



MPEKWENI BEACH RESORT, EASTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA

22<sup>nd</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> FEB 2026

# Lee Spyrou – Report

AUSTRALIAN DELEGATION



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## **Project Objectives and Achieved outcomes:**

### **Summary and Personal Takeaways from WRFC**

Attending the World Recreational Fishing Conference (WRFC) has been one of the most professionally and personally transformative experiences of my leadership journey in recreational fishing. Through active participation in keynote presentations, technical sessions, and direct engagement with some of the world's leading fisheries scientists, policymakers, and practitioners, I have gained knowledge, networks, and perspective that will directly strengthen my contribution to the Australian recreational fishing sector and to my leadership role as President of the Albert Park Yachting and Angling Club (APYAC).

### **Building Capacity, Capability, and Knowledge**

WRFC provided unparalleled exposure to world-leading science, management frameworks, and stewardship models. Presentations from globally respected researchers such as Dr Nelly Isigi Kadagi, Dr Valerio Sbragaglia, Dr Sascha Clark-Danylchuk, Professor Andy Danylchuk, Professor Robert Arlinghaus and Professor Steven Cooke reinforced the importance of evidence-based recreational fisheries management and the critical role anglers play as partners in conservation.

Key areas of capacity development included:

- Understanding the global scale and responsibility of recreational fishing, which involves over 10% of the world's population.
- Learning best-practice catch-and-release techniques, including species-specific considerations and the importance of gear selection.
- Gaining insight into emerging environmental challenges, including plastic pollution, habitat degradation, and the ecological impacts of fishing technologies.
- Reinforcing the importance of habitat restoration, validating APYAC's science-based reef restoration programs as a model aligned with global best practice.

These learnings have strengthened my ability to advocate for responsible fishing, informed stewardship, and science-led decision-making within my club, my state, and the broader Australian recreational fishing community.

### **Strengthening National and International Networks**

One of the most valuable outcomes of WRFC has been the establishment of meaningful relationships with international leaders in fisheries science, policy, and advocacy. Direct engagement with researchers such as Professor Steven Cooke and Marc Simon Weltersbach provided opportunities to discuss practical applications of their research within Australian fisheries contexts.

Equally important was strengthening relationships within the Australian delegation. As a recipient of the Emerging Leaders bursary, I'm now part of a national network of passionate and capable leaders committed to the future of recreational fishing in Australia. These relationships will form the foundation of ongoing collaboration, knowledge sharing, and leadership development.

These connections will ensure Australia remains actively engaged in the global recreational fishing community and continues to contribute to, and benefit from, international best practice.

### **Educating and Applying International Learnings to Australian Contexts**

WRFC provided valuable insights into international initiatives that have direct relevance to Australian fisheries management and club-level stewardship.

Key applicable learnings include:

- The importance of angler education and behavioural stewardship in improving conservation outcomes.
- The need to address emerging environmental threats, including plastic pollution from lost fishing gear and inappropriate habitat restoration materials.
- The value of involving recreational fishers directly in scientific research and fisheries management processes.
- The importance of promoting diversity, inclusion, and leadership opportunities within recreational fishing, particularly for women and emerging leaders.

These learnings will directly inform my leadership at APYAC, particularly in strengthening our education programs, conservation initiatives, and member engagement strategies.

### **Gaining Expert Feedback and Contributing to Global Knowledge Exchange**

WRFC provided a unique platform to both learn from and contribute to international discourse. Discussions with global experts provided valuable feedback on Australian initiatives, including reef restoration, stewardship programs, and leadership development through initiatives such as the Emerging Leaders program.

It was particularly encouraging to hear Australian programs recognised as progressive and impactful, reinforcing that Australia is seen as a global leader in recreational fisheries stewardship.

This exchange of knowledge has provided valuable perspective on how Australian recreational fishing can continue to evolve, improve, and lead.

## **Personal Leadership Outcomes**

On a personal level, WRFC has strengthened my confidence, broadened my perspective, and reinforced my commitment to responsible fisheries stewardship.

As President of APYAC, I now return with:

- Increased scientific literacy to support evidence-based leadership and education.
- Strengthened international and national networks that will support ongoing collaboration.
- Greater confidence in advocating for sustainable recreational fishing practices.
- Validation that APYAC's conservation and stewardship initiatives align with global best practice.
- Renewed motivation to support emerging leaders and promote inclusive participation in recreational fishing.

Most importantly, WRFC reinforced that recreational fishers are not separate from conservation – we're essential to it.

The knowledge, relationships, and inspiration gained through this experience will have lasting benefits not only for my personal leadership journey, but for APYAC, VRFish, the Australian recreational fishing community, and the long-term sustainability of the fisheries we are privileged to enjoy.

## Round Table with Dr Sascha Clark-Danylchuk – Advancing Fish Welfare and Stewardship

One of the most meaningful and professionally valuable engagements during WRFC was attending the face to face session led by Dr Sascha Clark-Danylchuk, co-founder of the internationally respected non-profit organisation *Keep Fish Wet*. Her work focuses on advancing science-based best practices for catch, handling, and release, with the ultimate goal of improving fish welfare and long-term fisheries sustainability.

Dr Clark-Danylchuk's presentation reinforced the critical importance of angler behaviour in determining the survival and wellbeing of released fish. Through her organisation, she has successfully translated complex fisheries science into clear, practical guidance that empowers recreational anglers to make better decisions on the water. This includes simple but highly effective measures such as minimising air exposure, supporting fish properly during handling, and prioritising in-water release whenever possible.

