



During 1989 and 1990, Jack Darcey, an oral historian, travelled over 26,800 kilometres around Australia to interview a cross-section of men and women involved in various aspects of the fishing industry.

These memoirs contain valuable and often colourful insights into the development of the industry.

The following people from the Northern Territory tell their stories here.

Lloyd **Browne**

David

**Dunstan**

Fred **Gray**

George

**Haritos**

Les **Liveris**

Lex **Mannix**

Graham

**McMahon**

Vena **Oliver**

Danny **Thomas**

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## Verbatim transcript of an interview with LLOYD BROWNE

### INTRODUCTION

Early in his career Lloyd Browne's interest in marine archeology took him to Carnarvon in Western Australia where he worked in the space tracking station until the closure of the station. He then moved to Darwin and was employed in the fisheries section of the Department of the Commonwealth Government in the days before Northern Territory independence. Following Cyclone Tracy's devastation of Darwin, the fisheries branch moved to Gove for several years and Lloyd Browne went there with it. He became the officer in charge of fisheries operations in which capacity he was involved in a number of politically sensitive issues following which, the enforcement role of the fisheries branch, together with the sea patrol was handed over to the police. A situation that still pertains in the Northern Territory.

Lloyd Browne became disenchanted with government service and when an opportunity came for early retirement on health grounds he took it, and is now a successful playwright. An adjunct to his activities has been his acceptance of the role of Northern Territory project officer for this oral history of the Australian Fishing Industry of which this interview is a part.

The interview was recorded for Murdoch University by Jack Darcey in Mr Browne's home in Darwin on the 18th May, 1990. There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** Lloyd would you record your full name, date and place of birth please?

**BROWNE** My name is Lloyd Francis David Browne. I was born on the 16th September, 1935 at Gladstone in Queensland.

**JD** And were you brought up in Queensland?

**BROWNE** Yes. I was brought up in Gladstone until I was thirteen and then we shifted to Brisbane. I stayed in Brisbane until I was.... I left Brisbane in 1968 to go to Carnarvon in Western Australia. In the meantime I'd married and had a couple of young kids.

**JD** And what were you doing in Carnarvon?

**BROWNE** In Carnarvon I was the administrative officer of the NAASA manned space flight tracking station.

**JD** Could I ask how did you get that job?

**BROWNE** Why I got the job was.... I was always interested in the old Dutch shipwrecks and this job came through the Gazette as a temporary vacancy and I thought if I went to Carnarvon, I might be able to get down and have a look at some of these wrecks on the West Australian coast. The only thing I knew about Carnarvon was it was the furthest place away from the east coast [laughs] you could ever go! And it still is: it's a two day trip in an aeroplane to get to Carnarvon from Brisbane.

**JD** Were you there long?

**BROWNE** I was in Carnarvon for six years and I'd still be there if the tracking station hadn't closed.

**JD** So when it did close, you left Carnarvon and came back here to the east?

**BROWNE** No. I decided that I liked the north west so much that I'd like to stay there but there were no jobs. You couldn't get a job north of Carnarvon in Western Australia. I worked for the Federal Government and there was no Federal Government presence north of Carnarvon except in Darwin so a job came in Darwin in the Department of the Northern Territory. The Territory at that stage, was run by the Commonwealth Government by the Department of the Northern Territory and I got a job in a branch called Forrestry, Fisheries and Wildlife, Environment and National Parks branch which had only just been formed. It had only just become a branch of the Department of the Northern Territory.

**JD** What was your function in that....?

**BROWNE** I came here as what they call an investigation officer. I wasn't specifically assigned to fisheries. I was an investigation officer - sort of a trouble shooter if you like - for the entire Department for forrestry, for wildlife, for fisheries, for environment for national parks, but as soon as I hit the place - as soon as I set foot inside the place - the Director of Fisheries (at that stage he as called the Chief Inspector of Fisheries) was a fellow called Ian Kerkiegard [sp] who was seven foot three tall, so you couldn't miss Ian K...., he nabbed me immediately. He went to see the fellow I was working for and said, "You've been promising me an extra man for fisheries. This guy has arrived and I want him to be attached to fisheries to help us." At that stage, fisheries consisted of a chief inspector, he had a clerk helping him - a clerical assistant - there was an enforcement section run by a senior inspector and he had about three fisheries inspectors. There was a small, what they call extension section, which was designed to teach fishermen, or people interested in fishing, how to fish and also especially teach aborigines how to fish commercially in the European way and market their fish and all that sort of stuff. I think there were two guys there and they doubled as fisheries inspectors anyway. Then there was a research section which had about maybe five or six people. So it was a fairly small time outfit, but always the cinderella - always the cinderella - never any money. The last in line to get any.

I arrived in Darwin in March 1974. At that stage, the fishing industry in the Territory was fairly rudimentary. There was a barramundi fishery: there was virtually nothing else apart from prawns. The prawning industry had been around since about the late '60s when the government, under its own initiative, let contracts for the establishment of prawn processing plants at various sites around the Territory in an effort to enhance

or to get people interested in prawning in these remote areas. So that was up and running: we had [unclear] Kiokio, left at that stage, Northern Research. [unclear] Kiokio was taken over from Sir William Gunn I think, who in turn had taken from Michael Kailis. Most of the other ones had shut down. In Darwin there was Northern Research - I think there were only two or three at that stage. [unclear] Kiokio was to shut down pretty soon after - it only last about another year perhaps - it went broke.

The barramundi fishery at the time was fairly disorganised. That is to say, it was run by a collection of individuals: very independent people who didn't want to form an organisation. The credit for forming them into an organisation really goes to two people: that would be Ian Kirkiegard [sp] who was the chief inspector of fisheries and John Hickman who was a private business man around town and is today, regarded as the father of the Northern Territory fishing industry. I don't really think he's that, but he certainly prevailed upon the [unclear]elements in the barramundi fishery to come together in an organisation which was known as the Wet Net and Line Fishermen's Association - incredible name. That was managed by.... or the fellow running the organisation, John Westbrook, who later went to Karumba and ended with a licence in the northern prawn fishery for what amounted to virtually, a rowing boat. He was incredibly lucky. John Westbrook had the arse out of his pants when I knew him - he probably still has. But in between times, he's had quite a lot of money pass through his pockets, John Westbrook, as a result of getting northern prawn fishery licence.

As I say, things were fairly rudimentary in those days. We [unclear] building in Mitchell Street in Darwin, waiting to go into a new headquarters at Berrimah. Fisheries was jammed into about two offices and I was, as I said before, I wasn't permanently attached to fisheries. In the extension section was Lex Mannix and Phil Green, our enforcement section was run by David Cuthbertson (known as the horse). He had [unclear]. I think that was about all. They had as an inspector. Ian Kirkiegard had Ian Both as his off sider. Bothy is still a licensing officer for fisheries. He's probably the last.... he's probably the one guy who's been there for the longest - Ian Both.

Research was run by Daryl Gray - he had one scientist - a fellow called Rolly Griffin who's still there, and about four or five other people - a couple of technical officers. But that amounted to the entire effort for fisheries.

Oh yes, I know why I got the job in fisheries. Martin Finger who was the first assistant secretary for resource development, which was a division of the Department of the Northern Territory, had stood up in the Legislative Council and it was a Legislative Council at that stage. That is to say, it was the last vestige of British Colonial Government - they formed these legislative councils in territories and places like Malaya, Fiji where the native populations were subjected to British law by this administration system known as the Legislative Council - they weren't democratically elected members. Basically, the power lay in members appointed by the government. Anyway there was still a legislative council when I arrived here. But Martin Finger had stood up and said, "We're going to have an overall review of the Northern Territory fishery." He hadn't bothered to ask Kirkiegard about it [laughs]: he simply told him. So Kirkiegard's task was (which was an horrendous task).... There were very few records, what there were had been buried in files of other departments because fisheries being the centre where I had been back and forth across the net finally to end up in the court of Forrestry, Fisheries, Wildlife, etc. etc. So Kirkiegard was really dedicated to producing this review on Northern Territory fisheries and we were going to hire a consultant resource economist which ended up to be Professor Copes, who's probably world famous now. But the trouble we had.... I remember I had to go and search out a resource economist - that was one of my first jobs and I think there were only two in the world at the time. At that time, what I was doing, I was working mainly in the

office and mainly as an advisor or support to Kirkiegard in higher administrative matters - for want of a better term. Like how many resource economists are there in the world and writing a letter saying things like "we are contemplating a review or actively reviewing the fishery and we wish to hire a consultant resource economist to tell us what directions we want the fishery to go in the future and would you be interested in the job?" and so on and so forth. That's what I was doing.

But in the meantime also, I was hopping on aeroplanes whenever I could wag it to go out to places like Murguella, Roper River, and have a look at the place. It was possible to do that in those days. It may still be, but I doubt it. So virtually that's what I did in 1974. Then Christmas '74, I left for Brisbane. We'd had a couple of cyclones. Coming from Western Australia, I was fairly alarmed at the lassitude that prevailed in Darwin over cyclones because I mean, I'd been hit by two or three in Carnarvon. People here didn't seem to care. Just before I left on Christmas '74 to go to Brisbane, there'd been two cyclones go past. People said you'll never get a cyclone in Darwin - they just go past. My experience was that the second cyclone, particularly in Carnarvon, always hit. In fact at the tracking station, we did a (because you had to stay the antennas at a certain wind velocity: we had computers there of course - huge computers) and we charted all the known data (it was one of my jobs in Carnarvon in fact) on cyclones and see if there was a couple, because it was critical to remain tracking as long as we could, but if the wind strength exceeded 80 miles an hour, you had to get the bolt in the antenna otherwise it would have been ripped off its mountings.

To get a long story short, what I found eventually the pattern that was thrown up, was that the later in the season it is, the more likely Carnarvon is to get a cyclone and if you look at the pattern of cyclone strikes in Carnarvon you'll find they're all in February, March, April and the later it is, the worse it is. If you get one in March and there has been one in March - I think the last one that hit Carnarvon was March or April - the worse they are. It seems to be something with isobars and pressures and something. But early on in the season they won't come round North West Cape. After that they keep coming a bit further south.

So anyway, I was aware that cyclones could be pretty damaging. There'd been two about a fortnight before - nobody had taken any notice. There'd been another one I think, which went past and nobody took any notice and the taxi arrived at my place (the wireless was on): the taxi beeped his horn and then on the wireless went waa, waa, waa, waa, was a cyclone whine - there was a cyclone and it looked like cyclonic too. So I thought well, there's nothing I can do. I had a yacht in the sailing club yard. So as soon as I got to Brisbane I rang my people in the department and said, "Would you go and stake this yacht down," which they did. I followed the thing for a couple of days. On Christmas Eve I rang the weather bureau in Brisbane and said, "Look I've got a boat in the sailing club yard in Darwin and I'd like to know what this cyclone's doing." I was told the wind strengths were 235 km (this is 6.00 p.m. before the cyclone hit Darwin). People in Darwin were going about getting drunk on Christmas Eve and no warning at all and yet the weather bureau in Brisbane could tell me this. It was 270 km an hour: it was 50 or 60 km north west of Darwin and heading south east at 210 km an hour. And I said to my wife when I hung up the phone, "You can kiss the boat goodbye."

When I woke up on Christmas morning and switched the wireless on, I was not surprised to hear that Darwin had been wiped out. I told people that after the cyclone. I don't know what happened, but it seems to me very strange that Brisbane weather bureau could tell me, but nobody could inform the people of Darwin. 275 km well I'm probably exaggerating - it was 240 perhaps, but if you divide that by two, it's more

than that it's 120 miles an hour. Now I've experienced winds - I've never experienced cyclonic wind more than 100 miles an hour. 100 miles an hour is bad enough - I can tell you - but 120 miles an hour. You're in big trouble.

I told people when they interviewed us after the cyclone, but never heard back. Perhaps they hushed it up.

Darwin was sealed off as this town in New South Wales - flooded town - that's how they learned to do that because Darwin was sealed off. But I got back in. They lifted the restrictions for two days, I think it was a mistake, but I'd been pestering everybody and I think the airlines or something.... But somehow I got on a plane and I got back and the place was really a mess. But at the same time, people had been evacuated. Most people were on holidays. Those that weren't had been evacuated and this applied to fisheries personnel. So when I got here I didn't see any fisheries guys - I'm not really a fisheries guy anyway [laughs]. Kirkiegard was in Brisbane or somewhere - wherever he was - he was a Queenslander too. He was lobbying with Martin Finger to get fisheries transferred to Gove so what I did, when I was here, I went to see Martin Finger and he told me that fisheries looked they were going to go to Gove and I said, "All right. I'll try and salvage what I can from the people's houses: Kirkiegard's house, Daryl [unclear] house and so on and so forth." Which I did. I hired a couple of guys and there was the odd person (manual labour type person - a technical assistant as I call it) in Darwin working for fisheries so I marshalled those guys. We went around all the various houses of the fisheries people and salvaged what we could and put it into containers and eventually put it on a barge and went to Gove.

Fisheries was based in Gove for the next eighteen months, two years. That's essentially how I came to work for fisheries. It was a critical phase there: I wanted to go. The critical phase as to whether I would go, whether I would be claimed by the rest of the department who were staying in Darwin, but I virtually put myself on the aeroplane with the baggage and said, "Well nobody else is going to get this stuff there if I don't." So I forced them into letting me go to Gove. It was always a sore point with the boss of our branch from thereon. He was always trying to get me back but I'd never come.

My job was never finalised as being a fisheries job until self government in 1978 or '79 when they actually had to create two new jobs. Up until then, just prior to self government, I'd actually been seconded back from fisheries to work for wildlife. [unclear] I wasn't particularly interested in.

Now our time at Gove. It was wonderful. It was like living in Carnarvon, living at Gove - it was beautiful. A small town about 3,000 people run by [unclear] and Company - a company town and everything ran on wheels. You couldn't buy anything there: it was one shop: one newsagent: one hardware store: one shoe store which simplified your life no end except if you wanted to go and buy a pint of thinners for a particular sort of paint. But I think fisheries more or less became a unit in Gove because we were all there together basically. One or two people refused to go and stayed in Darwin.

Actually there's a funny story about one of the inspectors, Spud Eggleton who was an ex copper from [unclear] stayed in Darwin and when I was in Gove I rang him up one day and the conversation went something like this. He picked up the phone and said, "Eggleton speaking," and I said, "Hi Spud, it's Lloyd," He said, "Who?" and I said, "Lloyd." He said, "Who?" I said, "It's Lloyd Browne, Spud." He said, "No sorry, mate, Lloyd's in Gove," [laughs].

Anyway, in Gove as I say, I think we became a unit. The review of the Northern Territory fishing industry was proceeding very slowly and Professor Copes actually came to Gove. We did hire him. Kirkiegard in the meantime, was (this was my first introduction what one might call political interference).... Somehow or other there was a fight over licence limitation in the barramundi fishery. Either Martin Finger wanted somebody admitted [unclear -background noise] cut the numbers. There were 130 fishermen or thereabouts and somehow or other Kirkiegard fought with Martin Finger - told him to stick his job up his backside. But he wouldn't take orders from.... or he would [unclear] no political interference or words to that effect. The upshot of that was that Kirkiegard left and went to South Australia as the director of research. I ended up running the show until the next chief inspector of fisheries came along.

In those days, (that was just before self government).... I really don't know what caused the fight, but certainly Kirkiegard had recommended that there'd be only 130 barramundi fishermen and Martin Finger wanted more or less or something. Anyway he left: I ended up running the show.

In those days there were executive members. The Northern Territory politicians.... the Legislative Council was changing into a Legislative Assembly. The local politicians, like Ian Tucksworth (the infamous Ian Tucksworth) had quasi ministerial responsibility. He had been elected somehow by the people of Tennant Creek and he was what you might call, a shadow minister and he was the minister for fisheries. There was another funny story where I ended up.... I was working for the Commonwealth government of course, for Evan Adam I think, was the minister at the time. I mean I had to write Evan Adam's correspondence for him: also had to write Ian Tucksworth's correspondence for him. And something arose where I had to notify Ian Tucksworth (it was something to do with some flash point in fisheries) say it was a number of mud crabs or something - which it wasn't but this is an example. I had to contact Ian Tucksworth and say, "Mud crabs are being overfished so you had better do something about it." He said, "Well, you'll have to write to the Federal minister about it." Of course I had to write to the Federal minister. So I knew that mud crabs were being overfished so I had to write to Evan Adam and I had to write a submission outlining the thing saying, "Mr Tucksworth is concerned...." then I had to write a letter to Mr Tucksworth for Evan Adam's signature (which he signed) and send it to Mr Tucksworth and then I had to write Mr Tucksworth's reply to the letter that I had written to Mr Tucksworth! So I mean the number of mud crabs in the fishery which I identified as a problem took me about three weeks to do all the administrative work and I was writing letters to myself [laughs] to solve the problem. Those were the good old days!

The good thing about those days was that you had a lot of local autonomy. Things that might have blown up as flash points between fishermen and government could be solved at a local level. In other words, I could enter the lists and go and see John Hickman who was a very powerful man in the fishery - had a lot of influence - and say, "John, this is getting out of hand. I think we ought to do this or something else," and the problem would vanish.

In later years, after self government, you couldn't blow your nose without writing to the minister and saying, "Minister, I'm going to blow my nose and it's likely to have this consequence on the fishery," and the paper work and the bureaucracy just escalated out of sight. Many things weren't problems ended up as being insurmountable problems because of the nature of the bureaucratic process under self government. I thought the place was better off before self government from the point of view of being able to solve problems readily and quickly and efficiently and I think that's true. Maybe you didn't get the money: we didn't have the advancement, I'm not sure. I'm not sure whether all the advancement and what have you that's gone into



the Northern Territory is all that worthwhile. I'm sure a lot of people have got rich on it. Well it benefits them. I don't think it's done a great deal for the rest of the people. A lot of that's an aside.

