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Around the Jetties

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An Anglers Newsletter

“If one branch of estuary fishing has boomed above others in recent times it is lure fishing for flatheads. The idea has roused great interest in every state.”

Vic McCristal “Freshwater Fighting Fish 1964

Editorial

Welcome to this the first edition for 2011. In issue 41 I commented on the plans to develop Lake Eildon into a booming Murray Cod fishery with the stocking of over 1 million cod in the next three years, and of course there has already been a massive stocking of Golden perch in this lake of recent times. The development of this fishery is a great achievement for both Fisheries Victoria and the commitment of the previous Government. Perhaps the challenge for the new Government is to undertake a similar development of the Gippsland Lakes. This is a fishery that has deteriorated over the last twenty years and the two major recreational species in this system namely black bream and dusky flathead are at extremely low levels. The new Government has suggested limiting netting at the mouths of rivers to protect spawning fish and this is a positive starting point, but much more will be needed if this wonderful lake system is to become a top recreational fishery. Perhaps the taking of spawning black bream from the rivers by recreational anglers should be immediately examined. Already recreational anglers have bag limits for black bream and dusky flathead, and it would seem necessary that the catch of the commercial fishermen should also be regulated, and this might come about with the closure of areas of the lake to commercial netting. At the same time an urgent examination of the minimum size limit for dusky flathead should be undertaken, as the current 27cm limit initiated in the 2008 Review of Regulations might be contributing to the dusky flathead decline in local waters including the Gippsland Lakes. (See later) I would hope this would be the challenge for the new Government and Fisheries Victoria in the next four years, and that plans for the protection of the two key estuary species and the development of the Gippsland lakes as a key recreational fishery are introduced in a similar way to the plans for the future of Lake Eildon. Currently no vision seems to exist for the future of recreational fishing in the Gippsland Lakes.

State Election 2010

Whilst this publication did not enter into a discussion of the policies of the parties with relation to recreation fishing, prior to the election, it did publish the policies with regard to recreational fishing of the candidates for East Gippsland and in most cases this was a state policy provided by local candidates. (Issue 40) Now that the Coalition have been elected I will provide a short examination of the Coalition Recreational Fishing Policy that was provided to this publication prior to the election, and attempt to determine what it may mean to the 700,000 recreational anglers in this state.

Coalition Recreational Fishing Policy.

It needs to be said that this was a very small policy with little detailed information; rather it was a broad statement of a small number of very general policies. Much will depend on the detail of the recreational fishing policy when that detail is ultimately made available. Secondly it is difficult to determine whether costings are for a year or are for the

four-year term of the Government. I believe that in most instances the costings cover the four-year term and this is significant.

Policy Items

- 1. The Coalition would reinvest all revenue raised from fisheries licences back into the recreational fishing industry, along with \$4million over 4 four years for the Recreational Fishing Grants Program.**

Comment

Does this mean that the \$1 million to employ Fisheries Officers would not come from this fund as they can hardly be called part of the “recreational fishing industry.” The \$4 million over four years towards the grants program would provide a 20% increase in the grants funds. Nowhere is the term fisheries research mentioned nor does there seem that any additional funding has been provided for this important area. Much of the detail will depend on the definition of the “recreational fishing industry.”

- 2. Coalition Government would not create any more Marine Parks in Victoria, and would make important changes to the management of the states fisheries to support Victoria’s recreational fishers.**

Comment

The statement of Marine Parks Policy is quite definite and welcomed at this time, however what are the important changes in the Management of the states fisheries to support recreational anglers? Are any recreational anglers aware of what these changes entail? Perhaps our Peak Body VRFish should have sought an answer to what these changes entail and informed the recreational fishers of this state.

- 3. The Coalition would protect spawning fish by introducing controls on the practice of commercial netting near the mouths of rivers, and expand the artificial reef program to increase fish habitat.**

Comment

I think most of this states anglers would applaud the cessation of netting at the mouths of rivers to protect spawning fish. The important question as to what distance nets can be set from the mouths of rivers is not specified, nor is the question as to whether areas such as the “Cut” on the Mitchell river are included as part of the mouth of that river. Only three reefs have been introduced to Victoria, and all are located in Port Phillip Bay. Will this program include areas such as the Gippsland Lakes?

- 4. In Government the Coalition will legislate to create a consultative body made up of key industry representatives to ensure future decisions on issues such as catch and size limits reflect the views of anglers.**

Comment

The success of such a body will depend on the key industry representatives and again any decisions will reflect the membership of such a body. It is true there has been considerable concern at the catch and size limits introduced in the 2008 regulations some of which were introduced against the wishes of anglers. (Dusky Flathead at 27cms was one case in point.) In NSW following extended research the size limit was set at 35cms and talks were taking place to increase the size limit to 45cms. It would be hoped that this consultative body would reflect the considered views of anglers and scientists and be transparent to all. Again there is no indication on membership of such a key body.