This work strongly resonated with me, both professionally and personally. As President of the Albert Park Yachting and Angling Club (APYAC), a non-profit organisation deeply committed to conservation, stewardship, and education, I recognised many shared values between our organisations. Like *Keep Fish Wet*, APYAC operates with the goal of increasing awareness, promoting responsible fishing practices, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the fisheries and environments we value.

A key learning outcome for me was the importance of structured, science-based education programs that translate research into practical behavioural change among anglers. *Keep Fish Wet* provides an excellent model for how non-profit organisations can influence positive outcomes through education, outreach, and community engagement. This represents a valuable framework that I intend to adapt and implement within APYAC to further strengthen our club's leadership in promoting responsible catch-and-release practices.

I also found Dr Clark-Danylchuk's leadership journey personally inspiring. Like many effective leaders in the recreational fishing sector, her work has been supported by strong collaborative networks, partnerships, and a shared commitment to conservation. This reinforced my own experience that meaningful progress in recreational fisheries stewardship is built on community, shared purpose, and collective effort.

Importantly, this engagement validated that APYAC's long-standing commitment to stewardship, education, and conservation aligns closely with global best practice. It also highlighted opportunities for our club to further enhance member education, particularly in the area of fish handling and welfare.

The knowledge gained from this session will directly inform future education initiatives at APYAC and will strengthen my ability to promote responsible fishing practices within both club and broader Australian recreational fishing contexts.

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This experience reinforced that recreational fishers, when properly informed and empowered, play a critical role as stewards of the aquatic environment, and that non-profit organisations such as APYAC and *Keep Fish Wet* are essential leaders in advancing this mission.



## **Round Table with Professor Andy Danylchuk – Bridging Science, Anglers, and Conservation**

A significant and highly valuable component of my WRFC experience was the opportunity to engage directly with Professor Andy Danylchuk during our delegation roundtable session, as well as through his formal presentations and informal discussions throughout the conference.

Professor Danylchuk is internationally recognised as a leading authority in fish conservation, with a career dedicated to understanding the complex relationship between recreational angling, fish welfare, and ecosystem sustainability. What makes his work particularly impactful is his ability to bridge the gap between science and practical application. As both a globally respected academic and a passionate angler, he brings credibility and relatability to his mission of promoting responsible angling and conservation.

During the roundtable session, Professor Danylchuk shared valuable insights into the development and implementation of best-practice catch-and-release techniques, emphasising that angler behaviour plays a critical role in determining conservation outcomes. His work focuses not only on the biological science behind fish survival, but also on empowering anglers through education and behavioural change. This approach aligns strongly with my own leadership philosophy and the stewardship values we promote at APYAC.

I also attended several of Professor Danylchuk's technical presentations, including *Catch and Release and the Blue Economy: Using Multi-Species Science in the Seychelles to Inform Actionable Conservation and Management*, and *As Good as Gold: Angler Perceptions of the Golden Dorado Recreational Fishery in the Neotropics*. These sessions highlighted the importance of integrating ecological science with social and economic considerations to support sustainable fisheries management. His research demonstrated that recreational fishing, when properly managed, can provide significant economic benefits while also supporting conservation outcomes.

One of the most important takeaways for me was his emphasis on “responsible angling” as a shared responsibility between scientists, fishers, industry, and community organisations. He highlighted the importance of translating research into clear, practical guidance that anglers can apply on the water. This reinforced the critical role that clubs such as APYAC play in educating members and promoting best practice.

Professor Danylchuk's delivery style was engaging, accessible, and deeply inspiring. His ability to communicate complex scientific concepts in a relatable and practical manner ensures that his work has real-world impact beyond academic circles. His use of storytelling, experiential examples, and visual media demonstrated effective strategies for engaging recreational fishing communities and influencing positive behavioural change.

I was also fortunate to spend time speaking with Professor Danylchuk during evening networking sessions, where he was extremely generous with his time, advice, and encouragement. These conversations provided valuable insight into leadership within the recreational fisheries sector and reinforced the importance of building strong collaborative networks between scientists and recreational fishing communities.

His work, alongside that of Dr Sascha Clark-Danylchuk through their non-profit organisation *Keep Fish Wet*, provides an excellent model for how science-based education and community engagement can significantly improve conservation outcomes. The principles he shared will directly inform my ongoing leadership at APYAC, particularly in strengthening our education initiatives, promoting best-practice catch-and-release, and reinforcing our role as leaders in recreational fisheries stewardship.

This engagement further reinforced that recreational fishing, when supported by science, education, and responsible leadership, can play a vital role in both conservation and sustainable economic development.



## **Roundtable with Professor Robert Arlinghaus – Integrating Science, Society, and Sustainable Fisheries Management**

A particularly valuable component of the Australian delegation's experience at WRFC was our roundtable session with Professor Robert Arlinghaus, one of the world's foremost experts in recreational fisheries science and integrative fisheries management.

Professor Arlinghaus is globally recognised for his extensive research examining recreational fisheries through a truly holistic lens, incorporating ecological, social, economic, and institutional dimensions. With over 200 peer-reviewed publications and close to 500 scientific works overall, his contributions have significantly shaped modern recreational fisheries policy and management, including the development of international best-practice guidelines such as the United Nations FAO Technical Guidelines for Responsible Recreational Fisheries.

