TAFI Media Statement

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ATTENTION: Chiefs of Staff, News Directors

Long-spined sea urchin research at Elephant Rock takes off

Members of the public are showing considerable interest in research on the sea-urchins causing devastation to sea-beds near the East Coast's Elephant Rock.

Prof Craig Johnson from the Tasmanian Aquaculture and Fisheries Institute at the University of Tasmania is leading the project to investigate options for management of the long-spined sea urchin in Tasmania.

He said 637 large rock lobsters have been released at a research site at Elephant Rock near St Helens.

"The research will follow movement of the lobsters and what they are eating, including whether they are eating the sea urchins," he said.

Each of the lobsters is tagged with an internal electronic PIT tag which allows individuals to be identified and followed. PIT tags are the same kind of tags commonly inserted under the skin of pets, and are harmless if accidentally swallowed because they are coated with a plastic.

Recent potting in the research reserve at Elephant Rock and on reef to the north and south of the reserve re-captured 25 of the tagged lobsters in 300 pot lifts. After samples were taken to determine what they had been eating, all lobsters were returned to the sea where they were caught.

A total of 23 local (untagged) lobsters were also caught, but most of these were small. None of the lobsters were caught from the 'barrens' habitat caused by overgrazing of seaweeds by the long-spined sea urchin.

Future work at Elephant Rock will include:

- Producing a more detailed habitat map of the area;
- High-precision acoustic tracking of individual lobsters;

- More potting exercises.

Researchers are also monitoring seaweed cover on the seafloor to determine whether lobsters can prevent further overgrazing by the sea urchins.

Professor Johnson said that the lobsters used in this research can be identified externally from two holes punched in the tail fan and two lines of coloured silicone dye injected under the skin at the base of the tail.

“It is important that any tagged lobster, whether caught inside or outside the reserve area, is returned to the water immediately at the site where it was caught. It is illegal to possess a lobster marked with the hole punches in their tail and coloured lines under the tail.”

Lobsters used in the project were supplied by commercial fishers from various parts of the state; researchers are grateful for their co-operation,” said Prof Johnson.

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