

VICE CHANCELLOR'S DISTINGUISHED AWARD  
*FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT*

**2016**

**Joint Award**

**Group 2**

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*Recreational Fisheries Research Group*

In recent years, Community Engagement has seen an enormous surge in high quality work with the result that in 2016 it was impossible to make a distinction between two groups for the award. The first group of recipients are the Recreational Fisheries Research Group.

There are between 500 000 and 900 000 marine recreational fishers in South Africa. These significantly outnumber commercial, small-scale, and subsistence fishers, and recreational fishers who also target linefish (fishes captured using hook and line) species, and their annual harvest is far greater.

This disproportionate harvest when compared with other sectors, for whom coastal fishing provides a source of livelihood, is a social injustice that has developed from South Africa's early history. Besides not requiring fish for their livelihoods, recreational fishers are also different from commercial, small-scale and subsistence fishers as their motivations for fishing also involve relaxation and spending time outdoors and not only catching fish.

Presently the catch of the recreational fishery is subject to several regulations. Unfortunately, most of these regulations were implemented in a top-down approach, without angler consultation and a recent study estimated that about 43% of anglers do not comply with them. In addition, research has shown that not all the fish that are released by the compliant (57%) recreational anglers survive, with some studies reporting mortality rates of over 90%. Recreational fisheries therefore have greater potential to reduce fish stocks than commercial and small-scale fisheries. If recreational harvests are not carefully managed, the potential for the expansion of the subsistence and small-scale sectors (because of limited resources) and therefore the achievement of social and economic Millennium Development Goals is limited.

Ultimately, if one wants to benefit under-resourced fishing communities, and address social injustice, addressing the harvest of recreational anglers is crucial.

This community engagement initiative by the Recreational Fisheries Research Group undertaken since 2011 has engaged with compliant anglers in recreational fishing communities to enhance their practices in order to improve the health and survival of the fish that they release.

From 2011 onwards, the Research Group began developing a rapport with the recreational fishing community, who can be notoriously anti-scientific, due to traditional top-down type inputs and the perception that scientists are a threat to their activities. By immersing themselves into the culture and norms of the communities they were working in, members of the Group were able to develop a relationship of trust between themselves and the community members which then allowed them to contribute to the community beyond simply providing advice on the success and management of the fishery.

The Research Group followed a program in which they worked to develop voluntary conservation behaviour within recreational fishing communities. This kind of voluntary behaviour required anglers to mobilise themselves and establish informal regulations such as self-imposed personal bag limits, size limits, constraints on gear and the development of entirely catch-and-release fisheries.

Through a program of extensive engagement with regional and national bodies, as well as on the ground demonstrations and networking within angling communities, the team has been successful in shifting both understandings of the importance of post-release fish survival within the community, as well as the attitudes of recreational fishermen towards fisheries. The group has found that through their large scale and strategic interventions they have managed to have a significant impact on angler behavior. As a result, they have hailed internationally as the first research group to demonstrate that they were able to improve angler catch-and-release behaviour and improve fish health and survival.

The Recreational Fisheries Research Group has developed from a simple community engagement project to a truly engaged research project, with tangible benefits to both parties, and postgraduate research. Their engagement happens at a local, national and even an

international level since the work of the group has extended to Namibia. The results of their research also feedback into several other recreational fisheries research projects, including the World Wildlife Fund ‘Fishtory’ and ‘Catch Report’ projects and is leading the way in understanding the mechanisms that drive improvements in angler catch-and-release behaviour. Since 2013, the Research Group has given 22 presentations to anglers on a wide range of topics, including the status of South Africa’s fish stocks, the science of catch-and-release angling, results of national competitions and how science/public partnerships can benefit the environment. The Group acts as the Scientific Advisory Team of the Rock and Surf Super Pro League Africa National Executive Committee. They have thus played an integral role in modifying the rules for the league and have been responsible for more than 14 rule changes that aim to improve fish handling practices and the sustainability of coastal fisheries over the last three years. When the fact that their engagements have directly influenced approximately 500 individual anglers in the 2016/2017 season alone, and that they, in turn, will go on to influence the behaviour of other anglers, the value of this community engagement effort to the sustainability of fish populations and to coastal communities that are reliant on these fishes becomes truly apparent.