What stood out most during our roundtable discussion was Professor Arlinghaus' transdisciplinary approach, which actively involves anglers, fisheries managers, policymakers, and scientists working collaboratively to achieve sustainable outcomes. He emphasised that recreational fisheries management cannot rely solely on biological science, but must also consider human behaviour, motivations, values, and social structures. This perspective reinforced the critical importance of recreational fishing clubs such as APYAC, which serve not only as social hubs but also as key platforms for education, stewardship, and behavioural leadership.

Professor Arlinghaus shared valuable insights into catch-and-release angling, particularly highlighting the importance of balancing conservation benefits with ethical considerations and angler perceptions. His research demonstrates that successful fisheries management requires both scientific evidence and community acceptance, reinforcing the need for ongoing education, engagement, and trust-building within the recreational fishing community.

I was particularly inspired by his personal journey into fisheries science. Growing up in Germany, where recreational fishing is not widely practiced, he discovered angling through personal curiosity and passion. That passion ultimately led him to pursue a career dedicated to understanding and protecting fisheries. His story reinforced the powerful role that personal connection to fishing plays in shaping lifelong stewardship and leadership - something I see reflected strongly within the APYAC community.

Professor Arlinghaus was exceptionally generous with his time, openly sharing his knowledge and engaging thoughtfully with our delegation. His approachable and collaborative manner demonstrated the importance of open dialogue between scientists and recreational fishers. This experience reinforced my confidence in the value of fostering strong relationships between the scientific community and recreational fishing organisations.

Key personal takeaways from this engagement included:

- The importance of integrating social science with ecological science to achieve sustainable fisheries outcomes.
- Recognition that angler education and engagement are essential tools for effective fisheries management.
- Validation that recreational fishing clubs play a vital leadership role in promoting stewardship and responsible fishing practices.
- The value of collaborative, transdisciplinary approaches that include anglers as active partners in conservation.

This engagement has strengthened my ability to advocate for science-based stewardship within APYAC and the broader Australian recreational fishing community. It also reinforced that the future sustainability of recreational fisheries depends not only on sound science, but on informed, engaged, and responsible angling communities working in partnership with researchers and policymakers.

Professor Arlinghaus' work and insights provided both inspiration and practical guidance that will directly inform my ongoing leadership and stewardship efforts.



## **Keynote and Roundtable with Professor Steven Cooke – Leadership, Science, and Optimism for the Future of Recreational Fishing**

A defining highlight of my attendance at the World Recreational Fishing Conference (WRFC) was the opportunity to hear Professor Steven Cooke deliver the keynote address and to participate in a roundtable session with him as part of the Australian Emerging Leaders delegation.

Professor Cooke is widely regarded as one of the most influential recreational fisheries scientists in the world. His research spans recreational fisheries management, fish ecology, conservation, angler behaviour, and stewardship, and he has published hundreds of peer-reviewed scientific papers that have directly influenced global fisheries policy and best practice. His work is particularly respected for its ability to bridge the gap between academic science and practical application within the recreational fishing community.

His keynote presentation, titled *“Pessimism and Optimism for the Future of Recreational Fishing through the Lens of a Scholar, Practitioner, and Angler,”* provided a balanced, honest, and deeply insightful assessment of the current state and future direction of recreational fisheries globally.

Professor Cooke spoke candidly about the significant challenges facing recreational fisheries, including increasing pressure on fish populations, habitat degradation, emerging fishing technologies, and the growing global participation in recreational fishing, which now involves more than 10% of the world’s population. Importantly, he emphasised that recreational fishing must be recognised as a significant and influential component of global fisheries, both in terms of its ecological footprint and its social and economic value.

However, the central message of his presentation was one of optimism.

Professor Cooke highlighted that never before have anglers, scientists, and fisheries managers been more connected, informed, and engaged in collaborative conservation efforts. He emphasised that the future sustainability of recreational fisheries will depend on anglers themselves becoming active participants in stewardship, data collection, and conservation leadership. This concept of shared responsibility strongly resonated with my own leadership approach and reinforced the important role that recreational fishing clubs such as APYAC play in fostering stewardship and promoting responsible fishing practices.

A particularly meaningful moment occurred during his presentation when he asked members of the Australian delegation to identify themselves. He spoke highly of leadership initiatives such as the Emerging Leaders program, funded by the Australian Recreational Fishing Foundation (ARFF), describing these programs as a key reason for his optimism about the future of recreational fishing. His recognition of the importance of investing in emerging leaders reinforced the value of the bursary program and strengthened my commitment to contributing to the long-term sustainability of the sector.

During our roundtable engagement, Professor Cooke was extremely generous with his time, openly discussing the importance of integrating scientific research with angler education and behavioural change. He emphasised that effective fisheries management cannot rely solely on regulation, but must also involve empowering anglers through knowledge and shared ownership of conservation outcomes. This collaborative model strongly aligns with APYAC's approach to stewardship, education, and habitat restoration.

One particularly memorable and instructive example he shared related to a scientific study his team conducted to test the widely held belief that pouring carbonated beverages, such as Diet Coke, over a fish's gills could stop bleeding during catch-and-release. His research conclusively demonstrated that this practice provides no therapeutic benefit and may in fact worsen bleeding. This example highlighted the importance of challenging anecdotal practices with scientific evidence and reinforced the critical role of science-based education in improving fish welfare outcomes.

