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Around the Jetties 27

The art of bottom fishing is that of letting the fish come to the fisherman, instead of vice versa...Bottom fishing in short is the Thinking Man's fishing

Louis D Rubin Jr.

The Even Tempered Angler (1983)

Editor-- This was obviously written before soft plastics were introduced however despite their introduction, I must confess to being largely "a thoughtful bottom angler."

Editorial

This state since its earliest years has been blessed with citizens who have had a love of fishing and this has led to early anglers undertaking stocking of dams and streams and the development of private trout breeding facilities from which Victorian streams were first stocked. As early as 1857 an angler Edward Wilson introduced Murray cod to the Yarra River. Perch or redfin were introduced from 13 fish brought from England, in 1861, by Morton Allport, at his own expense after several attempts. Trout after many attempts were introduced to Victorian waters largely by individual citizens and Acclimatization Societies. William Clark and Samuel Wilson were responsible for developing fishponds and importing ova. William Robertson who had a property near Gisborne bred trout in two ponds and in 1875 the first trout from his ponds were released. The Ballarat Acclimatization Society actually started on Samuel Wilson's property, Ercildoune but in the early 1870's it transferred to Ballarat and from 1870 was the most active supplier of fish to Victorian waters including Murray Cod to Lake Burrumbeet and redfin to Burrumbeet and Kirks Reservoir. About 1500 trout were released into a number of rivers and reservoirs in 1872, but its greatest success was with redfin in those early days. By 1900 this society was producing and distributing almost 20,000 trout a year and it was in 1900 that this society bred and released 4200 rainbow trout in Victorian waters. The Ballarat Acclimatization Society has played a most significant part in the introduction of fish to rivers and reservoirs and for many years trout were supplied to the Victorian Fisheries Department for release in Victorian streams. In 1932 527,000 brown trout ova and 351,000 rainbow ova were collected from Lake Wendouree for the breeding program. On Kings Birthday weekend each year Society members and hundreds of anglers gathered for the release of two year old trout into Lake Wendouree, and after the liberation every one was invited back to the hatchery to enjoy the hospitality of the Society. The society continued to supply trout into the 1950's but then Snob's Creek was coming into full production and Fisheries Victoria did not need to buy trout from Ballarat. Ballarat then turned to supplying fish to farmers to stock their dams. It is sad today to look at a dry Lake Wendouree, which over almost 100 years was the source of trout ova to the society. The story of the introduction of fish to Australia and in particular trout is a story of the efforts of the earliest anglers and their perseverance, despite all difficulties and there is no better example than the Ballarat Fish Acclimatization Society.

Ballarat Fish Acclimatization Society Today

After writing the editorial I thought I would find out if the Ballarat Society still exists today. I spoke to Denis Bentley the current President of the society who informed me he had with others been out collecting trout ova just before answering my call. Whilst Lake Wendouree has been dry the society members all of whom are voluntary workers have been collecting ova from other waters and they expect to have half a million trout ova 70% of which will hatch into trout and be sold. This is the 138th year of this society breeding fish for release into Victorian waters.



King's Birthday annual release of 2-year olds into Lake Wendouree.

Photo of the Ballarat Acclimatisation Society.1920's. Source - Salmon at the Antipodes by John Clements.

Dennis stated that today most of their fish are sold for aquaponics. (See later)

What's in a Name?

In the 2003/2004 Victorian Recreational Fishing Guide under the heading “Your Fishing Licence at Work” was the allocation of \$580,000 to employ 10 Fisheries Officers from the fund generated by the General Angling Licence. VRFish actively supported this at the time, although I now understand that this is no longer the case, although I have seen no published statements on this issue. I actively opposed this use of the anglers licence funds as I regarded the employment of Fisheries Officers as a normal part of Fisheries Victoria's activities and as such should have been funded from the normal budget for this department. This figure according to the 2007/8 Report To Parliament has now blown out to \$1.175m and in the forward to the report the comment is made that this figure will now only employ seven Fisheries Officers. In 2005/6 for some reason the cost of employing these officers was no longer included in the Recreational Guide. In the latest Recreational Fishing Guide, there has been a further change and the General Angling Licence is no longer funding 10 Fisheries officers but is now funding “Field Service Operations” with no costing figure attached. For an angler to find out the cost of these Field Service Operations he would need to access the Recreational Trust Account Expenditure Report to Parliament. If he did this he could also obtain the amount allocated to the following bodies, that no longer have their funding shown in the Fishing Guide namely VRFish, Fishcare, Licence Buyback and the cost of administering the allocations from the General Angling Licence receipts. In 2007/8 the receipts from the angling licence were \$4.8m.and the cost of administering that figure was \$554,000. It is interesting that the allocation for Field Service Operations has doubled even though it would seem to employ only 70% of the officers initially employed in 2003/4. It now appears that 25% of the General Angling Licence receipts are funding Field Service Operations, or more accurately 7 Fisheries Officers. Anglers might question the value of funding 7 Field Service Operators when the same allocation could be

