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DIVERS ATTACK DEADLY VIRUS

Victorian Abalone Divers have been proactively working on the deadly abalone virus issue since well before Christmas last year, while others it seems, have only now become interested in the issue, well after the horse has bolted.

In November last year, members of the Victorian Abalone Divers Association approached OceanWatch Australia's Victorian SeaNet Officer for assistance in reviewing and updating their Code of Practice so that it included bio-security protocols for mitigating their potential to spread the deadly abalone *Ganglioneuritis* virus.

Kate Milner, OceanWatch Australia's Victorian SeaNet Officer said, "The abalone divers were fully aware of the severity of this issue. They had been given some advice from the Department of Primary Industries about what protocols they should undertake to minimise their potential to spread the disease, but we took it further than that."

"We not only updated their Code of Practice, but we developed biosecurity kits so that every diver in Victoria (as well as six divers from eastern South Australia) had one of these kits. The kits had everything in them that they needed to make sure that they didn't spread the virus and that they were able to monitor where it was present."

The kits contain truck wash and a pump sprayer, a list of procedures if an animal is suspected to have the virus, photos of infected abalone, contact phone numbers, reporting forms, zip-lock bags for samples and a waterproof disposable camera.

"Divers are required under their Code of Practice to completely wash down their boat, their diving gear, their diving suits, their bilge, basically everything with truck wash. They are meant to wash down between fishing areas and at the end of each day. If they are going to fish in two areas in the same day, they are meant to fish in non-infected areas first, then wash down before moving to the known infected area, after which they do a full wash down. The Code is strict, but like I said, the divers know the severity of this" Ms Milner said.

The kits were produced by the Victorian SeaNet Officer and self funded by the Victorian Abalone Divers Association with some assistance from OceanWatch Australia and Seafood Industry Victoria. Fisheries Victoria provided no financial assistance.

Brad Warren, the national chairman of OceanWatch Australia commends the proactive initiative of the Victorian abalone divers. "These guys should be praised for the way they've handled themselves in the face of this crisis. I have read that Fisheries Victoria is blaming the Victorian abalone divers for the spread of this virus. With a \$75million dollar/year industry on its knees, I would suggest that Fisheries Victoria should be using their resources to attempt to remedy the situation rather than to try to attach blame to a professional group who have been pro-active in identifying the extent of the viral outbreak, as well as voluntarily doing something about it."

"Any recreational diver or fisher, any boat could help spread this virus, water currents could spread this virus. The 80 or so Victorian commercial divers who are undertaking the most strict of procedures to attempt to minimize the extent of this viral outbreak, as well as bearing the crippling financial cost of this mess, should be supported in this time of uncertainty for themselves and their families."

"Time and again, when those responsible for managing our marine resources are confronted by a tough issue, commercial fishers are used as the scapegoat. We should be getting behind our commercial fishers, not putting the boot in while they are down" he said.

SeaNet is a program funded by the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust. SeaNet Officers work with the commercial fishing industry to help move them towards environmental sustainability. SeaNet is run by OceanWatch Australia.

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OceanWatch Australia (OWA) is a national environmental, not-for-profit company that works to achieve sustainability in the Australian seafood industry through protecting and enhancing fish habitats, improving water quality and advancing the sustainability of fisheries through action based partnerships with the Australian seafood industry, government, natural resource managers, business and the community.