Where was I? The main research effort prior to this time was a prawn study in Fog Bay which had been done in Kirkiegard's years and he was always an advocate of an in shore prawn fishery. Shaun from the [unclear] anyway, was a school teacher at the time. Anybody in the Northern Territory fisheries will know who I'm talking about - Shaun Williams I think his name was - caused an enormous amount of trouble later had come along to Kirkiegard and said, "I want to fish in shore prawns in a small way." Kirkiegard saw this as a new in shore industry and said, "Yes. go ahead." He said, "Well, I've got no money." Kirkiegard said, "Well you'll have to have some sort of equity." So Shaun went away and started away on a prawning boat and amassed some savings then he came back to see me with the story (nothing in writing). I then created an internal waters prawn fishery specifically to get the department off the hook and started him in shore prawning and that's been a festering sore in Northern Territory fisheries ever since [laughs] and I'm proud of it!

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

Meantime [unclear] started an internal waters prawn fishery. I think we only ever had one boat there, but at the same time the major activity that was going on was the introduction of licence limitation in the northern prawn fishery. Somehow or other we got advance copies of the Copes report which recommended licence limitation in the northern prawn fishery. I think it was inevitable anyway. So for the next year or so what we were doing was somehow helping the Commonwealth introduce set all these parameters.

Now there were a few Northern Territory prawn fishermen. If there were wet boats based in Groote Eylandt at the factory (they'd originally come from Queensland) so indigenous N T fishermen there were but few. John Hickman had a boat, Paddy somebody or other used to skipper for him. Most of the guys that were fishing were trying to fish prawns - never got very far. But there were a lot of people who claimed to have fished prawns or at least to have boats and to be capable of fishing prawns: this sort of thing is going on today where new fisheries are being formed and the government always makes provision for participants in that fishery either as deckhands or as owners, or as people with keels laid in backyards intending to participate. Under the ages of those entry criteria there were a number of fishermen, Peter Mundy, John Raffle [sp], Ski Jazwinski, who had floating hulks one might call them. Boats of that ilk who were claiming to qualify knowing of course that once they got in eventually there'd be a premium for licence. Some of them I think recouped up to \$150,000 for the licences they eventually got. I don't think many of them ever fished with exception of Peter Mundy and his boat, anyway, was a fairly.... He was building a boat somewhere in South Australia. I recall at least two or three northern fisheries committee meetings where I battled long and hard for these guys. I think we got in about six to seven of them. Got them admitted as the nucleus of the Northern Territory fleet. Even at that time a fellow like Eddy Kemp, didn't have a boat. Eddie was still working as a skipper on the Northern Research boats. Eddie only came into fishery in the early '80s as a independent boat owner. John Hickman [unclear] from memory, was the only guy who could claim to be a proper Northern Territory boat. So there was lots of tooting and fro-ing Whether the licence limitation was a good thing or a bad thing I mean, you had to do something and even with the numbers of fishing

boats that were in.... If they hadn't cut it off in the several hundred [unclear - noise] I'm not sure of the exact number. Most of them have gone [unclear] since and the number is coming down and down.

**JD** [unclear - noise] were West Australian or Queensland vessels were they?

**BROWNE** Yes. I remember [unclear - noise continuing] proposing such a thing as a glut [unclear] .... suggestions that I was going to charged to put on [unclear] undermining the government. So it seemed to me to be the only way to manage the gulf fishery because of the three sorts of states that were involved. I mean it was basically, Commonwealth waters and our waters in the gulf although there were prawns caught on the eastern side of the gulf too, but it seemed to me that bureaucracy was just so vast that somebody had to do something to cut the red tape and anyway, it never got off the ground. But they're now running it by what they call, NORMAC, which is Northern Prawns Management, which is essentially run by the industry and they formulate all the management rules which was unheard of in my time. Even though we tried to keep the industry on side as much as possible.

One thing I must add is I talked about getting into trouble. I also got into trouble with Kirkiegard in Gove because I decided that it was time fisheries had a patrol boat. There was a [unclear] advertised in a magazine and while he was away somewhere and I was doing his job I started the wheels moving to get a Northern Territory patrol boat somewhere about 40 feet long. I remember him throwing the file at me when he came back [laughs]. Anyway to cut a long story short, after John Hawser, who was the boss of Forrestry, Fisheries, Wildlife, etc. at the time, they put us off the capital works and capital equipment programme [unclear] in favour of a bulldozer. We eventually did get the patrol boat. So my name was most unpopular until I [unclear] which is after [unclear] fisherman that Flinders encountered in [unclear] in 1803. I remember those days, but I can't remember [laughs].... I remember the historical names.

The next thing that happened of any interest was we got a new chief inspector that was [unclear] Smith who came from the Brazil: he'd been with the United Nations crowd whatever they call themselves. He came as chief inspector then the job was actually confirmed as being in fisheries - a little bit of personality entered between Dick and me. Dick was looking askance at me because I was the [unclear] of all the information and he didn't promote me really. He brought people in from outside to try and form some sort of camp management type role where the told people wouldn't have a great deal of influence. I did get promoted: I did get a job. That's [unclear] ended up jumping from fisheries administration to fisheries enforcement. As [unclear] out of all that was Murray Mitchell came in a [unclear] job from New Guinea and Murray didn't last very long, but I got an new job running fisheries enforcement which included inspectors - yes they were actually called fisheries operations - fisheries inspectors, extension and foreign fishing. In fact they set the foreign fishing unit off here and when the Taiwanese force came to go to commence fishing they used our technique of introducing them and controlling them as a standard technique for starting these types of things off in other places in Australia [unclear] was handling. That was essentially done by people like Greg [unclear] who'd come to us: he was an ex naval lieutenant. He'd been director of naval shipping operations here, but wanted to stay in Darwin and resigned and got a job specially in this unit. The unit at the time was run by Con Moran who still runs the units, he was still prosecuting Indonesian and Taiwanese fishermen.

At that stage we got into some fairly severe deep troubled waters with arresting people like Harry Mesler. I was responsible for grabbing the good Professor Mesler and we had seized a couple of his boats and it got so hot that Paul Everingham as Chief

Minister, was ringing me and asked me what I was going to do and he asked me to release boats that we'd seized. I said I wouldn't and six months later the fisheries inspectors went to the Police. I didn't think there was a connection at the time: I didn't think any man would be so petty but as time went on I became convinced that the reason fisheries inspectors were taken from fisheries and given to the Police was my refusal to do his bidding. I refused to do his bidding because it would have compromised fisheries to the extent that we would be unable to seize any boat in the future. Fishermen could quite legally and viably complain in court, that Professor Mesler's boats be released arbitrarily under some scheme, why couldn't the same circumstance be applied to them. I mean [unclear - interruption] totally wrong.

**JD** Can I ask you why were they seized?

**BROWNE** Well all I could say, at the time, in Gove the fisheries inspectors had the power to seize any gear, that included [unclear] nets, boats, anything at all that was involved in the committing of an offence. Harry Messler used these boats, taking barramundi out of season, I think there was a few [unclear] on one line - something like that and he had been seen in the act where a young wildlife ranger - Harry Messler was so arrogant that he did it under the nose of a young wildlife ranger whom he had on board the vessel which he conceivably had called. Being Harry Messler he had a whole prawning trawler [unclear] to lease this vessel. I mean his main purpose in the top end was to bring the crocodiles back - they were tracking them and all that sort of thing. But Harry Messler didn't do that it was Graham [unclear] who did that - responsible for saving the crocodiles. Harry Messler had all the political clout and the word was that all his stuff that he was.... the barramundi that he was taking was going back to Sydney and they were holding barbeques for their high court.... He had lots of friends in high places, like high court judges, and he would invite them to a Territory barbeque somewhere in Sydney and have magpie goose breasts, and barramundi and buffalo steaks. I don't know if that's true but that was the word.

Certainly what we seized from Harry Messler amounted to about six or eight cartons - perhaps 50 pounds - of barramundi fillets and these were taken in the closed season and taken by Harry Messler ostensibly as an experiment whether crocodiles would eat of them or some crazy thing!

Anyway we were getting into deep political waters, mainly I guess, because this autonomy thing that I've spoken of previously. I mean we were used to making our own decisions. The politicians were equally determined that we wouldn't make those decisions, they had to be made by them. About this time, we had what became known as the Whale Bore incident where we caught one of our major cattle barons poaching barramundi out of old [unclear] doorway and he had an abattoir there for slaughtering buffalo and we seized the entire abattoir. He started to agitate and make enormous waves and I think the sum total of that incident plus the Harry Messler incident resulted in the fisheries inspectors going to the police.

There's also the story that (in the meantime we'd got a second patrol boat) Peter McAuley who was the police commissioner, saw it coming in the harbour and that was the end of it as far as we were concerned. He wanted it - he sat on every [unclear] right hand side always - no matter where. Any public display McAuley was sitting in his right hand side. Whatever McAuley wanted, he got.

This, as I say, was in the early '80s long before the Fitzgerald report and the sorts of things that went on in Queensland. I'm not accusing every man of doing that. But I thought that at the time, there was no separation of powers and I still think there wasn't under the Everingham government. The Police Commissioner was in a very

close liaison with Everingham and the separation powers didn't exist. Anyway the fisheries inspectors went and I ended up back behind a desk in head office again.

**JD** Did the fisheries inspectors remain part of the police organisation?

**BROWNE** Yes.

**JD** Still are today?

**BROWNE** There are [unclear] fisheries inspectors. We have one survived who's still a police fisheries inspector. The others either resigned or went to other sections of the police force. The two inspectors involved in Messler bust and the [unclear] bust were Phil Mitchell (Mad Dog Mitchell they called him) and a fellow called Tom Galvin. Phil Mitchell is now catching buffalo himself I believe - doing pretty well and Tom Galvin is with the drug squad, but only [unclear] Peter Russell remains as a police fisheries inspector and the first year they had the boats and everything, it was dreadful. They were drowning outboard motors and they literally knew nothing about fishing or boats or anything. It was criminal to see the sorts of things that the police were doing. However, we soldiered on. There was nothing we could do. We were out gunned. Not even the secretary of the department could do anything about it. In fact he was most reluctant to let it happen, but he was powerless.

**JD** Could we come back to the matter that you raised earlier, Lloyd? You mentioned that there was an aboriginal fishing school or programme to teach the aboriginal people to fish in the white man fashion. Was that a successful enterprise?

**BROWNE** Not really. I mean this had begun done years before in Adelaide River. Cedric Sedder who was the commonwealth head of fisheries had somehow come up with a proposal to build base at Adelaide River. It cost something like 80,000 pounds in 1960 something or other to put in freezer works and they bought three boats. They had them built in Sydney and they were the sort of boats that were being built at the time by Artisan fishermen in Tonga. The boats could be built of this timber. In fact there is still two of them in Darwin today and these were given to the Aborigines at Madan Greener together with some white advisors and they were told to go and catch fish. But the thing never worked. I mean Lex Maddox to whom you'll be talking later on, came to the Territory as a professional fishermen to try and get the Aborigines fishing along the white man way, but never had any success. We still had people designated to do this, but their activities were confined to short visits to out stations trying to gee up the Aborigines and say, "Have you done any fishing? If you do fish these are the sort of services we offer. This is the sort of return." That sort of thing. I mean they're a different sort of people. Their values are different and they show rightly or wrongly (I wouldn't even attempt to go into that) little interest in engaging in white man's activities. They never have. The whole concept of making money seems to be fairly alien to the them. If they make it they have to share it with their relatives anyway.

We had fishing ventures on Elcho Island - they were all failures. Either because the person we had running (when I say we, it was a sort of an independent venture where other agencies of government like the welfare would fund these sorts of things). Well we had to oversee its progress. That failed, either because the white fellow native - married into the tribe - another guy tried to enter into local politics and every time he had [unclear] they'd spear it and break his windows and left him in no uncertain mind that he wasn't wanted on the island. I mean Aboriginal politics are worse than white politics. So they got to the stage they built a trawler at one stage [unclear] to eat the seafoods which had the greatest chance of succeeding. That was out of [unclear] in

Gove, but even that go anyway. No, it just doesn't seem to be a worthwhile venture, or that's what experience would say anyway.

**JD Lloyd**, to come back to the fisheries in general again. What are the matters of concern that you see confronting the industry in your day? What about depletion of stock? Was that of concern?

**BROWNE** Well, I mean it has already been of concern to the researchers. [unclear] fishery is undergoing an expansion. I mean, we have implemented licence limitation but there have been no technical limitations. I mean boats were getting bigger.

The fishery began up here with line boats that could only stay out for three days. You had to get the prawns back before they got black spot and died, so they were more or less tied to a shore base. But then technology got better and many of the big ship builders like Vaboon, who was with Kailis and France, he was basically a ship builder. I think Michael Kailis was also building ships or associated with the building of ships. You had the tail wagging the dog. You had the ship builders building bigger ships - the ships that could stay out for six weeks or six months. I mean today, they could stay out for six months - they have an unlimited range in capacity just about so long as they can get fuel. They were selling these to fishermen as the way to go so I mean the fishery was being, as I say, the tail was wagging the dog.

The characteristics of the fishery was being changed by the ship building mob. This was recognised by fisheries people, but there seemed to be little we could do about it. I mean if you're a student of human affairs, you will see that the First World War started exactly the same way. People knew it shouldn't start but they were powerless to stop it. The Vietnam war I suspect. Once the bureaucracy gets hold of it, things escalate and you can't stop it. I mean people know it's wrong but those people would have the stop go button, maybe they don't exist. They don't seem to be prepared to press the stop button.

That seemed to be what happened in the northern prawn fishery. It just got.... The capability to take prawns increased to such an extent that within the last few years anyway, over fishing has become evident. I mean there are whole fleets of prawn trawlers for sale now. I presume it's overfishing. Perhaps economics has something to do with it too in as much as the prices are very high these days. [unclear] left, Eddie [unclear] is still looking. Oh no, he's got, probably a small boat in today's terms, but an ex Northern Research trawler which he can get more money selling his prawns locally than he could if he exported them to Japan. So I mean he told me that he left the Territory specifically to get a base in the south, from which he could sell his prawns. He still fishes out of here: his boats are still based here but he wants an outlet somewhere down south where the prawns can go from here, but he can distribute them into Sydney and Melbourne. I suggest he should go to Jarvis Bay - I don't know if he did.

**JD Lloyd**, you've since retired from the fisheries. When did you retire and what have you been doing with yourself since?

**BROWNE** Well, I retired about '84 I think. I don't know the exact date - time goes so quickly. I retired on invalidity. I picked up some sort of bug on an Indonesian boat perhaps a Taiwanese boat (I don't know). Kept on going to the toilet for six months - I lost two stone in weight. They thought I had bowel cancer so they gave me a medical discharge. I said thank you very much and never been back since.

I had been little bit disillusioned with the whole business the way that fisheries inspectors had been treated. We had just got to the position where we were becoming an effective force in the Territory and to see that just totally abandoned which was worse. Purely to the police was a total abandonment of the fisheries responsibility - there's no doubt about that because the way to catch a fisheries poacher is to go and get the guy on his own territory. That is you've got to go bush and you've got to sleep under a banyan tree for several days hoping or knowing, that this guy will come out and stake a net and start poaching. Police are not like that. For a start they've got to have creases in their pants and shiny shoes - they don't wear thongs - the demands on their time even though they are ostensibly dedicated as a fisheries unit. They have enormous demands on their time. The fisheries unit now is the unit that usually picks up any body in the harbour. For example the murder of a business man here [who] was kicked to death or hammered to death with karate chops: his body was thrown into the harbour [unclear] that was shown on TV and "Pollywaffle" Peter Russell, was there carrying the body up the ramp [laughs]. So I mean they're not totally dedicated to fisheries. I mean they're a lot better now than they were. I mean it was absolutely terrible to watch [unclear] it was virtually a year's work just being thrown away.

So they kicked me upstairs and then this wog I had seemed to catch up with me and all in all, I took the opportunity to go when they offered it to me. There was a purge on as well and they were trying to get rid of people and everything just happened to work out.

I always wanted to write so the first thing I did when I retired was to sit down and I actually wrote a play about the Northern Territory which took me a couple of years to finish and it's had a great deal of success around Australia. It premiered at Perth for the America's Cup when we lost the America's Cup (when was that - 1985 or '86).

**JD** What was the name of the play?

**BROWNE** "God's Best Country." It was about a cattle station going bankrupt in the Territory. I used as characters, many people that I've met in my travels around as a fisheries inspector. The main character is a racist cattleman called "Horse" and it's a nickname which comes from fisheries section. No relation between him and the guy we used to call Horse. [unclear] I've got a film in Hollywood at the moment that somebody's trying to fund to get money to make. I've never had a film actually made yet, but....

**JD** What's the subject?

**BROWNE** Again it's all based on my experience here. In 1976 or perhaps '77 (somewhere around about there) we had a couple of wildlife rangers go up and shoot cattle that were illegally grazing on the Daly River Wildlife Reserve. There was about 5,000 cattle and the chief inspector of wildlife, had written to the mission (I mean it was an aboriginal enterprise) and said get your cattle off the wildlife reserve. I mean they had been grazing on there for 20 years and of course, they ignored him, but this guy took the bit between his teeth and sent his merry men with their SLRs and they blew it over 6,000 head of cattle. Of course what they forgot was it's only 400 years ago that his ancestor and mine were sleeping in the winter with their cattle. I mean cattle are property - they always have been. They're very valuable. They are in fact, regarded as property I suppose. So the government had to end up paying 30,000 or 40,000 dollars to.... and that forms the basis of my film. A couple of guys who are flying round in helicopters shooting [unclear] actually blow over the wrong herd because the pilot can't navigate. It's a comedy. It's an action comedy, what's described in the trade as comic book movie. You could see Bert Reynolds as playing

the lead part or Paul Hogan. I've sent it to Paul Hogan and he likes but not interested in producing it.

I've got another play coming up in Sydney shortly which will go on next year. So I get commissions from people like the National Institute of [unclear] to write plays. I get the odd bit of funding from the Australian Film Commission or the West Australian Film Council funding the last film that I wrote. I've got a play up and running on the stage: I've got to get a film on the screen - that's the next thing.