applied to research or restocking the waters of this state. It also seems this is a continuing annual subsidy to the Fisheries Budget, and perhaps this is not quite the original concept when a General Angling Licence was being introduced. This publication in no way suggests that the number of Fisheries Officers should be reduced, but rather the charge for these officers should be a charge against the fisheries budget. In addition the number of officers should be increased with an increase budget allocation for this purpose.

Some facts

The Department of Primary Industries in Victoria as well as some investigation officers employs approximately 65 Fisheries Officers. In 2006/7 of the 146 persons prosecuted 67 applied to abalone, and only five to black bream. Figures above from Fishery Status Report 2008

Some Thoughts and Observations

From the Concerned Angler

The Value of Recreational Fishing

Anglers need to keep pushing the value of recreational fishing, but one has to ask the question whether decision makers are really only giving "lip service" to both the value of recreational fishing and the overall worth to eco-tourism. An example of this occurred during the recent review of regulations, which could have examined netting practices in the Cunningham Arm at Lakes Entrance. I found it interesting that this matter was not raised in the questionnaire seeking the views of recreational anglers in the recent process to revise fisheries regulations. I can only wonder if the decision makers may have got a resounding level of feedback not in favour of netting in this area where eco-tourism is so important.

The Changing Gippsland Lakes.

Over many years there has been considerable publicity and discussion afforded the salt wedge slowly advancing higher in the Gippsland lakes. What is happening is the lakes are so slowly transitioning into a marine environment, and this is claiming more and more of this fabulous estuarine waterway. With the constant multiple demands for freshwater inflows and the continuous demand in some quarters to dam the inflows such as the Mitchell and the Aberfeldy I do not see any immediate solution to this marine transition.

So what does that mean for us anglers. There is clearly a change in habitat, and not surprisingly that means a change in species within the environment. Silver trevally are one species that thrive in the marine environment, so there is no surprise that silver trevally start to form an increasing part of the commercial fishing catch.

As for bream and flathead their preferred habitat is reducing steadily and probably accounts in part for the stock declines. After all if bream cannot get the right salinity mix at spawning time the recruitment of young bream for future seasons can almost be non-existent unfortunately.

Editors Comment

This publication on several occasions has raised the issue of commercial netting in the Cunningham Arm at Lakes Entrance. Currently the regulations allow for seine netting in the Cunningham arm from the 1st of May to the 30th November each year, on the Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday of each week, in the period commencing one hour after sunset and ending at sunrise on the following day. In other words a commercial fisherman can only net at night, and cannot operate on weekends or during active tourist periods. One could almost reach a conclusion the current regulations allow netting in this area by stealth, and certainly the regulations protect netting in this area from open public scrutiny.

Illegal Bream Catch

The Bairnsdale Advertiser reported on June 15th that a car was stopped by police during a road blitz over the Queens Birthday weekend and was found to have 108 black bream in the boot. It was also found that 81 of these fish were undersize. Fishing equipment was seized and the men were charged on summons. This was a good result and we can only hope the full force of the law is applied to such illegal fishing. It is at this time of the year when small bream move into the rivers that illegal fishing is at its peak and hopefully enforcement will be increased in recognition of this fact.

