

2024 NT ELECTION:



Policies
2024-28

How will your party support a bright recreational fishing future for the Territory?

A questionnaire for political parties to help inform Territorians about the policies that impact their fishing and support the NT's world-class recreational fisheries. Prepared by the Amateur Fishermen's Association of the Northern Territory Inc (AFANT).

2024 NT Election:

HOW WILL YOUR PARTY SUPPORT A BRIGHT RECREATIONAL FISHING FUTURE FOR THE TERRITORY?

WORLD-CLASS RECREATIONAL FISHING IN THE TERRITORY

The Amateur Fishermen’s Association of the Northern Territory (AFANT) is the peak body representing recreational fishers in the NT. The Northern Territory hosts world-class recreational fisheries, from metre-long barramundi caught during the run-off, to explosive dry season pelagic fishing, we have it all. Recreational fishing is a major tourism drawcard, and for tens of thousands of Territorians fishing is an intrinsic part of their culture, social life, and well-being. Beyond being a significant contributor to the Territory’s economy, with thousands of jobs spread across a range of occupations, quality fishing is also a key reason why many people choose to live, work, and stay in the NT. With over 30% of men and women actively participating, great fishing is an essential component of liveability for many Territorians.

Thanks to deliberate policy settings, strategic investments, and careful planning for the future, the NT enjoys an enviable position as Australia’s top fishing jurisdiction. Our fishing is a lifestyle beacon, attracting people to make the NT their home. This will continue to be an essential component to help deliver and retain the workforce the Territory needs to grow other key industries. Yet, recreational fishing is also a major industry in its own right.

Recreational fishing provides social, cultural, and economic benefits for Territory individuals, families, and businesses. In addition to the 60,000 adult locals who go fishing each year, the Northern Territory welcomes scores of visitors who travel to the Top End just to fish. Sustainable, inclusive, and world-class; NT recreational fishing contributed [\\$270 million dollars to Territory GDP in 2019 and supported 2,500 full time jobs](#), making it a key industry for Territory jobs. We need your support to reach our target of a \$500M recreational fishing industry by 2030.

It is essential that policymakers contending to lead the Territory fully understand that a bright fishing future is far from guaranteed. Excellent fishing is dependent on a range of policy settings, investment decisions, responses to challenges and changing situations (both local and external), and sometimes requires decisive commitments to trade-offs. Key needs include sound, responsive, and participatory fisheries management, clear and enduring access to fishing grounds, strategic infrastructure development and regular maintenance, environmental protection, best practice water resource governance, and sufficient funding for community groups, projects, and inclusive activities.

AFANT’S ROLE AND THE ANSWERS TO OUR POLICY QUESTIONS

Recreational fishers are Territorians of all ages and come from a diverse range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. With thousands of members and 60,000 adult constituents, at AFANT we understand there is no “typical” recreational fisher. There are, however, a range of values and policy decisions that will be essential to support abundant fisheries and to ensure the high-quality fishing that is required to sustain economic growth in our industry and liveability; the quality of life of Territorians into the future. This is why we are putting the following policy concerns and questions to the major parties contesting the 2024 Northern Territory election. Once we have received responses, we will collate them and produce communication materials to deliver the answers to our members and the broader fishing community.

We are undertaking this process to ensure that political parties are aware of the policies and investments required to support recreational fishing, and to help inform the 60,000 adult Territorians who fish, as well as our industry members, where each party stands on the issues important to their lifestyle and fishing future. We will never tell people how to vote and we are committed to working with any future Government to ensure that our shared vision for a bright fishing future becomes a reality. Complete responses are required by COB Wednesday, July 24, otherwise “no response received” will be listed. Please ensure answers are concise and include a clear “yes” or “no” indication.

KEY POLICY PRIORITIES FOR RESPONSE

1. NT Barramundi Fishery reform – the phase out of commercial gillnets

While barramundi can be found across the north of Australia and throughout much of Southeast Asia, the NT is famous for the best barramundi fishing in the world. This iconic status is no lucky accident. The NT's intact ecosystems, our free-flowing rivers, and vast connected floodplains and wetlands are the engine rooms of our productive barra fisheries. Yet, it is also the recent decades of fisheries management reforms that took barramundi from being just "sustainable", to being the abundant stocks that today underpin the NT's most popular and profitable fishery. While the \$270M economic contribution and 2,500 jobs in NT recreational fishing cannot be solely attributed to the barramundi fishery, it is entirely uncontroversial to highlight the fact that the barramundi fishery is the backbone of our valuable industry, with barramundi being the number one target species for local fishers, and by far the single biggest drawcard for fishing tourists who visit from interstate and overseas.

Management reforms in the 1990's, 2000's, and 2010's, including a significant reduction of gillnetting, the establishment of net-free-zones, strict recreational fishing possession limits, and the creation of premier Fish Management Zones, has underpinned the growth of the NT's recreational (and tourism) barramundi fishery to become the NT's single most valuable fishery. Unfortunately, over the past two years, uncertainty has increased for recreational fishers and our valuable industry. This comes as a result of commercial gillnet fishers losing access to the waters where up to 50% of their catch was coming from, shifting too much netting effort into the remaining open catchments like the Daly and Roper Rivers.

There is now unacceptable pressure from commercial barramundi gillnetting on key recreational, tourism and Traditional fishing areas. Systems including the Daly River and Roper River now face 10-year high commercial fishing pressure and this would be even higher if emergency regulations were not rushed in at the beginning of the 2024 fishing season, following pressure from AFANT and the NT Guided Fishing Industry Association (NTGFIA). What happens beyond 2024 is yet to be decided, but barramundi gillnetting is being phased out on the east coast of Queensland by 2027 and new net-free zones have already been established on the QLD side of the Gulf of Carpentaria. So, not only is the future of our world-class recreational barramundi fishing now under threat, but our main competitor for fishing tourism has also set a course for more abundant barramundi fisheries in the near future. This is especially problematic as the NT's main competitive advantage for fishing tourism is our abundant fish stocks.

