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Around the Jetties 22

An Anglers Newsletter

“Fishermen are born honest, but they get over it.”
Ed Zern (How to tell fish from Fishermen 1947)

Editorial

This newsletter again focuses on the dusky flathead and draws together considerable anecdotal information that would suggest this fish is under some threat or at the very least a decline in the Gippsland Lakes. Of course any argument as to the actual situation is handicapped by the lack of solid information such as the commercial catch of this species for the last year. I would again draw anglers' attention to the 25cm minimum size limit in our state (NSW 35cms) and the scientific paper from NSW summarised in the last issue which suggests that only 5% of female dusky flathead are mature at 36cms. This means that female dusky flathead can be caught well before they have reached maturity and spawned. Add to this refined recreational angling techniques that target these fish, and in the case of the Gippsland Lakes a commercial sector that is able to catch dusky flathead with no bag or catch limit to protect this species. With the decline of black bream in the Gippsland Lakes in the last decade it is probably fair to suggest the commercial sector has redirected considerable energy to taking quantities of dusky flathead.

In short we may have a growing problem that should be examined now.

I would like to acknowledge the prompt response provided by Dr James Andrews, Acting Program leader Bay and Coastal Fisheries, to a number of questions I have raised in writing to Fisheries Victoria. Whilst we would wish that some of the responses might have been a little different we certainly appreciate his open response.

Fisheries Regulations to be Released

The new Fisheries regulations will come into effect on March 2nd, and anglers will gain access to the changes in the Recreational Fishing Guide available in March. These regulations were due to be published and come into effect in February 2008 replacing the 1998 Fisheries Regulations. The next review of regulations is due in 2016. It would appear that VRFish already have access to the new regulations as they have selectively released a small number of

the changes in the regulations relating to Mulloway, Murray cod and snapper. I wonder why the new regulations have not in their entirety, been released by the recreational anglers Peak Body given the release of selected sections would seem to indicate the regulations are available to VRFish and the public. Should VRFish release the regulations this would be a service to recreational anglers of the state. The new regulations will be important as they will provide protection for some of our recreational species in the next decade as fishing pressure undoubtedly increases, and no species better illustrates this than the dusky flathead of our estuaries, remembering the Victorian minimum size limit is 25cms as compared with the NSW 35cms and which they are considering increasing even further to increase the spawning potential of the species.

The new regulations will be commented on in the March “Around the Jetties.” I look forward to receiving the comments of readers on the regulations when they are made available.

Fishing Pressure on Lake Tyers

On Sunday 24th of January I took a census of boats on Lake Tyers by undertaking a count of boats at launching ramps between 9.00am and 9.30am. At No 2 ramp there were 44 boat trailers while at Fisherman’s landing there were 20. I then went to Mill Point and there were 6 boat trailers giving a total of 70 boat trailers at that time accessing Lake Tyers.

This raises a number of points

Undoubtedly there is a strong case for a second boat ramp with a floating jetty at Lake Tyers. Over the holiday period it was normal for 20-35 boat trailers to be at No 2 ramp. Both the Fisherman’s Landing and Mill Point access could not be considered satisfactory.

Considerable fishing pressure has developed on Lake Tyers with the decline of the bream and dusky flathead recreational fishing in the Gippsland Lakes and tributaries. The anecdotal reports of anglers are supported by the Gippsland Lakes Taskforce’s snapshot survey of 2008. In the nineties angling clubs had visits to the Gippsland Lakes but these have declined and more anglers are going to Lake Tyers, Marlo, and Bemm River. These are relatively small estuaries and the fishing pressure on these waters is now extreme.

Murray Cod and South Australia

The South Australian Murray Cod season will be effectively closed from January 1st 2009 to December 31st 2009. This has caused considerable concern amongst anglers that this step, which was suddenly announced with no prior notice, will put additional pressure on Murray Cod in the Murray Darling system. Of course the degraded flows in the Murray Darling Basin rivers are generally regarded as a major cause of a decline in cod in the South Australian section of the river.