- 5. In Government the Coalition will target an additional \$4 million towards building new infrastructure and improving piers, jetties and roads to restore access for anglers to appropriate sites.**

Comment

Again I take this to be over four years and if this is the case \$1 million per year will not make a significant difference statewide to piers, jetties and roads providing additional access for anglers.

The recreational fishing policy of the Coalition is amazingly short on detail, and anglers and their Peak body will need to be part of the development of that detail, which will provide the blueprint for the future of recreational fishing in this state. There is a great deal left in the hands of the new Minister Peter Walsh and this area of his portfolio will be most challenging.

VRFish and the State Election.

I found it somewhat surprising that the only assessment of policies of the Parties prior to the election by VRFish was a single sheet with ten questions and the replies of all parties on the basis of whether the question was fully supported, conditionally supported, or not supported was attached by a colour code. This sheet with its results was made available through the Internet four days prior to the election and amended two days prior to the election due to a mistake in one of the answers. It was also somewhat puzzling that this single sheet was not made available to the many thousands of anglers who do not have access to the Internet. One might be forgiven for thinking that VRFish had distanced itself from the election.

In the document it was also surprising that the only question not supported by the Coalition and the Labour Party was the following-

“Will you your Party support the removal of fin-fish commercial netting in the Gippsland Lakes and the creation of a new recreation fishing haven.”

Given the acknowledged decline of black bream in the Gippsland Lakes, and the continuing decline of dusky flathead, this response is very hard to follow, particularly when only ten commercial fishermen continue to net this vast waterway. There is obvious concern expressed by the Coalition at the netting of spawning black bream at river mouths given the announced Coalition policy for the cessation of commercial netting the river mouths of the Gippsland Lakes, however there is also not sufficient concern to provide real protection for this iconic species, by banning commercial netting of black bream in the Gippsland Lakes.

No Decline in Black Bream?

I received the following statement as an addition to Labour Policy on recreational fishing from Greg Cooke Labour Party candidate in the recent State Election. It was received after the publication of East Gippsland candidate's policies regarding recreational fishing in issue 40 of Around the Jetties.

“Available scientific evidence does not suggest any significant decline in black bream abundance in any of the estuaries in East Gippsland. We support a sustainable commercial fishery in the Gippsland Lakes and believe that we have the right balance in terms of recreational and commercial fishing.”

As Coalition candidate Tim Bull indicated that he had been out fishing three times since mid September and he was able to catch a bag of bream on these occasions in the Tambo River and he then stated “the health of bream stocks is as good as I have seen in the last decade,” I would put forward an alternative view that is held by many concerned anglers.



Now it may be true that there is no evidence of decline in black bream abundance in some East Gippsland estuaries, but then the latest East Gippsland Fisheries Management Plan draft indicates that Fisheries Victoria is currently attempting to quantify the fish stocks in a number of East Gippsland estuaries and the fishing pressure in those estuaries. This draft would seem to indicate that in estuaries such as Tamboon, little is currently known of the abundance or otherwise of black bream.. On the other hand if one looks at the biggest estuary, namely the Gippsland Lakes the situation is somewhat different, as statistics provide a disturbing picture. Let's just look at a couple of examples of the massive decline in black bream in the Gippsland Lakes.

In 1996 the commercial catch of black bream dropped dramatically to 89 tonnes from 130 tonnes in the previous year. The Victorian Government and Fisheries Victoria introduced by means of a Premiers certificate a bag limit of 5 fish per day for recreational anglers and increased the size limit to 26cms in the words of Fisheries Victoria **“to protect the small remaining adult bream stocks so that sufficient reproductive capacity is maintained to ensure stock rebuilding occurs when conditions are favourable.”** Whilst the commercial catch at that time was 89 tonnes today the situation is far worse, with the average commercial catch between 2002/3 and 2006/7 being a mere 35 tonnes.

It is generally agreed that since 1987 successful spawning of black bream has only occurred in 1887, 1989, and 1995. Conditions have not been favourable for a bream recovery. In the decade 1993-2003 1,378 tonnes of black bream were taken from the Gippsland Lakes in commercial nets, at an average 137 tonnes per annum over that period. Now that figure of 137 tonnes per annum needs to be compared with the 35 tonnes per annum taken in the next five-year period. By comparing these figures the dramatic decline in bream stocks can be easily seen. (It should be noted the commercial catch has provided figures over many years as a comparison figure for bream stocks in the Gippsland Lakes.)

When considering this decline it is worthwhile remembering that the largest catch of black bream in the last fifty years occurred in 1983/4 and was 446 tonnes. If one applies the guidelines provided by the Murray Darling Commission in its Native fish Strategy 2003-2013 the black bream of the Gippsland Lakes would be considered vulnerable at best, and at worst a threatened species, and to allow commercial netting of this species in these circumstances would be considered by many as reprehensible.

Regarding ones ability to catch a bag of fish from the Tambo River on three occasions in the period since September gives little cause for rejoicing, in that the black bream have moved into the rivers to spawn, and the capture of these fish at this time might be seen as totally counterproductive to the future stock of this outstanding recreational species.