Some Memories from a Reader

I had a phone call a day or so ago from an 86 year old reader who was most interested in the article on the research by Paul Brown into Movements of Bass in the Snowy River. He told me that he used to catch bass in the upper Mitchell River and that he had on his wall a 7lb bass that he caught in 1986. Whilst it was normal to catch bass

many years ago, he made the point that to catch a bass in the Mitchell River today is rare, and he wonders why this change has taken place. He pondered on the question of whether trout might be responsible for this decline. He also raised the issue of what had happened to blackfish, and stated that some of the small creeks entering the Mitchell River years ago had large populations of blackfish but now they seem to have disappeared.

Editor

This phone call raised a number of issues including whether the Mitchell River should be restocked with Australian bass? The East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority recently stocked over 100,000 Australian bass in the Snowy River. (This was reported in a previous issue). The other question on the decline of the blackfish in our rivers is also interesting.

According to the book "A Guide to the Freshwater Fish of Victoria" by Cadwallader and Backhouse, the abundance of river blackfish has declined over part of its range. This book states that river siltation and "river improvement" schemes where watercourses are channelised and dead timber and other debris removed have contributed to this decline. The river blackfish is a secretive fish found under logs or stones and undercut banks. The female only produces up to 500 eggs with hatching occurring in 16 days. They reach a length of 60mm in the first year and 120mm in the second year. In Victorian waters these fish are known to have grown to 600mm and 5.5kgs in the south and an age of ten years although this is very rare. Perhaps a most interesting aspect of this species is that river blackfish south of the Great Dividing Range in Victoria reach 600mm whilst those to the north grow only to 300mm and 300grms weight.

I recall regularly catching these fish in the Delatite River in the North East of the state when fishing for trout with bait, and particularly on evening. This is one of our most interesting fish, and this publication would welcome comments or information from readers.



Southern Blackfish

Bob Pearce Comments

Bob Pearce former Chairman of VRFish emailed the following interesting memories on the same topic.

"I read with interest the article on the research by Paul Brown into Australian Bass. It brought back memories of the famous "Outdoors" magazine of years ago and, in particular, the legendary writer Vic McCristal. I can clearly remember an article he wrote on Bass fishing and I am pretty sure the year was 1960. Vic travelled to Genoa in far East Gippsland, which, apparently, was an adventurous thing to do then, as I remember Vic reporting that the road conditions there were pretty bad. The article was headed "Genoa's Giant Bass." During his brief time there, Vic caught quite a large number of Bass, some of which were over 5 pounds weight. I recall that the fish were caught on lures and he fished from around dusk and after dark. The Genoa River was probably a fantastic waterway in those days, but was soon to have its environmental flows greatly reduced as the Snowy Hydro Electric scheme was implemented. It is a very sad looking piece of water now and I doubt that it would contain any Bass these days. Pretty sad, isn't it. There are still reasonable populations of Bass in some Victorian waters, but if I provided any details, I would be risking a sudden and premature death from some mates who target them on a catch and release basis and want to ensure that the species does not become over-fished.

I have memories about one of my favourite fresh water fish, the River Blackfish. I lived close to the Yarra River in my younger days and caught heaps of these fish as they were there in huge numbers, but 90% of them were undersize. They are nocturnal feeders and would come on the bite after sunset and would continue to feed well after dark, after which the eels would take over. The Yarra was a lovely pristine stream in those days and I was lucky to see it at its best. The area where I used to fish is now very unattractive with poor water quality. A bit further upstream around Eltham it is still not too bad, apparently, and I know people who catch Murray Cod and Macquarie

Perch there on a catch and release basis. The Yarra is possibly the only Victorian water where the Macquarie's can be targeted with some potential for success (catch and release only I would hope). I believe they were illegally stocked there many years ago, but it seems to have turned out for the better."

Editor

Regulations for River Blackfish

The river blackfish has a closed season south of the Great Dividing Range from the 1st September to the 31st of December each year with a bag limit of 5 fish and a size limit of 23cms. It would appear there is no closed season north of the divide.

Denis Bentley from the Ballarat Acclimatization Society informed me that they are about to attempt to breed Southern blackfish for release in local waters as the breeding season of the blackfish does not coincide with that of trout so the Society would have the capacity to handle this species. All anglers acknowledge the work of this society as it continues to provide fish for Victorian streams.