Key personal and professional takeaways from my engagement with Professor Cooke included:

- Recognition of the critical role anglers play as partners in fisheries conservation and stewardship.
- The importance of science-based education to improve angler behaviour and conservation outcomes.
- Validation that community-based organisations such as APYAC are essential contributors to sustainable fisheries management.
- Increased understanding of the global challenges facing recreational fisheries, and the leadership opportunities available to address them.
- Reinforced confidence that the future of recreational fishing can be positive when supported by informed, engaged, and responsible angling communities.

This engagement was both professionally enriching and personally inspiring. It reinforced my commitment to applying science-based leadership within APYAC and the broader Australian recreational fishing community. It also strengthened my confidence that through education, stewardship, and collaborative leadership, recreational fishing can continue to thrive while protecting the fisheries and environments upon which it depends.

Professor Cooke's keynote and roundtable engagement provided valuable guidance, inspiration, and practical knowledge that will directly inform my ongoing leadership and stewardship efforts.



## **Keynote Speaker Isigi Kadagi (“Nelly”) – Leadership, Mentorship, and the Power of Purpose**

One of the most personally impactful and inspiring presentations I attended at WRFC was delivered by Isigi Kadagi, known as Nelly, a fisheries scientist, educator, conservation leader, and mentor working across Kenya and the broader Indian Ocean region.

Nelly’s journey into fisheries science is extraordinary. Growing up in Kenya in a large family, she lived approximately 17 hours from the nearest ocean. Her first exposure to the marine environment came through watching a black-and-white television, where she saw images of the ocean and fish that captivated her imagination. Despite the physical and social distance between her and the marine world, she developed a deep and unwavering sense that the ocean would one day become part of her life’s path.

Through determination, education, and resilience, Nelly transformed that childhood curiosity into an internationally respected career. She now works at the intersection of fisheries science, education, conservation, and policy, collaborating with commercial, artisanal, and recreational fishing sectors, as well as government and community stakeholders. Her work focuses not only on advancing scientific understanding, but also on strengthening communities, improving livelihoods, and ensuring sustainable fisheries management.

What stood out most to me was that, despite her impressive academic and professional achievements, Nelly identifies her greatest contribution not through her scientific credentials, but through her mentorship and her commitment to helping others succeed. Her personal philosophy, “Lift as you rise,” reflects her belief that leadership is not simply about personal advancement, but about creating opportunities for others to grow alongside you.

This message resonated deeply with me and strongly aligned with my own leadership values. In my role as President of the Albert Park Yachting and Angling Club, I strive to foster an inclusive and supportive environment where individuals are encouraged to develop confidence, capability, and leadership skills. Like Nelly, I believe that sustainable progress within recreational fishing depends on empowering others, sharing knowledge, and building strong, supportive communities.

Her journey also reinforced the importance of representation and access. Her story demonstrated that passion, determination, and opportunity can overcome geographic, social, and economic barriers. It highlighted the transformative power of education, mentorship, and leadership in shaping not only individual careers, but entire communities.

Nelly’s presentation served as a powerful reminder that leadership in recreational fisheries extends far beyond science alone. It is about people, relationships, mentorship, and creating pathways for future generations. Her work exemplifies how one individual, driven by purpose and compassion, can create meaningful and lasting impact.

This engagement has strengthened my commitment to continuing to mentor, support, and inspire others within APYAC and the broader recreational fishing community, ensuring that we continue to build a culture of stewardship, inclusion, and shared leadership for the future.



## **Keynote Speaker Dr Valerio Sbragaglia – Understanding Fish Behaviour and the Human Dimension of Recreational Fishing**

Another highly engaging and thought-provoking keynote presentation at WRFC was delivered by Dr Valerio Sbragaglia, an integrative marine ecologist whose work focuses on understanding the dynamic relationship between fish behaviour and recreational fishing.

Born in a small coastal town in Italy with a rich tradition of marine recreational fishing, Dr Sbragaglia's lifelong connection to fishing - particularly spearfishing - has directly shaped his academic and professional journey. His personal experience as an angler has given him a unique perspective as both a scientist and participant in the recreational fishing community, allowing him to approach his research with a deep appreciation for the cultural, ecological, and behavioural aspects of fishing.

Since completing his PhD in Marine Science in 2015, his research has focused on exploring how fish behaviour influences vulnerability to capture, and conversely, how fishing pressure can alter fish behaviour over time. His work highlighted that fish are not passive participants in fisheries, but adaptive animals capable of learning, responding to pressure, and modifying their behaviour based on environmental and human influences.

One of the key insights I gained from his presentation was the concept that fishing itself can shape fish populations in behavioural ways, not just through harvest, but through selective pressure. Fish that are more cautious, less aggressive, or more aware of their surroundings may be less likely to be caught, potentially influencing the behavioural characteristics of fish populations over time. This reinforced the importance of responsible fishing practices and thoughtful fisheries management to maintain healthy and balanced ecosystems.

Dr Sbragaglia also presented innovative research examining how modern tools such as social media can be used to better understand recreational fishing activity, angler behaviour, and emerging trends. This approach demonstrated how new technologies can provide valuable real-time insights into fisheries that were previously difficult to monitor. I found this particularly interesting, as it highlighted the evolving intersection between science, technology, and the recreational fishing community.