Fisheries Victoria in a “Quick Card” publication in 1996 stated that in the Gippsland Lakes “commercial catches and catch rates have declined by about 50% over the last six years” Those catches and catch rates have continued to decline and the Fisheries Victoria forecast in that same publication that “prospects for recruitment to the bream fisheries in the next few years now appear to be poor to average at best” have proven to be true. It is very hard to

reconcile the above facts with any statement that evidence shows no decline in black bream in the Gippsland Lakes estuary and that the health of bream stocks is as good as it has been in the last decade.

Finally Dr Matt Taylor in “Marine Stocking in Victoria February 2010”

“Black bream fisheries in some estuaries have **experienced substantial recent declines** such as the Gippsland Lakes possibly as a result of habitat loss and hydrographic conditions unfavourable for spawning and early survival.” (Page 7)

There has been a massive decline in black bream in the Gippsland Lakes and until this is recognised and accepted there is little hope for the development of any remedial plan to protect this wonderful sporting species.

An Anglers Observations Get Results

Many readers of this anglers newsletter will recall the item in issue 38 where “Sporty” Abbot of Horsham wrote indicating his concern at a fish kill in the Wimmera River. You may remember that he and his brother in law caught eight yellow belly just before Xmas 2009 and the next time they went to the river they were concerned to see between 150 and 200 dead fish floating in the water. They contacted Fisheries Victoria and the matter was referred to the Environment Protection Authority. I contacted Kate Giddings of the EPA who indicated that an investigation into the fish kill was ongoing.

On the 26th November 2010 the EPA released a media statement indicating that they had filed four charges against the Horsham Rural City Council for polluting waters and causing an environmental hazard. It is alleged that a temporary bund on an outlet in Yanga Track Billabong was opened into the Wimmera River thereby releasing toxic material that caused the fish kill.

Each charge laid under the EPA Act carries a maximum penalty of \$268,000. The matter has been listed in Horsham Magistrates Court on the 5th January 2011 for first mention.

I had a note from Sporty Abbot who said the issue was “the main headlines of Friday’s (26/11/10) Wimmera Mail Times.” The cause according to the paper was a hayshed fire and the fire retardant and foam used on the fire ending up in the river.

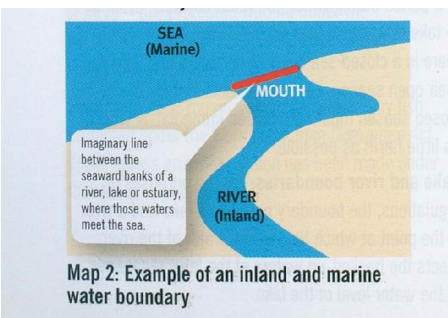
This is a great result where the actions of a concerned angler and the excellent work of the EPA has seen charges laid over a fish kill in the Wimmera River and this provides a warning to any polluters, and recognises the importance of our fish stocks.

New Recreational Fishing Guide 2010/11

Full marks to Fisheries Victoria on the publication of the 2010/11 Fishing Guide. I had been concerned for some time at the lack of definition in the guide between inland and marine waters. Anglers were actually referred to the 1995 Fisheries Regulations to find out the waters classed as marine, and of course this determined whether an angler could use 2 or 4 rods when fishing. It was unreal for Fisheries Victoria to expect anglers to refer to a 350-page book of regulations to get an answer to this query that should have been included in the guide, yet for many years this was expected. On the 30th of October 2002 Richard McLaughlin Director of Fisheries Victoria wrote in reply to one of my letters on this topic-

“I have noted the potential confusion that could be generated by not clearly defining the above terms (marine and inland waters) in the guide. This matter will be rectified in future editions.”

Now it has only taken eight years to rectify this matter.