Lack of Carp Statistics.

It is unfortunate that Fisheries Victoria decided in 2006/7 to cease publishing the commercial European Carp catches from the Gippsland Lakes in the Commercial Fish Production Bulletin.

Dr James Andrews of Bay and Coastal Fisheries when this matter was queried provided the following statement in a letter to this publication.

“Fisheries Victoria has undertaken many carp research projects in the past and monitors the carp fishery in the Gippsland lakes. There are strict guidelines to protect the confidentiality of data from commercial fishers so detailed statistics for individual species in particular areas are not always available to the public.”

Whilst understanding the reasoning behind this decision, these statistics for the conservationist and recreational angler provide the only indication of the European carp mass in the Gippsland Lakes and this could also provide an assessment on the growth or decline of this noxious species and its impact on the health of the Lakes. It is very hard for those interested in the health of the lakes to monitor the problem of European carp in the Gippsland Lakes when the actual catch of this species is not made available to the public. Perhaps the concept of open Government should be applied and the catch of this species disclosed in the

public interest. The 2004/5 commercial catch of carp in the Gippsland Lakes was 439 tonnes of a total 681 tonnes of fish taken in commercial nets. In that year the next major species was 47 tonnes of dusky flathead.

Carp and the Recreational Fishing Guide

I find it puzzling that in the Victorian Recreational Guide 2006/7 published by Fisheries Victoria as a guide for anglers, I can find no reference or picture of carp other than the statement that they are not to be used as bait. There is no reference as to how they should be treated when caught, and more importantly disposed of, and yet many recreational anglers will catch large numbers of this noxious species in our rivers and Lakes.

Recently on the BBC program River Cottage the show centred on the provision of organic European Carp from English ponds and the methods of cooking them. They even gave hints on how these fish could be spread around ponds. A group of English diners gave carp 10/10 for flavour . The show concluded by showing how any small pond might carry carp and anglers could have their own fishing in these ponds. By the way in the 2001 National Fishing Survey it was estimated that 330,000- carp are caught annually in Victoria by recreational anglers.

An excellent detailed reference on European carp is “Managing the Impacts of Carp” with one of the authors being our local Andrea Brumley. The Bureau of Rural Sciences published this book

An Interesting Fact

Carp are prolific breeders, females can produce up to three million eggs per kg of bodyweight by the time they are three to four years old. (about 350mm)

Source- National Carp Task Force Murray Darling Association

Artificial Reefs

Reader Alex Milledge supplied the following information from the Fisherman and Boatowner magazine. Alex raises the question of artificial reefs in Bancroft Bay which would seem an ideal site with its 50ft depth. There is no doubt that bream and other species look for structures as evidenced by the photos of fish in the wooden debris of the Tambo River.

This article notes that the NSW Department of Primary Industries is expanding its artificial reef program with a reef set to be put in place in Lake Conjola on the NSW South Coast.

Today reefs are purpose built concrete balls, which are designed to attract algae and thus offer an environment that is a food source. Evidence suggests these artificial reefs can be 80% or more as effective as a natural reef within a few years. The process is not new with over half a million reef balls being deployed world wide in over 3200 projects. Lake Conjola is the fourth artificial reef in NSW, which is part of a five-year fisheries enhancement program. The NSW Minister stated that the reefs are “in areas that are lacking reef habitat. The reefs provide a place for fish to live and shelter.” NSW DPI studies have shown these reefs attract a large variety of species. The Conjola reef will be made up of 400 concrete modules weighing between 76-90kgs. Moneys from trust funds established from Fishing Licence fees are being used to finance this project. A further artificial reef is proposed to be established in Merimbula Lake.

