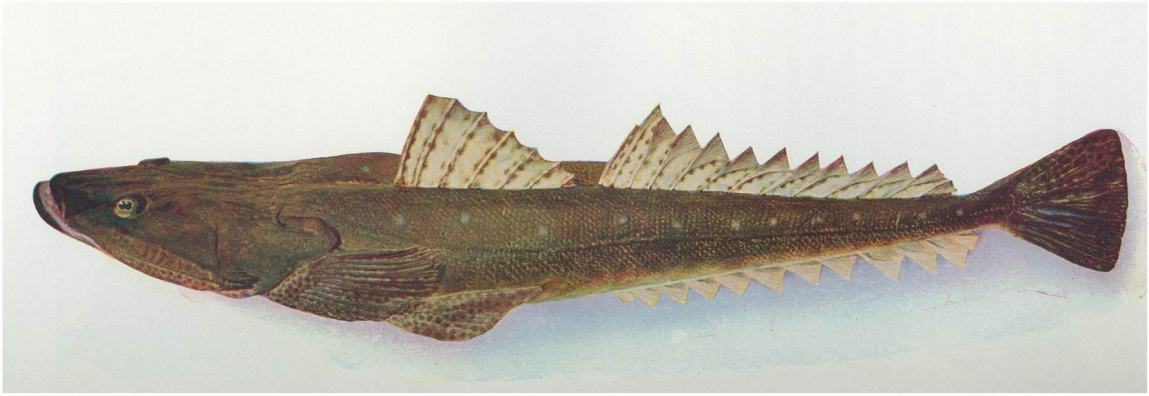

Around the Jetties

May 2011 Issue No 46

An Anglers Newsletter

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The literature of angling falls into two genres: the instructional and the devotional. The former is written by fishermen who write, the latter by writers who fish.

William Humphrey
My Moby Dick (1978)

Editorial

Much of this edition of Around the Jetties has been devoted to that iconic species the dusky flathead. It is hoped that by bringing this material together we may get a better picture of this recreational species and the challenges it faces. This also provides information for the many new readers of this publication on a species that occurs from Cairns in the north to the Gippsland Lakes in Victoria. This species could almost be regarded as the signature fish of Gippsland.

The Dusky Flathead

In recent years I have learned a great deal about this estuarine species which is sought after by anglers, and its popularity has risen greatly in recent years together with the increasing popularity of soft plastic lures. Today in our estuaries the dusky flathead is being targeted by anglers using the vast variety of plastic lures whilst generally the older anglers like myself who are the bait fishermen, choosing a favourite spot, and tempting the flathead with live fish baits or the old standards of whitebait or pilchard filets. The dusky flathead has provided exciting fishing for the young and a challenge for the older angler, however, it has been unfortunate that over the years the dusky flathead has been treated by authorities in the same manner as the innocuous sand flathead that provides almost no challenge. The dusky flathead, the largest of the almost 40 species of flathead found in Australian waters has been shown scant respect by the authorities, and it is only in recent years it has been given its due credit as a sporting fish that challenges the angler's skill.

It needs to be remembered that only in recent times a bag limit of 5 fish was placed on this species by Fisheries Victoria replacing the 20 fish limit that was also applied to sand flathead. The bag limit of five fish for dusky flathead came about when Fisheries Victoria became alarmed at the numbers of dusky flathead succumbing to the new plastics, and this was particularly evident in the prime dusky flathead fishery in Victoria, namely Mallacoota Inlet.

The dusky flathead largely lives its life in the estuaries, and whilst some have suggested movement between estuaries VICTAG has evidence of only one dusky flathead moving between estuaries. This occurred in 2004/5 when a fish tagged in Wingan Inlet in December 2004 was caught in 20 metres of water off Mallacoota in March 2005. I am unaware of any other confirmed movement between estuaries.

Thus this species lives and breeds within the estuaries and this is readily evident to any anglers who fish Lake Tyers which has not been open to the sea since 2007, and yet the lake abounds with small dusky flathead under one year old. This is a very different fish to all other species of flathead and an angler stands a chance of hooking and bringing to the boat a dusky flathead over 10lbs or 5kgs. We now know that all these large dusky flathead are females with a

capacity to produce over 3 million eggs. Anglers as never before are releasing these fish after careful handling and a quick photo.