A key personal takeaway from his presentation was a deeper appreciation for the complexity of fish behaviour and the importance of understanding fisheries not just from a population perspective, but from a behavioural and ecological standpoint. It reinforced that effective fisheries stewardship requires an understanding of both the biological and human dimensions of recreational fishing.

His presentation also reinforced the important role anglers play within the broader fisheries system. As recreational fishers, our actions influence fish behaviour, fisheries sustainability, and ecosystem health. This further strengthened my commitment to promoting responsible fishing practices, education, and stewardship within APYAC.

Dr Sbragaglia's work highlighted the importance of integrating ecological science, behavioural research, and angler engagement to support sustainable fisheries management. His perspective provided valuable insight into how recreational fishing continues to evolve and how science can help guide responsible and sustainable participation into the future.



## **Keynote Speaker: Judy Mann-Lang - A Voice That Bridged Oceans**

One of the most powerful and personally resonant keynote presentations of the conference came from South African marine biologist and conservation leader Judy Mann-Lang. Her lifelong dedication to protecting marine ecosystems, while actively engaging and empowering recreational fishers as custodians of the ocean, struck a profound chord with me — both as President of Albert Park Yachting and Angling Club and as a proud representative of Victoria's recreational fishing community.

Judy's message was not one of exclusion, but of inclusion. She spoke passionately about the critical importance of recreational fishers as partners in conservation, not adversaries. This philosophy aligns deeply with everything we believe and practice at APYAC and across Victoria. In our state, recreational fishers contribute directly through licence fees, which fund habitat restoration, fisheries research, education programs, compliance, and infrastructure. These contributions have enabled projects such as shellfish reef restoration, kelp regeneration, fish stocking programs, and youth engagement initiatives — all of which mirror the collaborative conservation model Judy has championed throughout her career.

What resonated most strongly was her ability to reframe the narrative. Rather than seeing fishing and conservation as competing interests, she demonstrated how they are intrinsically linked. Healthy fish populations require healthy habitats, and those who value fishing often become the ocean's strongest advocates. This is something I witness firsthand within our APYAC community, where members actively volunteer their time to support habitat restoration, citizen science initiatives, and educational outreach. Our members understand that giving back to the marine environment is essential to preserving the experiences we cherish.

Judy also spoke about leadership — particularly the importance of diverse voices in marine stewardship. As a woman who has risen to become one of the most influential figures in marine conservation in South Africa, she has paved the way for others to follow. Her journey reinforced my own sense of purpose and responsibility, not only to represent our club and our state, but to help ensure that future generations — including women, young people, and emerging leaders — feel empowered to contribute to the future of recreational fishing and ocean conservation.

Her work highlighted the importance of education, storytelling, and community engagement — principles that are central to APYAC's mission. Whether through our involvement in restoration projects, our youth fishing initiatives, or simply fostering a strong culture of stewardship among our members, we are part of a global movement that recognises recreational fishers as essential guardians of our marine environments.

Listening to Judy speak, I was struck by how connected our experiences are, despite being on opposite sides of the world. The challenges we face in Victoria — habitat degradation, climate change, and the need to maintain sustainable fisheries — are shared globally. But so too are the solutions. Her message reinforced that meaningful conservation is most successful when it is driven by community, supported by science, and embraced by those who care most deeply about the ocean.

Her keynote left me feeling incredibly proud of the work we are doing at APYAC and across Victoria, and deeply motivated to continue strengthening the role of recreational fishers as leaders in conservation.

## **Plastics in Recreational Fisheries: Risks, Responsibility, and Solutions**

One of the most confronting - and important - themes emerging for me from WRFC has been the impact of plastics on our fisheries.

Professor Steven Cooke spoke powerfully about artificial reefs made from plastics. While often well-intentioned, the science is increasingly clear: plastic structures can degrade, fragment, and ultimately become nothing more than persistent marine litter. Instead of restoring ecosystems, they can introduce long-term pollution and unintended harm. It was a sobering reminder that when it comes to reef restoration, materials matter just as much as intent.

It also reinforced something I am incredibly proud of - APYAC's reef restoration work has always been grounded in science, consultation, and care. Our reefs are built using natural, proven materials that support biodiversity, not compromise it. And the results speak for themselves - thriving ecosystems, increased fish life, and a legacy we can be proud of. We are part of the solution.

Another fascinating and relevant presentation was by Marc Simon Weltersbach, who explored the growing issue of soft plastic fishing lures as a source of aquatic pollution. Like many of our members, I love fishing soft plastics - and Alan Bonnici's recent presentation at APYAC showed just how effective and exciting they can be. But the reality is that lost or discarded soft plastics don't simply disappear. They can persist in the environment, be mistaken for food, ingested by fish and wildlife, and potentially cause harm over time.

The key message wasn't to stop using soft plastics - but to use them responsibly.

### **Some important takeaways I'll be bringing back to APYAC:**

- Never discard damaged soft plastics in the water - always bring them home and dispose of them properly.
- Store used and damaged plastics securely so they don't blow overboard.
- Use durable, high-quality lures that last longer and reduce loss.
- Retrieve snagged lures whenever safely possible.
- Support emerging biodegradable alternatives as they become available.
- Remember that every small action contributes to the bigger picture.

As recreational fishers, we are the eyes, ears, and guardians of our waterways. The choices we make matter.

WRFC has reinforced that recreational fishing can absolutely coexist with conservation — but only when we take responsibility seriously. At APYAC, this has always been part of who we are. From reef restoration to education and stewardship, we are committed to protecting the environments that give us so much.