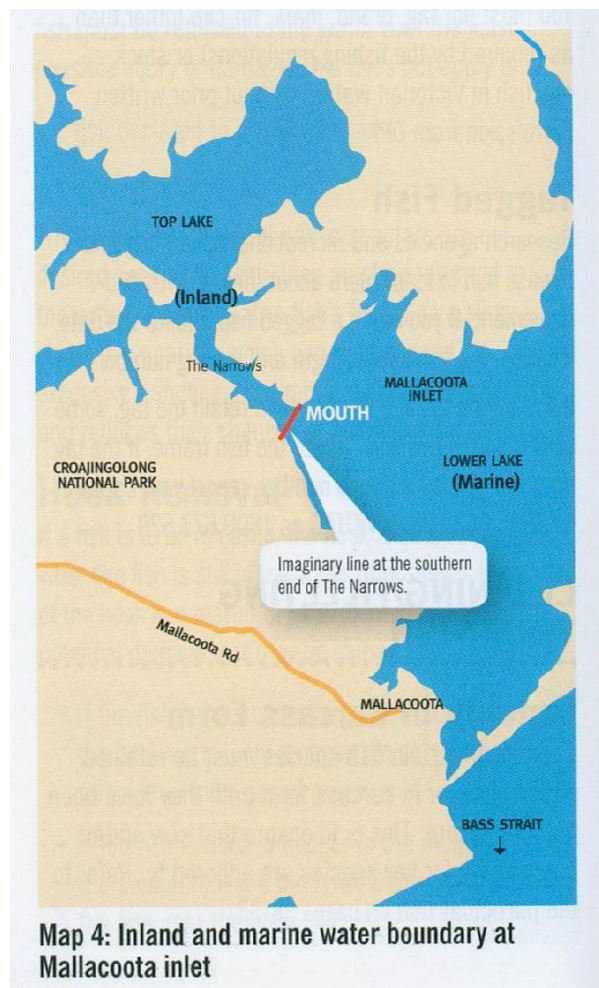
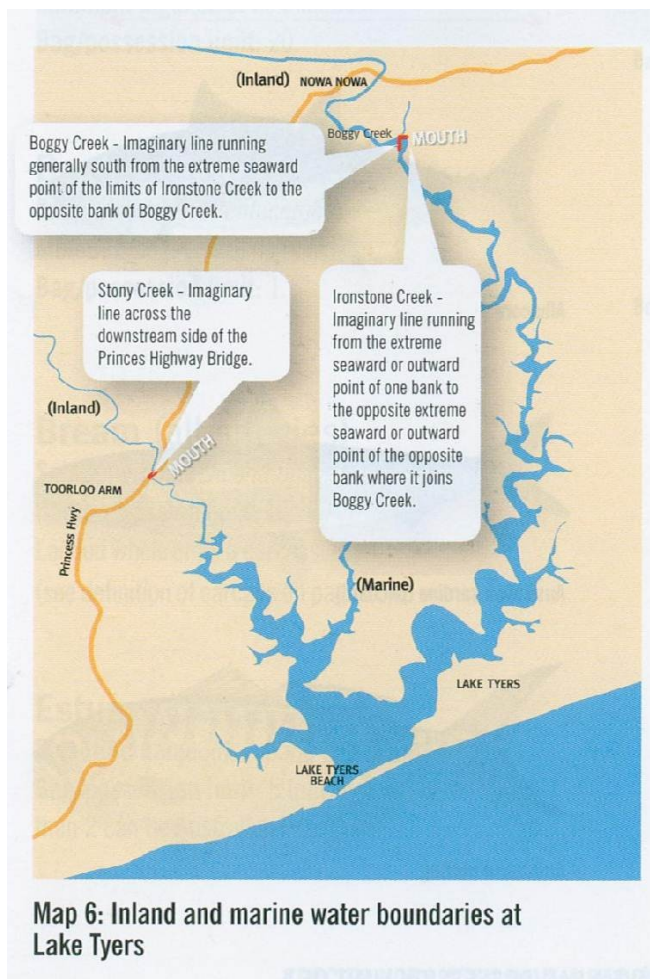
Just for readers the waters classed as marine where four rods can be used are the Gippsland Lakes, Lake Tyers, the lower Mallacoota Inlet, and Wingan Inlet.

Basically all other waters, rivers and estuaries including Marlo and Tamboon are inland waters and only two rods can be used.

It is particularly gratifying to see that this Guide also provides diagrams to indicate the specific boundaries between marine and inland waters at Mallacoota, Lake Tyers, Curdies River, Barwon River, Merri River and Yarra River.

Fisheries Victoria is to be congratulated on this improvement to the Recreational Fishing Guide and anglers will certainly appreciate knowing the specific boundaries between marine and inland waters. (This matter was commented on in issue 2 of “Around the Jetties, five years ago.) Anglers make sure you get your copy of the guide from any angling shop or by phoning 136 186.

Maps published with the permission of Fisheries Victoria from the Fishing Guide 2010/11. Note that the red lines on each map mark the division between inland and marine waters.



Fishing Lake Tyers September- November 2010

This report is taken from the recorded catches of Bob McNeill, a regular correspondent to this publication. Bob is a bait angler who regularly fishes Lake Tyers two mornings a week, from 6am to around 9am fishing from his boat. He uses only prawn for bait and targets black bream over the winter and around the start of November, when he is able to obtain live mullet he then targets dusky flathead whilst maintaining one rod with a prawn bait.

Over the two-month period Bob caught 107 black bream and returned 74 of these fish as being undersize. (Mainly 22-26cms) The undersize fish seemed to be prolific towards the end of October, and on one day he caught 14 bream and released 11 whilst on another day he caught 11 and released 10. This would seem to confirm research reports that whilst fishing for bream is currently poor, there is a significant stock of bream that will reach minimum legal size in the next couple of years. Also of significance was the lack of other species being caught. In the period recorded only four other species were recorded. (3 trevally and 1 tailor) and this is possibly due to the long period that Lake Tyers has been closed. (Over 1000 days)

Bob also noted that he had a report of a considerable number of bream caught in the Lime Kilns area of the Toorloo Arm. This is a recognised spawning area and an area that anglers asked to be closed to protect spawning fish when the Lake Tyers Management Plan was being prepared. The committee developing the Lake Tyers Management Plan took no action on this submission.