Despite now being over three years into a formal management review process, the future of the NT's recreational and tourism barramundi fishery is facing serious challenges, and its future is now under threat. The NT's status as the best place to fish for barra in the country, and the main fishery underpinning the NT's fishing lifestyle has become uncertain. A policy response is required from whichever party forms Government at the 2024 NT election and the cost of non-decision on future jobs, economic growth, and Territory liveability will only escalate as time goes on. Only wholesale reform of the fishery will provide certainty for all stakeholders.

Q: Will your party commit to genuine fishery reform and phase out gillnetting for barramundi over the next term of government? *(We envisage this to include establishing a new, gillnet-free, strictly quota limited commercial fishery in partnership with Traditional Owners & Aboriginal fishing stakeholders. Putting premium barra on menus)*

Q: If your party will not commit to a phase out / buy out of commercial barramundi gillnetting, how will your party protect the future of recreational barramundi fishing and address the serious issue of displaced commercial effort that has already been formally acknowledged and temporarily addressed with unsatisfactory interim arrangements for 2024? *(Please note that addressing this challenge is not part of the current barramundi fishery review, and this is not something that stakeholders can reasonably be expected to agree upon without explicit policy direction and a commitment of resources from the Northern Territory Government).*



2. Fisheries Management

The NT's great recreational fishing is dependent on effective and inclusive fisheries management, allocation, planning, and compliance. The NT has many well managed fisheries, with contemporary Management Frameworks (plans for the fishery) and Harvest Strategies (pre-agreed decision-rules) in place, or under active development. Yet, there is ongoing work to be done to improve management and compliance, as well as to calibrate resource sharing in ways that optimises economic and social returns to the Northern Territory community.

2.1 Management Advisory Committees

Management Advisory Committees (MACs) with members from the recreational, commercial, fishing tourism and Indigenous sectors have been tasked with developing and recommending new fishery frameworks and harvest strategies, as well as overseeing the implementation and review of these key management plans. Sound fishery management processes must continue to imbed stakeholders and include all sectors in fisheries resource governance structures and decision-making.

Q: Will your party commit to appointing Management Advisory Committees with members from the recreational, commercial, fishing tourism, and Indigenous fishing sectors to oversee the planning, implementation and review of all fishery Management Frameworks and Harvest Strategies?

Q: Will your party commit to maintaining a Recreational Fishing Advisory Committee?

2.2 Research and monitoring

Fisheries management should be supported by timely and relevant data. This must include performance, harvest, social, and economic data that is regularly collected at the appropriate scale. The last NT-wide Recreational Fishing Survey concluded in 2019 and for data to remain relevant, is due to be repeated every 5 years.

Q: Will your party commit to ensuring adequate funding for NT Fisheries (estimated at an additional \$1.5M over 2 years) to conduct a repetition of the NT-wide Recreational Fishing Survey?

2.3 Shoal Bay mud crabs

While the recreational fishing sector accounts for only approximately 10% of all mud crabs harvested in the NT, up to 40% of the Darwin-based recreational catch comes from within the confines of Shoal Bay. This makes Shoal Bay the most significant location for recreational crabbing in the NT. Conversely, the commercial crab catch from Shoal Bay is negligible, with only a handful of days fished there since 2009 (most of the commercial catch comes from the Gulf of Carpentaria and to a lesser extent, Bynoe Harbour). However, when commercial crab catches declined in 2016-17, there was significant pressure to relocate commercial crabbing effort into Shoal Bay, and an MoU between AFANT and the Seafood Council was required to prevent this (and the almost certain ensuing conflict).

Without any formal rules in place, commercial crabbing effort could transfer into Shoal Bay in the future, putting recreational crabbing experiences and equity of access to the fishery at risk. In 2018, in line with the NT Fisheries Resource Sharing Framework, and following correspondence from the then Minister, AFANT prepared a proposal for the MAC to consider formally allocating access to the small area of Shoal Bay for recreational, Traditional, and tourism crabbing only. The MAC did not reach consensus and the next step was to appoint an expert technical panel to formally assess the proposal and to make a recommendation to the Minister. However, to date, no progress has been made on the issue and resolving it remains a priority for the recreational fishing sector.

Q: Will your party help to ensure equitable access to mud crabs, either by allocating access for crabbing in Shoal Bay to the recreational, tourism and Traditional harvest sectors, or otherwise ensuring the appointment of an expert technical panel to review the issue?

2.4 Investing in behavioural change

In 2024, stakeholders have been briefed that golden snapper stocks around Darwin may have not yet recovered to technically sustainable levels. Fishery management may demand additional actions to reach sustainability within the timeframe targeted by the harvest strategy. Management options are likely to be limited, given that possession limits are already very small, and several Reef Fish Protection area closures are already in place. Yet, there is still significant opportunity to reduce fishing induced mortality of golden snapper by enhancing education and achieving behavioral change to prevent the catch and release of reef fish by recreational fishers and fishing tourists. The campaign should include education about retaining and utilising all sizes of reef fish and promote the alternative targeting of more abundant pelagic species.

Although the campaign would require additional budget, reducing catch through education would be an outcome that has significantly less social and economic impact than other potential strategies such as seasonal demersal fishing closures, or larger/additional spatial (area) closures.

Q: Will your party commit to additional dedicated funding for a campaign of behavioural change (to be delivered by NT Fisheries in partnership with AFANT and NTGFIA) to address catch and release fishing for reef fish and help reduce mortality of golden snapper and other reef fish from recreational and tourism fishing?



2.5 Innovative approaches to fishery productivity/recovery

Adjacent to Darwin, there are ongoing challenges associated with returning golden snapper to technically sustainable levels through the application of conservative possession limits and area closures. Enhancing or providing additional productive fish habitat through the construction of purpose-built reefs, within some closed (protection) areas, may represent an innovative and complementary strategy to addressing this complex issue.