Because the future of fishing doesn't just depend on the fish.

It depends on us.



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## **Catch and Release – Advancing Responsible Angling Practice at APYAC**

One of the most consistent and important themes throughout WRFC was the science, ethics, and best practice of catch and release recreational fishing. Multiple keynote speakers and technical presenters, including Professor Steven Cooke, Professor Robert Arlinghaus, Dr Andy Danylchuk, and Dr Sascha Clark-Danylchuk, reinforced that catch and release, when performed correctly, is one of the most powerful tools available to recreational fishers to support fisheries sustainability while preserving the social, cultural, and economic benefits of angling.

As both an angler and President of APYAC, this was a particularly valuable area of learning, especially given that our club has recently introduced measure-and-release formats within our fishing competitions. This progressive step allows anglers to record their catches without removing fish from the population, supporting conservation while maintaining the integrity and enjoyment of competitive fishing. However, WRFC strongly reinforced that catch and release is only effective when conducted using scientifically informed best practices.

### **The Benefits of Catch and Release**

Catch and release plays a critical role in reducing fishing mortality and supporting long-term fish population sustainability. Key benefits include:

- Preserving breeding populations, particularly large, mature fish that contribute significantly to reproduction.
- Supporting fisheries resilience and long-term ecosystem health.
- Allowing anglers to continue enjoying the resource without depleting it.
- Supporting stewardship ethics and conservation leadership within the recreational fishing community.
- Enabling modern competition formats, such as measure-and-release, which minimise ecological impact.

Importantly, research presented at WRFC highlighted that when performed correctly, many fish species have high post-release survival rates, reinforcing catch and release as an effective conservation strategy.

### **The Risks and Limitations of Catch and Release**

WRFC also emphasised that catch and release is not without risk. Poor handling practices can significantly reduce survival rates and negatively impact fish health. Risks include:

- Physical injury from hooks, particularly deep hooking or gill damage.
- Physiological stress caused by prolonged fight time, air exposure, and improper handling.
- Removal of protective slime coating, increasing susceptibility to infection.
- Increased vulnerability to predation following release.
- Improper release techniques, particularly in deep water species susceptible to barotrauma.

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These risks reinforced that catch and release must be supported by education, appropriate gear selection, and responsible angler behaviour to achieve positive conservation outcomes.

### **The Critical Importance of Hook Selection**

One of the most practical and impactful areas of learning related to hook selection. Multiple presentations highlighted that hook type has a direct influence on fish injury and survival rates.

Key learnings included:

- Circle hooks significantly reduce deep hooking and increase survival rates, particularly when targeting species prone to swallowing bait.
- Barbless hooks or crushed barbs reduce handling time and minimise tissue damage.
- Appropriate hook sizing improves hook placement and reduces injury.
- Artificial lures, particularly those actively retrieved, often result in cleaner mouth hook-ups compared to bait fishing.

This information reinforced that simple gear choices can have a major positive impact on fish welfare and conservation outcomes.

### **Best Practice Catch and Release Principles**

Based on the science and expert guidance presented at WRFC, several best-practice principles emerged:

- Minimise fight time by using appropriately sized tackle.
- Keep fish in the water wherever possible during handling and release.
- Avoid touching the gills or eyes.
- Wet hands before handling fish to protect the slime layer.
- Minimise air exposure to only a few seconds if required.
- Use appropriate release tools such as dehookers or long-nose pliers.

- Support the fish properly during release and allow it to recover before swimming away.
- Avoid fishing in conditions where survival may be compromised, such as extreme heat or low oxygen environments.

These simple but critical actions can dramatically improve post-release survival.

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## **Implications and Opportunities for APYAC**

The knowledge gained at WRFC provides valuable opportunities to further strengthen APYAC's leadership in responsible recreational fishing.

Key opportunities include:

- Continuing to expand measure-and-release competition formats.
- Providing member education on best-practice catch and release techniques.
- Promoting the use of circle hooks and appropriate tackle.
- Incorporating fish welfare education into club events, presentations, and communications.
- Reinforcing stewardship values and conservation leadership within our club culture.

APYAC has already demonstrated leadership through its habitat restoration initiatives and progressive competition formats. The learnings from WRFC will enable us to further enhance our practices and continue positioning APYAC as a leader in responsible recreational fishing.

## **Personal Leadership Outcome**

This focus on catch and release has strengthened my understanding of the important role anglers play in fisheries conservation. It reinforced that conservation is not achieved solely through regulation, but through education, behavioural change, and stewardship.

As recreational fishers, we have both the privilege and the responsibility to protect the resources we enjoy. By applying science-based catch and release practices, APYAC and its members can continue to enjoy fishing while actively contributing to the long-term sustainability of our fisheries.

The knowledge gained through WRFC will directly inform future education, competition formats, and stewardship initiatives at APYAC, ensuring that we continue to lead by example and promote responsible, sustainable recreational fishing.



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## **The Importance of Social Science in Recreational Fishing – Stewardship, Perception, and Leadership**

One of the most valuable and recurring themes throughout WRFC was the critical role of social science in recreational fisheries management. While biological science helps us understand fish populations and ecosystems, social science helps us understand anglers — our behaviours, motivations, values, and the collective impact we have on fisheries sustainability and public perception.