Bob caught his first dusky flathead on the 5th November and on the next three outings he had a significant dusky flathead catch using live bait. This helps to confirm a view that I have held that after the winter months, catches of dusky flathead commence around the start of November and continue through to June. Bob reported that the dusky flathead caught still had indications of spawning still to come, and one recently caught bream of 33cms had not spawned.

Material for this section was taken from Bob's Fishing Diary, which was then forwarded to Fisheries Research at Queenscliff. Special thanks to Bob, for making his diary available to this publication and anglers fishing will find this report interesting as they compare the report with their own fishing experience in this lake.

Black Bream and East Gippsland TAFE

Readers will be aware that this publication congratulated TAFE on its hatchery course held in 2010, and also sought information on the future of the 20-30,000 black bream fingerlings held in a holding tank at the Lakes Entrance TAFE facility which were spawned during that course. Unfortunately the CEO of TAFE did not respond to this request for information, which was most disappointing given the nature of this public education facility and the need for positive public relations. I did receive a letter on this matter of concern from Darren Chester Federal Member for East Gippsland, who stated

“Just back from Canberra and received the latest edition of Around the Jetties-as always a thought provoking read.

You are right about the facility on Bullock Island-some good work is being done at the moment with bream but the potential for a lot more locally based research activity on the Gippsland Lakes and catchment is obvious. It is an issue I have been pursuing with some local education institutions and I'll keep you posted if I have any success.”

Darren Chester MHR

Lets hope that this facility in the future becomes a major supplier of native fish to East Gippsland and perhaps it could become a cornerstone in the development of a booming recreational fishery in the Gippsland Lakes..

Murray Cod in Lake Eildon

In the last issue of Around the jetties it was stated that “Lake Eildon is set to receive over 1 million Murray cod in the next three years” as part of a ten year stocking program to develop a booming Murray cod fishery in this state. This project is initially costing in the vicinity of \$800,000 and the former Minister Joe Helper and Fisheries Victoria must be congratulated for their vision and enthusiasm for this project, which will provide a wonderful freshwater trophy fishery for recreational anglers. I well remember eight years of fishing Lake Eildon in the period 1960 /70 when the only fish in the lake were very silvery trout and large quantities of redfin. This fishery is very different today and one can only imagine what it will be like in the future.

Lake Eildon is now over 70% full and the attached photo is of John Pincombe of Mansfield, a fly fisherman of some note with his first Eildon Murray Cod. I am reliably informed that soon after this photo was taken he discovered an echidna swimming 500 metres off shore in one of the arms of Lake Eildon. This native with only its nose and a couple of spines above water was retrieved and returned to land. Now in many years of fishing, this is the first time I have heard of an echidna swimming in open inland waters.



Bass Stocking in Gippsland

In a Fisheries Victoria media release on Thursday 9th of December Anthony Hurst Executive Director of Fisheries Victoria, was quoted as saying “ recent advances in the genetic knowledge of Victorian bass stocks confirmed Gippsland bass are essentially one stock rather than several, as previously thought. This means broodstock from many Gippsland catchments within their natural range can now be used when breeding fingerlings”



This has meant a substantial stocking program of bass in Gippsland has recently taken place with 22,000 bass being released in Lake Glenmaggie near Heyfield, whilst Blue Rock Reservoir near Moe received 15,000 fingerlings. The two lakes had previously been stocked with 30,000 and 22,000 respectively.

New to the waters to receive bass are the Mitchell 15,000, the Avon 15,000 and the Thomson at Cowarr Weir 11,000. These fingerlings are about 1 gram and 3cms long when released and are expected to take several years before reaching 27cms the minimum legal length.

Readers may recall that this publication in issue 27 July 2009 reported on the stocking of bass in the Snowy river by both the East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority and the its NSW counterpart the Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority, and this stocking involved almost half a million bass fingerlings being stocked in the Snowy River alone.

Anthony Hurst stated, "Australian bass are a highly regarded sportfish and these stockings cement the Department's commitment to developing new fisheries for this species."

Again the work being undertaken towards the development and restoration of a recreational bass fishery in the Gippsland Rivers and lakes by Catchment Management Authorities and Fisheries Victoria is to be applauded.

However I had brought to my attention by a reader with a long association with commercial fishing that he feared that when mature many of these bass would be taken in commercial nets and certainly Cadwallader and Backhouses excellent book "A Guide to the Freshwater Fish of Victoria" supports the view put to me stating "Australian bass migrate into estuaries during winter to breed" and "the start of the spawning season is signalled by the downstream migration of adults." My informant suggested in the past commercial nets had at times claimed substantial catches of bass as they moved to the estuaries to spawn. This raises the issue of using recreational anglers trust funds to provide stockings that would support the commercial fishing industry in the Gippsland Lakes.