It would seem that with the early research being undertaken by the NSW Department of Primary Industry, and the scientific monitoring of reefs already installed, it would not be too hard for Fisheries Victoria to investigate the benefits from the construction of artificial reefs in areas such as Bancroft Bay using the research available from other states.

This publication will raise the matter with Fisheries Victoria. Thanks to Alex Milledge for raising this interesting issue.

Source- Article by Ross Taylor, Fisherman and Boatowner magazine.

Waiting is Over we Have an Answer-Or Do we?

We have been waiting for an answer to the question raised last November as to when the first angling licence was introduced in Victoria. Dr James Andrews Acting Program Leader, Bay and Coastal Fisheries provided this answer.

"The Amateur Fishing Licence is described in the Fisheries Act 1968"

I took this to mean that in the 1968 Fisheries Act the mention of the Amateur Fishing Licence would signify this was the first occasion this licence was mentioned meaning the licence was introduced in 1968.

However an alternate answer came from Natalie Pearson Media Advisor for the DPI who enlisted the assistance of Robert Krix Executive Officer of Fisheries Committees who undertook the research, and provided the following information.

"The Fisheries (Inland Angling) Act 1950 allows a person to 'angle' which means to use a line (whether or not attached to a rod) for the purpose of taking fish. The Act authorised the issue, on the payment of a fee of 5 shillings, of a licence to be called 'the inland angling licence' to angle during the open season for any fish in inland waters".

This source also indicated that enquiries made at the Victorian State Library indicate that there was a Fisheries (Trout Licence Act) 1932 which was repealed by the 1950(Inland Angling Act. A copy of the 1932 Act could not be located at the Victorian State Library and it is not known whether the act related to commercial or recreational fishing or both. I think this provides an authoritative answer that settles the issue.

The Inland Angling Licence was first introduced in 1950

I am indebted to Natalie Pearson and Robert Krix for this answer. For anglers this is an interesting fact and I thank the reader who originally raised this issue.

Help Needed

'My name is Jodie Simpson and I have decided to be 'brave and shave my head' to honour the memory of our beautiful son Eli Charlie Simpson who passed away in November 2008 due to complications from a bone marrow transplant. Eli was just 13 and a half months of age. Eli was diagnosed with Juvenile Myelomonocytic Leukaemia when he was just 15 weeks old. We spent nearly ten months in Melbourne for treatment and this is where the Leukaemia Foundation came in. They provided our family with a home in North Melbourne nice and close to the hospital where Eli received his treatment as well as ongoing personal support. Without the Leukaemia Foundation we would not have had the family time we so desperately longed for. The money raised from the Worlds Greatest Shave will help support other patients and their families who are going through a similar Journey.

Source VRFish Monthly Report January

Jodie Simpson is a Project Officer of Fisheries Victoria stationed at Lakes Entrance. She worked on the Lake Tyers and Mallacoota Management Plans, and I am sure there will be readers and recreational anglers who would wish to contribute to this worthy cause. The Worlds Greatest Shave takes place on March 13th so donations should be made prior to that date. Donations can be sent to-

Jodie Simpson "Worlds Greatest Shave"

C/o Fisheries Victoria

PO Box 337 Lakes Entrance 3909

Donations are a tax deductible.

Commercial Catch Statistics.

This publication has been seeking access to the Commercial Catch Statistics, which for many years have been published in November of the year relating to those statistics. Over the last couple of years the publication of these figures has got progressively later. The statistics are important as they provide a guide to the current status of fish stocks, and at this time with the

release of the Gippsland Lakes and Catchment Taskforce Report which indicated “generally low” fish numbers these statistics become even more important.

Dr James Andrews of Fisheries Victoria stated-

In regard to the availability of commercial catch statistics 2007/8 this information is still being received from fishermen and aquaculture producers and it will not be available until the data has been received checked and compiled”

Dr Andrews further indicated that the statistics would be available during 2009 on the Internet. In the past a complete published booklet covering the statistics was available in November. Given the concern at fish stocks in the Gippsland Lakes it seems strange that Fisheries Victoria does not release the two pages covering the Gippsland Lakes or even the statistics that relate to dusky flathead and black bream in the Gippsland Lakes, which are the species whose status is of most concern to local recreational anglers.