Bass in the Snowy River

It has been suggested to me that the Bass Project being undertaken at the TAFE Facility on Bullock Island in Lakes Entrance will be discontinued following the death of fingerlings in 2007 and then the death of brood fish the following year. No public announcement has been made nor has the cause of death of these fish stocks been made public. This is a disappointing result for a project that showed so much promise and which actually produced over 100,000 fingerlings, which were only a month or two from release. the fish from Narooma Aquaculture. It is hoped these steps will re-establish the Snowy River as a high-class recreational fishery. The Australian Bass travel to the estuary to breed in salt water and the juvenile's hatch in the estuary according to Southern Water and then swim up the river. (See the summary Paul Brown's research project on This publication reported on the purchase and release of 100,000 Bass fingerlings in the Snowy River by the East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority. In 2007 the Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority suggested 80,000 Bass would be stocked in the NSW section of the Snowy River in 2007 with a further 170,000 Bass by 2009 being put in that section, whilst up to 250,000 Bass were planned to be stocked in the 150 km Victorian section of the river. It was stated that the Southern Rivers Authority for the NSW section of the river would purchase Australian Bass in the last issue.)

Fisheries Research Project

This is a project that does not seem to have had any publicity yet it is an interesting collaboration between anglers and Fisheries Victoria. This report on the project was written from information supplied in a paper by Daniel Grixti

Over years Fisheries management has had to demonstrate that the sustainable management of fisheries was being achieved. Historically Catch and Effort Statistics from the commercial sector was an indicator, however with the removal of commercial netting from most estuaries this is no longer available, and therefore the only measurement in these waters is an attempt to monitor the recreational catch.

In the 1990's Fisheries Victoria introduced angler based monitoring systems to provide catch rates and size and age compositions of the main target species for recreational anglers in the estuaries of the state. This involved the **angler diary program** where numbers of recreational anglers compiled detailed catch diaries. Anglers who participated were called "**Research Anglers.**" This was found to be a cost effective tool to collect data, however a question remained as to whether the material produced in the diaries was truly representative of abundance and population structure of the key recreational species. In other words this project was to ascertain whether the diary results truly reflected the situation and could be used with confidence as a stock assessment tool.

Project

The project was therefore to ensure the angler diary program could be relied upon as a method of assessing fish resources for fisheries not only in Victoria but Across Australia.

Four case study regional fisheries were selected for this project. Black Bream fishing in lake Tyers, estuary perch fishing in Andersons Inlet are the estuary areas and selected areas on the Murray River for Murray cod and golden perch.

The recreational anglers results which would normally be included in their diaries will be validated by recreational research anglers fishing at the same sites and times as fishery independent methods such as mesh nets, trawl nets seine nets and electro fishing in freshwater areas. Within each study four zones are chosen allowing research anglers and independent fisheries to operate at the same time over four days with fishing taking place in one zone per day. The independent fishing will determine the abundance and diversity of fish in each zone. This will be

repeated over several years in each area. This will determine whether recreational angler returns reflect the state of the fishery as determined by the independent means being used.

Progress to Date.

So far each recreational fishery chosen has been evaluated once using research anglers and independent fishing means. The fishing results were varied and the catch rates were probably below average, however over the years this will even out. It is too early to draw any conclusions but it is an exercise where recreational anglers and dedicated research staff are working together to arrive at a method that will determine the sustainability of small fisheries with a cost effective method. Perhaps in the future research anglers will play an even more important part in assessing the sustainability of fishing in our estuaries.

Editor- I thank Daniel Gixti for these details and I am sure anglers will await the results with great interest. Thanks to the anglers involved and the research staff undertaking this project.

Fishing Jetties and Funding

This matter has been raised before in this publication, the last occasion in issue 26 when a 78 year old angler could not access the jetties on the backwater at Bairnsdale because of the distance to walk and the fact that no parking was provided and no driving to the jetties was permitted either. The distance to the first jetty would be several hundred metres and to the others over 800metres. These three jetties have been constructed by East Gippsland Shire using \$22,000 of angler funds derived from angler’s contributions to the Recreational Fishing Licence Trust Fund by means of their licence fees. Fisheries Victoria in a Fish Fax 17th January 2008 state “these jetties can best be accessed from the Eastwood estate are adjacent to recent urban development and are linked by a walking track.” This statement does not indicate that only two methods exist for accessing these jetties. One is by two steep tracks from the Eastwood Estate to creek level, and both are totally unsuitable for handicapped or aged anglers. The other alternative is walking between 300 and 800 metres along a walking track that does not allow cars for the handicapped or frail to use.