I've got a yacht that I like to go places in and that's about all. That's about it. So there is my life there. I don't ever regret having left the public service I might add.

**JD** It sounds idyllic.

**BROWNE** Well I think it's idyllic. Everything's got its price. But it's getting harder for a person to operate within the confines of a bureaucracy these days and perhaps, I was a bit of an [unclear] having been brought up in the days when you had a great deal of local autonomy and maybe I just couldn't come to terms with having to get the politician to do everything. That I feel, is a problem with governments these days.

**JD** Lloyd, thank you very much for this interview. It's been a very very interesting one and may I wish you all success with your literary ventures.

**BROWNE** Thank you very much.

**JD** Thank you.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

That is the end of this interview with Mr Lloyd Browne of Darwin, Northern Territory.

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with DAVID DUNSTAN

### INTRODUCTION

David Dunstan is the Executive Officer of the Northern Territory Fishing Industry Council. In this wide-ranging interview he outlines the structure, membership and funding of that Association, and its relationship with other similar State organisations, and with the National Fishing Industry Council.

He also gives a concise account of the Northern Territory Fisheries and the number of participants in each, as well as discussing some of the matters of concern to Northern Territory fishermen, including the need for sound management of the ecology, overseas incursions, product substitution, training and escalating costs. In addition he discusses such topics as research, enforcement and control of foreign fishing.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry and was recorded in Mr Dunstan's office in Darwin, by Jack Darcey, on 23rd of May, 1990. There are two sides of one tape and the interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** David, would you record your full name, date and place of birth, please?

**DUNSTAN** My name is David Dunstan. I was born 11th of September, 1948, in the Victorian town of Geelong.

**JD** And were you brought up in Victoria?

**DUNSTAN** Yes, I lived there until I was nineteen years of age and from there I went to New Guinea, was involved in the Public Service in New Guinea, got a taste for the tropics and lived north of the Tropic of Capricorn ever since.

**JD** And how did you come to get into this job?

**DUNSTAN** Well, I spent most of my life (fifteen years in fact) in the Public Service, mainly in administrative areas. I was working with the Department of Fisheries in the Northern Territory, when this particular job was advertised, and I applied for that, and obviously was successful in that. That was six years ago and I've been involved as an industry representative ever since.

**JD** And what's your title and function?



**DUNSTAN** Well, I'm the Executive Officer of the Northern Territory Fishing Industry Council. My major function is to provide a liaison between industry and government, and also to represent industry, and by industry I mean the catching, marketing and processing sector of the commercial industry. I represent those bodies wherever and whenever I'm required.

**JD** Could you outline the organisation or the people you represent in the industry?

**DUNSTAN** The Council, as I said, represents marketing, catching and processing sectors of the industry. The Council is made up presently of various companies, other organisations (fishing organisations) such as Commercial Fishermen's Association, Pelagic Fishermen's Associations, Prawn Association and a number of others. This office provides administrative and secretarial services to those organisations. They make up the majority of membership, but also there are fishing companies, and individual fishermen who make up the membership of the Council.

**JD** And how's the Council.... is that elected or appointed? What happens?

**DUNSTAN** Well, membership to the Council is open to anybody involved in one of those three sectors of the commercial industry, and I should include aquaculture - it's a new developing sector. [unclear] and represented by us as well. So anybody involved in the commercial fishing operation is eligible for membership.

**JD** Pearls?

**DUNSTAN** Pearls? Yes, we have pearlery as members of our organisation. So we have a general membership then, and from that membership, office bearers are elected. My position of Executive Officer is obviously a paid position on the association, and I'm employed on contract basis, while other positions are vacant every year, and there is an annual election to provide office bearers.

**JD** Are there other employees besides yourself?

**DUNSTAN** Only in the way of secretary.

**JD** Is Government represented on your Council?

**DUNSTAN** No, not at all. No, this is 100 per cent industry, an industry organisation. The only involvement at all from Government is in the funding of the Council. We get our funds by way of the Fishing Industry Research and Development Trust Fund. In effect, it's the re-allocation of fishermen's money, so even though it is channelled through the government trust fund, it is fishermen's funds that Government organises.

**JD** There'd be quite a lot of negotiating with Government, wouldn't there?

**DUNSTAN** Yes, most definitely. One of our major functions is negotiation and discussion with Government, to find the best economic returns to our fishermen.

**JD** Coming back to the constitution or the people involved, or the fisheries involved more particularly, in your Council, you mentioned quite a number of them. Can you put sort of figures to the numbers of people, or the numbers of units in the different industries?

**DUNSTAN** Yes, I could give you pretty accurate figures I guess, on the number of participants in the various fisheries that we represent. They're broken down I guess, into two classes: the Territory based fishermen, or Territory Fisheries, and Commonwealth Fisheries. A number of our members are involved only in Commonwealth Fisheries, and that is the Northern Prawn Fishery, that's the major fishery of northern Australia. I guess what would be classed as a major fishery in Australia as far as dollars and cents go. There's about 240 units (that is vessels) involved in that fishery at present, although there's a drastic reduction procedure [laughs] going on at the present. But we would have twenty people, I guess, residents of the Northern Territory, members of the Association who are involved in that fishery.

**JD** Is that owner operators usually?

**DUNSTAN** Yes, yes.

**JD** The rest of them would be company boats?

**DUNSTAN** Yes, that is correct. Well, as far as the Territory participation in the northern prawn fishery goes, yes, and we have.... there's a developing northern trawl fishery for fish - finfish trawl - and at present we would only have about three resident fishermen operating in that particular fishery. Of the Territory fisheries, we've got barramundi.... that is a fishery that is also undertaking a rationalisation at present, and you've got 30 licences involved there. The Government intends to have that reduced to 20 and that's for political reasons not biological reasons. It's a question of re-allocating the resource to recreational fishermen. We've got a healthy crab fishery with 49 licences issued and that's the maximum - 49. Pelagic fishery is a developing fishery. Shark in that will be the main species. We've got 45 licences in that fishery at present, and some of the smaller fisheries are bait net fishing. There we have 72 licences, but really there's probably about 40 active people in that fishery. There's a trap fishery, a trap fishery at present where you first fix traps.

**JD** What are they fishing for?

**DUNSTAN** Mainly the reef fish. They're placed in various areas there. It's a very small fishery, and really could be classed as subsistence fishing, I guess. There's a trepang fishery. There's three people licensed for trepang but at present there's nobody actively collecting trepang, but they're trying to develop that, and the same applies to the wild oyster. We have four licences issued there, but very little activity, because we had to get some interested oyster [unclear] in the not too distant future.

There are six pearl licences issued in the Territory. They're relatively new, and we're expecting a big future there, and [unclear] what, we've got 100 people licensed in in-shore reef fishing, and it's over 101 in the off-shore.

**JD** All professionals?

**DUNSTAN** Yes, this is all from the commercial sphere. So we have a total of about 400.... no, that's wrong, about 350 odd licences operating in the Territory.

**JD** Are there many Aboriginal people holding licences?

**DUNSTAN** Yes, a couple of the trap licences are held by Aborigines, but the results are an allowance for Aboriginal communities to have certain amounts of net to catch fish for their own use.

**JD** Is that only in their own areas?

**DUNSTAN** Yes, and they can't sell that fish. Any commercial operations, whether it's Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, requires a licence, the only exception being subsistence fishing for Aboriginal communities.

**JD** The population in Darwin is very multi-cultural, and I wonder.... many of these fishermen perhaps would have an ethnic background of some sort, that is they may be from these.... where?

**DUNSTAN** The current situation is that our crab fishery is made up certainly in the main, by south east Asian fishermen, Cambodians, Vietnamese, what else? and a couple of [unclear] also. Of course, going back twenty years, the ethnics involved in the fishing then were Italians and Greeks and so forth, and mainly in the barramundi industry. They're still in our industry. I guess they be just regarded as Australians now, and I'm sure the south east Asian population will be regarded as Australians too, in the not too distant future.

**JD** Are the south east Asian people ex boat-people?

**DUNSTAN** Some are and some have been sponsored over here by other refugees and some of the original boat-people, but in the main, they are people who have, I guess, refugee status.

**JD** Are they readily accepted by the other fishermen?

**DUNSTAN** They weren't readily accepted, no, and it was basically because of the cultural differences. South east Asian people were brought up in a very dog eat dog type of environment and the ethics that fishermen observe over here, weren't being observed in the first instance by these people, so they weren't readily accepted, but the situation is changing all the time. They are certainly more accepted now than they were originally, and they seem to be fitting in quite well. They're certainly very proud.

**JD** David, what are your relationships with other similar bodies in other States, and with the national body? How do you fit in?

**DUNSTAN** Well, the national body is made up in the main, of representatives from associations such as ours. All the State bodies - and most States have very similar organisations - they're not all fishing industry councils. Queensland has the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Association, but most other States it's fishing industry councils, and the national body is just the heads of all those combined, so it's a very close working relationship. All the other States have similar positions to mine, that is they have executive officers who stay in constant contact with one another, certainly on matters of common interest. We do have a little bit of a problem in the remoteness. We're so far away from the other States, but FAX and so forth these days, bring us closer together.

So all for argument's sake, that happens in Western Australia, that they believe may have a ramification here in the Northern Territory, they'll forward to me and likewise, I'll do the same for them. As every year goes by we are getting a closer and closer

network. You do work closely together. The national issues that have to be addressed such as taxation, foreign fishing and so forth, are always dealt with at the national body, and that whole network is [unclear] towards profit, and with the coming of the new administration of Commonwealth Fisheries, we are sort of involved in that on a national level, and we are changing our own modus operandi, if you like, to suit the new climate.

**JD** The Council will become even more important when that's fully operative, won't it?

**DUNSTAN** Well, that's debatable. Maybe the importance of the Council may in fact, diminish a little. If the authority that's formed functions as we hope it will.... I mean there's always a little bit of concern about how a new association (a new authority) is going to work. Certainly we believe that this system of user pays, the user should say, is certainly worth pushing to have that say. I'm a little concerned about how Government perceives the new authority. Unless we do get sort of a say on anything we require, then the Council certainly - the National Council - will continue to play an important role, but I would hope that the authority is just right.... is a proper authority. If it does well, I think the importance of the Council - well it's not important but the work that it will need to do will probably lessen.

**JD** What are the channels of communication that you have with industry in this area?

**DUNSTAN** Well, here in the Territory, having such a small base of fishermen, the lines of communication are very direct. We communicate usually by mail or phone, directly to the people, even though our Council, its membership is around 44. They represent practically everybody that's involved in the industry in the Territory, so our communication to them is through our meetings (regular meetings) and direct mailing of the relevant information. We did have the use of a government produced news letter. It's no longer being printed unfortunately. We do endeavour to combine our efforts with the Government and see if we can get such a publication sent out again to all licence holders on a regular basis. That seems to be the best method.

**JD** Do you have a happy working relationship with Government in the Territory?

**DUNSTAN** Oh, happy relationships. Well, we didn't [laughs]. We have a happy relationship with certain sections of the Government. It varies. I don't think we're any different from any other industry organisation in the relationship with Government. We certainly have differences of opinion. I think that's healthy. But generally the personnel involved with the government departments we deal with - the co-operative - we sometimes have difficulty with the policy which the politicians set, I think more than most other States in the country. We have a better access to our ministers, we have access to our ministers, so yes, you could say we have a good working relationship. It's certainly not without conflict.

**JD** Is there any machinery for conflict resolution?

**DUNSTAN** Yes, the machinery is basically in the form of advisory committees. There's more and more of these being set up in relation to fishing, and they're being set up at the instigation of the minister, providing advice for him I guess, in the main, and his department, on fishing related matters. Most of the major fisheries have an advisory committee, and all of that which is [unclear] for use, and things like any other interests of the resource, recreational and so forth.

**JD** Can we turn to look at some of the problems that the Council sees confronting the industry? Things like conservation of stock, or the necessity, all of that.

**DUNSTAN** Conservation of stock obviously is always a topical issue. Responsible fishermen are probably the best conservationists around. They need to conserve the stock for their own benefit, and also for the benefit of their children. So they're very, very conscious of conservation. It's not a great problem on its own in the Territory. All our fish stocks are fairly well managed. We haven't got a problem of over-fishing in the Territory fisheries. There's a perceived problem in the northern prawn fishery, though it's really not a stock problem. It's an economic problem more than a stock problem. Our barramundi resource, we haven't got a problem at this stage with the stock. We do have a very real problem with allocating the resource, and a lot of recreational effort made to develop it in the future. The commercial effort on that resource is fixed and it's reduced to [unclear] and is going to reduce even more. So the commercial effort is not a threat to the resource at all, but the recreational effort is. If it is allowed to continue unchecked we hold grave concerns for the future of that resource, and it's a very valuable resource for the recreational effort as well as commercial, so it needs to be addressed.

I don't believe the government's addressing it at this stage, and well we are endeavouring to correct that. Of the other fish stocks, we hope WE do not have anything to fear at this stage of the continuation of them. As I say, they are in the main, fairly well managed. But we do have concerns with foreign fishing, and the effect on our resources. Obviously the off-shore resources and control by the Commonwealth, you have participants in them, and it's always the way, when foreign interests are allowed to exploit our stocks and we're not getting the profit for encouragement from our governments (and I would say "governments" here, not necessarily the Northern Territory Government) to help Australians develop them. So if there is a problem there, we would like to see effort put on to developing those fisheries for Australians, and it reverts back to foreign markets being produced I guess. The foreign companies are supposed to provide an outlet for Australian products, but that's not occurred, and we need to address that problem as quickly as we can.

**JD** Is there a concern about the importation of fish from overseas?

**DUNSTAN** Yes, most definitely. That's a serious concern of ours, and it's not so much it's being imported. We don't believe that we shouldn't have any competition at all, however, the major concern is the presentation of that product that comes from overseas. Now here in the Territory, probably the most important product is barramundi, and we have burramundi. Well, the name's exclusively Australian and our name is being used by similar fish coming from overseas, and the stock that's coming from south east Asia is the same species, but it's in the main farm-bred, farm-raised, it's inferior quality, and the [unclear] consumer doesn't get the chance to differentiate because it's just sold as barramundi.

The same has happened with Nile perch. It's coming in and being sold as.... well, initially it gets marked that it's African or Kenyan barramundi, and yet when you go to a restaurant it appears on the menu as "barramundi". [unclear] it is like and I've noticed just recently that West Australian legislation of the Health Act, that the fish must be labelled with its country of origin, and that's basically all we're asking for here in the Territory, because our fish gradually disappears and if people know that it's Northern Territory fish, or Australian fish, that they're eating, and it pays to import it, we will survive.

**JD** There's been a great deal of trash fish sold under the name of barramundi in some States, hasn't there?

**DUNSTAN** I'm not so sure it is actually trash fish, but it is certainly inferior fish.

**JD** Well, it's not costly like barramundi.

**DUNSTAN** No, well, the most common substitute for barramundi is threadfin salmon, which is caught in conjunction with the barramundi fishery. Actually it is a very fine fish. It doesn't handle as well as barramundi. Unless it is treated correctly from the moment it is captured it will have a distinctly inferior flavour to it, and the fishermen are generally to blame for this. It's very difficult for Northern Territory fishermen to market fresh fish in other light than what it actually is. So the barramundi is being caught and sold by the fishermen as barramundi but what happens to it when it reaches southern restaurants is anybody's guess.

**JD** What about the question of the ecology? Is that a problem in the north here? [unclear] and so on.

**DUNSTAN** It's not a distinct problem. It's something that we're keeping aware of because the ramifications world wide of chemical pollutions and development of industry in wetland areas. The Territory being small in population and there's no major development going on on our coastline, it hasn't showed itself as a problem at this point in time, but we are rather careful any time that anybody suggests development, it is looked at rather closely, because of the fact that we are well aware of the problems they've had in the other States.

**JD** You've probably heard of the worries in the west over overseas' ownership in some processing plants. Is there any evidence of that happening in the Northern Territory?

**DUNSTAN** No, not in the Northern Territory, but again we'd have to treat the industry as an Australian industry, and the problems over in Western Australia can be seen as our problems too, as anywhere else in Australia too. And I think the question of foreign ownership is a serious one. I know it's certainly in the meat industry, and the fishing industry as it realtes to the Western Australia situation with rock lobster, it certainly is a very dangerous situation where you have one group being able to control [unclear] at the market, and we are being very careful that it doesn't occur in the Territory.

**JD** Would you say that as an industry, the fishing industry presents its product well enough?

**DUNSTAN** No, I don't think it does, certainly from the Northern Territory's point of view. We have very limited number of people involved in our reef fish industry, for argument's sake, and there have been a couple of guys who have realised the benefit of presenting their product to the optimum degree, and they are using their initiative to produce good quality product. Their fish is sought after in southern markets, people are waiting for it, and they are returning a very good value for it. We haven't got that message across to enough fishermen at this stage unfortunately, but that is probably the biggest single area where we can improve our game by value adding in respect of our product. The reef fish, [unclear] exactly the same fish, caught in a prawn net, and the same fish caught by line or a trap, and handled correctly, and the difference in dollar value could be \$1.50 a kilo for the trawl caught fish to \$10 for the hand caught fish. There is a need to look at that sort of thing more closely. We can project our

stocks better if we look at the methods, and raise the quality rather than plummet it, [unclear].

**JD** Was there any training offered to the people involved in the industry along those lines of yours?

**DUNSTAN** In the past there's been very little. Certainly now at this point of time, the training aspect is increased and quite substantial. We have a full time training officer now, and he is helped by various government departments - Federal and State or Territory Governments - he guides training courses, and it covers everything from getting certification for your vessels up to product handling, and a lot of emphasis on product handling and packaging now. I don't think they're in a position where there's too much training. I don't think you'll ever get into that position.

In the Federal Government's pushing towards a national levy on employees and employers, for training, [unclear] and I'm sure the industry as a whole will benefit by this training.

**JD** I imagine there would be considerable concern among fishermen at the ever increasing charges the Government is imposing on them? Is that the case?