Q: Will your party commit \$1M to trial habitat enhancement/reef building in closed areas, and assess the effectiveness of this strategy to support reef fish recovery in the greater Darwin region?

2.6 Fisheries Policy & NT Fisheries Act review

In 2023 The NT Government released the [NT Recreational Fishing Development Plan 2023-33 \(NTRFDP\)](#), it also convened the Directors Strategic Advisory Forum, with experts from the recreational, commercial, and Aboriginal fishing sectors, to support the Director of Fisheries in developing a new blueprint for fisheries management in the Northern Territory. It is expected that this group will develop an NT Fisheries Policy and that this policy would be used to guide a formal review of the *Fisheries Act*.

Under Outcome 2 of the NTRFDP “Diverse and abundant fish stocks”, one of the key actions listed is to *develop an overarching fisheries policy that integrates recreational fishing expectations and objectives, which includes recognition of maintenance of high levels of natural abundance*.

Q: Will your party commit to continuing to develop a fisheries policy that incorporates key specific recreational fishing objectives, prior to commencing a formal review of the Fisheries Act?

2.7 Fisheries compliance

Effective compliance with fisheries rules and regulations by all sectors is an essential component of effective fisheries management. In 2023, ongoing concerns about the capacity of NT Police to prioritise fisheries enforcement led to the announcement of a new, dedicated compliance unit within NT Fisheries Division. With the new unit only being stood up in early 2024, there is a need for ongoing appraisal, investment, and commitment to ensure that the Northern Territory’s fisheries laws are routinely and comprehensively enforced.

Q: Does your party commit to maintaining a dedicated compliance unit within NT Fisheries, and will you review their resourcing for adequacy and increase their capacity if required?



3. Recreational fishing infrastructure & fishery development

In 2023 the NT Government launched the NT Recreational Fishing Development Plan 2023-33 (NTRFDP). The plan was developed by NT Fisheries, AFANT and the NT Guided Fishing Industry Association (NTGFIA), working closely with the NT Recreational Fishing Advisory Committee. The plan is the product of over 18-months of community engagement, and technical and strategic planning workshops, that incorporated the views, ambitions, and ideas of hundreds of individual recreational fishers, associated industries, government departments, organisations, and businesses. The plan sets out a bold 10-year vision for recreational fishing in the NT; a future that is bright, inclusive, and will cement the NT's reputation as the best place to fish in Australia. Delivering the plan will require ongoing commitment, including supporting policies, strategic investments, and genuine collaborations between government, organisations, and the community.

While in recent years there has been number of important investments in boat ramps, access roads, and artificial reefs, the NT continues to suffer from an historic infrastructure deficit compared to many parts of Australia. This means there is still a long way to go to help ensure that recreational fishing can continue to deliver jobs and economic benefit to the NT, and to remain an essential and celebrated part of the way of life for tens of thousands of Territorians.

3.1 NT Recreational Fishing Development Plan 2023-33

The NTRFDP 2023 to 2033 was developed in collaboration with industry to ensure the Territory's recreational fishing sector will continue to successfully navigate changes, overcome challenges, and create opportunities to deliver a strong and sustainable recreational fishing future. The planning process revealed that the recreational fishing sector exists in a complex and dynamic environment, where change is to be expected and must be prepared for. The plan articulates a vision for where we want recreational fishing to be in 2033 and sets a course of actions to get us there.

Q: Will your party continue to acknowledge, and work to deliver the objectives of the NT Recreational Fishing Development Plan 2023-33?

3.2 Land-based fishing

While many excellent river and offshore fishing experiences are available to boat fishers, safe and accessible land-based fishing locations are lacking, especially when compared to other parts of the country. Large tidal ranges, crocodiles, stingers, extensive private land, and unproductive accessible areas are impacting the opportunity for families and individuals to enjoy fishing. AFANT surveyed hundreds of land-based fishers, with 82% of respondents telling us they would go fishing more often if additional, or improved, land-based fishing options were on offer. In addition to building new land-based fishing platforms, fishing experiences may also be enhanced through upgrades, including the installation of rod holders, lighting, shade, and even artificial reef modules within casting range.

Dudley Point at East Point has been identified through several community consultations, by the NTRFDP, and by the RFAC, as the key location to construct a new jetty for fishing. A tender for public consultation on this fishing platform was awarded by NTG at the beginning of May 2024. Other key areas identified in the NTRFDP to build safe and accessible land-based fishing infrastructure around Darwin include Channel Island, Buffalo Creek, and Deck Chair Cinema/lower esplanade. Wherever possible, new infrastructure should be inclusive of all abilities access.

Q: Will your party commit to seeing through the community consultation, design, and construction of the jetty for land-based fishing at East Point (Dudley Point), or otherwise at another suitable location in Darwin?

Q: Will your party commit to building new, safe, and accessible land-based fishing platforms in the Darwin region (e.g. at Buffalo Creek, Channel Island, and Deck Chair Cinema/lower esplanade)?

Q: Will your party commit to investigate, and if feasible, develop opportunities for croc-safe, seasonal, land-based fishing infrastructure in regional locations such as the Katherine River and Mary River?

3.3 Artificial reefs & reef building

In recent years, purpose built Artificial Reefs and Fish Aggregating Devices (FADs) have been deployed in the waters around the greater Darwin region. Prior to this, some reefs made of materials of opportunity were also constructed around Darwin. Built reef structures provide fish habitat and when they are constructed at scale, are designed to enhance fishery productivity. Importantly, built reefs also offer accessible, high quality, and sustainable fishing experiences for reef fish and pelagic fish. The ongoing development of artificial reefs is essential to maintaining quality offshore fishing experiences in the Top End, especially as the NT targets population growth.