An unfortunate aspect of the treatment of this rather special fish is the fact that the minimum legal size is only 27cms despite the requests of anglers for a minimum legal length around 35cms. Again most anglers are returning small fish as the filet off one of these fish is hardly worth having. It is difficult to understand why Fisheries Victoria has not agreed to a larger minimum size although it has been suggested that this would be a most unfavourable move for commercial netters, particularly given the recently increased flathead prices and added to this the state wide commercial catch of dusky flathead comes almost entirely from the Gippsland Lakes. (47 tonne in 2005/6 declined to 14 tonne in 2009/10)

In a report to Fisheries Victoria in 2010 by Dr Mathew Taylor on possible fish releases in estuarine waters, Taylor suggests the techniques to rear large numbers of dusky flathead are currently available, though he is unaware of brood stock being held in any fish hatchery. In this report he lists the dusky flathead as a recommended species for restocking of the Snowy/Brodribb rivers, and this may at some stage in the future signal the approach that will be necessary to maintain stocks of dusky flathead in our estuaries. Until that time recreational anglers may need to lead the way in ensuring the future of this species.

Dusky Flathead and Eating Habits

Ron Brymer writes

"On a topic you raised in the last issue of Around the Jetties about the strange things fish eat, flathead in this case:

The first pic is of a 94cm dusky taken at Mallacoota in 2003 - I was extremely upset it only pulled the scales down to 9lb+ and I'm sure to this day the scales were in error, BUT when boat side, this flattie spat out a WHOLE octopus that must have weighed nearly 1kg.

The second two pics are of a 5lb+ dusky caught recently in Merimbula lake - nothing remarkable I hear you say, but if you look closer you will see the tail of a 40cm dusky sticking out of her mouth - the smaller flattie was the one that took my blade lure and he in turn got eaten - I managed to extract the smaller fish AND my blade without damaging either fish (tricky extraction that!) and both fish swam away unharmed.

That's the second time this has happened - last year a dusky estimated at 12-14lb swallowed a 45cm flattie I hooked at Mallacoota - I got the big fish boat side to see the head of the smaller fish poking out it's mouth with my squidgie firmly in the small one's mouth - unfortunately the big fish didn't make it to the boat as she opened her mouth and spat out the smaller fish eventually.

Interesting stuff happens on the water!!

PS: this past summer is the WORST in 10 years for duskies in the lower Gippsland Lakes for me - not sure if this is the pressure of the pros, or that the higher salinity has disrupted dusky movements - I have been getting some great flatties in the Nicholson and Tambo Rivers, sometimes way up in the fresh and of the few I've kept, there is fairly well developed roe in some which is unusual for this time of year."

Editor

I first read some of Ron Brymer's writing in an article he wrote called "Catching a Ton of Bream in The Gippsland Lakes" and it sets out how he planned to catch 100 bream in the local rivers in 30 days using hard bodied lures and fishing twice a week to coincide with his wife's golf days. This is a remarkable document of how an angler researched the approach needed and then tackled and achieved this result. I was intrigued in Ron's thoughts and writing from that date. The attached photos show how he documents those surprising moments in an angler's experience. This attached

photo information reminded me that some three weeks ago I caught a 34cm dusky flathead which had the entire tail missing. This little chap had probably lost its tail to a tailor, however the wound had healed and he was surviving with no tail. Unfortunately I did not get a photo as I was just so amazed and wanted to get him back into the water as quickly as possible.
Ron is now an angler who targets both dusky flathead, black bream and estuary perch using soft plastics and lures and takes a great interest in the habitat of these species and provides wonderful photographs to illustrate his fishing.

More on Dusky Flathead

Ron's comment on the fact that the Gippsland Lakes in this last year have provided in his experience the worst fishing in ten years for dusky flathead. This comment I have heard numerous times and recently over the Xmas period anglers fishing the lakes from Metung had almost no duskie flathead with only an occasional fish resulting from a days angling. Over the years the catch of the commercial anglers has provided an important guide to fish stocks in the Gippsland Lakes and this was used in Bream Stock Assessments up to 2005. In the case of dusky flathead the commercial catch peaked in 2005/6 at 48 tonnes. Since that time the commercial catch has declined every year until in 2009/10 it reached a low of 14 tonnes. It is expected to drop further when the commercial statistics for 2010/11 are released. It would seem obvious that with no catch limit on commercial fishermen, and the dramatic decline in bream catches in the Gippsland Lakes that dusky flathead have been targeted as never before. Added to this is the fact that we now know that the future of dusky flathead depends on the survival of fish over 55cms which are the breeding females for the future, and of course commercial nets do not discriminate on the basis of size. Whilst recreational anglers have willingly accepted a bag limit of 5 dusky flathead with one only over 60cms, commercial fishermen have no limitation on their catch of dusky flathead in the Gippsland Lakes. This is an anomaly that has been ignored by politicians and fisheries managers and may ultimately see the demise of dusky flathead fishing as we know it in waters shared by commercial fishermen and recreational anglers. We have often heard in recent years the call for an even playing field in many areas of our lives. Today commercial fishermen and recreational anglers fishing in the Gippsland Lakes are not sharing an even playing field. With no restriction on the commercial catch of recreational species commercial fishermen are indeed in an advantaged situation.