Anecdotal Information

This year over the holiday period I fished the Gippsland Lakes at Metung and in Lake King for a total of eight hours in the company of others and only landed one small dusky flathead and no other fish that could be kept. I have spoken to a number of chaps returning to the Metung jetty and am yet to see a dusky flathead in an angler’s bag. This is a vastly different scene to the previous four years and Alec Milledge who fishes regularly from his jetty at Shaving Point has indicated similar results.

Commercial Catch of Dusky Flathead 2005/06= 47 tonnes
2006/07 =34 tonnes

This is a 25% decline in one year and anecdotal information would suggest the decline in 2007/08 might be even greater.

Source- 2006/07 Commercial Catch Statistics Publication

Recreational anglers who willingly accept a fairly strict dusky flathead bag limit for the sake of the fishery should remember that no catch limit applies to the commercial fishermen who can take all the dusky flathead they can catch. Surely this is an anomaly that must be addressed.

Gippsland Lakes Dusky Flathead Tracking Project

I have received the Fisheries Revenue Allocation Committee Report October 2008 prepared by Dr. J Hindall of the Arthur Rylah Institute DSE, on the movement of dusky flathead using transmitter technology. Forty fish were surgically implanted with acoustic transmitters and monitored over eighteen months (December 2006-June 2008). The rate of fish loss in this study was around 25%. In real terms the study suggests that most fish were sedentary and moved little, remaining in single regions of the Gippsland Lakes for extended periods, however fish often moved into the lower and middle reaches of major tributaries (Tambo Nicholson and Mitchell Rivers.) and appeared to reside in these regions for up to a couple of weeks.

Larger movements of 30kms over two to three days were shown but this was not common. During the large 2007 flood some fish moved to more saline waters but no fish were recorded exiting the estuary during the flood. This is the first study mapping the movements of dusky flathead using transmitters.

Statements from the Report

“Lack of knowledge about the basic biology of the dusky flathead severely hampers our ability to understand the consequences of environmental change on reproductive success and or productivity of fish in the Gippsland Lakes.”

And

“Unless we understand where dusky flathead live and breed in relation to the most impacted areas of the Lake system, no amount of recreational fisheries management will ensure a productive and sustainable fishery in the future.”

And

“Properly understanding the basic biology of dusky flathead, including critical habitat, movements and spawning locations are the key to implementing the most appropriate strategies to ensure the sustainability of this important species for recreational fishers throughout eastern Victoria.”

This report also indicates that there was some movement of fish towards Lakes Entrance around November/December. Hindall suggests this species may spawn in late spring and early summer so that the movement to Lakes Entrance may have occurred *“in response to spawning which may occur inside the Lakes in the vicinity of Lakes Entrance.”*

Readers may remember a report in this publication headed “Dusky Flathead in the Cunninghame Arm” in Issue 20 December 2008. This article indicated that several readers had caught and released large dusky flathead of between 60-84cms near the footbridge during October/November. A reader indicated the gathering of large fish had been evident for a number in this area at this time for a number of years, and the view of these recreational anglers was that these fish were spawning. In that issue I provided details of the professional netting regulations for this arm, and the fact the area could be netted up to December 1st and then it is closed until 30th of April, and the consensus of opinion is that this closure is to avoid conflict between commercial fishermen netting the area and holiday makers.

It is worth noting that the NSW research report “Reproduction and Growth of Dusky Flathead” referred to in the last newsletter suggests the predominant spawning period for dusky flathead was from September to March and that dusky flathead spawned in the marine dominated lower reaches of estuaries. Both these conditions were met in the Cunninghame Arm last November and reported upon in this publication.