**DUNSTAN** Yes, it is, yes. The biggest charge that [unclear] that are prawn fishing is the taxing of those grounds. There is a rebate on diesel fuel. It's fished as a [unclear]. The rising fuel costs are very hard to overcome. The costs in '82 and it seems to me there's going to have to be a score that [unclear]. I believe that the prawning industry - the real prawning industry - as fishing, is one of our country's.... what they have to rely on to get out of trouble, and if we keep getting taxed the way we are, well, you know, there's going to be less incentive for people to be involved in the fishing industry, and at a time when you should encourage the production of all primary industries, you find that we're getting taxed.

**JD** This interview continues on Side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**DUNSTAN** The Government's real initiative of imposing resource tax on fisheries is a big concern to the industry. Again we have the situation where the Government's trying to lever every dollar they can from the people who really produce the wealth of the country, and we are told that these taxes will only apply to the new fisheries or the restructured fisheries, but if you look around the country, all the major existing fisheries are under restructuring so they are certainly going to fall into the category of resource tax, and again we're told that it's going to apply to super profits, and we haven't been given a definition of what super profits mean, but I fear that it will mean any sort of profit, and once again, we've got a situation where incentives are being taken away for people to go out and develop and in fact, make profits. It can do nothing but harm to the country. The bureaucracy also imposes mountains and mountains of paper work on the industry, and that seems very easy for Government - or one section of the Government - to require a piece of paper and say, "Well, it's only one form to fill out."

I'm not sure of the situation now. Some may have been rationalised to start with, but it wasn't long ago a prawn operator needed to fill in something like 42 pieces of paper to go fishing. He needed radio licences and DPI licences and State licences and Commonwealth licences and the registrations, and we added it up at one stage and it was 42. I don't think it's changed dramatically, it's still a huge number of bits of paper. Then the Government will come and say, "You get your information from research, so would you mind filling in another form?" [unclear] but that opens your mind and you're required to fill in another paper, and that becomes a [unclear], and I think the associating authority when it's put in place, can look very closely at rationalising all that, and it's not just rationalising the fishing side of it, I mean you've got the Department of Transport or the various State fishing authorities, that need to be included. There's no reason, for argument's sake, why the licence couldn't be issued for five years or a longer period. Why it needs to be reviewed each year I don't know. Certainly the [unclear] of annual fees may need to be an annual event. Surely the licence could be issued for longer.

You see they need to look at that. We're being asked to contribute more and more to the cost of administering these fisheries and we're up to the tune of 90 per cent now and note, we're national, and if that doesn't give us the right to 90 per cent of the say, then I don't know what is. I think that industry and the National Council in particular, would need to push very hard with Government to ensure that they have free and proper representation when the authority.... when it finally does get put in place.

**JD** David, you mentioned research and I think everyone would agree that there is a great need for research into all aspects of fishing, or many aspects if you like, but who should control that and who should fund it, and who should decide what research is done?

**DUNSTAN** Okay, yes, well certainly research is important. Nobody would deny that. In the past and to a lesser extent what's happening right now, is we have government departments deciding what research should be done, and going ahead in having that research undertaken. It is generally being paid by industry. On the Federal scene, the Commonwealth contributes one per cent I think, of the gross national value of the fisheries - of the combined fisheries - which they put back into research, and that's commendable and should continue, but those industries - those sections of industries that are viable and profitable, they are contributing to their own research, and they can use - in my experience in all that situation, the prawn fisheries. See, they had to set up their own research committee. The research group involves the northern prawn fishery, is freed by that research body which is a combination of industry and government, but in the main, industry is loaded, and I think if fisheries around the country area went in that direction, it would be very good. We won't have wasteful research.

There's some very good people in government research circles, and there's no reason why they shouldn't continue to be used. There would be more and more user pays process now, and so as long as industry wants that research to be done, it could be done, but certainly the research shouldn't be restricted to those government bodies. I think they are outside organisations that have the expertise, and they should look for some of the best available research bodies to do whatever research is required.

The other area that is really of note with reference to the Northern Territory fishing industry is the fact that unlike most other States - if not all other States - we've got a situation where we have the potential for considerable over-development and it's important that this is done in an orderly way. The history of fisheries management in Australia is nothing to be proud of. There are very few fisheries that haven't been



fished away to capacity and require some form of restructuring, and certainly some form of reduction. You know I would like to think that here in the Territory, the developing fisheries, such as our pelagic fisheries, the shark and mackerel, and I think pearl fisheries, can be developed in an orderly fashion so that we can maximise the returns, and get to the stage where we are exploiting the resource to its full potential without going over the top, and therefore, not necessitate these very costly reduction schemes, and I think we could probably increase the value of the fisheries here in the north considerably. I would not think it's out of the question to expect to perhaps treble our value of our fisheries in the next five to ten years. We can only do that if Government and industry are prepared to discuss rationally proper management issues on those fisheries.

**JD** And what about the question of enforcement?

**DUNSTAN** Enforcement has been a vexing question in the Northern Territory for some time. Up until 1981, enforcement was the responsibility of the fisheries division. They had their own enforcement section with a number of vessels and a small number of personnel. However, with that huge coastline as you are aware in the Northern Territory, plus the expansive inland area.... we had no commercial inland fisheries, but we do have a lot of inland billabongs and so forth. We had a home to barramundi and very, very popular recreational areas that can also be exploited by.... I don't like to call them amateur fishermen, because a true amateur fisherman doesn't do it, but they're certainly exploited illegally by unlicensed fishermen and it's always been a problem for our enforcement section.

But when enforcement was under the control of the fisheries division, there seemed to be a core of personnel there who were sensitive to the requirements of commercial fishermen, and they didn't interfere too much with commercial operations, but certainly without anybody doing the right thing. They concentrated most of their efforts on these illegal inland activities. I think it was 1981, the police took over the role of fisheries enforcement, and even though they increased the number of personnel involved in enforcement, the effects seemed to be much less than that of the fisheries officers. I don't know whether that was from inexperience or just the way the police react to certain situations, as opposed to fisheries officers. But certainly the enforcement as far as industry being concerned is diminished in recent times, since the police involvement, and I'm sure it's not because of the individuals involved, but I think the policy and the practices of police differ from other people. They're just trying to do it in a different way, and we've been trying to get the Government to have enforcement returned to fisheries without any success for a number of years.

We do seem to have a continuing problem of illegal fishing - and I'm not talking about illegal sea fishing, like the Indonesians and so forth.... we do, of course, have that. The situation that concerns us mostly is what's happening inland, and if I could just mention what we think about the illegal Indonesian activities, I think this is a question that could be answered a little easier than is being done right now. The Indonesians who come out here and mainly on the western coast, and fish for trochus shell, I think have to be stopped and I think we've got to come down harder on that type of fishing. But it does concern me a little bit that some of the Indonesians could only be described as genuine and traditional Indonesian fishing, who happened to just drift across our line. It just seems a little bit hard. They've got some resources on their side of the line that I think we could accept, prawns and so forth, and I don't think they're causing a lot of trouble, you know the ones that have just accidentally drifted across our line.

I'd like to see the two Governments sort of sit down and work out a more amiable solution to that problem. It's totally different if it's a mechanised - highly mechanised - vessel, coming across. Occasionally Taiwanese vessels do that although in recent years, they've reduced. I certainly wouldn't advocate any relaxation of the efforts to confiscate their vessels and so forth. The Indonesians I don't think are as much problems as the press would make out.

**JD** Really, it's a matter for the Commonwealth Government isn't it, to negotiate that?

**DUNSTAN** Yes, yes, it is.

**JD** David, thank you very much for this interview. It's been really very interesting and very valuable. Thank you.

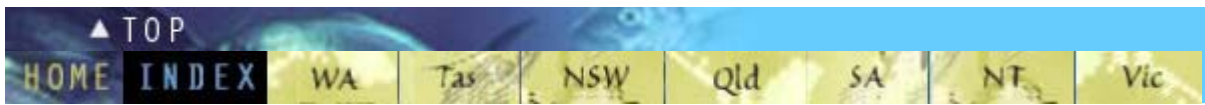
**DUNSTAN** My pleasure.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr David Dunstan, the Executive Officer of the Northern Territory Commercial Fishermens Association of Darwin.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with FRED GRAY

### INTRODUCTION

Fred Gray is a Northern Territory legend. He's over 90 now and confined to a wheelchair. He's English born and came to Western Australia as a young man hoping to take up land and embark on a farming career. He did that, but the venture did not succeed and having to gather enough capital to make another start, he became involved in pearling in Broome in 1928. He had just acquired his own vessel when the pearl shell industry collapsed.

Fred Gray moved to Darwin and some time later went trepanging in the Gulf of Carpentaria. A long series of adventures followed including shipwrecks, cyclones and massacres. During the War he was asked to assist the flying boat base at Umbakumba on Groote Eylandt. He did that and in the process established and ran a settlement for natives, a task he continued for twenty years, only to see his achievement partially destroyed after he left.

He returned to Darwin and established the Umbakumba on a small property - a place of support for Aboriginals from the island.

Fred Gray has been the subject of literary works and his name is perpetuated in the cape named after him. It is pleasing to note that he was awarded the Order of Australia medal last year.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry and was recorded in Mr Gray's house in Howard Springs, Northern Territory, by Jack Darcey on the 18th and 20th of May, 1990. There are four sides on two tapes.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** Fred, would you record your full name, please?

**GRAY** My name is Frederick Harold Gray, christened Harold Frederick Gray but registered Frederick Harold Gray, and I didn't know until I came to Darwin because I had to sign Frederick Harold for everything you see and so, of course, it rather made things a bit awkward you see, [unclear] because they didn't like me changing my name to Frederick Harold Gray. But then they seem to have got it right now and I had to write my signature so that I put the H first and crossed over to the F so it made everything all right. But I didn't know until all those years and when I wrote home and told my father and mother that I was really.... Mother was very annoyed because Father had registered me as Frederick Harold. He wanted his name first.

**JD** Fred, what was your year of birth?

**GRAY** 1899.

**JD** So you will be 91 this year.

**GRAY** That's right. Next January 28th. I almost didn't make the century but January.... December, sorry. December the 28th, 1899, was the day I was born.

**JD** And you were born in England?

**GRAY** In England, yes.

**JD** Whereabouts in England?

**GRAY** Kidderminster in Worcestershire.

**JD** And you were brought up there?

**GRAY** Yes, in [unclear] The only part of England that I knew besides Kidderminster was down in Dorsetshire, my father's home, and it wasn't till I went back in 1979 (that was my first trip back home) that I realised what a beautiful place England was - the countryside.

**JD** Yes, yes. When did you come out to Australia?

**GRAY** 1924, January the 5th, 1924.

**JD** And why come out here?

**GRAY** Because I wanted to be a farmer. I was always mad on farming and as a necessary [unclear] to school but I was very keen on painting and all that sort of thing and essays, but I never seemed to take to schooling very much. I just got by and that was all.

**JD** You were coming out to take up land here, were you?

**GRAY** Well, my father was Chief Constable of Kidderminster, Chief of Police and, of course, my parents were well off. They had enough money to buy a farm in England for me, so they decided that the best thing I could do was to go as a pupil on a farm. So we advertised in the newspaper and we got no end of enquiries but we thought that everybody was looking for a bit of cheap labour, but anyway it didn't work out that way with the people that I eventually went with. I got in with an old couple who had 100 acre farm, and they decided that I [unclear] and they wrote what they wanted. They were a mixed farm you see, cattle, sheep and a bit of arable land and all the rest of it, and it was ideal for me.

Four years of that and they still couldn't see any future but these people had a relative in Australia who came over and they stayed at this farm so they filled me with what a wonderful place was Australia etc. and the next thing I was on a boat coming out to Australia.

**JD** Where did you land?

**GRAY** At Fremantle, and then I looked round for a job first of all. I got a job down on a timber mill in West Australia, Pindalup, where they were cutting jarrah and that, and my first job was looking after the horses which used to drag the huge logs of timber in the bush. But I had to leave the little township where the mill was, drive the horse and cart with the food on, get out to where the men's camp was and my job was to feed up the horses and water them and groom them etc. and then the men would get in the cart and go in to the township, and I'd have to stay out there. There was me, a chap of 24 I suppose, left out in the bush all on my own and at first (the first night) I wondered a little bit and when they went away, they said, "Watch out for this and watch out for that," but, of course, there was nothing. I had my needle hammock with me. I slung that between two trees and went off to sleep and I used to do that night after night as happy as Larry [unclear] and I really enjoyed it.

Then I had some friends in Perth so I left there and went up to the friends in Perth, and they had a friend who came down from the bush who had a farm up in Trayning in West Australia, and the lady and her son were on this farm so they invited me to stay there as long as I liked. So I did. I stayed with them for quite a while and then I applied for a block of land down south of West Australia. I got this block of land, I thought I was made and I hoped to... sufficient so that I could clear so much land. 100 acres I cleared first of all, and I was able to buy some machinery very cheaply from these friends of mine and so I went down and cleared the 100 acres of land, had it all sewed and expected my first crop which would have meant that I even had seed for the next year. I went on clearing and, of course, as you all learn after.

Anyway the crop came up about six inches high. It never got any higher, came into ear, not a grain of wheat in it, so I just walked off. I didn't intend to walk off completely. I intended to go back, you see. I thought I could go and make some money somehow - I didn't know how at the time. I had to go and make some money somehow so I could go back and start off again, you see, because I had some help from my friends as well.

Anyway, I got to Perth and I got a job to go up to Broome in West Australia to travel with a Singalese pearler going to [unclear] and I didn't know what was in store. He wanted to use me as a sort of companion to him from what I could make out, but it was to be a bodyguard to him actually, because he was carrying pearls, all the pearls that he'd sort of collected and helped. He had [unclear] of his own, you see.

Anyway I went up there and I met this man and got on a boat with the man. Now he was carrying oh, 94 beautiful pearls - also his wife. Also he had packets of diamonds. I suppose being a Singalese, he would be dealing in diamonds too. [unclear several words] but anyway he was a very nice chap, quite dark, and we went to the same hotel in Perth and stayed there and he paid all expenses and he took me round to [unclear] quite nice people in Perth. What I noticed about him, he was always apart from the ones he was doing business with, he gave a lot of pearls away and then it came the time for him to go back to Broome again. He said, "Well, I'm coming down in a month's time," he said, "will you look after me then?" He wouldn't be carrying so much stuff he said, but he turned down with just as much stuff and this time, I met him at the boat when he came in and I stayed with him all the time that he was in the hotel and also he went in to St John of Gods Hospital, had an operation of some sort. I couldn't work out what the operation was, but he was there for... I can't remember now. It was so many weeks, three or four weeks, and then before he went back, he said, "Look, Mr Gray, how about you come up to Broome. I've got a fair boat up there

I'm having rebuilt and if you give me a small sum of money," he said, "you can have that boat and I'll put you out to the pearling, the pearling trade."

Well, of course, that time I didn't know then, the pearling trade, the bottom was dropping out of it. So anyway when the boat was ready I went up to Broome. He got the divers, got all the crew and everything ready and he suggested that I should go out on the boat myself altogether if I could, but if not, go for at least three months and learn about it. So that's what I did and it started off when we were getting the boat ready, the pearlers in Broome had decided to cut their take of pearl shell grounds, that was 1928. I'm not sure where the pearl shells.... I went up in 1928. But anyway they only allowed themselves just eleven ton of shell for the season.

Now that is all right for pearlers who had four or five boats. [unclear] had just one boat out, or two boats out and get all that they wanted. The man with one boat, especially just starting off.... and I came home with nothing that first year you see. Anyway he started up again for the second year, but this year he had to take the engines out of the boat, the engine pumps and put in a handbelt thing and only get five tons in the year. Well, of course, I couldn't see any future or any survival. The bottom seemed to have dropped out of the market completely.

So after a while I said to Janquin, "It's no good me going on with this. I think I'd better hand the boat back again." I'd paid 300 pounds and I was going to pay the balance on the never-never sort of thing but I couldn't see any way of ever making anything. By admitting that I was taking sufficient notice of the business to live on at the time, but apart from the boats I couldn't see that I could make anything. So then Charlie, that was his son whom he had sent off to Broome to get married to a Singalese lady.... Charlie had returned. Well, after I went to Broome, Charlie and I, especially after I stopped living on the boat, and we were living on the shore.... you know, we were companions, you see. So he said that he was going to go up to Darwin and start up a jewellery business and [unclear] you see. He was like his father and dealt in diamonds as well. So I said, "Well, I'll come up there then and see if there was anything I could do up in Darwin, and if there isn't, I'll come back to Broome, hand the boat back and go and live up in Broome," you see.

So I went up there (the two of us went up on the **Kalinda** I think it was the first time) and had a look around. I couldn't see anything just at the time for me and I couldn't find anything that I wanted to do and that's when I helped Charlie with the jewellery business. So I became rather proficient at the jewellery work just helping and making [unclear] for the rings and all that sort of thing. He used to say I could take the shell nacre and so, of course, I learned how to do that and anyway, I stayed with him for twelve months. But I said, "Well, I've got to do something for myself," because I couldn't go on.... [unclear] I only made 36 pounds over the last year and I cleaned up everything, I finished up with 36 pounds that I'd made and I got a few pounds besides that, but that's all I'd got.

So I then went.... being with Charlie [unclear] and also living in Cabinet Street we were. Charlie [unclear] they married so I was living in the [unclear] above the store, so that Charlie's mother is a Japanese lady in Broome but Charlie's wife was Japanese/Chinese. She was a very nice girl too. But the old lady was wonderful. This was before the War, of course, and she couldn't do enough for me. If I wanted sewing or anything like that, we used to have the Japanese coming in from a boarding house on the other side of the street. Singalese mother's boarding house for Japanese, and I got talking to them and they said, "Oh, get a boat and come with us to the trepang."

They'd just been out and had a wonderful year. They caught 80 tons of it that year, and they said it's so plentiful you can't help but make money.