The closest access to the jetties. A series of steep steps or very steep ramp.

When one reaches the jetties they are totally unsuitable for wheelchair anglers as the photos show the steps that are have to be traversed to reach the Jetty.



Now what is important is the fact that the application for funds for these jetties stated in point 5.4 “**Note that access and facilities must be constructed to a standard that is suitable for persons of all abilities.**” This requirement has not been met by the Gippsland Shire as the photos show. The Shire indicated that it was seeking further funding for more jetties on the Clifton Creek area adjacent to Eastwood Estate. **This publication believes no further grants should be made to East Gippsland Shire until the terms of the first grants are met and the three jetties already built are constructed to a standard that is suitable for all persons.** These jetties probably add to the ambiance of the Eastwood Estate but do not meet the basic requirement of access for all anglers. The matter of general access to jetties was first raised with the East Gippsland Shire in May 2008, after the late highly respected Don Jolley AIM a handicapped angler and reader of this publication brought the matter to our attention.

Editor

Robert Krix, Executive Officer Fisheries Committees brought the requirements specified in the grant application to our notice and we thank him for his ready interest in this matter.

Commercial Catch Statistics 2007/8

An Anglers Analysis

The commercial catch statistics were released on the 16th of June, and these figures provide **one of the key indicators of the state of fish stocks in the Gippsland Lakes**. My initial reaction when examining these figures was surprise, particularly with the commercial catch of black bream, which had risen **from 49 tonnes in 2006/7 to an astounding 144 tonnes in 2007/8**. This is the highest tonnage of black bream taken in commercial nets since 2001/2. I suggest this figure is surprising in that the anecdotal reports I have received from recreational anglers have not indicated a threefold increase in recreational black bream catches and it is probably true to say that no increase over the last couple of years would be a general opinion. (It would be interesting to compare angler diary reports for the same period.) Probably the majority of fish that made up this catch were spawned 4-6 years ago (2003/4). It will now be interesting to see the effects of the recent algal bloom and loss of seagrass on spawning of black bream in the last two years. This catch yielded a return of \$1.243m to commercial fishermen, which in turn would suggest the return to some commercial fishermen, would be over \$120,000 on this species alone, whilst the average return per kilo for black bream was \$8.60. The overall gross return on average to commercial fishermen was \$160,000, and of course within the ten commercial fishermen the return would vary with some taking far less than the average and some making far more. It needs to be remembered that the commercial catch of black bream in **2002/3 was only 26 tonnes** and in the next four years the catch did not exceed 50 tonnes.



Commercial Fishing Vessels North Arm Lakes Entrance

The catch of dusky flathead fell from 35 tonnes in 2006/7 to 30 tonnes in 2007/8, the catch of dusky flathead has dropped now from a peak of 47 tonnes in 2005/6. Again this does not seem to mirror the experience of recreational anglers who have found the recreational catch of dusky flathead in the Gippsland Lakes far lower. I expect the 2008/9 figures to indicate a further decline based on anecdotal information and my own experience. The average return to commercial fishermen was \$3.26 per kg for dusky flathead.

Despite the general view that the Gippsland Lakes are becoming more marine than estuarine, the catch of silver trevally was only 7 tonnes a drop from the 13 tonne catch in the previous year, and tailor remained steady with a catch of 13 tonnes. This may not reflect the availability of species but rather may reflect increased effort by commercial fishermen associated with netting the higher value black bream.

A figure was published in this issue of the Commercial Catch Statistics for the catch of European Carp. No figures were provided in the previous issue on the basis that there were less than 5 licence holders fishing for this species. (Confidentiality clause) Despite the suggested more than five commercial licence holders fishing for this species the commercial catch of European carp dropped from 251 tonnes in 2005/6 to 64 tonnes in 2007/8. This is a significant change, but I am wondering whether this reflects a drop in the number of carp in the Gippsland Lakes, or is it a factor associated with the marine environment? This figure is the lowest catch of European carp in the Gippsland Lakes in the last 24 years and the second lowest in the last 50 years.

