



Sully's Yarns

By John Sullivan

The Biggest Catch . .

I think it would be fairly accurate to suggest that most of us who have bought boats would have done so in order to be able to go fishing sometime, and usually somewhere a little further from the shoreline.

After owning many small clinker dinghies and a 'revolutionary' aluminium 12 footer (this is in the 1960s, I refer to!) to which I purchased and attached a Johnson 12hp outboard, in 1972 I finally graduated to my first fibreglass pride and joy, a 16ft. Cruisecraft 'Rambler'. "A chance," I said, "to finally be able to venture offshore to chase the big ones!"

It was on one of these offshore excursions a year or so later when I was fishing with a mate of mine about 3 miles off Cronulla in front of Osborne Shoals, that I spotted what looked like a school of dolphins about half a mile south of us playing. I surmised that there must have been a dozen or more jumping, diving and skylarking as a group and paid little attention at first. After a few minutes the aquatic ruckus became a little more hectic so we decided to pull anchor and venture over to see what was going on.

As we approached the 'boil' we started to notice thousands – no, *make that millions* - of tiny fins breaking the surface and marked a circular shadow in the water that would have been at least 80 metres across. We turned the engine off and just coasted into the school of fish that we now we could identify as Scad Mackerel or large Slimy Mackerel. There were literally millions of them and they were all about a foot long (300 mm). The dolphins seemed to be having a feeding frenzy.

After observing them for a few

minutes we were amazed to see what was unfolding right underneath us. The dolphins seemed to have split into 3 organised groups and were collectively 'farming' the school. There were about ten dolphins swimming around the outside of the school hemming them in to an ever-tightening formation. There were another six or seven covering the bottom of the school by swimming under them and forcing them to pack up tight towards the top. The remainder, maybe ten, were diving into the school with tremendous

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enthusiasm and devouring as many as they could in each assault. Then every 3 minutes or so, they would rotate their shifts and a new group would take their turn feasting on the cowering mackerel.

We were so engrossed in the goings on that we didn't realise that we were literally floating in a sea of live fish. I picked up the large landing net I carried and with one huge sweep beside the boat I scooped up about 30 fish. I could hardly lift the net into the boat.

My mate and I laughed to think that we could just net as many fish as we wanted and they couldn't do any thing about it.

Well, we filled the esky, we filled the outboard well, we filled the inner well and before we knew it we were literally knee deep in slimy, thrashing fish. I still don't know what possessed us that day but we continued to net fish until the boat was so full that the forward cabin had fish up to the bunks.

I said to my mate, "The missus is going to kill me, look at the stinking mess, what the hell are we going to do with all these?" To which he gleefully shouted "there're bloody good tucker mate, we'll have enough for weeks". I figured we had enough to feed all of Sutherland Shire, so I suggested we head back in and see about cleaning this lot.

It must have looked like something out of a Three Stooges movie. We had over two thousand fish in the boat and we were up to our knees in mackerel. The boat handled like a wounded submarine as we slowly headed back into Burraneer Bay to the ramp. In those days I had a base 27 meg. radio in the kitchen so I called the missus and said we had rather a large catch, and would need some help filleting. I asked her to call five or six of my mates and get them down to the ramp with their big filleting knives and eskies ASAP.

By the time we had pulled up at the ramp there was already a crowd gathering to see "the big catch". I pulled the boat onto the sand beside the ramp and started to unload esky after esky of fish. There were 8 of us filleting for nearly two hours and the final count was two thousand, three hundred and fifty mackerel. That's forty five hundred fillets. Let me say something at this point about bag limits. There was no limit on this species as they are regarded as 'bait' fish. However, in their culinary defence the fish were around half a kilo each and produced two very nice pan size fillets that tasted superb

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when deep fried with beer batter or just bread crumbs.

I am happy to say that at least 20 families enjoyed mackerel fillets for the next month or so, none of it was wasted and I suppose I can say that I have caught over 2000 fish on one outing. We calculated later that the

boat would have had about one and a quarter tonne of fish on board, or equivalent to another 12 adults. It’s no wonder she was sluggish in the water!

I have since told Ern Grant (*Grant’s Fishes of Australia*) about this phenomena and he said that we had witnessed something very rare, a natural food chain event in the sea. He went on to say that only a hand full of people in the world have ever been able to get that close and actually observe the wonderful and intelligent choreography of the dolphins feeding methods when dealing with large schools of fish. That made me feel kind of special.

As for the boat, well... the aftermath was a two inch coating of slime and a smell like a fishmonger’s wheelie bin. We hosed and scrubbed the inside half a dozen times over the next few weeks and only after a chlorine bath and finally a whole bottle of French perfume scattered at random would the missus venture on board again.

Every time I see dolphins at play now I think of that fantastic event

Editor’s Note: *John is 63 years old and has been boating for 50 years. Apart from the many thousands of private hours he has accumulated, he also holds a professional skipper’s ticket and has driven fishing and charter boats on and off for 30 years. His love affair with the sea and his undying affection for fishing and boating make his life experiences seem to many an enviable accumulation of adventures.*

When John and Annie finished their popular reports on the trip around to the Kimberley (F&B #146), we decided this was a skipper we couldn’t just sign off - so we’ve commissioned John to produce a monthly yarn about his life’s experiences on the water - and he’s got some ripper yarns to tell!

and wonder at just how intelligent they really are.

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