Flathead in Lake Tyers by the Concerned Angler

The following analysis was contained in an email I received from Peter Spehr on the 30th May 2008. Peter wrote for this publication under the pseudonym of the "Concerned Angler." Peter who was credited with tagging over 5000 dusky flathead and black bream, passed away in 2010, however his views continue to be relevant today. The family kindly gave approval for the continued use of Peters writing.

"Though small flatties have always been present in Lake Tyers the large numbers of small dusky flathead have only started to appear since the closure of the lake to professional netting. I always found that prior to Xmas back a decade, when I was live baiting, that the run of flatties was typically most fish in the mid to high 30's(cm) with the occasional fish in the mid to low 20's and as the summer progressed these fish disappeared and the better quality fish around 50cms and the occasional big girl would be caught.
Since the closure to professional netting the run of large fish has declined but I think that in part is due to the water quality of the lake. The better quality fish have just not been caught consistently and I know they are out there partly because of the quality fish tagged in 2003 and 2004 that have not been recaptured.
I have a view that there has been an explosion of dusky flathead breeding in the lake since the netting closure along with the simultaneous and as yet unexplained slowdown in the consistent capture of the better class of fish over 50cms.
I do have a view as to why there has been an explosion in the smaller run of duskies. I strongly believe the breeding flathead come into the bottom of the lake each summer to spawn and like many fish the spawn attaches to the weed and bottom where it develops and the fry spends its initial development in the late summer and autumn. In the autumn the netters and particularly the haul netters, working these weed banks and dragging the haul nets unknowingly disturbed the nurseries and killed much of the fry.
Now remember commercial fishing ceased in Lake Tyers in April 2003. There is no coincidence that in the summers of 2004 and 2005 these small duskies of 18 to 25cms started to appear in big numbers. These duskies would have spawned in the summer 12 months earlier, that is, since the discontinuation of professional netting. In the summer of 2004 I released 120 duskies between 18 and 25cms compared with only 1 or 2 small duskies prior to the lakes closure to netting.
This provides interesting food for thought.

Editor

This seems a most logical argument that may have relevance to the current discussion of the reasons for the decline of dusky flathead in the Gippsland Lakes.

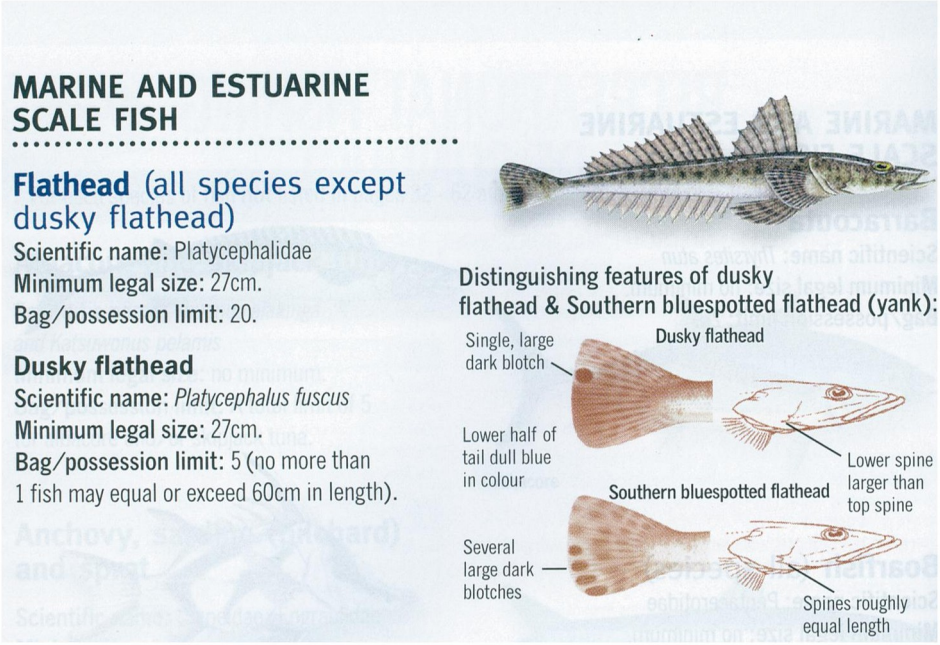
Southern Blue Spot Flathead

Ron Brymer Comments on the numbers of Southern Blue Spot flathead in the Gippsland Lakes.
This was written in 2009 "Recently I have located and targeted a good population of Southern Blue Spot (Yank) flathead in the Gippsland lakes. I much prefer to eat the blue spot and now nearly all duskies go back to preserve the population- the yanks fight much better for a given size than the duskies, being more muscular for their length and eat as well as King George whiting. (Although Fisheries in Lakes Entrance will tell you there are no Yanks in the Lakes)"
This item was taken from the article "Catching a "Ton" of Bream in the Gippsland Lakes".