Pipi Harvest at Venus Bay

"A two month blitz focussing on pipi collection at Venus Bay has seen 285 random inspections leading to 24 infringement notices being issued together with a number of official and verbal warnings." December 21st 2010 Media Notice of Fisheries Victoria. The daily limit for pipis is 2 litres per person. Four men from Melbourne were recently convicted of taking pipis using hand held digging implements were intercepted with a total of 75.5 litres of pipis. They were each fined \$800. The magistrate in sentencing indicated he wanted to show a strong deterrent to the rest of the community.



A Fishing History Gem

Recently I was reading and came across a report on the Konong Wootong Reservoir, which supplies Coleraine and Casterton domestic water supplies. Now this reservoir is also a great little trout fishery, and Noel Vickery who has fished the reservoir since 1947 considers it one of the best trout fisheries in the state. Noel also claimed it also holds the world record growth for a Rainbow Trout. "A two year old Rainbow trout stocked in the lake as fry grew to 9lbs 12ozs.(4.4kgs) Noel said this fish went to the British Museum in London. This fish was well short of the biggest fish to come out of this reservoir. In 1939 Dorothy Woolley caught a rainbow trout that weighed 14lbs 10ozs.(6.6kgs) "She was fishing with mud-eye and used a split cane rod and catgut line." Noel said the quality of fish in this reservoir led the Ballarat Fish Hatchery people to come to this lake over the years to strip the trout of their eggs for breeding.

After the Rains

In March 2010 we travelled to the Western district, and happened to stop for lunch in Ballarat. We had a picnic lunch and decided we would have it beside Lake Wendouree. The lake was bone dry and we wondered what the future held for this former fishery. (See Photo) The rains came and the lake filled and on November the 8th Fisheries Victoria released ninety thousand Rainbow Trout fry into the lake. A further 75,000 brown trout were expected to be released in December. The fish were sourced from the Snobs Creek Hatchery and weighed a small 3-5 grams each. The last time Lake Wendouree was stocked was seven years ago. Lake Wendouree is an internationally recognised venue for fly fishing having previously hosted the Commonwealth Games Fly Fishing Championships. Again congratulations to Fisheries Victoria on its prompt response to this need.



Licence Fees at work in the Mitchell River



This was the heading of a recent Fisheries Victoria Media Release that points out that using \$85,000 from the Recreational Fishing Grants program, East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority has placed 30 log structures into the Mitchell River below the cut. East Gippsland Catchment Authority have received several similar amounts for previous log placements in East Gippsland rivers. Fisheries Executive Director Anthony Hurst said the new in stream structures would provide habitat for key recreational species such as estuary perch, black

bream and luderick. I have long been an avid supporter of returning structures to our rivers and was involved in the first log structures introduced to the Tambo River. Recently I heard a Fisheries Victoria officer state “the juries still out on the effectiveness of log structures in local rivers.” I wonder is the jury still out on this issue, and do we have research that supports the work that has been undertaken in the last fifteen years on restoring habitat to our rivers?

An Interesting Comment from the ‘Concerned Angler’

I have seen some interesting contents in dusky flathead stomachs before my catch and release days. I have no doubt small bream feature in the food chain for many species. One year there was a bloom of 20cent size flounder and every flattie was gorging on them. Why they were still taking live mullet confounded us. I also caught a mid 90cm dusky flathead one evening and it regurgitated a 7 inch bream. It made an interesting photo. We have to accept that bigger fish will eat little fish, but if there is a good spawning enough fish of quality will get through.

A Stillness Shattered

On January 3rd it was our 52nd wedding anniversary and Dawn and I left home at 5am launched our boat and before 6am were sitting in an area above Devils Hole on Lake Tyers having a celebratory breakfast of muffins and coffee and thoroughly enjoying the stillness of the morning in an area of bush. Suddenly a speedboat appeared towing a water skier who came close to our anchored boat without a glance in our direction. Some fifteen minutes later the speed boat reappeared and the skier went even closer to our boat. Then within ten minutes a Jet ski went past at considerable speed and obviously went to Nowa Nowa and then reappeared through a wave of spray returning to the main lake. The amazing thing about this incident was that both watercraft were travelling in an area that is listed as having a 5knot speed limit, which extends from the Trident to Nowa Nowa. We left soon after this incident with our single flathead, tailor and 36cm bream. Now I know most boats travel in this area faster than 5knots, but I find almost all boats slow to a walking pace when passing an anchored fishing boat. Perhaps it’s just a matter of manners and concern for the other fellow.