The NTRFDP has identified the need to develop and implement a new artificial reef network building program and a supporting artificial fish habitat policy. This should update the site selection tool to weight proximity to boat ramps significantly higher in the multi-criteria analysis used. This is required so that new reef networks can be as accessible to fishers as other constraints will allow. The policy will also need to provide guidance around the use of selected repurposed materials, as well as the augmentation or refurbishment of existing artificial reefs. It should explore options to embed economic efficiency, including the potential for circular economy principles to deliver lower cost, purpose designed reef habitats that can support enhanced fishing opportunities.

Q: Will your party commit to developing an updated 'Artificial Fish Habitat Policy' as outlined in the NTRFDP, and will you implement a new \$4M Artificial Reef Network Program to support enhanced fishing opportunities in the greater Darwin region?

3.4 Upgrades at boat ramps

The NTRFDP has highlighted the need to improve safety and amenities at existing NT boat ramps. A key action identified in the plan is: *all-abilities facilities at all public boat ramps, safe boat launch and retrieval (tidal, night launch and security), toilets, shade, camping, as well as wash down and filleting facilities.*

Q: Will your party commit funding to improve boat ramps through the installation of amenities including toilets, pontoons, fishing cleaning tables, CCTV, shades, or similar, as informed by community consultation and RFAC prioritisation? And how much funding will your party commit to this program over the next 4 years?

3.5 Key infrastructure – a Darwin Region Fishing Strategy

The NTRFDP has identified the need to develop and implement long term strategic planning for fishing in the Darwin region. Planning and prioritisation are essential to maximise social and economic benefits and to deliver quality fishing opportunities in areas of higher resource use. The strategy should consider key factors including infrastructure needs, urban and industrial development, population growth, and climate change. The strategy should focus on supporting the growth of the recreational and tourism fishing industry in the Darwin region.

Q: Will your party commit to working with AFANT, NTGFIA and RFAC to develop and then commence implementing a Darwin Region Recreational Fishing Strategy? (key developments may include projects like upgrading/ sealing access to Saltwater Arm / Leaders Creek, redeveloping the Conacher Street (Ski Club) boat ramp, maintaining, and enhancing facilities at Finnis River Fresh (Hardcastle) and Bynoe Harbour boat ramps).

Q: How much funding will your party commit to invest in the delivery of infrastructure in the Darwin Region Recreational Fishing Strategy during the next term of government?

3.6 Key Infrastructure – NT Regional Recreational and Tourism Fishing Development Strategy

A key action of the NTRFDP is to develop and implement long-term strategic planning for recreational fishing and fishing tourism in regional areas of the NT. Fishing visitation presents opportunities for regional economic growth and new jobs. Planning and prioritisation of projects will be essential to optimise experiences for locals and visitors, and to increase regional economic activity and jobs in the recreational fishing industry. The NTRFDP has identified the need to focus on maintaining and creating fishing opportunities and experiences across regional areas, as well as the need for targeted work with Aboriginal communities to plan and develop economic opportunities on Country.

Q: Will your party commit to working with AFANT, NTGFIA, RFAC and other key stakeholders to develop and commence implementing a Regional Recreational and Tourism Fishing Development Strategy? (key investments may include projects such as upgrading the Shady Camp Road, upgrading (or building new) regional boat ramps, Stage 2 of Point Stuart Road, upgrading Woolianna Road, and infrastructure to support business development, etc.)

Q: How much funding will your party commit to invest in the delivery of infrastructure in the Regional Recreational and Tourism Fishing Development Strategy during the next term of government?

3.7 Fish stocking

Manton Dam and suburban lakes are stocked annually with barramundi in order to maintain safe and accessible recreational fisheries in locations where sufficient natural recruitment of barramundi does not occur. In recent years, additional water bodies have been stocked including McMinns Lagoon and Rum Jungle Lake. The fish are bred by NT Fisheries from suitable broodstock with local genetics at the Darwin Aquaculture Centre.

A key strategy identified in the NTRFDP is to develop and implement an NT fish stocking program and supporting fish stocking policy to identify priority stocking objectives and locations, to create site-specific stocking strategies to meet objectives, and inform priority aquaculture infrastructure needs. This includes focusing on priority closed water bodies, and exploration of stocking in open systems (such as Darwin Harbour).

Q: Will your party commit to continuing funding for the NT Fish stocking program and commit to working with AFANT and the RFAC to review fish stocking policy (including investigating stocking new locations, and new species if suitable)?

Q: Will your government investigate the suitability and (if deemed appropriate) a trial stocking of barramundi into Darwin Harbour to potentially support enhanced metropolitan fishing opportunities?



4. Access to fishing locations and relationships with landowners

While the Northern Territory proudly boasts some of the best fishing in the country, access to many prime coastal and inland fishing locations is less developed and considerably more tenuous than enjoyed by fishers in the rest of Australia. Uncertainty over fishing access relates to several key factors, including limited infrastructure and comparatively few accessible coastal towns outside of Darwin. This is compounded by there being few working examples of formal public Access Routes being registered in accordance with *Pastoral Land Act*. Most significantly, close to 90% of the NT coastline and many rivers are Aboriginal freehold land or are expected to be granted as Aboriginal Land. Unfortunately, there has been little recent tangible progress on reaching new agreements for fishing access with the Traditional Owners of rivers or intertidal Sea Country.

AFANT supports the formal recognition of Traditional Ownership in accordance with the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act*. We believe there are considerable unexplored opportunities for fishers and Traditional Owners to mutually benefit from agreed certainty of fishing access. While long-term fishing access agreements covering several of the NT's most socially significant waters have been negotiated between the NTG and Traditional Owners in the past, there is a need to improve certainty of access and to progress these matters more promptly.

4.1 Long term access for recreational fishing in Aboriginal waters

AFANT has been constructively involved in Blue Mud Bay access negotiations between the Northern Land Council, NTG (and other parties) since the end of fishing access waivers in 2017. Despite significant funding and work by all involved, progress has remained slow and recreational fishers are presently able to access considerably less waters than they could in 2017 (as neither agreement or permit access arrangements are in place for the Finniss River or the Mini Mini region).