Editor

This item first alerted me to the possibility of Southern Blue Spot flathead in the Gippsland Lakes and it was supported by a number of keen anglers including charter operator Frank Milito and the late Peter Spehr who both reported catching numbers of Southern Blue Spot flathead and personally verified the interesting Brymer comment. I approached Fisheries Victoria at Lakes Entrance on this matter and was informed there was no evidence that Blue Spot Flathead had been caught, however it was possible. It has occurred to several of the anglers that I have spoken to that the Blue Spot flathead may have been caught by many anglers who simply put it in their fish box or released it believing it was a dusky flathead. The book Sea Fishes of Australia (Hutchins and Swainston) reinforces this view stating the dusky flathead is "often confused with large examples of the Southern Blue Spotted flathead but are best separated by the distinctive coloration of their caudal fins."

We have printed the identifying features previously in Issue 29 October 2009, however for the benefit of new readers we again provide information on the identifying features of these two species of flathead found in our local lakes.



With thanks for permission to print DPI Victorian Recreational Fishing Guide 2009-2010

In issue 30 of Around the Jetties Ron confirmed the Southern Blue Spot flathead as being a regular lakes fish but said "I don't think they are distributed any further along the system from the entrance than Metung, and I have never caught one above Metung or in the rivers. I personally have caught them to 4-5lb and in terms of total catch in a good year I will catch 200 plus, and while I do keep a few of the smaller ones for the table I release most. The "yank" seems to have a preferred habitat in a few locations and they co-exist with duskies in these areas. They turn up in late spring and my view they come from the ocean and stay until April. They respond to the same techniques as duskies with soft plastics being the stand out method. Undoubtedly the bag limit on this species should be lowered, and given they don't freeze well, recreational anglers "take" numbers should be voluntarily kept low. In my view the minimum size limit should be 35cms and this should also apply to dusky flathead."
The Southern Blue Spot flathead provides another intriguing aspect to the topic of flathead of the Gippsland lakes. It is surprising that the Southern Blue Spot flathead has a bag limit of 20 whilst its size limit is the same as the dusky flathead namely 27cms remembering the dusky bag limit is 5 fish with one over 60cms. The book Sea Fishes of Australia suggests that the Southern Blue Spot flathead grows to 95cms whilst the dusky grows to 1.5 metres. Whilst the dusky flathead is found from Cairns to Wilson's Promontory the Southern blue spot flathead is found in Victoria, northern Tasmania, South Australia, and WA to north to Kalbarri.

Reproduction and Growth Of Dusky Flathead in NSW Estuaries

I have referred to the NSW research into dusky flathead previously and it appears to be the only research we can rely on to understand this recreational species. Charles A. Gray and Lachlan M. Barnes for the NSW Department of Primary Industry undertook the research, and the report was published in July 2008. No similar research has been undertaken in Victoria and there seems to be some hesitation in applying the NSW research to the Victorian situation.
The following is a summary of what I regard as one of the most important scientific reports that assists recreational anglers understanding of this species which is so important to Gippsland's estuary fishermen.

The Report Summary

The dusky flathead in NSW is regarded as an important recreational species, however there are concerns over the long-term sustainability of the species. A total of 7,783 dusky flathead comprising 394 juveniles, 1745 males and 5664 females ranging from 5.7cms to 98.5cms were examined in this study.

1.In NSW the minimum legal length was increased in July 2001 from 33cms to 36cms.This increase was based on information available at that time on the length that dusky flathead spawn, however more information was needed and this study aimed at providing that information. Further increases in the minimum legal length of dusky flathead in NSW are being proposed and it is intended that this study will provide information upon which a further increase to the minimum legal length may be made.
In Victoria the minimum legal length for dusky flathead was increased from 25 to 27cms in the 2008 review of regulations, despite Fisheries Victoria indicating that most angler submissions requested an increase of the minimum legal length to a figure over 30cms.

2. Dusky flathead are a bottom dwelling predator that normally occupy soft bottoms. The species is fast growing and can potentially attain the length of 18cms in one year and 40cms in three years. It has been found that female dusky flathead have an extended reproduction period between November and March, and that, in this, study female dusky flathead in reproductive condition were only sampled near the entrance of estuaries and in adjacent coastal waters.
This publication reported on the gathering of large dusky flathead in the Cunninghame Arm in November, and raised the question were these fish spawning in this water. (Issue 22 Feb.2009) What would be concerning is that commercial netting may take place in this arm between March and the 30th November each year on a Sunday, Monday, Tuesday Wednesday or Thursday from 1hour after sunset to sunrise.