Finally it will be interesting to see the 2008/9 statistics which were collected on the 30th of June to ascertain if the increased black bream catch is maintained or is the figure for 2007/8 just a spike from a better spawning 4-6 years ago or is it associated with the 2007 flood when it was reported large commercial catches of bream were made as the fish were forced out of the rivers by fresh water? The effects of the recent algal bloom and loss of sea grass was expected by many scientists to impact on black bream numbers, however the real effects of this event on black bream spawning might first become evident in the commercial catch statistics around 2013/14.

Editor

The above is an attempt to extract information for recreational anglers from the statistics published by Fisheries Victoria. All anglers will have their own thoughts on what these statistics signify.

New Recreational Fishing Grants Group

The Department of Primary Industry is seeking expressions of interest from recreational anglers wishing to join this group to advise the Victorian Government how funds derived from fishing licence fees should be spent.

There are six positions for people who can provide a range of knowledge covering coastal estuarine, freshwater native fish, and trout and salmon covering Pot Phillip Bay, South West, North East, North West, East Gippsland, and West Gippsland regions.

In addition to the above six, one person from the recreational fishing industry, and one person nominated by VRFish to provide advice that reflects the entire recreational fishing community.

Expressions of interest close on August 4th 2009.

Persons interested should contact Mr Robin Billen from Horton International on (03) 9650 2555 or for more information about the positions Robert Krix on (03) 9658 4727
There are specific selection criteria that have to be satisfied.

Editor

This is a wonderful opportunity for recreational anglers across the state to provide advice that reflects the wishes of the angling community directly to the Victorian Government on the allocation of funds generated from angling licence fees. This new body replaces a previous committee known as the FRACS committee made up of 2 representatives of the Fisheries Co-Management Council, 2 representatives of the Department of Primary Industry and 2 representatives of VRFish.

A sitting fee and travelling expenses will be paid to successful applicants to the new body.

A Sad Passing

On Friday the 19th of June Brian Mark passed away after a long illness. Many of the older readers will remember this name as Brian was a leading clay target shooter and over his life he had won an astounding 700 clay bird events around Australia. Brian as a Winchester manager actively supported a program I was introducing aimed at developing Gun Safety programs into Victorian Secondary schools with particular emphasis on rural schools. At the first Victorian Schoolboy and Schoolgirl Championship held at the Melbourne Gun Club when over 500 secondary students competed, a young Russell Mark, Brian's son was the winner of the Senior Boys event. This young man went on to win gold at both Olympic and Commonwealth Games in clay target shooting. Brian was a figure larger than life and a wonderful raconteur who could entertain an audience with ease. I think in the years ahead the name Brian Mark will be remembered with some of the other great clay target shooters such as Newton Thomas and Horrie Burns who demonstrated shooting techniques and safe gun handling to many young country students and provided an inspiration for them that was often recalled as they grew older. I would think the name Russel Mark will also be among those who raised the profile of claybird shooting.

Crouch Reels

A former student and now fishing mate collects Crouch reels and he rang me the other day to look on the computer at Ebay where a 1952 crouch reel in mint condition in its original box was being sold and the bid I saw for this reel was \$876. Now all you chaps should dash out to the shed and see if you have one of these reels that were so popular in the 50's. We have commented previously on the sad decline of the company at Dunolly that was producing this Australian designed reel in the post war period.

Aquaponics

This term was used in association with the Ballarat Fish Acclimatization Society where substantial sales of fish are made to gardeners using aquaponic garden systems. This is a system where a large tank is used to provide water for hydroponic gardens. Into this tank a number of trout are placed and the droppings from these fish and wasted food are piped to the garden beds and this in turn provides food for the plants, and the side benefit is that later on you have prime fish for the table or for sale. To be honest I had not heard of this until Dennis Bentley described the system, and I got onto the Internet to see about aquaponics. To my surprise there was pages of information, even to advice regarding setting up and running an aquaponics system in the home garden.