Leading researchers such as Professor Robert Arlinghaus, Professor Steven Cooke, and Dr Valerio Sbragaglia emphasised that the future of recreational fishing will depend as much on human behaviour as it does on biological science. Recreational fishers are not simply participants in fisheries; we are key stakeholders whose actions directly influence conservation outcomes, policy decisions, and the long-term social acceptance of our sport.

### **Understanding the Human Dimension of Recreational Fishing**

Social science research has shown that angler knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours play a decisive role in determining fisheries sustainability. This includes how fish are handled and released, how fishing gear is used, how habitats are respected, and how anglers communicate and engage with the broader community.

Importantly, public perception of recreational fishing is increasingly shaped by visibility through social media, community engagement, and environmental awareness. As a result, anglers are now more visible than ever before, and our individual actions collectively shape how recreational fishing is viewed by policymakers, scientists, and the general public.

Dr Sbragaglia's research highlighted how modern tools, including social media, are now being used to study angler behaviour and track trends within recreational fishing. This reinforces that anglers are not only participants in fisheries, but also contributors to the broader social and ecological system.

Professor Arlinghaus also emphasised that effective fisheries management must integrate both ecological science and social science, recognising that sustainable outcomes depend on angler cooperation, education, and shared stewardship.

## **The Importance of Stewardship and Responsible Behaviour**

WRFC reinforced that recreational fishers are among the most important stewards of aquatic environments. Our direct connection to fisheries places us in a unique position to protect, monitor, and advocate for their long-term sustainability.

**However, with this privilege comes responsibility.**

Responsible angling behaviour includes:

- Practicing proper catch and release techniques.
- Using appropriate gear and minimising environmental impact.
- Respecting habitats and avoiding pollution.
- Supporting conservation initiatives and habitat restoration.
- Promoting ethical and respectful treatment of fish and the environment.

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Equally important is the role anglers play in influencing each other. Positive cultural norms within fishing communities can significantly improve conservation outcomes through shared knowledge and leadership.

## **Public Perception and the Future of Recreational Fishing**

A key takeaway from multiple presentations was that the long-term future of recreational fishing will depend heavily on maintaining social licence - the acceptance and support of the broader community.

Public support for recreational fishing is strengthened when anglers are seen as responsible stewards who contribute positively to conservation and environmental protection. Conversely, poor behaviour, environmental neglect, or disregard for fish welfare can undermine public trust and support.

Professor Cooke highlighted that anglers must be recognised not only as resource users, but as active partners in conservation. This requires ongoing education, awareness, and leadership within the recreational fishing community.

## **The Leadership Role of Clubs such as APYAC**

Recreational fishing clubs play a critical leadership role in shaping angler behaviour, stewardship values, and community engagement. As a well-established and respected organisation, APYAC provides an important platform for promoting responsible fishing practices, conservation awareness, and environmental stewardship.

Through initiatives such as habitat restoration, education programs, and progressive competition formats such as measure-and-release, APYAC demonstrates how recreational fishing organisations can actively contribute to sustainable fisheries management.

Importantly, clubs provide opportunities to educate members, mentor emerging leaders, and foster a culture of stewardship that extends beyond individual anglers.

## **Key Takeaways and Future Opportunities**

Based on the knowledge gained at WRFC, there are several important opportunities for anglers and clubs to strengthen stewardship and social responsibility:

- Continue to promote education on best-practice fishing techniques and fish welfare.
- Lead by example in demonstrating responsible and ethical angling behaviour.
- Encourage open dialogue between anglers, scientists, and fisheries managers.
- Promote conservation initiatives and habitat restoration.
- Foster inclusive, supportive fishing communities that encourage stewardship.
- Recognise that individual angler behaviour contributes to the collective future of recreational fishing.

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### **Personal Leadership Reflection**

Attending WRFC reinforced that the future of recreational fishing depends not only on scientific research, but on people - anglers who are informed, responsible, and committed to stewardship.

As President of APYAC, I recognise the important role we play in leading by example. Our club has a long and proud history of conservation, education, and community engagement. The insights gained from WRFC will further strengthen our ability to promote stewardship, educate our members, and contribute positively to the future of recreational fishing.

Ultimately, social science has shown that when anglers understand their role as stewards, they become one of the most powerful forces for conservation.

The future of recreational fishing depends on us - not just as anglers, but as leaders, educators, and custodians of the aquatic environments we value.





## Recreational Fishing Licences – Investing in Our Future

One of the most powerful and recurring themes at this year's World Recreational Fishing Conference has been the role that recreational fishing licences play in shaping the future of our fisheries. Across many countries, there is growing recognition that fishers are not just users of the resource – they're among its most passionate custodians. When structured properly, licence programs create a direct and meaningful pathway for fishers to give back, helping fund critical work in research, education, habitat restoration, stocking programs, and long-term conservation.

In Australia - and especially in Victoria – we're incredibly fortunate to have one of the most successful and transparent recreational fishing licence systems in the world. Every dollar that recreational fishers contribute through licence fees is reinvested directly back into improving fishing opportunities and protecting our aquatic environments. This funding supports everything from fish stocking and habitat restoration to education programs, access improvements, and scientific research that ensures sustainable fisheries for future generations.

Both Shea Bloom and I are honoured to serve on the Victorian Recreational Fishing Licence Trust Committee, alongside seven other dedicated members. Together, we provide advice to the Minister for Outdoor Recreation, the Hon. Steve Dimopoulos, on how these funds should be distributed. It is a responsibility we take extremely seriously, knowing that we are representing the interests of hundreds of thousands of Victorian recreational fishers.