3. The study determined the length at which 50% of the dusky flathead population are mature was 31.7cms for male fish and 56.75cms for female fish. The age of the male fish at this level of maturity is 1.22 years and the female 4.55 years.
The findings would support the view that the present Victorian regulations for dusky flathead
27cms minimum legal length would mean that dusky flathead would have no chance to spawn before becoming a legal catch.

4.Female dusky flathead grow faster, than male fish, live longer and are heavier than the male dusky flathead. The largest observed female in this study was 98.5cms (7.5kgs) and the oldest was 16 years whereas the largest male was 61.5cms and 11 years old. In NSW flathead reach an estimated 30cms in one year and 42 and 59cms for males and females after 5 years.
This would indicate that any dusky flathead over 60cms is likely to be a breeding female fish.

5.In NSW the current 36cm legal length appears to protect 5% of the female and 75% of the male spawning population. To allow greater protection to mature females so as to allow 50% of females to spawn at least once would involve an increase in the minimum legal length to 57cms. Such an increase would virtually eliminate males from the fishery.
From this study this is the finding that poses a major problem for fishery scientists and administrators in Victoria. To protect the fishery what should be the minimum legal length of dusky flathead in this state. It has to be obvious that 27cms minimum legal length provides no protection to this species remembering in this study less than 5% of females were mature at 36cms.

6.Estimates at egg production suggest that female dusky flathead produce between produce between 290,000 and 3.9m eggs and it is suggested they might have multiple spawning events.

7.It has been argued that male dusky flathead change to female and this was based on the almost total female population of fish over 60cms. This study and other studies referred to show no evidence of sex change in the fish, and the authors simply put this that female dusky flathead grow bigger and faster than the male fish.

8. The authors suggests their findings have implications for any future change in the minimum legal length of dusky flathead in NSW, and these implications may be to provide the opportunity for female dusky flathead to spawn once before entering the fishery ensuring sufficient reproduction to maintain stocks.
A reader provided this NSW study to this publication, soon after its publication in July 2008. Fisheries Victoria and angler publications have provided almost no comment on the important findings in this study. It would seem the submissions of recreational anglers to Fisheries Victoria at the time of the 2008 review of regulations, for a substantial increase in the minimum size limit for dusky flathead would have sound support from this study and should not have been ignored
The comments in blue are the editor's application of this report to the Victorian scene.

Movement of Dusky Flathead

This item was taken from Issue 22 of Around the Jetties February 2009 and is reprinted as part of the dusky flathead emphasis in this edition.

Gippsland Lakes Dusky Flathead Tracking Project

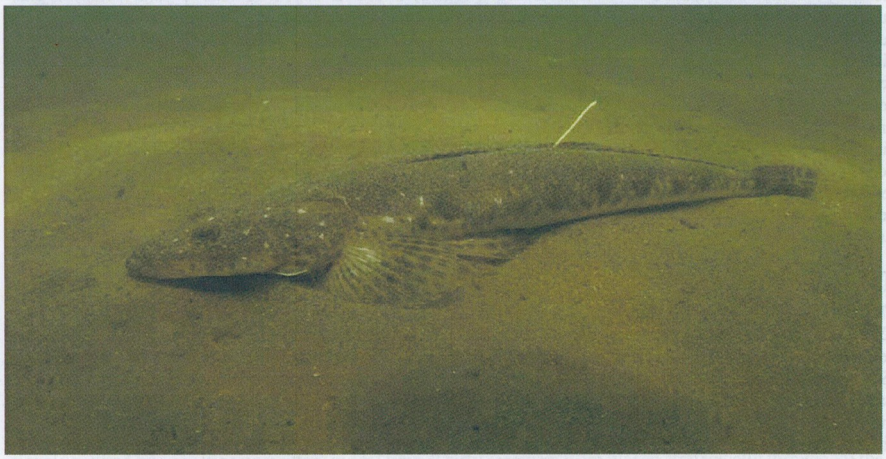
I have received the Fisheries Revenue Allocation Committee Report October 2008 prepared by **Dr. J Hindall** of the Arthur Rylah Institute DSE, on the movement of dusky flathead using transmitter technology.
Forty fish were surgically implanted with acoustic transmitters and monitored over eighteen months (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.

Figure 5. Implanting an acoustic receiver in the peritoneal cavity of a dusky flathead. Picture J. Hindell.

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*."