A Special Report

Dusky Flathead –A Recreational Anglers Report

Reports from the Gippsland Lakes have indicated very poor results for recreational anglers fishing for dusky flathead and this is reflected in the commercial catch which has declined from 48 tonnes in 2005/6 to 20 tonnes in 2008/9 and is expected to decline further based on current recreational reports from the last twelve months. Part of the reason for this is the fact that no catch limit exists for the commercial sector and they can take all the dusky flathead caught that satisfy the legal minimum of 27cms, and this is vastly different from the recreational angler who can only take five flathead daily with only one over 60cms. The one over 60cms limit recognises the importance of the larger female flathead in the spawning cycle as the larger fish make the most important spawning contribution to the dusky flathead stock. Recreational anglers have noted a decline in large dusky flathead in East Gippsland waters, and these are the fish with the greatest spawning potential for the species. This decline is evident in Lake Tyers where it was stated at the Lake Tyers Fisheries Management Plan briefing that “the proportion of dusky flathead greater than 50cms total length has declined from more than 20% in the early 2000’s to less than 5% of the catch in 2008/9. In 2008 a detailed NSW report on dusky flathead was undertaken by Gray and Barnes entitled “Reproduction and growth of dusky flathead.” No similar report is available on Victorian dusky flathead and yet there seems to be a Victorian unwillingness to accept the NSW findings and take interim action to protect this species.



The photo, right, was taken at Lake Tyers just before Christmas and Robert Brown, of Nicholson, was pleased to catch a 47cm flathead on his first outing to the Lake with your editor. Robert and Norma have just retired to Nicholson and have the Nicholson river right at their back door. So probably lots more fishing to be done.

The following is a report from the “Concerned Angler” written in March 2009, immediately after the release of the Victorian dusky flathead regulations in the 2009 Fisheries Regulations. These regulations set the Minimum Legal Length for dusky flathead in Victoria at 27cms. This paper by the Concerned Angler sets out the current problems associated with Fisheries Victoria’s policy with regard to dusky flathead as perceived by many recreational anglers.(Editor)

The Concerned Angler on Dusky Flathead.

“The NSW report by Gray and Barnes contains some eye opening data on a key, no vital, recreational species and should be treated accordingly given its currency. The very fact that our key decision makers chose to limit the daily catch to 5 dusky flathead is commendable but to ignore such findings from Gray and Barnes report and only increase the MLL (Minimum Legal Length) by 2cms to 27cms and allow an angler to take one dusky flathead over 60cms each day falls horribly short of what is needed.

Lets look at this further. It can be reasonably assumed that Victorian dusky flathead are similar to NSW dusky flathead re their population characteristics. If dusky flathead reach reproductive maturity at 31.72cms for males and 56.75 for females (findings from the Gray and Barnes report) many and probably far too many will be harvested before they have a chance to spawn at least once. If only 5% of female dusky flathead are protected under the current NSW MLL of 36cms, how few female dusky flathead are protected under the new Victorian MLL of 27cms?

As a snapshot consider what is happening in the Lake Tyers fishery. The only long term harvesting record available is the commercial fishery catch from 1915 to almost the year of their exclusion from lake Tyers. Over that time the highest annual catch of dusky flathead was 6 tonnes and the approximate annual dusky flathead harvest to commercial fishing was 1.5 tonnes. For the sake of discussion that equates to some 3000 500grm dusky flathead. Prior to the advent of soft plastics the recreational harvest was small, probably insignificant, with the exception of a very few very dedicated anglers fishing with live bait, and most fish were only caught in the summer months.

Along came plastics. Slow to take off soft plastics have grown as a phenomena to dominate angling, especially as the proficiency of anglers has grown. dusky flathead are an easy target on soft plastics. The summer harvest of dusky flathead has grown significantly as a consequence and the window to catch them has extended well beyond the summer months. In itself there is nothing wrong with everyday anglers having great sport with dusky flathead as long as they fish within the regulations AND the regulations are set to protect the sustainability of the fishery. It would appear that the current annual harvest of dusky flathead well exceeds the best years of annual commercial harvest and breeding females, particularly the highly fecund big dusky flathead are vulnerable.

The question is can we continue this annual recreation harvest of dusky flathead in the Lake Tyers fishery when we are taking many fish well below their maturity to spawn at least once, and NOT protect the large breeding females. After all these large breeding females have the potential to produce some 4 million eggs per annum, and this is assuming they only spawn once which is not clear as yet. Given that management enables the harvest of pre spawning age dusky flathead which is probably unavoidable the high fecundity of large female dusky flathead should be protected. No dusky flathead should be able to be legally harvested once it reaches 70cms. The digital camera should replace the notion of taking a trophy to show a few mates.

When you further add the commercial fishermen pressure in systems like the Gippsland Lakes these regulations throw further doubt on the appropriateness of these new regulations.

Lets hope we don't see the collapse of dusky flathead populations because of these regulations.”

