (were delivered to the VFA), and 1000+ statements of support from individuals including marine biologists, scientists and educators, verbal and social media support from anglers and their representative bodies.

We believe a short period of no-take of the crabs during their peak moulting time would mitigate the majority of issues and risks, and given it is a new fishing pressure, it would gain wide community support, including people with fishing interests. A short no-take period would also be in line with other no-take seasons for other species such as abalone and rock lobster.

We acknowledge the complexities given this is not only a fisheries issue – and involve several government agencies with an interest in the safety of people in the area, and the protection of marine life in the bay. However given the issues are stemming from the taking of the spider crabs, we believe that fisheries has a great opportunity to play a lead role in curbing the issues.

As Minister for Fisheries, we seek your intervention on the most effective way to address this issue - a no-take period on fishing Spider Crabs during their critical aggregation period between March – July.

Additionally, we request consideration of the following measures:

- Decrease the total allowable catch per recreational fishing license holder per day, which is currently at 30.
- Play a lead role in coordinating the collaboration of all government agencies with interests in the safety of people in the area for better management of the spider crab migration during their entire moulting season.

We believe this is a real opportunity if acted on quickly to curb before it gets even further out of control in coming spider crab seasons.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and/or appropriate staff online to discuss this important issue in further detail at your earliest convenience, and further brief you on the important work the VNPA does for our marine and coastal environments on broader marine biodiversity policy, and citizen science. Please contact Shannon Hurley, Nature Conservation Campaigner at shannon@vnpa.org.au, or on 0433 481 346.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Ruchel". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Matt Ruchel
Executive Director
Victorian National Parks Association