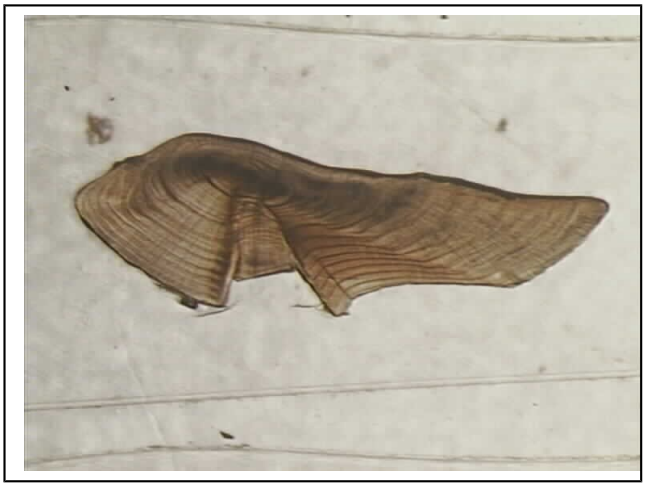
Figure 6. A dusky flathead released after tagging. Picture J. Hindell.



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 in this area had bee evident for a number of years in this area at this time of the year and the view of these recreational anglers was that these fish were spawning. 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.

Growth Rates of Dusky Flathead



John Harrison a regular contributor has provided this fascinating item, and also the magnified photo of a dusky flathead otolith and I am sure readers will be interested in this information relating to a tagged dusky flathead recently recaptured in Lake Tyers, as it adds a little more to our understanding of this wonderful sporting species
This fish was tagged by Peter Spehr, on the 17/12/2004 with a measured length of 660mm. The fish was recaptured by research angler John Harrison on the 9/1/2009 with a measured length of 820mm and a weight of 3.20kgs (7.1lb). The fish was a female and when the otoliths were removed the fish was found to be 10 years old. In four years the fish had grown 160mm giving an average growth rate of 40mm per year.
The photo attached is of an otolith of this fish showing the ten age rings."
Thanks to John for this information and the photo.

What is an Otolith?

The otolith in fish is made up with layers of calcium carbonate and is found just behind the eyes of the fish. The growth of the fish results in rings in the carbonate similar to the rings on a tree. By counting the rings it is possible to determine the age of the fish in years. Scientists use otoliths to discover growth rates, which in turn allows understanding of spawning, recruitment and population structure of the species. John Harrison as a research angler removes otoliths from both bream and flathead and provides these to Fisheries Victoria for research as well as providing information on deep hooking and thus survival rates of fish. Recreational anglers such as these have made a major contribution to our understanding of fish species in local waters.
(Reprinted from Issue 23 March 2009)

Snowy River Habitat: A readers Comment

Ron Brymer who has contributed to this publication on a number of occasions makes the following comments on the item in the last issue of Around the Jetties on "Woody Debris for the Snowy Estuary."

"I'm all for habitat logs and root balls being installed into rivers and estuaries and have caught some good fish off them in the rivers. I think the design of the "habitat logs" could be improved however, as they don't often hold large schools of fish, primarily as they provide limited cover. The addition of root balls to the logs would be a vast improvement. I'm not so keen on "bank stabilisation" however, when taken in isolation.
By this I mean the dumping of tonnes of rocks along the riverbanks, usually AFTER the bankside vegetation and existing snags have been REMOVED from the river. A prime example of this is in the Snowy river, where some of the best perch and bream snags were removed a couple of years ago to enable dumping of more tons of rock - and now I read there is more to come!!!!
There is NOT ONE set of habitat logs installed in the Snowy above Second island to replace the snags removed to accommodate the rocky banks and this is extremely disappointing - all the habitat logs are in the lower estuary. I sincerely hope that in the future they find the right balance between bank stabilisation and snag REPLACEMENT, whether that be installing habitat logs or replacing the snags removed in conjunction with the stabilisation!"

Fish Assemblages and seagrass condition of the Gippsland Lakes 2008-2010

This study undertaken by Jeremy S.Hindell and FionaY. Warry Published September 2010

The Gippsland Lakes and Catchment Taskforce following the bloom of the blue green algae Synechococcus that occurred in 2007 and persisted for over 10 months funded this project. There appeared to be a substantial decline in seagrass as a result of this bloom and as a result a "snapshot" study took place in September 2008, April 2009, and April 2010. On each of these occasions' seagrass and fish assemblages were assessed at 30 locations. The fish study commenced using an otter trawl, whilst in 2010 fish were sampled using a small beach seine net and electro fishing was trialled. In 2009 an additional 20 sites for sampling seagrass were added to the original 30.