Editors Comment

I believe the above article clearly sets out the concerns of many anglers who love the challenge of fishing for dusky flathead in our East Gippsland waters. The NSW study found that dusky flathead can attain the length of 18cms in one year and 40cms in three years making them one of the fastest growing recreational species. The scientists estimated that most dusky flathead are 2 years old when they reach the minimal legal length of 36cms. The study also found that 120cms was the largest reported dusky flathead in NSW and this fish would have had an approximate weight of 15kgs. Concerns over the status of dusky flathead populations in NSW led to an increase in the minimum legal size from 33 to 36cms in 2001, and a further increase is currently being considered by NSW fisheries managers. Female dusky flathead grow faster than male counterparts and live longer according to the study. The estimates of the number of eggs a female dusky flathead will spawn varied in the study from 294,000 to 3.9 million.

One of the management steps the report suggests that should be considered is to set a MLL that allows a majority of dusky flathead to spawn once before becoming available in the fishery. It is interesting as this was one of the reasons for Fisheries Victoria increasing the MLL of black bream to 28cms,(2005) which would allow the species to spawn at least once before entering the fishery and becoming available to commercial and recreational anglers. One can only wonder why the same criteria is not set for dusky flathead. The distribution of dusky flathead stretches from Wilson's Promontory in Victoria to Mackay in Queensland.

What is not specifically noted in the above article, but which is a major concern to many anglers is the increasing fishing pressure on the estuaries and lakes of East Gippsland.

On the 28th of December between 2.00pm and 3.00pm I took a count of fishing trailers on Lake Tyers (area 25sq kms) and the result was over 90 boat trailers. (No2 ramp 49, Fishermans Landing 16, Mill Point 12, and Nowa Nowa 13.) Added to this figure would be the small boats and kayaks launched from bush tracks around the lake.

Fisheries Managers must be aware of the increasing fishing pressure from increased boat ownership. This is a factor we seldom see mentioned in draft reports or Management Plans, yet it can readily be verified by ever increasing boat registrations and must be part of any planning.

Finally it should be noted that in Victoria there is almost no evidence of movement of dusky flathead between estuaries, and in general the life cycle of the dusky flathead takes place within the estuary, which means the fish within the estuary must be managed without any recruitment being evident from other waters. In Lake Tyers this is more evident as the estuary has been closed for over three years, and therefore the spawning of dusky flathead within the estuary is the only recruitment to the fishery.

In 1991 when the Natural Resources and Environment Committee looked at recreational fishing in Lake Tyers black bream and garfish accounted for 87% of the recreational catch with less than 15% of anglers fishing for any other species. Today it would be my guess that 80% of recreational anglers fishing Lake Tyers are targeting dusky flathead, and most would be using soft plastics or other lures, and this would be relatively similar for other estuaries in East Gippsland.

Dusky flathead are under considerable pressure in our estuaries and we need to ensure sufficient reproduction to maintain stocks if this fishery is to survive the current pressures and yet maximize the yield to recreational fishing..

I found it interesting that research into the effects of the 2003 dusky flathead regulations (that is 5 fish with one over 60cms) based on the Mallacoota recreational fishery showed that few anglers retained dusky flathead under 30cms, and that most dusky flathead caught were between 35-45cms. Perhaps this reinforces the view that the current dusky flathead regulations have little influence on the stock, and recreational anglers are taking the matter into their own hands. It must also be remembered that when the 2008 regulations were introduced most anglers asked for a minimum legal length of between 30-35cms. Fisheries Victoria increased the minimum legal length from 25-27cms. The Mallacoota report referred to also indicates the proportion of larger dusky flathead, that is fish greater than 50cms has considerably declined and few fish greater than 50cms have been recorded in catches since 2005/6 This study was reported in some detail in Issue 35 June 2010. Again this decline in the larger dusky flathead population should be a matter of concern for fisheries managers.

The report by the Concerned Angler was first printed in Around the Jetties in issue 24 April 2009. I think this report is worth reprinting again today.

The **Concerned Angler** who wrote the perceptive article on dusky flathead in March 2009 was the late Peter Spehrs (Died 2010) who contributed to this publication over a number of years. Peter was a fine angler but also added to our knowledge of recreational species in Lake Tyers, Mallacoota and the Gippsland Lakes by his tagging of recreational species, particularly black bream and dusky flathead. It is believed he tagged and released over 5000 fish in local waters. Recreational anglers and Fisheries Victoria recognise the contribution of this angler to recreational fishing.

Contributions- Your contributions to this angling newsletter are most welcome and we look forward to publishing your items of interest

Readers- Don't forget you may get a friend or an interested angler onto the mailing list for **Around the Jetties** by simply sending us an email with details of the person you are nominating and his email address or a letter with details of a mailing address.

Good Health and good fishing
Lynton Barr

Postscript from T.C. Roughleys book "Fish and Fisheries of Australia.1953"

"The dusky flathead is not regarded by anglers as a good sporting fish; it requires little skill to hook and when on the line is inclined to be sluggish and to exhibit few fighting qualities."

Vic McCristal's comment in on this statement in 1964-"The same can be said for trout when deep hooked."

Today the dusky flathead is regarded as one of this states most sought after sportsfish

