

The Australian

Tony Burke gaffed in marine park row

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Scallop fisherman Clayton Nelson, co-owner of OneSea, pictured in Fremantle Harbour. Picture: Marie Nirme
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ONE of Western Australia's three remaining federal Labor MPs has appealed to Environment Minister Tony Burke to reconsider shutting fisheries off the coast of her electorate as the Liberal Party taps into anger over a proposed network of marine parks the length of the state.

The West Australian fishing industry is taking advice on its campaign against the proposed marine reserves from Senator Ron Boswell, who helped the Coalition target 13 Queensland marginal seats over the issue before last year's federal election.

In Perth yesterday Senator Boswell was a special guest at a seafood lunch with the West Australian Fishing Industry Council and Fremantle MP Melissa Parke, who revealed she believed there were good reasons why some commercial fisheries slated for closure off the coast south of Perth and near Rottnest Island should be allowed to continue.

Ms Parke said she supported the commonwealth rollout of marine parks around Australia. But some WA operators were trawling in a sustainable manner in areas marked for "mixed use zones" which meant their licences would be cancelled. Ms Parke said she believed a strong argument could be made for exceptions for some operators.

"I have been talking to the minister (Mr Burke) after seeing some of these operations," she said.

After a weekend conference where Labor wrestled with moral quandaries such as same-sex marriage and asylum-seekers, the fishing industry campaign will focus the spotlight on a mainstream economic issue that concerns people's livelihoods.

Ms Parke said Mr Burke had been receptive. She said she believed Rottnest Island Premium Scallops was an example of a sustainable operator that would be forced to close if exceptions were not made. The fledgling business, run by Perth man Clayton Nelson, catches about 23 million tonnes of scallops a year in deep water between Perth and Rottnest, supplying local restaurants including Neil Perry's Rockpool.

"When something can be done sustainably, then a good case can be made for exceptions," Ms Parke said.

Marine parks exist off the coast of Tasmania and Victoria. There are five large areas of marine reserves proposed around Australia, including no-take or mixed-use zones along the east coast, stretching from Torres Strait north of Queensland to southern NSW.

Proposed restrictions for the south-west of Australia are the most advanced. The WA fishing industry was backed by Bob Kearney, emeritus professor of fisheries at the University of Canberra, in its bid to counter "emotional" and "misleading" arguments about the need to scale down the industry.

Professor Kearney said the only species being "overfished on technical terms" in Australia was the gemfish. He said it was impossible, with known technology, for the Australian fishing industry to do damage to yellowfin tuna stocks.

And Professor Kearney, former director of the NSW Fisheries Research Institute, said that in Australia orange roughy was commercially fished in only 13 per cent of the ocean where it occurred.

There were an estimated 100 million orange roughy in Australia and NZ and each female laid 30,000 eggs.

Opposition Leader Tony Abbott attended Professor Kearney's speech and said commercial fisheries were best placed to maintain a sustainable industry as their livelihoods depended on it.

The federal government had got it wrong with its marine park proposals, Mr Abbott said, and was beholden to the Greens.

Guy Leyland, chief executive officer of the WA Fishing Industry Council, said yesterday's event was the beginning of an important campaign to save jobs across a range of fisheries including the shark, scallop, shark and tuna industry.

"It's a bit of a sleeper for the Labor party - we saw what happened at the last Federal election where this issue was very prominent in Queensland," he said. "A couple of seats changed hands because it resonated with people."
