

BANDED MORWONG DEVELOPMENTAL FISHERY

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The banded morwong (*Cheilodactylus spectabilis*), an marine fish common on the shallow coastal reefs of southern Australia and northern New Zealand, has recently formed the basis of a potentially lucrative live fish fishery for professional fishers. The Marine and Freshwater Resources Institute (MAFRI) has commenced a 3 year project on the banded morwong fishery in Victoria to provide a preliminary assessment of the status of the resource and its capacity to support an ongoing commercial fishery.

The banded morwong is an attractive fish that has a striking pattern of seven or eight dark coloured bands across its white body. Although often targeted by spearfishers, banded morwong are not often caught by recreational line fishers as they don't often take a baited hook.

Flesh of the banded morwong has a delicate flavour though it is considered dry, and is best cooked to ensure moisture is not lost. The market has recently been opened to professional fishers for live fish through Asian restaurants in Melbourne and Sydney. As live fish they can return the attractive price of around \$17 per kilo on average.

In Tasmania, the banded morwong fishery has operated since 1995 with catches averaging about 80 tonnes per annum. In Victoria, the annual catch has increased from an average of less than 1 tonne per year for the three years between 1995 to 1997, to a total of over 8 tonnes in 1999. The catch from Victoria is likely to be significantly lower than from Tasmania, because of the smaller area of suitable reef habitat off the Victorian coast.

The Victorian banded morwong fishery has been declared a Developmental Fishery for a period of 3 years. There are limited number of fishers operating, and there is a 50 fish per day limit on their catches. There is also a closed season during the spawning season, and minimum and maximum size limits for the fish are in place.

Banded morwong can grow to just over 50 cm fork length and over 3.5 kg in weight, living to be as old as 90 years. Research in New Zealand has shown that male banded morwong are highly territorial and the same fish may defend a particular reef site from other males over a number of years. They take a long time to reach sexual maturity and have a complex, ritualised spawning behaviour. This combination of longevity, slow growth rates, long time to reach maturity, territorial behaviour and complex spawning behaviour, all suggest that banded morwong populations may be very sensitive to increased mortality from fishing.

The MAFRI research project will be monitoring the Victorian fishery closely during these first three developmental years. Information on the longevity, growth and mortality of banded morwong in Victoria will be collected as well as trends in catch and effort data and an assessment of the bycatch associated with the fishery. Armed with this information, fisheries managers will be able to make a decision as to whether this fishery can move from being a Developmental Fishery to an ongoing commercial fishery operating under a normal Fishery Access Licence.