So I saw Mr Muramits, a Japanese trawler in Darwin (an Australian born Japanese) because I'm trawling boats and he was well educated and a very nice sort of man, and he hired me for about ten pounds a week.... ten pounds a month. Ten pounds a month, that's right. So I got a crew together and tried to find out what trepang looked like and what it was about. I saw one trepang before I went out. I tried to find out as much as I could about it and the only trepang I'd seen up to that time was one in [unclear] lagoons. That's where the Sunshine [unclear] in Darwin now. His grandfather you know, and so they fitted me out with stores and what have you, and I set off, [unclear]

We left Darwin for this [unclear] and then we found we hadn't got any cooking pots on the vessel [laughs] so we had to stop there and get off and go and get cooking pots and then we set off. Eventually we got around to.... I called in the different missions, not the Catholic missions (I always wish I had done) but I used to call in to Tolcon Island and Murrinimbi. [unclear] and they quite [excessive noise so unclear]. Then we eventually got down to Melville Bay.

Now one of the crew was a Thursday Islander who had been fishing for trepang on Thursday Island, but evidently the trepangers in there and, of course, this was on the boat. They fished the boat and cooked it on the [unclear] the boat. But with this chalk fish which was a cheap trepang you couldn't do the quantity on the boat, you see, so we had to have our camps on the shore which was illegal. I didn't know it was illegal at the time and we got to Melville Bay and started looking round for trepang. We found some but what we found was all tiny stuff, no bigger than two inches long or an inch long, like that sort of trepang would be in the nets. They were three inches long in [unclear] and this man didn't really know much about trepanging at all because he said, "Oh, that's all right. That's the sort of stuff." But when it was boiled up two inch stuff was no bigger than that stuff, you know, that sort of stuff.

So I was getting a bit worried and I said, "This isn't a trepang." "Oh yes, it is." So I set up Sunday. I said, "We'll anchor and I'll see if I can find the Japanese who are in Port Bradshaw." [unclear] names all these had. That's one thing my memory serves up and I said, "I'm going to walk over the peninsula from Melville Bay to Port Bradshaw, and so I set out with the [unclear] boat in Melville Bay, and set for Port Bradshaw, a little tiny hand comfort and two boys from Murrinimbi. Of course, I didn't know the name that the Aboriginals had got at that time, you see, and set out with these two chaps and I tried to set them on the course where I knew Port Bradshaw would be, but they would keep veering away. I set them on the course and they'd keep going on that a while and they'd veer away. I said, "Look, you're going too far north, you'll miss the Port Bradshaw," which they did. They missed the top of Port Bradshaw and came way down to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

So anyway, these two natives, I said, "Port Bradshaw is down there and so this way." "No, Port Bradshaw is up this way." Of course, they didn't know it as Port Bradshaw really, it was [unclear] and so I said, "No." So we set up [unclear] so I said to myself, "Fred, don't be stupid. Go where they want to take you." So that's what I did. I stopped and I said, "I'll go where you think Port Bradshaw is." So they turned straight round and walked straight up the knoll on the beach. We walked up oh for miles and it was just on [unclear] when they suddenly turned up into the sand dunes at the side of the beach, over the sand dunes, then across the mangroves and by then it was dark. They went straight on through the mangroves and I followed them along and at last we came to an opening. It was pitch dark, but they didn't stop. They just walked

straight on into the water and after we'd been walking for a while, the water gets higher and higher, and I was just trying to think of the boy's name.... The boy turned to me, one of them, "Can you swim, Mr Gray? Water is up to there." I said, "Yes, I can swim." I'd only learnt to swim in Australia. I was 24 at the time and the first time I would be 32, yes. We carried on, kept on and I [unclear] the stroke, of course, and at last I said, "My word, it's a long way." All I got was a grunt. He said something, kept on going, kept on going.

At last I said, "It's a long way. I don't think I will be able to make this." And all I got was a grunt and then I was swimming automatically, just automatically and going on. I kept all right. I had good strong shoulders so I think that was the saving part of all that. Then at last he said, "Look, Cuccabar ahead." Talk of the walking. He was a long way off, I don't know where he was walking from and at last we got to where we could walk and we walked up on to the bank at the side of the.... and the moon's coming out. The moon was showing.

They didn't stop. we just walked up the bank, turned round and went up the Aboriginal track. This was following the side of the creek all the way. So at last we kept on walking and I was stretched to pieces, because I had walked all from Melville Bay and done that swim across. I wasn't the least bit tired and at last, he looked at me and "Sssh, people." And he could speak a bit of English, these [unclear] people and so, "You wait here and I find out."

So he came back again and said, "They want you to go in to the camp." So I went in to the camp and there was an old [unclear]. It was quite a big camp, and mostly women and I think two old men, and children. They brought me a drink which was fairly nice, and okay that's the [unclear] roots and some fish and they told Tuckabag that the Japanese had gone back to Darwin. The Japanese had gone back to Darwin and they didn't know when they'd be back and also a man named Cochrane who had been fishing in Port Bradshaw too, had also gone back.

So I sat down there amongst them and they told me that the [unclear] the men of the party who owned the camp, had gone over to [unclear] that morning. I sat in there and then I went to sleep on the blanket and [unclear] and I don't think even today people would do it. But anyway, they woke me up about four o'clock in the morning and I [unclear] and he knew where the trepang was in Melville Bay and in the morning he would start out with us and help me and show me where it was.

**JD** This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**GRAY** He said he'd take me back and show me where the trepang was and it was [unclear] trepang the correct size. So we set off. He said he would show me a shorter way back. So when we came back it was like coming, because we went all round over the bauxite plains where [unclear] is now, which instead of taking round to the top of Port Bradshaw which we would have done, you see. Anyway we got back to my tent where they were very glad to see me, and we went out in the dinghy and [unclear] showed us just where the trepang was. It was in about four fathoms of water and



great big trepang, oh a beautiful trepang it was. I say beautiful because some of the trepang is very beautiful, but there were plenty.

Then after a while it seemed to peter out a bit so, [unclear] said he knew a place in the English Company Islands at Nakker Nakker, where there was good there. We were running out of stores because we'd delayed so long, you see, and they said, "Oh, we better get back to Darwin to the sea." So we went into Nakker Nakker, and it wasn't such a good plan being on the beach. We were behind the mangroves you see. But there was a creek running along the side so there was plenty of wallaby and food. [unclear] stores too you see. It was a very good camp really. Then, of course, we had to go to Darwin and so we left everything (all my gear) with Gulshaw, and he carried on getting trepang while we were away which you couldn't get them to do today. He carried on while I got plenty to.... I gave him a hand. I couldn't tell you how many days but he caught a nice lot of [unclear] with trepang, all ready for when we were there [unclear].

And Birdshaw is the father of Utherpindoo. You've heard of Utherpindoo? Birdshaw kept in touch with me all the time I was wanting to come back and afterwards I came in to Darwin and he came and gave me a corroboree, as the same as the [unclear] only that was the front and we were back at the back you see. He came down and had a corroboree out on the.... more or less at the front. Oh they gave me a wonderful time. He got hold of his family and quite a few of the others and gave me a great time. And those are the treasures that I have in my mind of the different ones coming in to see me. But there's very few of them left now. [unclear] of course, and Utherpindoo used to come in and every time we came in to Darwin, he would come in and have a cup of tea with his wife. [unclear] he had family troubles and I haven't seen him....

The last time I saw him was at Yoongalla. We finally went for a visit and he came from Kiringi on the plane so he sat with me on the plane. In fact he pushed my wheelchair to the plane, but nowadays I haven't seen him for a long, long time. Presumably he'll turn up again but I think he had a lot of tribulations [unclear].

**JD** You didn't stay trepanging for very long then. You left it after that, did you?

**GRAY** I was trepanging from 1932 until '38. Yes, up till '38. I had my boat from Mr Duramats [unclear] and then later on he wanted the boat back and sent it out pearling again and so he had another boat from.... Clarke was the fellow's name. I can't think of his first name now, but a friend. But this boat was a beautiful boat but what? It was open from stem to stern and the older timbers were rotten. The masts had had spokes driven into them. I don't know what they call the spokes into the.... I don't know the names of the types of masts now, where the [unclear] on the mast and this last boat I lost a mast having just caught on a sandbank just coming through Local Island Passage or strait. We hit the sand bank and the main mast slipped over. But we still carried on with the one mast and that was the time that I went into [unclear]. ..... I think that would be the time.... no, I think I made a trip to Caledon Bay and then on the one mast and then set out for Darwin with a final load of [unclear].... I suppose it would be the final load. We were so loaded down there wasn't room for any of the crew to sleep there, under the hatches' covers or in the cabin even. We all had to sleep on the deck on the top.

But it was in the bad weather time, we had a very rough trip as far as Murrinimbi, and I said, "We have got to try and go to Darwin just on the mast in this weather. I'll leave a couple of tons of the trepangs so that we can at least take shelter inside, just under the hatches say, and go back to Caledon Bay, go on working there until it clears up," and because it's still [unclear] to help me through. So went back and then one day,

decided.... I think we were getting some very rough weather in the bay and we couldn't work in Caledon Bay, so I said, "I think we'll go round in to Tryal Bay the next day. As long as it's going to keep blowing we have to go." Up by the jetty there was a Cape Gray in Caledon Bay and it's named after me. But the Cape Gray, you had to go round it to Tryal Bay.

So, we had worked in there a little bit before and I thought we'd go back there because it's more sheltered than where we were. Oh it was a fairly open bay, more sheltered than Southern Bay was. So we went to go but before we got round Cape Gray we were struck with this weather, not a gale, more a cyclone, and it wasn't long before the second mast went. And we wallowed and wallowed and it took some time to hold it for the [unclear] to keep it in line. But eventually we got right into Tryal Bay and then we got the dinghy out and towed it as far as we could, but we got on to a sandbank and the boat was so heavily loaded, she just went over. All the side of the boat went in it was so rotten. I should have been aware of that. I know when I told you you told me exactly the same thing.

When we came out on one of their boats.... no, we had been to and probably take.... I'm wrong again. We'd been to Capalver Station to take some stores. I took him up.... a fellow used to try [unclear] up and down the rivers you know. I don't know, but we'd been up to Capalver, came out of Capalver and the only thing we had on board was our gear for going trepanging, you see. We went across the entrance for that. We went to land on there and we went over on our side. So we'd got nothing to prop the boat with. If we'd been able to prop the boat we would have been all right. But when you went inside you could see the side of the boat is concave it would be, wouldn't it? Yes, inwards. And as the tide came up all the water was coming in through the side of the boat and before it righted itself all the planks dropped back into place.

So we carried on. We went round to.... We went working like that to get.... we went into pearlers.... I don't know it was Caledon Bay or not? Yes, I think it was Caledon Bay and then they said they're packed again with the produce and I wished I'd left it all because I would have been financial then. But you see I'd only left a couple of tons, and that all went. That all went and the missions were carting it in and carting a lot of stuff in, one way and another.

**JD** So you lost the vessel and its cargo?

**GRAY** I lost the vessel, yes. But then anyway, I was bright enough to cut the mast off. It was broken off you see, so the owner had the mast with the spokes driven in to hold the sail in position, time after time, over the years I suppose, and it left the mast only held up by the rigging you see. Anyway the boat was insured when I went out but he hadn't reinsured it, so he got nothing for it except that he got what we had towed off in the salvage money. He got that because it was this.... working on the salvage, we got 200 pounds salvage I think from the Japanese boats and the men, the boatmen, they had most of it and my share, which wasn't a great deal.

**JD** Those boats were Japanese boats?

**GRAY** They were Japanese boats. We'd taken the two boats where the massacre.... the crews had been massacred.

**JD** Tell us about the massacre. You haven't told us about the massacre.

**GRAY** No. I think I mentioned earlier on that that was in the first trip to Caledon Bay, that was, the massacre.

**JD** Could you tell us about that?

**GRAY** Yes, I can go on to that. We went in to Caledon Bay and set up a camp which is now Gray's Bay in Caledon Bay, and did very well there. But we weren't on close enough to the beds where the trepang.... we had such a long way to go up and down in Caledon Bay to get to the trepang, which wasn't worrying us a great deal because we had all the time in the world, you see. But two Japanese boats came in one day, came ashore and came up to me. "Mr Gray, we want to go down to Groote Eylandt," but they had a crew there that were frightened to go to Groote Eylandt and they were panicking. He said, "If we all go down to Groote Eylandt we could fish any trepang there. Do you mind if there's no trepang there or if the crew won't let them go in to Groote Eylandt. Do you mind us coming in to Caledon Bay?" "No," it didn't worry me that they were there. I said, "There's plenty of trepang here by the look of it, for everybody."

So they left us. The fellow didn't like [unclear] when they came in, came in to our camp. He had a comb and some glasses and calico to all the people sitting in my camp, you see, all the Aboriginals. I didn't care for that very much but anyway they came back again [unclear] the crews absolutely refused to go on to Groote Eylandt. [unclear] I think. So they said, "You don't mind?" "No," I said, "I don't mind you being in Caledon Bay." But I found out then they were late on the trepang beds and they were out early in the morning before we got down there and when we got to the places where there were no trepang, you see. So we decided to move camp and we moved [unclear]. There was a creek on one side and so we were both.... all we had to do was both go out at the same time and get up to the beach, you see. So that would have worked very well but we'd only just finished getting our smokehouse up and getting ready. When everything was all ready to start work and they sent.... they had a boat waiting for me. They sent it round to tell the Kallomans if they wanted to work and they could come and work if they wanted to.

So he goes round. To go to the Kallomans' camp which was half way between mine and the Japanese camp, they had to go round the southern strip and go to the Kallomans' camp, you see. And going round the point of the southern strip was where the Japanese camp was, he saw the boat [unclear] the Japanese had been attacked. He saw spears flying everywhere so they shot back with the dinghy as fast as they could. So I set out in the dinghy then to go across the reeds to the Japanese camp, stopped near the boats and I saw the.... they were emptying the boats at the time and then they all got off, and cleared away from us and we went to the boat and took some guns and we went towards the shore. There was nobody there left of the Japs only [unclear - excessive noise] But we had to leave the [unclear] if only we'd gone round first the natives see.... oh and then six natives had come in to the camp at the time to say that.... to tell us that the Japanese had been killed and [unclear] pay money. They left that camp.... had been killed.

So anyway, we went towards the shore. I was going to run if possible because I couldn't think that they would hurt us. But one of them had a Japanese gun and fired a shot at us. I didn't know at the time that the man who fired the shot at us had a double barrelled shotgun. I didn't know at the time that Gerin, that's one of the Kallomans, speared him in the leg for firing at us. But if I'd known that I could have gone ashore at the time you see, but as it was I couldn't. We set back again and went to the boats and up-anchored the boats, took them over to my camp and walked all round the shore and I still can't think today but it would be quite a long, long way -

many, many miles. After leaving my camp we crossed the creek and then we came across the body of Kimoshima, that was the head Japanese man, and I think we stayed and buried him. Then we went on to the Japanese camp and there we found the cook in their kitchen. He was dead and two more down at the water's edge and one in the water. There were six Japanese in the party and.... that's Kimoshima, the cook, two at the water's edge and then we didn't find any more. We found four at the first time.

So we buried the three and then the following day we found the engineer of the boat up on some rocks at one side and we buried him. We never saw any sign of natives. We only heard them after we first arrived there from the distance. So we recied around for three days to see if we could come across the sixth man. Anyway we eventually concluded that he'd got away. Six of the others that were not from that part, they got away from the Japanese and we concluded that he got away overland, you see.

So then we went to the boat, got the boats moved to my camp, cleaned everything up and then decided that we would return. Just pick my crew up, you see, and we'd also got six of the Japanese crews with us, so we had enough crews for the three boats and then we set out for Murrinbimbi. We eventually arrived in there and gave them the news. Then we left Murrinbimbi and went on to Darwin and explained the situation to Darwin, and foolishly handed the boats over to the enemy straight away. But anyway we were able to get the men to put the stuff on them and then because my crew wanted salvage, you see, because I didn't want to bother about the salvage, but they wanted salvage, so I just had to go through with it.

We had them taken to Darwin and then we found that we had to return to Darwin because of being questioned and what have you and all that sort of thing. The owner of the boat and the authorities, [unclear] they came again and I thought well, I'll carry on to Barnum Bay for a little while and see how things go. I took them to Gilburne Island and the missioners there told me that two men in a very small [unclear] boat fifteen foot long, had been travelling down the coast. They called in there and they tried to advise them to go back to Darwin, especially after the Caledon massacre, and these two fellows said that they wouldn't, they were going to go on. But the day I arrived at Gilburne Island they'd arrived at Murrinbimbi and Theodore Webb, who was missionary in charge at that time, he tried to advise them to go back to Darwin, because they were destitute. They had no provisions of any sort. They hadn't even got a compass or a chart and they were going round to Thursday Island. They said they thought they could follow a chain of islands.

So anyway I got to Gilburne Island and arrived at Murrinbimbi and I still wish I'd got that letter Mr Burke sent out to me, in a canoe right out in the Arafura Sea, no sign of land in sight, but these natives had come out to me and not picked me up, but found me and then I went.... I was going to Murrinbimbi in any case because they'd asked me to at Gilburne. I got in and I found these two men on the beach (they were Mr Shepherdson and Mr Werne) fixing their boat up which was damaged because they'd gone on to a reef, and trying to advise them to go back to Darwin. I stood on the beach for two or three hours trying to get them to go back. So at last the Murrinbimbi people gave them some stores and I [unclear] straight off my chart for them, and I advised them not to travel across the Gulf, because they would never make it in that tiny boat, but to go round the Gulf, but on no account to go ashore on the way down past Groote Eylandt and, of course, they did the wrong thing. They went ashore and they interfered with women and they both got killed. That was two more killings.

The next thing that I found... oh I had towed from Murrinbimbi to Arnhem Bay which was [unclear] and I didn't go any further than Arnhem Bay. I just managed to keep myself going, you see, and some of the natives came over from Tullerton Bay to [unclear] a big [unclear] and asked me if I would go back to Caledon Bay. That they wouldn't harm me if I would go back.

