Ocean Perch

(*Helicolenus* spp.)

**EXPLOITATION STATUS** FULLY FISHED

Two relatively long-lived species comprise the majority of the catch of this group. Significant in both the Ocean Trawl and Ocean Trap and Line Fisheries but most of the catch comes from the Commonwealth South East Trawl fishery. Status in NSW is consistent with the Commonwealth status of ‘not overfished’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCIENTIFIC NAME</th>
<th>STANDARD NAME</th>
<th>COMMENT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Helicolenus barathri</em></td>
<td>bigeye ocean perch</td>
<td>Also known as offshore ocean perch.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Helicolenus percoides</em></td>
<td>reef ocean perch</td>
<td>Also known as inshore ocean perch.</td>
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**Background**

Five species of ocean perches (family *Sebastidae*) are found offshore along the NSW coast but two species comprise the bulk of the landings. The reef ocean perch (*Helicolenus percoides*) is distributed across the continental shelf and onto the upper slope in depths between about 80 and 350 m while the bigeye ocean perch (*H. barathri*) is an upper-slope species found in 250-800 m. The deepsea ocean perch (*Trachyscorpia capensis*) occurs mostly in midslope depths greater than 800 m and, because there is little fishing at such depths off NSW, few deepsea ocean perch are caught locally. Two similar species (*Neosebastes incisipinnis* and *N. scorpaeoides*) are smaller fish which occur closer inshore, and are sometimes caught incidentally by trawl fishers.

The two species of *Helicolenus* found off NSW are very similar in appearance. However, the ‘inshore’ reef ocean perch tends to be orange in colour with small dark spots on the head and more defined darker vertical bands on the body, compared to the ‘offshore’ bigeye ocean perch which has a more overall pink-red colouration with greenish flecks on the scales. The reef ocean perch seldom exceeds 30 cm in length and is commonly 20-25 cm, whereas the bigeye ocean perch can reach more than 40 cm in length (1.5 kg) and live for 60 years. Most catches of bigeye ocean perch now comprise fish in the 25-35 cm range which are less than 15 years of age.
Ocean perch are lecithotrophic viviparous, meaning that egg fertilization and larvae development occur inside the female fish. The larvae are released when they reach about 1 mm in length. The ocean perch breeding season extends from June to November and a single female can produce between 150,000 to 200,000 larvae per season. Ocean perch are ambush predators, rising quickly from the ocean floor to capture prey. Main food sources for ocean perch are royal red prawns, squid and smaller fish.

Ocean perch inhabit reef and areas of flat, hard seabed. Commercial catches are primarily taken by trawl although the quantity taken by line fishing methods is increasing. The two species of Helicolenus are important trawl fish around south-east Australia and the annual total allowable catch (TAC) for ocean perch (combined for the two species) in the Commonwealth managed Southern and Eastern Scalefish and Shark Fishery is around 500 t; the actual bigeye ocean perch catch is about 250 t and the catch of reef ocean perch, mostly taken south of NSW, is around 50-100 t. Because of its generally small size, relatively large quantities of reef ocean perch are discarded.

NSW landings are comparatively small, ranging between 15 and 30 t per annum since 2000. Most of the landings are reported by Ocean Trap and Line and Ocean Trawl Fisheries, and comprise mainly bigeye ocean perch.

**Additional Notes**

- Two main species in this group: the inshore form (Helicolenus percoides) and the offshore form (H. barathri).
- NSW has a small line fishery, which targets the offshore species, though both species are sometimes harvested in the trawl fishery north of Sydney.
- Stock appears relatively stable after an initial fish-down – possibly due to existence of ‘refuges’ (reefs which are not able to be trawled).
- Monitoring of the size composition of NSW dropline catches is continuing at the Sydney Fish Markets.

**Catch**

*Recreational Catch of Ocean Perch*

The annual recreational harvest of ocean perch in NSW is likely to be less than 10 t. This estimate is based upon the results of the offshore trailer boat survey (Steffe et al. 1996) and onsite surveys undertaken by I & I NSW.

**Historical Landings of Ocean Perch**

Commercial landings (including available historical records) of ocean perch for NSW from 1976/77 to 2008/09 for all fishing methods. Note that the decline in reported catch during the 1990s was due to changes in catch recording requirements for fishers with both NSW and Commonwealth licences.

**Landings by Commercial Fishery of Ocean Perch**

Reported landings of ocean perch by NSW commercial fisheries from 1997/98. Fisheries which contribute less than 2.5% of the landings are excluded for clarity and privacy.
The length distribution of bigeye ocean perch (H. barathri) landed by NSW commercial fishers was relatively stable from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, and comprised mainly fish between 20 and 40 cm fork length (FL). The majority of fish measured during this period were caught in demersal trawl nets. A smaller number of ocean perch were measured during the late 1990s and recently (2005 to 2009) - these fish were mostly caught on droplines and were larger, between 30 and 40 cm FL. There is no minimum legal length for ocean perch in NSW.

Further Reading


Please visit the CSIRO website, http://www.marine.csiro.au/caab/ and search for the species code (CAAB) 37 287093, 37 287001, 37 287005, 37 287019 and 37 287046, common name or scientific name to find further information.