The study suggested there had been some decline in seagrass between the 1990's and 2008. Seagrass returned at 50% of the sites sampled in 2008 but sampling in 2010 suggests that seagrass has declined again across a number of sites. It is suggested that this study provides a baseline for future studies. The two species of seagrass were Rupia in waters to 1m and Zostera in waters to 2m.
With regard to the fish studies as expected black bream dominated the catches with several other species also common. It was acknowledged that the changes in the fishing gear used between the first study and later studies made comparison difficult. The introduction of electro fishing in 2010 meant that a range of species not previously caught were included in this years catch.

The report notes that one of the most serious implications of the blue green algal infestations that occur is reduced light penetration, which in turn affects the growth of seagrasses.
An interesting aspect of this research was the trialling of the electro fishing unit. Normally electro fishing according to the report is not effective in salt water, and as a result of the work undertaken in 2010 when electro fishing operated in water with salinity over 30 parts per thousand a powerful electro fishing unit is being built that will operate in water with high salinity levels in the future. The use of this gear meant that areas along rock walls could be sampled and within the large wooden debris of the rivers.

Editor

I would think that little can be drawn from the results of the fishing over the three snapshots other than there was a substantial decline in black bream from 2009 (61) to 2010(12). Of interest to anglers would be total lack of dusky flathead or yank flathead over the three years. Again 42 luderick were caught in 2009 and only 13 in 2010 but I doubt any of these figures have bearing on the fish stocks of the Gippsland Lakes, although I found surprising that only 3 yellow eye mullet were caught and they were caught in the otter seine net in 2008.
I think what is disturbing is the 48% of sampled areas showing a seagrass decline between 2009 and 2010, and the variability shown in other areas although a small number of sampled areas exhibited tracts of dense seagrass, (5 sites)
The last major seagrass study was undertaken in 1997, and perhaps it is time for a similar study. The current report might provide a base line to work from, but it provides few if any answers in the area of Gippsland lakes fish and poses more questions than answers on the status of seagrass in the Gippsland lakes.
In the Bairnsdale Advertiser of April 21st the following summary of the three snapshot studies state "overall the sampling has shown that there is a direct relationship between the health of the sea grass and fish in the Gippsland Lake."
This relationship is hardly a new discovery when in 1996 the following statement appeared in a publication on seagrass in the Gippsland Lakes-

"The dependence of black bream on seagrass in the Gippsland lakes was dramatically illustrated between the 1920's and 1950's when seagrass almost disappeared from the entire system. The loss of seagrass was matched with a decline in the commercial catch of black bream from a high of 352 tonnes in 1919 to an all time low of 12 tonnes in 1958."
Research J.Strong and J Malcolm 1996.

Odd Bits

Yabby Poacher Sent to Jail

A Broadmeadows man was fined $5000 and jailed for taking illegal quantities of bass yabbies. According to the Age newspaper (May 4th) he was branded by the magistrate an "environmental rapist" **Bach Dang Nguyen** was banned for five years from any involvement in fishing and lost his $10,000 boat and fishing equipment. Nguyen was arrested last year with 2201 yabbies in his possession and was at the time serving a suspended jail sentence for similar offences. Nguyen was convicted of five offences including possessing and selling and possession of fish. The magistrate Rod Crisp said Nguyen was a crafty dishonest man whose business was persistent poaching when jailing him for three months.

Editor

The magistrate should be congratulated for the realistic sentencing of this persistent poacher but what is interesting and disturbing is that in Issue 17 September 2008 I reported-

From the Age 19/9/2008

A man caught with thousands of bass yabbies – A prized species investigators suspect is being targeted by organised crime poaching- has received a prison sentence been fined and forced to forfeit his expensive boat. **Bach Nguyen 39** was arrested and charged after taking 3823 yabbies in a wetlands area of Westernport Bay. He pleaded guilty in the Frankston Magistrates Court to six charges.
Magistrate Ross Betts said jail was warranted for such serious offences and that others had to be deterred. Nguyen was sentenced to six months jail, suspended for two years, fined $2000 and had his boat and equipment taken.

Editor

One can only wonder why the original 2-year sentence was not applied in the latest instance of poaching given that one magistrate considered it was organised crime poaching.

Anglers Caught Hiding Snapper in their Boats

A media release from the Department of Primary Industry (May3rd) indicated Fisheries Officers were disappointed at the actions of a number of anglers hiding illegal catches of snapper in their boats. The media release states officers "at Black Rock found a man had hidden snapper under trays in his tackle box, and another boat at Mordialloc had 71 snapper aboard, eight of the undersize and fifty hidden in the folds of the boats canopy." Another boat at Sandringham has 35 snapper hidden aboard. Director of Field Services Michael Hodder stated, "in all four cases the actions of the fishers have been to deliberately to deceive the Fisheries Officers who are working to protect the fisheries and these actions will not be tolerated."
Two men in there sixties will be charged on summons after the Mordialloc discovery. In recent weeks officers have issued more than 40 infringement notices and last week five people appeared in court and received fines ranging from$250 to $750.