So on my next trip out from Darwin I went back amongst them again. I was received with open arms and persuaded them would they come back in with me when I went back to Darwin the next time. So anyway the three who were most concerned in the killings said that they were coming with me, and in the meantime the police had sent [unclear] police to Arnhem Bay, and they went overland to Caledon Bay and didn't see natives all the way, and they came back to Darwin and then they were sent from Darwin down to Groote Eylandt to the base camp at Groote Eylandt, and they stayed at the mission and they'd only been down a little while and one of them got killed, the police, on Wooder Island. They should never have landed on Wooder Island really. But they landed there and just after these two tracksmen had been killed. You see, the natives thought that the police were after them and so one of them got killed.

So anyway after the killing of the two white men, I went back in to Caledon Bay again and got this big [unclear]. In the meantime the mission people had come up on what they called a "peace exhibition" to try and find out what was the cause, why they were killing so many boat people at the time, you see. They knew a few of the boat people and they went and they arrived in Caledon Bay and they found us there which took the wind out of their sails. But anyway they were very friendly with me and then it was on that trip that I went up to take all the trepang to Murrinbimbi... to have to return on account of the weather, and then I cut in to Caledon Bay. I decided to take a run round in to Shower Bay which was the next bay on the coast and that's where I was wrecked you see, and I was stranded there for a month with one white man and two half-caste men and crews from Murrinbimbi [unclear].

So anyway when I lost the boat we had to stick everything we could from the boat and....

**JD** That's the boat that the Aboriginals....

**GRAY** The Aboriginals helped me and they helped me set up a camp there with my sail. The sails made tents, and I just had to wait there. Then two of the Caledon people went down to the mission to let them know I was wrecked and stranded there, and they arrived just at the time the leader of the expedition.... just the day before he came back from Burketown, and he arrived just as these were setting out to rescue me. He said, "I'll come," and the next thing he was in the mission boat and so anyway, the mission people came up and that was all right.

They told me there was a boat for sale down at the mission and I was able to buy a boat on the spot where I was wrecked. It was not as big a boat as the other one which, of course, held me back for the next few years, you see and, of course, I'd lost everything. I had to start completely.... I had to get the boat on tick to open it up to start off. But I was able to.... I had already asked the Aboriginals if they would go in with me to Darwin and give themselves up as the killers of the Japanese, and I hadn't been in contact with the killer of the police or anything, not even the white men you see. But when I got to the mission, the mission was asked if they would take these killers of the Japanese in to Darwin - the killers of the policeman rather, in to Darwin, and they said no, they weren't police. It was up to the police to take them to gaol if they wanted to get them, and then they suggested that as I was taking in three of the Caledon people for killing the Japanese, who wanted to come in to me. As I say it was

far better if they gave themselves up because they thought at the time, that if the Japanese hadn't fired at them.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

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## TAPE 2 SIDE A

**JD** Fred, on the last tape we were talking of how you brought three of the Aboriginal people involved in the massacre back for trial in Darwin.

**GRAY** Yes.

**JD** You expected them to get a light sentence but, in fact, they got twenty years in gaol. You then went back to Caledon. Is that right?

**GRAY** Yes.

**JD** And could you tell us what happened from there on?

**GRAY** Well, I started up fishing for trepang again, and it was more difficult because after taking the Aborigines in to Darwin, I had a smaller boat and it meant that Caledon... well, it was quite a long way to Darwin for carrying much, so I used to take my material into the mission where the coastal boat came down at first, and then get my stores that way. I found that I had to make trips across to Thursday Island in my little six ton cutter and how I used to do it, I don't know, because really I knew nothing about sailing boats except the little bit that I'd learned at Broome when I was pearl fishing and then, of course, I had both boys (both crews) who had experience before on small boats at Thursday Island. I had three men who were fairly proficient in sailing boats and, of course, I learned to do it, but when they'd finished with me and gone back to Thursday Island, I had to do the skippering myself, see, and yet with this small boat, I used to go backwards and forwards to Thursday Island with a small Aboriginal crew, and I never had a mishap at all.

On one occasion I got to... soon after starting at Umbakumba, I got a bigger boat again, but I was never able to use it because the War was on, and I could only just use my small boat, but nevertheless, how I used to travel direct from the base of Groote Eylandt straight across... I use to go across to Mapoon in Queensland and visit the mission there and go on from there up to Thursday Island, and then sometimes I would come directly from Thursday Island straight back across to Groote. Yet I never missed the Struck Point at the top end of Groote Eylandt when I came back, and how I did it was just on dead reckoning, just an ordinary small compass and the only time I ever missed the northern Groote was when I was bringing this new boat down. This was in 1942 I think it would be, or round about 1942, and we struck a storm just outside of Thursday Island, outside the Prince of Wales Island. We lost the compass and everything off the top of the deck so we had no compass. At that time we made it right down to Vandalin Island, missed Groote Eylandt altogether.

We came down in about three or four days in hurricane winds and then we got to Vandalin Island, anchored there for a few days to find out where I was - because I didn't know quite where I was. We had to guess more or less where we were and it took me ten days to get to Fairlin down from Vandalin Island to get to Groote Eylandt,

and yet we used to go across to Thursday Island four or five days backwards and forwards.

As I say, I often sat back in the chair, when I was able to sit back in the chair, and wonder how the hell did I do it? Get backwards and forwards when the gale force had some name for sailing then. We had this and [unclear] had returned.

**JD** After you'd been there a while, you established a settlement.

**GRAY** Yes. Well, it happened that I'd been asked by the missionary, or rather asked by the Government, because the message was sent to the missionary to send across to me at Caledon Bay, to go across to Groote and help in any way they could with my [unclear] in the area, see. To the flying boats, you see. I suppose this was principally Civil Aviation because they were the only ones that I really [unclear].

**JD** Was it for the Shell Company too, the flying boat base?

**GRAY** Yes, [unclear] and it seemed to work out very well and the missionary was very friendly, Father Taylor, and then for some reason or other, he thought it would be better for the mission if I went back to Caledon Bay you see, in to a big cottage which I built for the mission. It's got their name [unclear] and support for this [unclear due to excessive noise] go back to Caledon Bay now." Well, I didn't like being hounded off so peremptorily and I said they ought to put someone in charge of the missionary because I'd made it so the missionaries had their camp on one side of the dune and the air-base was on the other side and if any natives went over, I took them over every time and took them back to Umbakumba. I built this cottage so the missionaries could put their.... I was using it because I was there, and so the missionaries could put their men in straight away and carry on, you see.

So he told me that they wouldn't.... they hadn't got a man to put in my place and if I went away all the missionaries.... all the natives would go down to the mission. So I said to him, "Well, you know that the natives are already drawn to the people at the other end of the island." I said, "If the mission people had brought in natives from the mainland who are hostile to the east coast natives," I said, "you know that there's very few there." "No, they don't, no, they don't. They will be all right. They won't bother to [unclear]" but, of course, that's what the natives were worried about, that if I went away the natives would be [unclear].

So anyway Philip Taylor and I argued and I said, "You'll have to put someone in or if someone's going away, I'll do the job myself." [unclear] if you want. "I'll do the job myself." "You can't do the job yourself," he said. "Do you know what it costs to run a mission?" I said, "Yes, I know exactly. I've been going to a mission for many years." There was always the previous missions. I'd gone backwards and forwards to Caledon Bay you see, and they had been visiting me at Caledon Bay too. That was [unclear] a Mr Perryman and the original missioner who had rescued me when I was wrecked and also had in the first place come to see me, when they had come upon what was called a "peace expedition" and they were surprised to find a white man around at the time. In fact I think it did take the wind out of their sails when they found that things were so peaceful, which they were.

So we argued about it and the next thing he did, was to get on the first flying boat he could and went in to Darwin (you see, the flying boats could go in that time) and see if I could do it, you know, from the island. So I had spent a couple of months with him. His wife had died recently and I'd spent to keep him company and help him for a couple of months before going back to Caledon Bay. So the thing was he turned

hostile. I had a letter from Dr Cooke that [unclear] but he had no objections to my being on the mainland, I still had my permit to be on the mainland, but he would prefer if I was on the island. So the thing was, I said, "Oh well, I've got to get all my gear back in to order again before I went back to the island." So that we could have the nice technique to make it easier for carrying stuff from the various tankers that came in for the Shell Company and I said, "It's going to take a little time for that," I said, "so we will see how things go."

So in the meantime, Mr Hempel (Squadron-Leader Hempel) had taken over the Civil Aviation base and censorship, and I met him on the air-base one day and I was telling him about things and he said, "Senator Pollo is coming up from the south on one of the flying boats." (I think he was expected that day or something.) He said, "You be here on the jetty when he comes and I'll introduce him to you. You let him know what you want." So that happened. I was there to meet Senator Pollo when he walked up the jetty and told him how things were. He went up to the air-base buildings, sent a telegram to Darwin, "Gray to be left alone and his position made legal." So I just carried on there and eventually a Mr Chinnery came down and he was the Chief Protector of Aborigines at that time. It's got a different name now but it was Chief Protector at that time. [unclear] titles, and he came down and he was rather a disgruntled man when he arrived because he was also a friend of... or had made friends with Philip Taylor at the mission, and he said, "Now what do you want?" and I said, "All that I want is my permit to stay on the island and I'll carry on here." So he said, "Well, how many acres do you want?" He said, "You'll have to have a lease." I said, "I don't want a lease. If I do anything it will be for the natives." I didn't know how long it would be and I didn't... This was all in the mind of... just go ahead and have cartons there and sell produce to the air-base and other things, which I did.

It wasn't long before we were able to get the gardeners going and we use to sell artefacts from the [unclear] at the air-base. But I knew if I did it I had to put everything of mine into the settlement, that I wouldn't be able to return to carrying on making money for myself you see. I'd just got to the stage where with the help of the air-base business that I was doing, and the money I got from the Shell Company, etc, I was back on my feet again, you see. From the time that I was wrecked I had only just been able to make enough to scratch along you might say.

So anyway (I must just try and collect myself a little bit).

I'd already set up a little house for the missionaries to come in to you see, so it was not difficult for me to carry on. I'd still got my boat and we set to and cleared a few acres of land (about twelve acres) for producing mainly the food for the natives, that was sweet potatoes and cassavas, and we also got several vegetables growing that they used at the air-base. We did washing for the people at the air-base. We made bread for them to eat at the air-base. The natives made it, not me, and I taught the natives to do the ironing because all the time I was on the boat, I had my own petrol iron you see, and so that's how we managed things. The air-base were very pleased with our goings on.

We had to keep the natives from being on the air-base. It was an area of land which was... what did they call it? Seconded? No, taken out of the reserve you see. So, no whites were allowed to come on to the settlement at all, and no Aborigines were allowed to go on to the air-base without permission. Well, we got two natives which they used as stewards at the air-base. They used to go over every day and help the cook and do the officers (many of the officers) there at the air-base. The Shell Company employed a lot of them as [unclear] virtually now they employed only between [unclear] employed. They used to have different natives to go over to sort



out [unclear] and all the money they earned went into the settlement fund. I transferred all the money in my account which just happened to be fairly considerable at that time.... I transferred it to the Groote Eylandt Settlement Account and the Governemnt gave me permission to have a Trust Account and so that was all right. A little while after having permission to have this, the Government wrote to me and said I would have to.... I couldn't have the Trust Account because I wasn't a member of the government service.

Then a little while later they sent word again that I could have a Trust Account, but I told the bank manager and they said, "Look, leave it as it is, the Groote Eylandt Native Settlement. Get someone else to.... one of your half-caste people to make a second signature on the cheque," and that's where we finished up. The Chinese half-caste, he used to sign the cheque so we had no more [unclear] then. But I kept my own Darwin account going and I kept ten pounds in that account from the time we started the settlement to the time I came back to Darwin. We had quite a few people sending money at various times for the settlement and sometimes a few into the current account, and quarterly we transferred it from my current account to the settlement account.

As I say we managed that quite [unclear] the settlement funds and a few of the [unclear] for extra food and there wasn't a great deal because they used so much. We had poultry and by the time I left the settlement we had poultry and goats, cattle - a nice cattle herd. One of the policemen who came down, he said, "Look, Mr Gray, you've got the best cattle herd in the Territory," because the natives collected animals you see. We started off with three from Local River. The red poll bull from Thursday Island, or rather [unclear] it came from, and it built up into a very nice herd that we were eating.... we were killing off a bull every now and again, and we got a herd of British cattle, but the mission took over after we left and they let all the cattle go. They put all the goats up on North Beach Island. I don't know what happened to the chooks. I left them turkeys, ducks and chickens. They all vanished. So that's how things went.

**JD** You were there for quite some years.

**GRAY** Twenty years, yes, twenty years altogether. But the last two years I closed the settlement down because the mission were wanting a lot of changes done with the Aborigines. They were going to pour our money into them and they.... were running into hundreds and thousands, going to the Aborigines. Also they were going to supply the money for me to engage staff and there had been a lot of keeping and all the rest of it and I decided that it just wouldn't work, how they wanted it and, of course, all new houses would have to be built. Of course, in my time, they had no houses except their own [unclear]. We did build paperbark cottages, stringybark cottages, which they appreciated in the wet season and as soon as the dry season came they tore them down for firewood and went back on the beach again to sleep. So that's how we went on right until I finished up there. We had no houses, only the cottage. The buildings that we built for the settlement itself had meant that the children all slept in dormitories and the people had a people's kitchen where all the food was cooked for the [unclear] people you see, so they all had good meals every day. But everything went on well, in fact we were supposed to have one of the two healthiest stations in the Commonwealth.

That's on the health survey which I was very proud of that because we had no hookworm, no leprosy, but still there.... TB amongst any of the people. Either I killed them off the court or not, I don't know. But the thing was there was no [unclear] at the time and it wasn't until after I went they got everything after, because they

started mixing up with people from the mission, you see. They had leprosy and hookworm very badly. We had no skin diseases which today is just alive with skin disease - that's hookworm and tinea. Anyway they work a good case, I think. If it had only kept going like that, more or less in their natural state, and I would say they were happy. No beer.

**JD** Have you been back since then?

**GRAY** Yes. I didn't go back for seventeen years because I wasn't supposed to go back you see. That was the agreement that I wouldn't go back to the settlement, but I was able to go close. I suppose I still had my.... no, I suppose that had lapsed really, my permit to be on the reserve too, but in seventeen years I went to the airport, got on a plane and went down, but I knew what to expect because the people all came to me and they were coming in to work.... for the first six years they were still coming backwards and forwards to the settlement at Umbakumba. That was the Little Umbakumba [unclear] and so I knew exactly what was going on on the mission.

**JD** That Little Umbakumba was the establishment that you set up here in Darwin?

**GRAY** Yes, Little Umbakumba. The mission carried on for about three years after I left and then they handed it back to the Government again. Then the Government set it up as a [unclear] or something and sent all sorts of funny.... there might have been some good people among them but from what I could see they were funny sorts of people went down. There were [unclear] a big meals allowance which went down and they've got photographs of all the cartons that appear [unclear] The Government built them a beautiful canteen where they could have meals all cooked, a restaurant in it. It was just money, money, money thrown into the place. And then they wrecked that, wrecked it themselves, the natives wrecked it.

But when I went down the canteen was going and they'd got a bar in there and on that occasion I went down, white people were sitting down with the Aboriginals on the floor in the canteen, all drinking beer all day. Things were really gone to the pack. I had no objections to them drinking beer if they would drink one at a time or something like that, but they didn't have any at all because I always had a drink of anything, but I never had more than one drink. I always tend to [unclear] my drinks. I'd go to a party, have a glass of beer and that would do me for the whole evening and I've always enjoyed beer. That's the only time I enjoy it.

**JD** Can I ask you, Fred, how were the children getting on?

**GRAY** After I left, you mean?

**JD** Yes, when you went back?

**GRAY** When I went back. Well, the good thing is in going back, the last time made the most impression on my memory of the lot I think. The men had got plenty of money, the women have rarely got plenty of money with all the Chinese diamonds and that. They can get it from them, but a lot of the young men are being killed off by either the drink or spearings or something like that, through the year, and the police are not informed young children.... their fathers have been killed and they're being brought up by their brother's wives, that sort of thing. There is no discipline there for the children. It seemed to me that when I went down the last time that all that they had to do was wreck it. We had left a two storey building there. We bought the [unclear] settlement there and we transferred them to the Umbakumba see. One of the two storey buildings was [unclear] and cement upright sure.... the cement uprights had all been

pulled down to [unclear] of the air-base. The cement lumps that were holding the building up.... they'd been hauled down to the beach, floated across on rafts to the settlement, dragged up and directed to the settlement, all [unclear] except that they did have a carpenter up.... I forget the man's name, but they did get a carpenter [unclear] up to organise the erection of these different pediments that they'd brought up from the air-base. There's one of them still there.

But when I went back seventeen years later that two storey building was still standing intact. There had been a cyclone or two and my old house first of all was used as a municipal building. They used my old house for the offices there, which was quite enough for the whole settlement. Then Mr Whitlam arranged for the municipal building to be built at a cost of over half a million plus it was, which took the place, air-conditioned and everything whereas the old house with the whole lot of business that was done, it was still big enough. But the thing was that the natives themselves wouldn't allow any of the newcomers in charge to pull my old house down which was a cement brick house, or this two storey building.

But anyway the children hung on to this two storey house and had just broken everything solid in the building and that's how I believe some of the white people knew how the children were behaving. Everything they could possibly break up. The only reason my house has survived is I think, because some [unclear]. It's only.... it's in ruins now but the natives themselves all want to keep this historic business, to destroy this whole cottage. They haven't got the go in them to get things going.

**JD** This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

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## TAPE 2 SIDE B

**JD** Fred, after you left Umbakumba, you came back to Darwin and what did you do with yourself here?

**GRAY** The first thing that I did was to go and buy a block of land with a nice little house on it. It was a farming sort of.... cleared and apart from that. There was only one outhouse on it which we used for the Aboriginals when they came in, you see.

