Fishing

“The Abrolhos may be considered as a place of refreshment, inasmuch as fish, of an excellent quality may be taken with hook and line in any quantity.”

Captain John Wickham, 1840

Wickham’s account of the marine life in Abrolhos waters inspired the fishing industry in the 1840s – an industry which still exists today.
William Saville-Kent, the Commissioner of Fisheries, was deputed by the Western Australian Government in 1897 to examine the Abrolhos for the establishment of profitable fisheries. He was very impressed by the marine resources at the Abrolhos and devoted a large portion of his book, *The Naturalist in Australia*, to the wildlife both on the islands and in the surrounding waters.
From left to right: Denis “Fiddle” Hancock, Ray Page, Bill Newbold and Colin Hancock, on Basile Island in 1950.

Gerald Jennings with his catch, Rat Island in the 1950s.
Initially, fishers at the Abrolhos targeted finfish, whales, seals and sea cucumbers. Recreational fishing helped to support the guano and tourism industries at the islands, providing both a food source and a source of additional income.

The western rock lobster industry started to develop in the 1920s, increasing during and after World War II, as a result of a decision by the Defence Foodstuffs Administration in 1941 to supply canned lobster to canteens for the armed forces. Some of the first fishers’ camps on the islands were constructed around this time and parts of these original camps still remain today, on the islands currently inhabited by commercial rock lobster fishers for part of the year.

Many of the smaller vessels which ran afoul of the Abrolhos were fishing boats, including the Columbia in 1929, off Rat Island. One man from the Columbia drowned, trying to swim to shore with a rope. His name was Giuseppe Benvenuto and his grave stone can still be seen on Rat Island.

(left): Bob Jennings with his rock lobster catch at Rat Island in the 1950s. (right): Fixing rock lobster pots on Rat Island in the 1950s.