Each year, approximately \$9 million raised through recreational fishing licences is reinvested into projects that make a real difference. As highlighted yesterday by Taylor Hunt during his presentation, these funds have played a vital role in iconic restoration efforts - including the remarkable work being done to rebuild Murray Cod populations, ensuring that future generations can experience the thrill of encountering this truly magnificent native species.

Being part of this program has made me immensely proud - not only as an angler, but as a representative of the Victorian fishing community. It stands as proof that when fishers are empowered and trusted, they become leaders in conservation. Victoria's licence system is not simply a fee - it is an investment in our fisheries, our environment, and our shared future.

I look forward to bringing back new ideas and global perspectives from this conference, continuing to ensure that Victoria remains a world leader in recreational fishing stewardship.



## **Sisterhood, Unity, and the Power of Care**

There has been an unexpected and deeply personal lesson woven into my experience here at the World Recreational Fishing Conference - one that has had nothing to do with fisheries policy, science, or governance, and everything to do with humanity, vulnerability, and the extraordinary power of care.

Somewhere in transit, my luggage was lost. As I write this, it still hasn't found its way back to me. On the surface, this may sound like a simple inconvenience. But for me, it struck much deeper. Like many women who step into leadership spaces, I've always used the way I present myself - my clothing, my presence, my profile - as part of my armour. It's part of how I express strength, identity, and purpose. Being suddenly without any of it left me feeling exposed, stripped back, and vulnerable in a way I hadn't anticipated.

Quite literally, I was left with nothing.

And yet, in that space, something remarkable happened.

The community around me - and especially the women - stepped forward with a level of kindness, generosity, and quiet strength that I will carry with me forever. The women of our Australian delegation, along with incredible women from across the world, rallied around me without hesitation. They offered clothing, yes - but far more than that, they offered reassurance, dignity, and belonging.

For the Gala Dinner, it was the women of our Australian team who clothed me. But what they truly restored was not my appearance - it was my sense of self. They reminded me who I was. They reminded me why I was here. They reminded me that identity does not live in fabric, but in purpose, passion, and courage.

It was a profound and humbling experience - an eye-opening reminder of how much we can unconsciously rely on our "costume" to project who we are to the world. When that was taken away, I was forced to shed not just my physical belongings, but also some of my own ingrained beliefs about strength and presentation. I was forced to accept help. To accept care. To accept community.

And in doing so, I witnessed the true power of sisterhood.

This conference has shown me many things, but perhaps the greatest lesson has been this: when women support each other, when we lift each other, when we stand beside one another in moments of vulnerability, we create something far more powerful than any individual presence. We create unity. We create resilience. We create belonging.

To the incredible women of Australia, and to the remarkable women from across the global recreational fishing community who showed me such compassion - thank you. You didn't just help me through an uncomfortable situation. You reminded me of the strength that lives within community, and of the extraordinary power of care.

## **Conclusion and Acknowledgement**

Attending the World Recreational Fishing Conference has been one of the most transformative and meaningful experiences of my personal and professional journey in recreational fishing. The knowledge, relationships, and perspectives I've gained throughout this experience have profoundly strengthened my leadership capability, my scientific understanding, and my commitment to stewardship within the recreational fishing community.

This opportunity has provided me with direct access to world-leading scientists, policymakers, and practitioners, and has allowed me to engage in meaningful discussions on fisheries science, conservation, stewardship, social responsibility, and leadership. I will return home with not only with increased knowledge, but with renewed purpose and confidence in my ability to contribute positively to the future of recreational fishing.

I would like to express my deepest and most sincere gratitude to the Australian Recreational Fishing Foundation and the Victorian Fisheries Authority for awarding me this bursary and providing me with this life-changing opportunity. Their investment in emerging leaders demonstrates a genuine commitment to the future of recreational fishing in Australia. Their support has enabled me to gain invaluable international experience, knowledge, and networks that will directly benefit the Australian recreational fishing community.

I would also like to thank the mentors, organisers, researchers, and fellow delegates who generously shared their time, knowledge, and encouragement throughout this journey. Their mentorship, friendship, guidance, and patience have been invaluable, and I feel incredibly fortunate to have learned from such passionate and dedicated individuals. Their willingness to engage, support, and encourage emerging leaders reflects the strength and inclusiveness of the global recreational fishing community.

On a personal level, I am especially grateful to those who saw potential in me, who believed in me as an emerging leader, and who recognised my capacity to contribute meaningfully to this sector. As a woman in recreational fishing leadership, this support has been both empowering and deeply motivating. It's reinforced my commitment to continue leading with integrity, purpose, and inclusiveness, and to support others in their own leadership journeys.

I'm incredibly proud to represent Australia, Victoria, VRFish, and the APYAC on the international stage. I look forward to applying the knowledge, insights, and connections gained through WRFC to strengthen education, stewardship, conservation, and leadership within our local and national recreational fishing communities.

This experience has reinforced that recreational fishers are not simply participants in fisheries – we're custodians, advocates, and leaders. I will return home with a renewed sense of responsibility and optimism, and with a deep commitment to ensuring the long-term sustainability and positive future of recreational fishing in Australia.

Thank you for believing in me, and for giving me the opportunity to grow, learn, and lead.