Editor

Congratulations to the Fisheries Officers concerned and it is to be hoped that the courts will support the work of the officers with appropriate responses that deter anglers from taking illegal quantities of fish.

Tougher Penalties under New Legislation

A new bill being introduced into Parliament will according to Member for East Gippsland, Tim Bull, provide tougher penalties and equipment seizures for individuals who assault or obstruct Fisheries Officers. The court under this legislation may issue an order to revoke recreational fishing privileges for up to twelve months. There has been concern that the presently low penalties for obstructing Fisheries Officers when compared with the penalties for fishing offences create an incentive to destroy evidence and resist seizure. The bill will provide for a maximum penalty of 120 units and or 12 months imprisonment.
Source Lakes Entrance News May 4th.

Tracks into Lake Tyers

This is an ongoing issue with Parks Vic who are responsible for the tracks. A detailed report on the letter sent by the Eastern manager for Parks Vic to VRFish was reported in the last issue. A copy of the response of Parks Vic to VRFish was sent to both John Harrison and myself. One matter that had been discussed in detail was the need for signage on the tracks indicating work being undertaken and limitations on camping and access etc. I had thought this was agreed as an important action during discussion on the day of the fact-finding excursion to the tracks led by John Harrison.

This matter was omitted from the response of Chris Rose the Regional Manager of Parks Victoria to VRFish on the 4th April. After over a month we are still waiting on a contact from VRFish on this matter of tracks into Lake Tyers. I think the general feeling is that this is a very disappointing outcome at this stage and anglers will suffer from the lack of action and this applies particularly to the older and the handicapped anglers who like to take a chair down to the waters edge for an afternoons fishing as well as others who just love to enjoy the lake and the bush.
Worth Noting the following statement was in the State Budget of the 3rd of May under fishing projects funded in the budget. The Government would "working with relevant authorities to improve access tracks and upgrade boat launching facilities for recreational fishing." Perhaps the Lake Tyers tracks could be a starting point for this commitment.

State Budget and Recreational Fishing

In a Budget Summary for recreational fishing the Government has committed $16.2m to improve opportunities for recreational fishers, and whilst this is most welcome and a number of proposals have been put forward, at this stage there is a lack of detail. For instance-
1."Commitment to return all revenue raised from the sale of fishing recreational licences to the recreational fishing industry." The question arises as to whether the employment of Fisheries Officers using licence fee funds should be considered the "recreational fishing industry, or a charge on the Fisheries budget.
2.Commitment to "working with recreational and commercial fishers to implement measures to protect spawning fish stocks near the mouths of rivers." This proposal will have direct application to the Gippsland lakes and detail of how it will be introduced will be watched with great interest by recreational anglers who have for years opposed the netting within 400 metres of river mouths.
3.Commitment to "the development of new recreational fisheries including the stocking of trout cod, Macquarie perch, freshwater catfish, and Australian bass in suitable waterways." A number of these developments such as the trout cod and Macquarie perch are already well under way but the commitment of the Government to the maintenance of these programs is most welcome.
4. Commitment "to investigate the opportunities to stock black bream and estuary perch in the Anglesea River subject to the scientific review of the estuary." This is a most interesting commitment given the recent study by Dr Mathew Taylor into "Marine Stocking in Victoria" (2010) included the Anglesea River. His study recommended that no fish should be stocked in this water. He suggests the high abundance of black bream contributes to the low number of estuary perch and the estuary is also subject to water quality problems.
5. Commitment to "developing and implementing research and development projects to support recreational fishing." This could be regarded as the most important commitment of the Government as recreational anglers realise work urgently needs to be undertaken on species such as the dusky flathead, black bream and estuary perch in the Gippsland area. Again this lacks detail, but undoubtedly great interest will be taken in the research projects announced in the next twelve months.

There is an anomaly that does need clarification. In the Bairnsdale Advertiser (May6th) the member for East Gippsland Tim Bull states that $16.2m will be spent over the next four years to improve recreational fishing, whilst the Minister Peter Walsh indicates in his statement on the impacts of the budget on recreational fishing, that the Coalition Government "would spend about $4m a year over the next four years to breed more native and salmonoid fish." If that is the case it would be welcomed by anglers, However, on the figures made available, it would seem almost no other projects could be undertaken as the "$16 million budget boost for recreational fishing" would be utilised with one item. Perhaps the local member could clarify this matter.

Thought for the Month

I am aware that Southern Blue spot flathead have been regularly caught in the Gippsland Lakes, and I am told there are numbers of this species in Mallacoota Inlet however I am unaware of any reports of the yank flathead in Lake Tyers. Perhaps a reader may be able provide some information on this.

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