Welcome

To Bruthen Angling Club, who now receive this newsletter, and make it available to members. The Bruthen Angling Club has been known as a very experienced club with many excellent anglers.

[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 also welcome contributions from readers.](#)

Due to circumstances beyond our control we will not publish an August 'Around the Jetties', but hope to be back in print in September.

*Good health and good fishing
Lynton Barr*

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

Attachment

Fisheries Assessment Workshop- Black Bream in Gippsland Lakes

By John Harrison

A stock assessment workshop for black bream in the Gippsland lakes was held on Saturday 27th June. Fisheries research officers, scientists, local fisheries officers, recreational anglers, and bait licence holders attended this assessment. Commercial licence holders declined to attend.

1. The last stock assessment in 1995 concluded that bream stocks were declining. All current indicators point to the fact that stocks continue to decline although there was a spike in commercial catch rates in 2007/08 corresponding to the June 2007 flood. (Fish forced out of rivers?)
2. The last strong year class was in 1989. The 2003-year class was above average but still relatively low and there was a significant but low year class in 2000/01. Year classes since then have been generally very low.
3. There is little sea grass in the lake. The commercial bream catch has correlated with sea grass abundance over the years. There has been a continual decline in bream catch rates since 1975 (with the exception of the spike in 2007/08 corresponding to the 2007 flood) and preliminary 08/09 figures indicate the catch rate is dropping back to the lower trend level.
4. Fish growth rates within the Gippsland Lakes are highly variable. For example, a 3 year old bream could be between 12cm and 30 cm length and an 8 year old bream could be anywhere from 17 cm to 38 cm in length. The growth rate for fish spawned in recent years is higher than in earlier years with recent year classes reaching 28cm total length in 5 years compared to earlier year classes taking 10 years to reach the same length.
5. The survival rate for undersized released fish from commercial nets is good. For recreational anglers the survival rate for undersize released fish is good if the fish are lip hooked but less so if the fish is gut hooked or bleeding. Overall the increase in minimum size to 28cm has been positive in that more fish are surviving. Fisheries Officers report that anglers have reacted positively to the change in minimum size.
6. Transmitters placed in 44 bream and tracked for 12 months show that bream are highly mobile, travelling an average of 8.7km per day. Some fish travelled 30km in one day. Fish tend to inhabit the rivers in winter and start to move out into the lakes in spring. There is a tendency for lake use to increase at night. Overall bream spend approximately twice as long in the rivers as in the lakes. River use increases with an increase in the average river flow rate indicating fresh water flow is important.
7. Recent research shows that the interface between freshwater and saltwater, known as the halocline, is important, as it is here that the developing larvae are found. The location of the halocline changes and

moves up and down the river and out into the lake depending on fresh water river flows. In recent years, with reduced flows, it has generally been found some considerable distance up the rivers. As a consequence it is smaller than if it had been out in the lake and this impacts on larval growth and survival. The CMA advises that projections indicate a 50% reduction in flows into the lake system given current rainfall trends and this will have consequences for the size of future year classes.

8. The research work on the connection between larval location and growth and the halocline has been conducted in the Mitchell River and a priority is to extend this work to the remainder of the lake system.
9. Although recruitment is determined principally by environmental and habitat conditions there is a need to adjust commercial and recreational fishing pressure through management decisions to ensure that fishing practices do not exacerbate a situation which might develop. There is ample information available on successful year classes, on population distributions and on growth rates. There is a need, however, to determine the tipping point at which the survival of bream stocks is problematic. There is a need to determine the performance indicators and reference points at which intervention is necessary and the form that intervention should take.

Editor

In John's words –“I wrote the above from rough notes taken on the day, errors and omissions accepted, and the official summary should be out in 4 weeks.”

With a decline in river flows, lack of sea grass, both of which have an impact on bream spawning and talk of the “tipping point at which the survival of bream stocks is problematic” it would seem that we have reached an appropriate time to consider whether commercial netting should continue in the Gippsland Lakes.

I was unable to attend this assessment and so I greatly appreciate this report by John Harrison being available for the July edition of Around the Jetties .An official report will be printed and released later by Fisheries Victoria.