

Two sides to bivalve battle

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South Australian cockle fishers are fighting over an ever-valuable but diminishing resource, according to a parliamentary committee investigating the industry.

The committee has found the industry riven by dissent ever since the Department of Fisheries began regulating cockle harvesting, giving some catchers enormous access to the multi-million dollar resource and allocating other fishers such small quotas it is hardly worth their while.

Cockle fishing was almost a free-for-all in terms of catch until departmental studies showed the number of cockles was dropping alarmingly. The industry was clearly unsustainable. Quotas were imposed, but the existing catchers believed the Government showed favouritism to some at the expense of others.

Fisheries' officers told the committee that cockles, sometimes called pipis, are "now the most important species in the Lakes and Coorong fishery in terms of value and production".

The quotas were allocated on the basis of historical catch and effort information. Fishers who'd concentrated on cockles were given vastly more allowable tonnage than

other fishers who had previously concentrated on scale fish, such as Coorong mullet. But as the price of cockles went up, so did the number of people who wanted continuing access to the resource.

The committee found that the department's policy of co-management with industry and the consultation process could have been more effective, perhaps involving independent negotiators to work with fishers.

It recommended the department review its consultation process to ensure it's transparent, effective and comprehensive.

Feelings are still bruised in the industry. Smaller fishers believe the Government has favoured larger processors. The big players believe they should be justly rewarded for investing millions to process and market the increasingly-popular shellfish.

The committee's report urges the fishers involved to settle their differences and work with the department to ensure a long-term future for cockles and the cockle industry.



Locals find only a few pipis on 90 Mile Beach during the cockle season.

Photo: Kate Elmes