With many more popular fishing areas expected to be granted as freehold Aboriginal Land by the Commonwealth, following recent recommendations or review by the Aboriginal Land Commissioner (areas such as Shady Camp, Mary River, Roper River, McArthur River, and Lower Daly River), attention on, and investment into this matter remains a top priority for the recreational fishing sector. Failure to reach acceptable terms for ongoing fishing access at key fishing areas will fundamentally impact the social and economic benefits that recreational fishing brings to the Territory community. Cumulative closures would seriously impact the often-celebrated Territory outdoor lifestyle and liveability for many Territorians.

AFANT respects the rights of Traditional Owners to decide upon access arrangements and conditions for fishing in their waters. From our engagement with Traditional Owners and the Land Councils it is clear that not all Traditional Owners want the same things. It has also become apparent to us that some of the past offers put forward by NTG were in serious need of updating. This is why we campaigned for the more flexible and generous access agreements that have begun to be put on the table for the consideration of Traditional Owner groups in recent times.

Q: Will your party commit to ensuring that long-term recreational fishing access agreements are put before Traditional Owners for consideration in a timely manner? And that the benefits offered by the NTG in exchange for the agreements will be continuously reviewed for adequacy and flexibility, and be improved if necessary?

4.2 Capacity to build constructive relationships with Traditional Owners and rangers

Throughout our engagement on fishing access to Aboriginal waters, and during the extensive NTRPDP development process, the lack of capacity for our sector to meaningfully engage with the Traditional Owners and managers of the lands where our constituents go fishing has been identified as a major barrier. Put simply, despite goodwill and intention from all parties to meet and progress a range of issues, AFANT, NTGFIA and even the NT Fisheries recreational fishing team, simply do not have the resources we need to be able to travel and routinely meet with

Traditional Owners, Aboriginal rangers, and Land Councils. While we have some resources to engage with the NTG, the fact that we are still not resourced to engage with the Traditional Owners of 90% of our coast and most rivers, is an indication of funding not keeping pace with the law, or the reality on the ground since the Blue Mud Bay Decision of the High Court in 2008.

The NTRFDP, under Outcome 1 “Shared Understanding and Access” has established the following strategy as a top priority: *Build on partnerships and establish capacity and initiatives between Land Councils, NT Government, peak bodies, Aboriginal rangers, and Traditional Owner groups to improve communication and cross-cultural understanding, progress matters of mutual concern, and to discuss issues relating to fishing access (such as codes of conduct, co-designed research priorities, information sharing, etc.). This should commence with establishing an initiative for key stakeholders to regularly engage and work together.* The RFAC has also identified the need to urgently invest in this strategy by providing funding to AFANT, NTGFIA and the NT Fisheries recreational fishing unit.

Q: Will your party commit to funding liaison officers at AFANT, NTGFIA and NT Fisheries to better engage with land councils, Aboriginal Traditional Owners, and rangers on recreational fishing (\$2M over four years)?

4.3 Access to waters across pastoral land

Object D of the NT *Pastoral Land Act* is to provide reasonable access for the public across pastoral land to waters and places of public interest. Section 79 of the Act sets out the process to regulate public access; in doing so it assumes pastoralists will have nominated an Access Route to perennial waters years ago. In practice, this is not the case, and Object D of the Act remains largely unfulfilled. There are few examples of Access Routes being declared, and for the most part, requests for access are managed on an *ad hoc* basis. AFANT has been working to try and establish a fenced and nominated Access Route across pastoral land to the Katherine River, however, despite receiving funding commitments, progress has been frustrated by myriad factors. Efforts have not been helped by the fact that the current law does not support seasonal closure, negotiated camping conditions, or requirements to follow codes of practice, and this has resulted in resistance from pastoralists to developing formal access.

Noting that progressing access across pastoral land has remained challenging, and with few working examples of official Access Routes in operation across the NT, the NTRFDP identifies the following strategy: *Maximise opportunities to access recreational fishing experiences on the Territory’s pastoral estate. Establish a working group and engage with pastoralists to explore how to improve recreational fishing access arrangements on pastoral land. A key focus should be on Pastoral Land Act 1992 issues in relation to s79 and its alignment with Act objectives.*

Q: Does your party confirm ongoing support for Object D of the Pastoral Land Act, and will you commit to establishing a working group with pastoralists, AFANT, DEPWS and NT fisheries, to either inform the development of specific s79 Access Routes, or identify options for legislative reform to enable access routes that can better meet the needs of both pastoralists and fishers?

Q: Subject to the identification of satisfactory access routes (in conjunction with AFANT and pastoral landowners), will your party commit to providing support to assist with funding the fencing and grading of key new access routes?



4.4 Access to fishing across government land

Despite access for fishing being a major issue facing recreational fishing around the Territory, access to fishing locations on, or adjacent to government (or government corporation) land has seemingly not been optimised. Over recent years, some areas managed by the NT Government have even become less, rather than more accessible.

Q: Will your party commit to establishing a working group with AFANT and key agencies/bodies to investigate opportunities to improve public access to fishing and camping locations on, or adjacent to, NT managed parks and Crown Land, as well as lands held by the NT Land Corporation and the Conservation Land Corporation?

5. Recreational fishing sector & community Support

The Northern Territory recreational fishing community is diverse and inclusive. From Katherine to King Ash Bay, from Groote Eylandt to Dundee, and everywhere in between, Territorians are proudly committed to their fishing clubs and organisation. Clubs are more than just a place to talk fishing or to compete, they are place of social support and one of the best ways for new residents and novice or junior fishers to learn from the Top End's best.

Thousands of club members, individual members, businesses, and the broader fishing community are represented by us, the Amateur Fishermen's Association of the NT. It is our role to ensure that the recreational fishing sector is professionally represented in fisheries management, and across all other policy areas that our great fishing is reliant upon. For a bright fishing future, it is essential that our sector has the capacity to have meaningful, and well-informed input across the range of policies, developments, and the factors that support, or may impact our future.