But first of all I had to get my own stuff away from the island. We hired a boat from the Methodist mission to bring the gear over that I was allowed to bring in, that I'd asked for you see. I got everything I asked for they had to bring in, you see, because I didn't own anything that was on the ground you might say. At least, I was allowed to bring in my boat because I went there with the boat in the first place and then I was allowed to bring in any [unclear] that I had brought in, half a dozen chooks, half a dozen goats and I couldn't move any cattle, of course, they were too big. But I [unclear] the island that I would like to have because all that furniture was given to me - some by the air-base. When the air-base closed down I was allowed to have so much of the furniture, only just bits round the house you might say. So we had a boatload of stuff when we came in.

So we arrived.... my wife came in first and set the house. It was a walk in, walk out business. People walked out and my wife walked in. I arrived on the 6th of May, I think it was, in '58, and Marjorie had brought in some of the people on the plane, so they helped her. So then we had to set up Umbakumba [unclear] and decided to go in

for some chooks and that sort of thing and took all the balance of my money to pay, so I was penniless again and before very long I had an overdraft of 2000 pounds. But things got to the stage where.... This was in 1966, I think when the assimilation came in and we were just to the stage where we could start to make money and, of course, it was a problem for the settlement. The natives were all paid, I think it was two pounds a week at the time and all their food.

So it just got to the stage where it was beginning to pay and also some friends of ours, it was [unclear] who I had made friends of ours, asked if we would look after their dog for them while they went on holidays, which we did, and another friend asked us to do the same. We didn't charge them for it, but then the next thing I got, people were beginning to ask us and we had to build our kennels bit by bit, a kennel at a time almost, so at last we could quote a kennelling business.

Then the assimilation business came in, and I told the natives that they could have their cans of beer, but never more than a couple of cans or so at a time, but I wouldn't have them bringing cartons on the place. They wouldn't have that. They wanted cartons. So all of the people went away. They even took their adopted children. So I saw Mr Ginsey and they took them to some white people who were happy that they could have them there for tea, now that type of people. So I saw them and these people they'd taken the children to school the following day and they said, "Take them away." I went to the school and took them home to [unclear] and then brought them home you see, and we carried on with those three.

**JD** These were the children that you had?

**GRAY** The adopted ones, yes. Then a couple of the other odd ones came back [unclear] but then, of course, I wasn't doing it for the natives then. I was going to build the place for myself, you see. Of course, it never worked out that way because I always had [unclear] coming in and I had ten pounds [laughs] in those days and all that sort of thing.

But anyway it got to the stage where the kennel boarding business had built up and Marjorie and I used to walk the dogs every day and look after them, and then we employed a white man instead of.... and so it built up gradually. Then the Government decided they wanted that block of land and bought it off me after from 1958 until 1974 I think. I was 74 years old then and I transferred everything from there. I had one of the adopted - two of the adopted boys. We had the littlies, all the names of this one family. We had them almost [unclear] and they would come and help me, go back to the island, come and help me, go back to the island, that sort of thing, you see, make some money and go back. So they got into these kennels which did very well. We had as many as (on one occasion) we had as many as 64 dogs in the kennels you see. But it all went to the knackers and fortunately Marjorie, that's my wife, was able to go backwards and forwards to England, because she had an old father there you see.

We were able to just keep a [unclear] all the time she was there. I was never short of money altogether but all the time I kept these different natives coming in, working for a few weeks and going back to the island, that sort of thing.

Then that finally stopped us, you might say, till I couldn't take on the work any more. We always had some of the natives backwards and forwards you see, it used a bit of my money but, of course, when I went on the pension as well, so I was allowed to make a very small amount of money for myself and that's how I went on. I never

wanted to make a lot of money except it turned out I had.... that I had everything I wanted.

**JD** Fred, last year you were awarded the Order of Australia medal.

**GRAY** Yes. That came out of the blue. I was quite surprised when I was asked whether I would accept it and lots of people [unclear] always wondered why I had been recognised. You see there have been such a lot of people who have come to me here who were in the Air Force, and the Civil Aviation, visiting me, and I always wondered why the minister.... everyone who stood up about my work at Umbakumba and no-one could understand but, of course, I had the mission people against me and, of course, the mission people are very strong, and yet I've got good people in the Government working at Vandalin as well. There was Mr Carados, he was the secretary to the Minister of the Interior, you see, and he'd always backed me up every time that [unclear] had come. The [unclear] the anthropologist tried to back me as well, and he sent a report in which was very favourable towards me and I was told that this report had come in but they'd taken no notice of it and at last when the [unclear] report, I was left.... and he wrote back, [unclear due to excessive noise].

They did everything they could. Try to bring down a couple of patients and one murderer hung himself on the island which was tragic [unclear] and I asked for an inquiry and the result of the inquiry was the policeman was [unclear] the mission. How much of the last one and the first one.... The last one was more sure that the facts made in the statements, but the first one told to do that sort of [unclear] because it was the means to survive, I suppose [laughs]. But I enjoyed it all.

**JD** Thank you for sharing that story with us [unclear].

**GRAY** Yes, and I know that the natives were looking for me to (that's the Umbakumba natives I suppose) that's when it first started I think and then I did hear that some other people had pushed this native business and, of course, now it's the Order of Australia now.

**JD** Congratulations on it anyway.

**GRAY** Thank you very much and I could tell you something else. My [unclear] my wife died last Christmas. We've been very happy too. The prodigal son of Western Australia [laughs].

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Fred Gray of Umbakumba, now of Howard Springs, Northern Territory.

END OF RECORDING ON TAPE 2 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with **GEORGE HARITOS**

### INTRODUCTION

George Haritos is 70 years of age and started fishing before the Second World War. After five and a half years of service in the Australian Army (much of it overseas) he returned to fishing, this time fishing the northern rivers for barramundi, an industry in which he was a pioneer.

Cyclone Tracy destroyed both his boat and his home, and George himself now has an irreversible illness.

In this interview he records something of his immense store of knowledge of the Gulf of Carpentaria barramundi fishery. It is a fascinating story of boom days and decline, of hardship and setbacks, all told in a tone of quiet understatement by a very notable fisherman.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry and was recorded in Mr Haritos' home in Fanny Bay, Darwin, Northern Territory by Jack Darcey on the 19th May 1990.

There are two sides of one tape and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** George, would you record your full name please?

**HARITOS** George Haritos.

**JD** And your date of birth?

**HARITOS** I was born in Darwin in 1920. I am of Greek origin.

**JD** When did your parents come out to this country?

**HARITOS** 1915.

**JD** And did they come to Darwin straight away?

**HARITOS** Yes. Most of the immigrants got as far as Darwin and before they could go any further they got work here. My father started the salt works and made salt for the

Vestey meatworks and then for the buffalo hunters - supplied them with salt; and of course a bit to the bakers. There used to be some Chinese fishermen here making salt fish. Well actually they were the original fishermen of these barramundi areas.

**JD** The Chinese were?

**HARITOS** Like the Finiss River and Sampan Creek, which as you know got its name by the name [sampan]. Sampan Creek is a delta of the Mary River. But they were more interested in small threadfin salmon, which they sort of packed the inside with salt and rammed it into the stomach and then packed them in salt, and then brought it into Darwin and sold it to the Chinese for local consumption and export to China for flavouring their rice and things.

**JD** Yes, yes! And you went to school here in Darwin did you?

**HARITOS** Yes, I went to school in Darwin, a Catholic school. I was apprenticed in the building trade as a carpenter but before I finished my time I went fishing in the harbour using fish traps - the arrow head traps. The market could only absorb so much fish here, and then of course the war came and I went away for five years.

**JD** George, born in 1920 and served five years during the war, you must have been pretty young when you joined the....

**HARITOS** Armed services. I think I was about twenty when I joined - I was close to twenty.

**JD** And you joined the Army did you?

**HARITOS** Yes.

**JD** And where did you serve?

**HARITOS** Oh, New Guinea and up at a place called Morotai, which was the taking off base for the attack on Borneo. I was with the Royal Australian Engineers and we were the supply base for landing on Borneo. We supplied bridging equipment and lots of other things - small boats - to the forces.

**JD** And when you came home after the war what happened?

**HARITOS** I got my discharge in Brisbane and went to Adelaide to work on a housing scheme there. Actually I got an occupation release.... I couldn't stand it there, I lasted about five or six weeks in Adelaide. I came back to Darwin; and some chap that I was actually partners with in the fishing before the war came back here, and another chap that I grew up with, and bought some of the disposal boats from the army disposal - small boats. And we did any work that we could find along the coast, mainly carrying buffalo hides.

And of course we operated out of.... one of the places was a place called Sampan Creek, one of the deltas of the Mary River, and while we were there at low tide waiting for the hides to come down or the tide to get up so that we could go a lot closer to the bank to load them, barramundi kept bumping the boat as they were sort of.... any little movement they would probably be lying alongside. And we used to drift the

dinghy down along the bank and we'd get two or three fish jumping into the boat, and that was our eating. So we decided to get some nets and try it out for fishing.

We had Italian hemp nets to start with, which weren't very successful. Crocodiles and sharks played merry hell with them, and the barramundi would break them easily. After they'd been in the water for a couple of days barramundi would just hit them and go through - straight through them like cutting cheese. But we did get quite a quantity of fish and we found that the market in Darwin wasn't big enough to absorb it.

Anyway, my brother did a tour of the capital cities. The capitals like Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, and drummed up some business to supply barramundi to these places, and from there on it kicked off. And then, of course, we got nylon nets. We started off with six inch and then we went to seven/eight inch; eventually we just used seven/eight inch gill nets because we got too many small fish with the six inch.

We had a thing going, we'd airfreight them whole to the various places, mainly Melbourne. They would take whole fish, they didn't want fillets because they thought we might ring in shark on them. So we supplied them with whole fish.

**JD** Did you supply retailers or did you supply the markets?

**HARITOS** No, retailers. Retailers, yes!

**JD** And that must have been a pretty expensive exercise, airfreighting them that far.

**HARITOS** Yes. The most expensive was holding them in storage in Darwin. There was what they called the cool stores run by the government, and we stored them there and sent them away as they were required. That was quite expensive, by the time you got rid of your catch what you paid in storage. That cut into your profits.

**JD** You froze them on board, did you?

**HARITOS** No, we used ice; we packed them in ice. We had a smaller boat that would only take three or four thousand pounds to start with, and then we had a bigger boat that you could get six thousand on to. And our usual catch was between four and a half to six thousand, sometimes in a day.

**JD** In a day!

**HARITOS** Yes. Oh, there was a lot of fish there. It's something that you dream about now.

**JD** Were there many fishermen catching them?

**HARITOS** No, we were the only ones.

**JD** Oh, I see!

**HARITOS** And then a few started up fishing them in the fresh water. Of course the taste and the texture of the fish is not as good and it nearly ruined the market. People were a bit dubious about buying it. And then I got out of it.... I got out of the fishing.



My brother took over and then he sold out about 1960's to some Italians; and of course they did very well. The price went up, and it changed into supplying fillets.

When I was fishing we started off at two shillings a pound for whole barramundi and then the price went up to two and six for headless. To ship it south we'd pack it in bags. We used to load up on trips out with about eighty or ninety blocks of ice, I think they were 56 pound [lb] blocks and as we got fish we'd pull the ice out and put the fish in and then ice on top. Crack the ice, and pack them in ice until we were full. And sometimes we'd get our 5,000/6,000 lbs in a day or a day and a half - that's a day and a half fishing, not including travelling time, and come straight back home.

We started off using six inch nets and then went to seven and eight inch, and the average jumped up to.... oh, I think the average was 10 lbs per fish, headless. So we filled up very quick.

**JD** George, you mentioned earlier that some people were selling freshwater barra and that they were not as good a quality fish. Does that still go on?

**HARITOS** No. It's illegal now. There might be a little bit of poaching goes on but they are very hard on it. Of course, when the freshwater people started up, you know, seeing how well we were going and they'd get tonnes of fish in the freshwater. As you know, barramundi will move up to the freshwater from the salt and grow, and then come down and spawn. On the reverse cycle, the smaller fish go up and some of the bigger fish, and they stay in the billabongs and rivers that have broken off contact with the sea. And they were there in literally hundreds of tonnes, but the flavour wasn't very good - no! A lot of people called it muddy, we called it weedy, and the texture of the flesh is much softer. You can always tell by their colour when you get them out of the water, they've got a golden.... looks like a herring colour, a greeny/gold sheen about them.

**JD** Did you fish for any other species besides barramundi?

**HARITOS** No, no we didn't. We got a few salmon in the nets. In those days there wasn't a market for them whatsoever, and actually we fished mainly in the rivers or the creeks, whereas most of the big threadfin or salmon were outside. Later on people started fishing salmon (threadfin).... The market developed for threadfin or salmon and they fished them out in the flats at the river mouths, and they could get them in very large quantities too when they struck a school of them. They were a big fish also - they are a big fish, more or less the same as barramundi and they have the same habitat as barramundi.

**JD** What about reef fish. Is there much reef fishing goes on?

**HARITOS** Oh, in close to Darwin there are some reef fish but not a constant supply you know, it's not a commercial thing to fish for reef fish.

**JD** Is there a mackerel fishery out of Darwin?

**HARITOS** There is, but it's not a very successful one. There are mackerel around but they are moving. See later on I joined barges - actually I was driving them - and we trolled for mackerel on our coastal runs. We were supplying the coastal settlements with stores, supplies, and we always trolled. And you might strike a patch and get twenty or thirty mackerel, and then come back the next day and forever afterwards and you'd never find them there again. They move a lot. They don't seem to stay in one place. Maybe they are migrating. There are a lot of mackerel up at Aru Islands,

maybe this is sort of a path from Queensland around to the Aru Islands, I don't know. But you can never rely on a quantity of them. Spring tides, when the water got a bit dirty, you'd hardly get any; neap tides you'd get them; and between September and April you got more than you did when the sou'-easters were blowing. You might do three or four trips and not catch one while the sou'-easters were blowing, but therefore you know, it's inconsistent.

Down the west, in the Kimberley area there are quite a few mackerel there. Some people are making a living but it is not as good as barramundi was. Barramundi fishing was the best.

**JD** You did have some problems, didn't you? There were the predators, the crocodiles and sharks.

**HARITOS** Yes, yes. When we first started barramundi fishing we had terrible problems with big tiger sharks and hammerheads, they were the two main offenders - and crocodiles, of course. The crocs would go to eat the fish out of the net and with the hemp nets they'd tear great holes in them. And, of course, if a barramundi or shark... a smaller shark, or whalers also, were tangled up in the net and rolled the net a bit, the shark would come along and bite the nets in half.

**JD** Through the net?

**HARITOS** The net - clean in half! And that happened very, very often. We had a lot of trouble. If you moved up the creeks you didn't have a problem with sharks, but if you fished near the mouth at all you'd be bound to have a couple of nets cut in half in one fishing trip. With the crocodiles... they were a pest but when we saw them, well we went out with a spotlight and shot them for their skins as well.

**JD** As a sideline?

**HARITOS** As a sideline, yes, with the barramundi. So, you know, [laughs] we kept their numbers down. Later on, after '71 when they were protected, we used to try and let the croc go. They'd get caught in the nets. And then when you got nylon nets that used to stop them. They'd get their teeth tangled up. A lot of them would drown, but if they weren't drowned we'd unpick the net off their teeth and give them a few belts around the head to make them remember, and then let them go.

But the sharks were a terrible nuisance at the start, some very big tiger sharks and hammerheads. And quite often you'd get a hammerhead in the net and they tangle up much quicker because of the shape of them. And quite often they'd have babies in the net, and you'd find these things about fourteen/fifteen inches long tangled up in the net everywhere. The mother had given birth while she was tangled up.

**JD** George, was weather a problem to you?

**HARITOS** No, we fished mainly from May until about October. When the wet season came, of course, the area flooded. In the meantime, during the build-up the water would be too hot and the fish would move out into the open sea. In those days we didn't go chasing them, we didn't have any what they call flat nets here - shallow, long nets that you set in the flats. So we didn't operate say between October and May. But later on, about January sometime, February, March and April, the whole area would be flooded. The plains in back from the beach would be just a big ocean and, of course, the barramundi would spread out over the plains so I had to get them in one

concentrated place where you could catch them. In that part of the year we used to go crocodile shooting.

**JD** What about crew, did you employ crew?

**HARITOS** Yes, in those days we employed.... in the early part we employed Aboriginals, and then later we got some coloured lads that used to be at Garden Point, and when they left school the priests arranged with me to start them off and give them a job. And then, of course, you got whites interested and later the crews were white - and even some women in the crews. But that was after my day. Well put it this way, I gave it up and then went back to it again in the '70's.

**JD** How did you find the Aboriginals?

**HARITOS** Oh, they were quite good when they were interested. Until they lost interest. [Laughs]. One thing I discovered they did to me.... they'd be working gutting fish and if there were too many fish, while you weren't looking they'd push them down under water and press them into the mud with their feet, and about three days later when they swelled up they'd pop out of the mud.

Later on, in about the 1960's, the amount of barramundi fishermen increased. The fish in the creeks got a lot less because, naturally, if you start to fish a place the fish move out. But then they worked the method of using what we call flat nets - meaning they fished out in the open sea, and of course these areas were very shallow, muddy places. And they'd set the nets out in the open and for a while they were getting a lot of fish on the flats, and also salmon - which came into the market later. But gradually the quantity of fish declined and.... well they spread out, they fished the Daly, the Finnis, all Van Diemen Gulf.

With barramundi you don't get them everywhere. You've got to have that swamp backing inland to produce barramundi. Barramundi are everywhere but not in any quantity. You've got to have that swamp backing. The same goes with salmon. They feed on prawns, and of course the prawns breed in the rivers and the salmon get the prawns as they come out of the rivers.

**JD** During your time in fishing there would have been big changes in the management of the fishery, in other words licences would have been introduced and so on.