Perhaps it is important given the reports of anglers and the suggestion from the tracking project that an attempt should be undertaken to provide some research that would examine spawning areas for dusky flathead and suggest appropriate protection if needed. Congratulations to the Recreational Fisheries Grant Program who have printed and released this study in six months. This is vastly different to a similar program on transmitter tracking of black bream, which was completed in September 2007 and still has not been released.

Access to Fishing Platforms.

Ms Anna Cook, Manager Community East Gippsland Shire, has responded to the letter I wrote involving the matter raised by the late Don Jolley OAM on handicapped access to fishing platforms. Ms Cook said a Rural Access officer had been appointed and she would develop a proposal to put to the Disability Action Committee on handicapped access to fishing jetties and an information booklet for the handicapped giving the location of these jetties. Let’s hope we get a positive result in memory of one of our readers. I will keep readers informed.

2008 Fisheries Status Report

Dr Andrew James Acting Program Leader Bay and Coastal Fisheries has informed that the Fisheries Status Report 2008 is being printed in hard copy form and will be available to the public through the Customer Service Centre on 136 186. Readers of the last newsletter may recall it took me nearly two hours to print this 180 page document off the Internet. **Fisheries Victoria is to be congratulated for making this report available to anglers in this form.** This report does provide a host of interesting information although, as I mentioned previously it is unfortunate that it does not mention the sand flathead or the dusky flathead, two of the most sought after recreational fish species.

Dusky Flathead in Lake Tyers

Whilst being predominantly a bait angler, my catch of dusky flathead in Lake Tyers is somewhat down on the same period last year. However after talking to a number of anglers who are users of soft plastics it is evident that there is no shortage of dusky flathead in Lake Tyers. Frank Millito whose charter uses only soft plastics on a catch and release basis says

that many mornings have yielded upwards of 30 dusky flathead all of which have been released, and the number of small flathead is amazing.

John Harrison whose home overlooks Lake Tyers and who fishes the lake on a regular basis states—“re flathead, I posted 120 dusky otoliths to Fisheries Victoria yesterday. Not all caught by me as I monitored the ramp for a few days over Xmas and collected frames. It gave me a good opportunity to monitor catch rates. Huge numbers of duskies being caught and still are although they spawned on mass around the 15th of December and the size has now decreased. I caught and released 8 in 1.5hours this morning (27th January) and flicked about the same number off at the side of the boat instead of bringing them aboard. Over Xmas many were in the 45cm range which is an improvement on last year”

In conclusion John made the observation to Fisheries Research regarding the number of anglers who had well over the bag limit.

My thanks to John for these valuable and thoughtful observations, and they have started me thinking as an old bait angler, that I may have to join the new generation and the soft plastic revolution.

Frank Millito made this comment to me, “imagine what the fishing would be like in the Gippsland Lakes if they had a dusky population similar to Lake Tyers, and imagine the effect on tourism.” I would think this is unlikely to happen whilst unfettered netting of this species removes up to 40 tonnes of duskies annually from the Gippsland Lakes. The difference between the paucity of quality angling in the Gippsland Lakes and the excellent fishing to be had in Lake Tyers illustrates graphically a major problem facing the Gippsland Lakes.. This view would seem to be reinforced by the preliminary work undertaken by the Gippsland Lakes Taskforce, which noted low fish numbers in the Gippsland Lakes in the interim report “Fish populations and seagrass condition of the Gippsland Lakes”. (A summary of which was published in the last newsletter.)

I would be interested in reports from other anglers on dusky flathead in Lake Tyers and the Gippsland Lakes.

Bass Project to Continue

Frank Millito informs me that the Bass Project to provide fingerlings is being reinvigorated, and that brood fish held in dams in Orbost will be used to replace the brood stock that died last year. To overcome the problem of water quality, rain water tanks are being installed and this quality control of the water used in the program is aimed at ensuring the death rates of small fish and brood stock experienced last year are overcome. We wish this program well and hope success will eventuate in this breeding program. Frank indicated that he did not expect small bass for release until 2010.