Despite the thousands of volunteer hours at our clubs and associations, some Government support is critical to the health of our vibrant community, as well as to continue to grow the valuable economic contribution our sector makes to the Territory and the thousands of jobs it supports.

5.1 AFANT funding – community & industry representation

The Amateur Fishermen's Association of the Northern Territory is the peak body representing recreational fishers. We also proudly represent an industry that contributes over \$270M to Territory GDP and supports over 2,500 full time jobs. For over 40 years, we have strived to ensure excellent fishing for everyone, and we have no doubt that the incredible fisheries the NT enjoys today are, in many ways, attributed to the tireless work of our staff and volunteers.

AFANT is governed by an elected volunteer committee, and our staff work to ensure that recreational fishers are represented professionally. Our core funding is provided by the Northern Territory Government and is specifically for AFANT to formally participate in fisheries management processes, to communicate with fishers, and represent the sector to government departments and Ministers. This funding also supports our citizen science program.

Over the past decade there have been increased demands on our organisation's capacity and resources. Challenges include engaging professionally with a range of NT departments as they modernise and improve water, environmental, and resource governance (resulting in AFANT being formally involved in large number of departmental and Ministerial advisory committees, steering committees, working groups, and reform processes). The Blue Mud Bay Decision of the High Court and the subsequent changes to access to waters overlying Aboriginal Land has also been a significant challenge for us to engage in effectively. Our capacity has not kept pace with ever-expanding and evolving expectations to effectively communicate with our stakeholders across a range of channels, to inform them about the work we do, and the processes and consultations we are formally involved in. On top of this, our limited funding for human resources has been further impacted by the recent period of very high inflation.

Stakeholder participation in fishery resource management is essential to equitable and optimal outcomes, including economic growth. Yet, there is no self-funded recreational fishing peak body in Australia, with all successful peak bodies funded principally through consolidated or specific government revenue. While AFANT has worked hard to diversify our income, there are limited ways we can bring the required capacity to our core functions. For example, while we have been successful in securing project funding, or delivering professional services, these are always tied to additional deliverables. Without our core funding being directly addressed, our ability to retain suitable professional staff to fulfil our obligations to the community, to engage effectively with the Traditional Owners of Aboriginal waters, and to meet the expectations of NTG for meaningful input will be increasingly challenged.

AFANT received our first funding top-up in almost 2 decades in mid-2022. Yet, this only addressed the loss of real value eroded by CPI and was calculated prior to the recent period of very high inflation. This level of funding was committed to for 3 years and is due to expire at the end of the 2024/25 financial year. Putting aside the need for dedicated funding to meet increased challenges and expectations, without an ongoing commitment to fund AFANT at present levels plus CPI (from 2021/22; approx. 12.5%) AFANT will not be able to continue to operate with present staffing levels (approx. 1.7 FTE) beyond mid-2025.

Q: Will your party commit to maintaining AFANT’s core funding for professional sector representation and coordination of citizen science programs at a minimum of current (23/24) levels plus at least the 12.5% that has been eroded by CPI?

5.2 NT Recreational Fishing Grants Program

The Northern Territory Government’s Recreational Fishing Grants program (NTRFG) provides crucial funds for community events and projects. Funded initiatives include the Buddy Boats Day, Gone Fishing Day, and kids fishing clinics (like the Junior Barra Classic), as well as investment in community facilities/infrastructure, and fisher-led research and custodianship projects like fish tagging, fish habitat and capacity building. Dedicated fishing grants programs operate in the NT, NSW, Vic, SA, TAS and WA. These programs breathe life into the needs and priorities as identified by recreational fishing communities and leverage significant value from volunteers and in-kind support.

The NT Recreational Fishing Grants program has made up to \$500k p.a. available, and is essential to support a diverse, capable, and inclusive recreational fishing sector. Additionally, each dollar committed through the NTRFG program leverages significant supporting co-investments of cash and in-kind contributions, sponsorship, generous contractor discounts, and volunteer labour. This means that NTRFG projects and events not only support our community, but they also provide services at excellent value to the Northern Territory Government. The NTRFDP has identified an action to review the guidelines of the program and update for continuation into the future.

Q: Will your party commit to continuing the NT Recreational Fishing Grants program (up to \$500k p.a.) over the next four years? And will you commit to including AFANT and RFAC in a review of the current program to ensure guidelines are optimised to meet community needs and to provide value?



6. Water management, planning & governance

Many of the Northern Territory's most important recreational fisheries are dependent on the sustainable management of community-owned surface and groundwater resources. Iconic barramundi fisheries in the Daly, Roper, Mary and Adelaide River catchments, and the food webs that support them, are vulnerable to the overuse of water. Potential disruption to ecosystem connectivity through the building of dams, especially on-stream dams, also remains a constant threat to key fisheries and must be mitigated through careful and considered planning.

It is understood that the future water needs for Darwin, the Darwin Rural Area and agricultural/horticultural industries will require the development of water resources, including improved storage. For Darwin, the current plan is to return Manton Dam to service while maintaining it as a recreational dam, as well as planning the construction of the Adelaide River Offstream Water Storage (AROWS).

It is also essential that water policy and development remains community-informed and that it recognises and prioritises environmental needs, therefore seeking to ensure optimal social and economic benefit while causing minimal environmental impact.

6.1 Community participation in water planning

AFANT representatives have diligently participated in Water Advisory Committees tasked with the review, development, and implementation of several Water Allocation Plans. As is the case for our fisheries, water resources are community-owned assets and it is essential that community, Traditional, and environmental perspectives, and knowledge are fully integrated in water resource planning processes.

With existing plans due for review and new plans being developed over the next term of Government, the ongoing role of Water Advisory Committees is as relevant and important as ever.

Q: Will your party commit to ensuring that Water Allocation Plans are overseen by Water Advisory Committees comprised of community, Traditional Owner, industry, and environmental/academic stakeholder representatives?

