

Lessons From The Territory

Introducing a very special report commissioned by the F&B Team in the wake of the recent GBRMPA (Great Barrier Reef) RAP furore and the patently obvious inability of east coast recreational fishing interests to deal with the power and efficiency of the government's PR machine. At issue is not whether the government's actions were right or wrong, but the way they were so easily able to steam-roll the legislation into place, achieving exactly what they wanted - and even making it look like they had achieved "due public consultation".

The final score? GBRMPA 8, Fishermen, 2

However, declaring every piece of fishable water "green" and totally out of bounds is not the only answer, and as the Northern Territory's AFANT executive manager John Harrison explains, we have to look no further than our own Northern Territory to seek possible future solutions - by scientifically prepared example, too - and inspiration that *it can be done!* If they've done nothing else, AFANT has proven that fishermen CAN be organised as a powerful political force.



One of F&B's favourite fishing persons, Klm Bain having a chat with a nice little barra, fresh out of the NT's South Alligator River

AFANT's Advocacy for Access and Allocation

'Access' was the catalyst that conceived the Amateur Fishermen's Association of the Northern Territory (AFANT) in May 1980. It was the very threat of **not** being able to fish in the coastal strip around the Tiwi Islands (about 80 kms north of Darwin) that drove about 300 people to a public meeting.

An application for a sea closure around Bathurst and Melville Islands has never been enacted - but it was enough to galvanise the anglers in the NT and the birth of AFANT has led to many successes for recreational fishing since.

In 1980 the AFANT elected committee realised that membership was the key to success - the more members, the stronger the voice. Little has changed in 23 years because that analogy rings truer today because we all know the meaning of 'I Fish and I Vote'. Fishing is a way of life in the NT, and with a very small electorate base, the NT politicians quickly realised that the angling community is a strong lobby group, and AFANT has been at the forefront of many changes to the fishing scene in the NT.

In the early years of AFANT, artificial reefs were high on the agenda and were deployed in a number of places both in and just outside of Darwin

Harbour. These continue to be popular and productive fishing locations today and successive governments have continued a program of deploying artificial reefs.

However the real challenge was resource sustainability. Everyone knows that the barramundi is the icon fish of the NT. Regarded as the barra capital of the world, the NT was in grave danger of losing the very fish that today makes it such a drawcard for thousands of interstate and international anglers.

The mid 1980s was a time of some very heated exchanges between commercial and recreational fishing.

Barramundi stocks were in serious threat of collapse due to overfishing by the more than 100 commercial licences fishing both legally and illegally. Something had to be done.

Closing the Mary River

In 1985 a submission by AFANT called for the introduction of a barramundi commercial licence buyback scheme, a recreational tagging program, closure of the Mary River to commercial fishing and hefty increases in fines for illegal fishing. The recreational sector had a closed season on the Mary River from 1 October till 1 February and a two fish possession limit

- factors which are still in place today.

For the commercial sector the proposed closure was like a red rag to a bull, and the subsequent public meeting almost turned into an 'all-in' with commercial and recreational interests coming together for the first time.

The graph below shows clearly the dire position of stocks in the Mary river. The commercial catch per unit of effort (CPUE) plummeted and the anecdotal evidence from the recreational sector was also painting a very bleak picture.

Eventually the Mary River was closed to

commercial barramundi fishing.

In 1988 the government closed the river as well as a 2 - 3 kilometre closure box around the flats out the front of the river. Professional fishing catch statistics are collected through log books and for reasons of commercial confidentiality are aggregated into grid areas. Graph one shows the improvement to the CPUE after the closure. And this improved trend in CPUE (Acronym for "catch per unit effort" - ed) has occurred wherever a river system has been closed. Graph Two shows the improvement in the CPUE for the Roper River. The