Gut Hooked v Lip Hooked Fish – Update

By John Harrison (Recreational Research Angler)

In May 2008 I experimented with various hook sizes (size 2, 4, 6), hook styles (bait holder, tuna circle, wide gape) and fishing techniques (slack lines, tight lines) to see if there was any effect on the rate of gut hooked fish being caught in Lake Tyers. The results were reported in an earlier edition of “Around the Jetties” but to summarise the overall percentage of gut hooked fish was 93.6% and there was no significant difference between the rates using different hook types, hook sizes and techniques.

At the time I undertook to repeat the trials in spring/summer. The following results were obtained from 200 bream hooked from mid November to the end of December 2008.

Overall – gut hooked fish - 82%

Hook size- size 2 – gut hooked fish 81%
Size 4 - gut hooked fish 88%
Size 6 – gut hooked fish 79%

i.e. again hook size does not appear to make a significant difference

Slack v tight line – slack line – 81% gut hooked
tight line – 85% gut hooked
i.e. again slack line /tight line has made no significant difference

Although the percentage of fish gut hooked is not as high as it was in May last year it is still high and runs contrary to the results obtained by Fisheries in trials conducted in the Gippsland Lakes. As a result of those trials Fisheries published advice to recreational anglers that they should use large hook sizes and tight lines to ensure fish were lip hooked and that therefore their survival on release was enhanced.

The fish caught by Fisheries in the Gippsland Lakes were all juvenile fish, under size. The fish caught by me in May 2008, however were all over 31 cm in length and of the 200 fish caught in November/December only 23 were undersize (73% gut hooked). It would appear that the conclusions made by Fisheries may not apply to fish of legal size and bigger- at least in Lake Tyers.

There may be a need for additional research by Fisheries so that appropriate advice can be provided to anglers in regard to fish over the legal minimum size. This is particularly important as an increasing number of anglers are releasing legal size fish and it will become even more relevant when/if the bag limit of 5 bream comes into effect.

Most of the gut hooked fish I caught in both periods were bleeding significantly, probably as a result of the tougher and longer fight the larger fish demonstrate compared to juvenile fish. . This raises the question of the long-term survival rate on release of these larger, gut hooked fish. Fisheries have done extensive work on the post release survival rate of released bream and as a result have issued advice to anglers to cut off the hook rather than remove it. I will inquire if their advice applies also to the larger size fish or if it applies only to juveniles. With increasing numbers of anglers releasing larger bream we need to be confident that they will survive.

Also of concern is that Fisheries advised anglers to use tight lines to reduce the likelihood of gut hooking fish. It appears that in their trials a tight line was defined as a rod **held in the hand**, with the drag locked up and with the angler striking on the first sign of a bite. Most experienced anglers fish with more than one rod and to them tight line fishing is with no slack line and the drag tightened up but with the rod in a holder. Fisheries need to make clear to anglers what they mean by tight line fishing and preferably undertake research using the same techniques used by most anglers. These results from Lake Tyers were obtained with rods not held in the hand and do not appear to support their conclusions.

Editor

Thanks to John Harrison for this report. These results and the important questions raised in this report are being made available to Fisheries Research at Queenscliff.

Thanks to the contributors to this newsletter, and we are always looking for material from readers.

Please remember you can recommend a friend to receive “Around the Jetties” in 2009 and we welcome new readers whether individuals or angling clubs.

We can provide a large print version of “Around the Jetties” to any reader having problems with the size of the print.

Good health and good fishing

Lynton Barr

Opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the author unless otherwise acknowledged.

MATERIAL FROM THIS NEWSLETTER MAY BE REPRODUCED BUT IT WOULD BE APPRECIATED IF THE AUTHOR AND PUBLICATION WERE NOTED.