6.2 Precautionary water planning

A key challenge for effective and sustainable water allocation planning is understanding the needs of the environments that are dependent on natural water resources. Ideally, water allocation plans should be informed by detailed scientific research into the environmental requirements of the plan area. Where this direct research has not yet been sufficiently conducted, it is essential that a lack of information is not used as an excuse for failing to ensure adequate water is made available for the environment.

Currently, the NT Water Allocation Planning Framework specifies that for Top End aquifers, at least 80% of annual recharge will be allocated as water for the environment and that extraction for consumptive uses will not exceed 20%. This is often referred to as the "80/20 rule". For surface water in the wet season, the contingent rule specifies that the volume of water available from wet season water flows to consumptive uses will be 5% of the 25th percentile of total flows for the three highest flow months of the year based on the previous 50 years flow, or modelled rainfall data of the river basin (5% of 25th percentile). This is referred to as the 5% Rule.

Q: Will your party commit to maintaining the default Top End "80/20 Rule" for the management of groundwater (and connected dry season surface water), and the default "5% Rule" for wet season surface water in water allocation planning in the Top End?

6.3 Water infrastructure development

The Northern Territory Government has identified predicted shortfalls in the future water supply for Darwin. Future water infrastructure planning must include both community and industry perspectives and must be informed by the best available science.

AFANT is strongly opposed to the damming of the Territory's free-flowing rivers because the cost to our environment, fisheries, and existing social, economic, and cultural values are too high. There is, however, an ongoing opportunity to embrace participatory planning processes aimed at guiding water resource development that can best address future consumptive needs, maximise social, cultural, and economic benefits, while minimising impacts on our healthy environments and the values these ecosystems support.

Q: Will your party commit to excluding the possibility of damming the NT's iconic free flowing rivers?

Q: Does your party commit to the Adelaide River Offstream Water Storage as the preferred option to meet Darwin's future water supply needs, and will you maintain the Darwin Region Water Supply Program Community Reference Group to advise government on its development?

Q: Will your party commit to maintaining, or including, recreational fishing in water supply dams (like Manton Dam) whenever possible?

7. Environmental protection, management & NT Parks

The Top End's status as Australia's best place to go fishing is underpinned by the NT's abundant and intact ecosystems. A bright fishing future and the liveability and lifestyle benefits it supports are reliant upon economic development that respects, maintains, and even enhances our celebrated natural values and recreational activities.

Recent environmental approval and resource governance reforms have heralded a more robust regulatory and compliance landscape for a range of industries and future projects. While there is always talk from industry about "cutting red and green tape" and improving the efficiency of approvals, commitments to streamlining processes must not be code for weakening essential environmental protections. This is especially important for those regulations that have only recently been reformed in line with best practice. An ongoing commitment to strengthening environmental protection, while maintaining participatory, risk-based management is important to ensure that our environment can continue to support exceptional social, cultural, and economic values.

7.1 A threat and risk-based approach to Marine Parks; No Lockouts

The NT's marine environments are some of the world's healthiest and most intact ecosystems. Our coastal waters are cared for by Traditional Owners, Aboriginal Rangers, 60,000 recreational fishers, and a broader community who values their conservation and careful management.

Established in 2012, the Limmen Marine Park allows recreational fishing (as regulated by the Department of Primary Industries and Resources). The first Plan of Management for the park was introduced in 2019 and it commits to a threat and risk-based approach to future spatial planning within the park. Put simply, this is a commitment to not ban recreational fishing in the park, and to instead evaluate threatening processes to key park objectives and implement specific actions that address and reduce risks to acceptable levels. To be effectively managed, this and other parks need to involve stakeholders like AFANT in formal spatial planning processes.

The Limmen Marine Park is an example of environmental and resource management maturing in accordance with our unique Territory values and conditions. At present, while lacking resources, the plan for managing the park integrates the cultural knowledge and aspirations of Traditional Owners and it embraces the recreational fishing community. It has set a management direction that has thus far avoided the controversy and friction that arbitrary recreational fishing lockouts have caused in several Australian states.

Q: Will your party commit to maintaining a no arbitrary lock-out, threat and risk-based approach to marine park management, including for any new Territory marine parks?

7.2 Fishing at Casuarina Coastal Reserve

In 2024 the NT Government announced the intention to make Casuarina Coastal Reserve a National Park. AFANT recognises that the new National Park will continue to protect a range of important fish habitats, including terrestrial, freshwater, estuarine and marine aquatic environments (with park boundaries extending well offshore). Protecting these natural assets from development and other potentially destructive processes is supported by AFANT and more broadly, by the fishing community. It is also essential that protection of the ecological values within the boundaries of the park is balanced with the current range of recreational activities including recreational fishing. The primary objective for the park should remain as it currently is *to manage the reserve as one of the Territory's most valued community recreational assets*.

Casuarina Coastal Reserve is a uniquely important location for Darwin's recreational fishing community, with the all-abilities Rapid Creek fishing platform at one end, the popular Buffalo Creek Boat ramp at the other, and a range of fishing experiences in between. Fishing activities include land-based beach, creek and rock fishing, land-based crab potting/catching, cast netting and drag netting for bait fish, and boat-based fishing for a range of species including pelagic fish, barramundi, and reef fish. The park provides fishing opportunities that are not readily offered in many other parts of metropolitan Darwin, and AFANT seeks to maintain these opportunities into the future. We also recognise the value of the National Park could be significantly enhanced by adding the Buffalo Creek Management Area (currently owned by the Commonwealth Department of Defence) to the park and bringing it under NT management for conservation and recreation.

Q: Does your party commit to maintaining all current fishing access & activities within the Casuarina Coastal National Park?

Q: Will your party commit to investigate acquiring land from Defence to incorporate the Buffalo Creek Management Area into the new Casuarina National Park during the next term of government?

7.3 Middle Arm Industrial Precinct – recreational fishing offsets

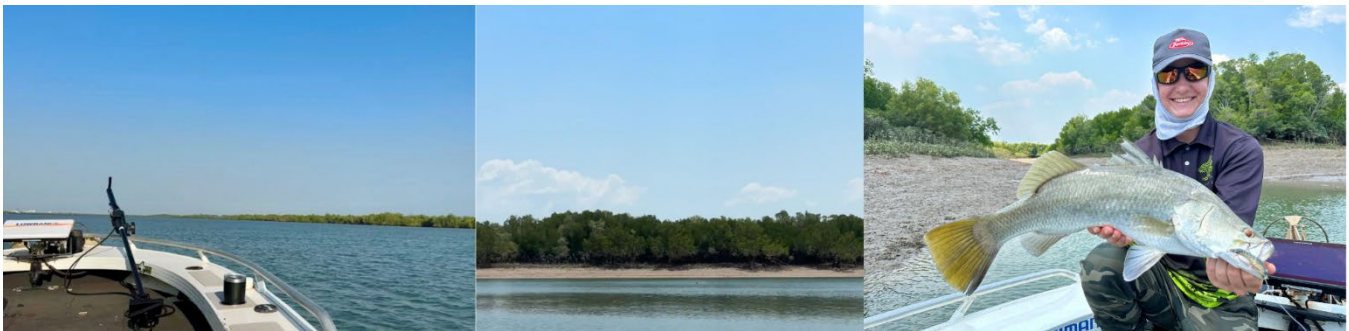
Depending on the final development scenario and the associated requisite need to dredge a new shipping channel, as well as the eventual extent of port infrastructure construction at the Middle Arm Industrial Precinct, there are significant impacts expected for recreational fishing. These include impacts to a variety of benthic fish habitats due to dredging. Additionally, access to several creeks, popular for fishing and crabbing is expected to be lost, as planning documents show these creeks are expected to be built out with wharves. Departmental planning materials have also forecast that access to the Elizabeth River is likely to be impacted when gas transport vessels are docking, as these require large exclusion zones, and the mouth of the Elizabeth River is not wide enough to accommodate the docking of certain types of vessels and recreational traffic simultaneously.

The NTRFDP has identified the need to *facilitate appropriate recreational fishing offsets for unavoidable impacts of the Middle Arm Precinct Development to recreational fishing resources and experiences*. Depending on the final

development application and consequent approvals, desired recreational fishing offsets may include fish habitat restoration/enhancement to compensate for lost access to creeks and benthic habitats removed by dredging. Other offsets may need to include the facilitation of access to Darwin Harbour from Elizabeth River, such as new boat ramp construction. Failure to compensate for loss of access and habitat productivity is likely to have impact on the quality of fishing available and will impact on the social values that support the liveability and lifestyle of the workers that Middle Arm is hoping to retain and attract to the Territory.

Q: Will your party commit to providing recreational fishing offsets to compensate for lost access to creeks due to port development, and habitat damage due to dredging for the Middle Arm Industrial Precinct?

Q: Will your party commit to providing alternative access to and from Darwin Harbour and Elizabeth River, if the final design results in the mouth of the river becoming impassable to recreational vessels for extended periods as has been identified by Government consultation?



7.4 Seabed mining prohibition

In response to the 2020 NT EPA Report on Seabed Mining, on 4 August 2021, the Minister for Environment declared seabed mining to be a prohibited action in accordance with section 38 of the *Environment Protection Act 2019*. Seabed mining presents significant threats to our fragile coastal and marine environments. Damage to the coastal and benthic environment puts many existing social, economic, and environmental values at risk. We are seeking clear, ongoing commitments to rule out any future seabed mining in the Northern Territory.

Q: Will your party commit to maintaining a regulatory prohibition on seabed mining in the Northern Territory?

7.5 Wetland management

In the mid-1980s, the Northern Territory Government introduced a 'Saltwater Control Program' for the Mary River floodplain. This was aimed at stopping the expansion of saltwater channels into freshwater floodplains. The program has involved construction of numerous barrages aimed at minimising the ingress of saltwater tidal flows. Several studies have been commissioned to inform future wetland management, as the effectiveness of the barrage program to prevent saltwater intrusion, and the impact of barrages on erosion and ecosystem connectivity continues to be an evolving issue.

A consultant report commissioned by the NT Government and delivered in 2019, stated that *barrages are effective at mitigating saltwater intrusion into the upper catchment of the Mary River Floodplain, when compared to the absence of barrages. However, this human intervention is adversely impacting the natural environment.* A CDU report from the same time however, recommended that *natural processes of land adaptation are much more effective (than weirs) at mitigating sea level rise.* The scientist advised the Government to *prepare stakeholders for extensive salt water intrusion of the floodplains downstream of Shady Camp* and recommended to *promote mangrove community establishment in areas where freshwater/brackish ecosystems are lost to salt water intrusion.*

To date, community awareness about the expectation of further freshwater wetland loss appears to be very limited. Legacy structures continue to present issues for ecosystem connectivity, and potentially avoidable seasonal fish kills are known to occur. It is also unclear whether there are any active management strategies in place to promote the establishment of mangrove communities and to prevent soil acidification. Better education and awareness are needed, and active management is essential to ensure the predicted loss in ecosystem productivity is mitigated to the greatest extent possible.

Weed management also continues to be an important issue. There is a need for updated community information about the prevalence of introduced aquatic weeds such as salvinia and olive hymenachne (the latter appearing to increasingly impact both habitat and navigation) in important wetlands.

Q: Will your party commit to reviewing and updating approaches to wetland management (especially in the Mary River system) and invest in updated management and community engagement about seawater level rises and wetland changes?

Q: Will your party work with fishers and landowners to investigate and implement optimised approaches to barrage management, and where applicable, install fish friendly infrastructure (e.g. installing gates or seasonal earthen plugs to let fish pass and prevent mass fish kills as water recedes at the end of the wet season)?

Q: Will your party commit to investigate options for more active control of aquatic weeds, like olive hymenachne in rivers and wetlands like Corroboree Billabong?