**HARITOS** Well yes, we did have licences but we just went up to the Harbour Master and got a fishing licence, no boat surveys or anything like that. Later on, of course, when they had a Fisheries Department all this thing came into being. As a matter of fact you didn't have a ticket to run your own boat; now, of course, you have to have a ticket.

Things have changed considerably. Nowadays they are buying back the licences from the barramundi fishermen. I was reading in the paper today where they've bought one for \$103,000 or something like that.

**JD** That's to reduce the number of fishermen?

**HARITOS** Yes, to reduce the number of fishermen active in the barramundi fishing. They certainly have cut the numbers down a lot, but there is still.... Some of them still make a good living, some of the good fishermen - the Italians, they are doing all right out of it. Not as good as it was, you know. At that period they made fortunes out of it,

and wrecked themselves - because it's hard work. Anyone who has been barramundi fishing for a few years, his health is not one hundred per cent.

**JD** It must be pretty difficult to work hard in this climate. It's pretty tropical, isn't it?

**HARITOS** Not so much the climate. But, you know, you might have ten or twelve fish in one small bundle of net and you've got to lift those amount of fish into the dinghy or the boat so that you can pull them through, and they are very heavy.

**JD** Lifted by hand, are they?

**HARITOS** By hand, yes. We worked out of dories originally, but nowadays they've got 15, 16 foot dinghies with 40 horse[power] outboards on them to get them mobile. You know, it makes your work quicker. And, of course, you run up to the net and you've got a very strong tide, you might have a net full of jellyfish as well, and you've got to get that net up so as you can pull the fish out.

In those days I used to sort of do it myself, whereas nowadays there might be a couple of people working a net and that makes a big difference because sometimes you couldn't get that net on board (so that you could get the fish out) without a big struggle. And this went on day and night, you know. You'd finish cleaning one lot of fish and you'd be out getting the next lot out of the net so it wouldn't go bad on you. You weren't only fishing in the daylight or dark, you just did it all the time.

And apart from the hard work the mosquitoes at night were something terrible at times - mosquitoes, insects around the light. Sandflies weren't as bad. But the thing is, you know, you've got dengue fever, Ross River fever, and there was a bit of malaria here in those days, and it all added up to make what I used to call "mud, mangroves, mosquitoes and misery". And, of course, boats were small - you camped on the boat. You couldn't rig mosquito nets or anything like that, you more or less camped on deck. It wasn't a very comfortable life at any time.

**JD** What size boat would you be working from?

**HARITOS** Well we started off with a 30 footer, and then we got to a 50 footer. But the last session I had, I had an 105 footer - an ex wheat ketch from South Australia. It had a very big freezer in it and I was working on fillets. I couldn't go back to my old haunts because they were overcrowded so I used to sail to the Roper River and fished the Roper River.

We'd work until we were full and then I did have a thing going that I sent it in with some landing barges that used to operate in the area. One trip I went to Gove and unloaded some there, and then some in the Roper River. But then they wanted to up the price of the freight so I decided to bring it in and I'd wait until I had filled up, which was 30,000 lb of fillets, and then come into town and get rid of it.

But by those days there was a wholesaler here and.... now what was the price then? About \$4 a kilo, I think. \$4 or \$5 a kilo. And you just unloaded in one lump into this, and you got your cheque straight away.

**JD** This interview continues on Side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## **TAPE 1 SIDE B**

**HARITOS** Of course, at one stage people were bringing in other fish as barramundi. Well naturally people down south wouldn't be able to recognise the difference but a man that has been handling barramundi could tell the difference, and that looked like ruining the market for a while. But I think they overcame that and, you know, the genuine barramundi is still holding its price. I think they are getting \$10 a kilo for it now - fillets.

**JD** The fishermen are getting \$10?

**HARITOS** Yes.

**JD** It is \$20 or more to the customer down south.

**HARITOS** Yes!

**JD** George, you've been out of the fisheries for a while now?

**HARITOS** Yes.

**JD** What did you do when you left fishing?

**HARITOS** Oh, I went to Gove for a while and worked at Gove for about twelve months. And then I bought a wheat ketch from South Australia - sailed it up here from Adelaide east, and worked cargo until I sort of got pushed out of business by the landing craft which were a bit easier to operate. And in 1970 I went barramundi fishing again, I put a big freezer in it and went barramundi fishing to the Roper River. I was going very well until Cyclone Tracy. I lost my house, I lost the boat, and I didn't have the heart to start up again; so I went and got myself a ticket and got a job driving landing barges around the coast supplying the aboriginal settlements with supplies. And I did that until July 1969.... [correction] '89, sorry, when I retired.

**JD** When Cyclone Tracy came, was your ketch in the harbour?

**HARITOS** Yes.

**JD** And it was lost in the harbour?

**HARITOS** Yes.

**JD** George, as a very experienced fisherman and lived in this area for a long time, what would you say the prospects for the future are for the barramundi fishery?

**HARITOS** There's a limited future, it's got to be limited. A lot of areas are being closed and it's the main areas like Mary River delta which I mentioned earlier, that's been closed. Now that is THE prime barramundi fishing area in all Australia, and of course the number of boats have to congregate in other areas. The Roper River, they were going to close it but they met with opposition, so they are still fishing the Roper; but then that will be closed. The Daly is closed. And then there are areas which are on

aboriginal land - they're closed. And as I said, there's a few areas that carry barramundi.

The Moyle River (we'll start from the west)... The Moyle River; and because of the swamps back inland, the Daly was very good. The Finniss. Because they all have big swamps inland. And then you go right around until you get to Van Diemen Gulf and you have the Mary River delta area, the Wild Man.... the West Alligator, the East Alligator, Mowganella, and then you run out of country again and the next.... I mean I'm talking about areas that carry quantities of barramundi. I mean there's barramundi all over the coast - but quantities!

The next area is around Liverpool, which is aboriginal land but no one fishes it, and then you've got the Blyth River. As a matter of fact someone was caught in there the other day and prosecuted. After the Blyth.... oh, the Glyde. The Glyde's got the big Arafura swamps up the top of it and that carries a lot of barramundi. And then you've got another 300 or 400 miles around to Blue Mud Bay. Oh, wait a minute, I'm sorry.... Buckingham Bay. It's not as good as Van Diemen Gulf but it carries a bit of barramundi.... Buckingham and Arnhem Bay.

And then you've got about 300 miles around to Blue Mud Bay. That has barramundi supply stocks but not very big stocks. Then you've got aboriginal land there, you can't fish the creeks and rivers. And the next place, of course, is the Roper. As you can see, of all this coastline there are not a lot of areas that carry quantity of barramundi; you know, commercially viable quantities!

**JD** Do the aboriginal communities fish commercially at all?

**HARITOS** No, they'd sooner buy their fish - and crabs. They'd sooner get somebody to go and catch them and buy them. That's the way things are at the moment. They are not interested in fishing.

I know a chap that went over to Bathurst Island to teach them how to use nets and that. He couldn't get them out after 4 o'clock in the afternoon because the club was open, and that was when they did their drinking. And there was no way in the world they were going to go out fishing.

**JD** Just not interested?

**HARITOS** No. I think another thing I might mention too.... the amateurs. A very strong lobby, and I think they've swayed the government, (that's my opinion of course).... swayed the government to close a lot of these areas to make the fishing best for them. And, of course, the government said "Oh, we're doing it for the tourists" - but it's obvious that the amateur fishing clubs lobbying the government has brought this about.

**JD** It's a concern to the professional fishermen?

**HARITOS** Oh, very much so. Very much so! See, another thing too. You take a year like this year. We've had very little Wet. Now there is fish in the billabongs but thousands upon thousands will die of lack of oxygen as waters recede. The fish will belly up and die. But, you know, not a few fish - just enormous quantities of them. So it's wasted, isn't it? Commercial fishing is not getting them. The amateurs can't catch them all and they just up and die. But that's the way things are going.

See, amateur fishing brings quite a bit of business to the Territory, and of course a lot of tourists come in and I think they are sacrificing.... My opinion is they are sacrificing the commercial fishermen in favour of the amateurs.

**JD** Yes.

**HARITOS** I mean they tell you that they've made studies. Naturally the fish are getting depleted, but then maybe chucking the licences back might help. But then closing all these areas.... they are the best areas, and I don't think it's going to be too good for barramundi fishermen in the future.

**JD** Are those areas that are closed to professionals also closed to the amateur fishermen?

**HARITOS** No. No they are open to amateurs. Well the amateurs don't go down to the salt water - a few of them do - but they fish the headwaters and freshwater, like Corroboree and Shady Camp. Well they are from the one system - the Mary River.

All along there are big areas of freshwater and people go out there. I mean they enjoy themselves. But then why sacrifice the commercial fisherman - because the commercial fisherman has been here a lot longer than they have. See I'm an amateur myself these days. My wife and I like to go out and camp on a billabong and catch a few barramundi and spend a week there and then come in to town. But then I can see the point - why sacrifice commercial fishermen because of it.

**JD** George, thank you very much for talking to us and giving us this wonderful insight into the barramundi fishing in this area. Thank you very much. And I wish you well for the future.

**HARITOS** [Laughs]. I haven't got much!

**JD** Oh, let's hope that that's not true.

**HARITOS** Well, it's a one way thing. Like leukaemia. It can turn into leukaemia apparently. There's no treatment for it, if they treat you it is likely to change to leukaemia.

**JD** Well, best of luck with it anyway.

**HARITOS** Thanks.

END OF INTERVIEW

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with LES LIVERIS

### INTRODUCTION

Les Liveris is a son of Greek immigrant parents who came to Darwin in the early years of this century. He served in the RAAF during the war and returned to the Commonwealth Public Service after discharge, ultimately becoming Regional Director of the Immigration Department in the Northern Territory. It was in that capacity that he became involved in the pearling industry and played a crucial role in the re-entry of Japanese divers and crews into the post-war pearling industry.

In this interview he shares his extensive knowledge of pearling and of people prominent in the industry, notably the Nicholas Paspaley's, father and son.

Despite poor health Les Liveris has been active in community work. He is a Notary Public, served in the diplomatic overseas and was awarded the Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal as well as the Order of Australia Medal.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian Fishing Industry and was recorded by Jack Darcey at Mr Liveris' home in Larrakeyah in Darwin, Northern Territory on the 21st May, 1990.

There are two sides of one tape and the interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

*JD* Would you please record your full name, date and place of birth?

*LIVERIS* My full name is Lasarus Liveris but I've always been known as Les. I was born in Darwin on the 28th October, 1923.

*JD* You were brought up in Darwin?

*LIVERIS* Yes. Actually I remained in Darwin until the age of seventeen when we went for our first holiday to Sydney and really never got back until after the war.

*JD* You avoided the war then in Darwin? You weren't bombed and all that?

*LIVERIS* Fortunately, yes we did because we left in November by ship and Darwin was not bombed until the following February so we.... the reason why we could not get back.

*JD* Just got out in time?



**LIVERIS** Just!

**JD** But you would have been here through the Cyclone Tracey trauma.

**LIVERIS** Yes. Cyclone Tracey but that was my second cyclone because I do recall one in 1937 - on the 21st March, 1937, but really that was like an afternoon sea breeze compared to Cyclone Tracey.

**JD** Must have been a terrifying experience?

**LIVERIS** I think one had to see the effect of the force of that wind to believe it. I don't think I would have believed what I was told about the effect of Cyclone Tracey. It was horrifying actually.

**JD** You went to school away from Darwin?

**LIVERIS** No, I went to school at the Darwin Public School and.... well, I won one of two scholarships awarded to the Darwin Public School which enabled you to go south to a southern boarding school, but it required a subsidy beyond that scholarship. Now, my mother had three sons - she was a widow - I was the youngest of three. She was as poor as a church mouse: couldn't find the subsidy and although two organisations offered to make up the difference my mother wasn't one - she was as proud as the proverbial peacock - to accept charity so I didn't go and I continued to study. Actually, at the time, by hurricane lamp and I studied for about (before we went on a holiday to Sydney at the age of seventeen) I think it was about six months before what was matriculation standard, although I hadn't sat for the Intermediate Level, I had gone that far.

**JD** Did you do this study by correspondence?

**LIVERIS** By correspondence, yes. I'm sure now, it was the teachers' college in Brisbane possibly, or some such organisation. I don't exactly recall the name.

**JD** What were you studying for Les?

**LIVERIS** I was trying to get my matriculation actually. This is what I was aiming for because I was working as a public servant in the Northern Territory administration originally until it was taken over by the Commonwealth in 1939 so it became a Federal public service. But to go out of the fourth division into the third division, I had to either have matriculation or the public service exam and I had neither. So when I left here at the age of seventeen, I had neither of the qualifications that enabled me to get into the third division of the public service and then of course, the war broke out while we were in Sydney - or Darwin was bombed rather. Couldn't get back. I enlisted in RAAF and finished up getting back to Darwin in February 1946.

**JD** Les, could you tell us how your family came to come to Darwin?

**LIVERIS** Well, it's a sad story. My father was a seaman. He arrived here as a migrant in 1915. He left my mother and my eldest brother back in Casta Rossa the island Hispo at my mother's residence. He went back in 1917 to bring my mother back and also some of her sisters and family and arrived back here in 1918, but the interesting thing was the trip was Casta Rossa to Darwin took seven and a half months. I was born here and actually my father died when I was two months old and my mother was left with an eight year old boy, a nineteen months old boy and a two months old baby with

virtually not a penny to bless herself with and no support. There was no governmental support scheme in those days and it was a very very hard time for her, but I've always had a great admiration for my mother because I could always recall her saying that one of these days my boys will grow up and they'll go to work and I'll be all right. We lived in shacks with dirt on the ground floors and we moved about from pillar to post until finally, in 1939 we bought our own home in Darwin and it was the good management of my mother that saved and made her buy the land. By this time my two brothers were carpenters and I was working in the public service and things started to ease off a bit. Because of the public service requirement to take leave every three years, that's the reason why we went down in November 1941 because my holidays were due and the rest of the family came down as well because they had never been away either from Darwin. My mother had been here since 1918 to 1941 and not moved out and it was quite interesting because the first big city we landed in was in Brisbane and the thing I always recall was I was helping an old Greek lady off the tram. I got onto a tram and she couldn't get off and she couldn't speak any English and she was asking for someone in Greek to help her off and I said, "I'll help you off." I spoke to her in Greek and someone turned around and said very harshly, "Speak English!" And I ended up in Immigration [laughs]. So I always thought of that little story.

Anyway that was how really basically, our pre war story. My mother laundered mainly to keep us alive and a lot of people were very kind and they gave us a bit of food here and food there, but I didn't ever believe that a struggle in life ever did one any harm and I don't think it did any of us any harm really.

**JD** She must have been a remarkable woman [unclear]?

**LIVERIS** I believe she was. I have a great admiration for her.

**JD** To come back to your own story then, Les. You served in the RAAF and then after the war, you came back to the Commonwealth Public Service, was it?

**LIVERIS** Yes.

**JD** Could you outline your career in the service?

**LIVERIS** Yes. Well, Jack, when I got back.... I had approximately two and a half years in a theatre of war and coming back to a desk [laughs] was not an easy thing and I always felt that as a clerk I'd make a good fisherman. I never ever believed that I belonged to a desk and my supervisor - I said to him, "What's wrong with me?" He said, "Try and settle down," and I said, "Well, I'm trying hard."

Well, the [unclear] was writing to me wanting me to go back into the permanent air force and then, I said no I wasn't interested in that and then they offered me a full time course down at Sydney Technical College. I thought about that for a while and I said, "No, I don't think I could put up with that either." It was just the restlessness - the post war restlessness. And then I had a person who took a bit of an interest in me because I was only 22 when I got back and he said, "Why don't you do your public service exam and get into the third division. If you're going to stay here you may as well make something of yourself." I said, "Oh, leave me alone." Anyway, by June he had convinced me to do this and I couldn't get hold of any textbooks so I had to scratch around. I had an old school friend - a Chinese boy actually - he's in Canberra still. We were very close: we were like brothers because he was living at our home after a while, because his family stayed in Longreach - they didn't come back. They were scattered actually throughout Australia and he sort of said, "Well look, study that

and study this and study something else," and I sat for the exam in October. Thinking I'd failed and a customer's friend came along one Sunday morning and said, "Oh you'd better have a look at the Gazette," I said, "Why? I'm not really interested in the Gazette." He said, "Well you ought to be." I said, "What makes you think I ought to be?" "Well," he said, "you passed the public service exam."

It was quite a shock to me, Jack, because I really didn't think I had a chance at all and then I got into the third division, but I still was with the Department of Northern Territory or the Department of Territories, it could have been at the time. Now I was getting a lot of acting positions but I wasn't getting the reasonable permanent promotions and this same guy who talked me into sitting for the third division examination came and said, "Now, there's a job that suits you in the Gazette and you're going to apply for it." I said, "Oh no, I'm not."

It was in immigration as a... starting up the immigration department in the Northern Territory and I said, "I don't know anything about immigration," and I said, "For heaven's sake, you've pestered enough and I've done the exam, now leave me alone." He said, "I'm not going to leave you alone." This went on for weeks, Jack, and finally he was standing at my shoulder and I think the Department would be a bit horrified when they hear this, and I wrote out the application while he stood over me and I said, "Well, there you are, go and post it if you want to." And so he went and posted it and I finished up getting the job and I wasn't even interviewed, Jack, and that always mystified me because there were a number of other applicants. See I had a language but the reason was I found out on my first visit to Canberra, Jack. It's quite interesting. I'd worked with a fellow in Alice Springs, he was based in Canberra. I thought he was a hard task master but he was always very fair and very helpful and apparently our administrative office in Canberra knew him and must have asked - they did ask him - because when I went to Canberra they said, "Would you like to go and see Mr so and so." I said, "Well, what for?" And he said, "Well I think he wants to say hello to you," and then it twigged. But that was how I came.... and I went to immigration.

But it was a job I liked because I was dealing with people and people's problems and I thoroughly enjoyed it. And then [unclear] the person who wouldn't promote and always left me in the acting positions said, "Come back and we'll offer you this. We'll give you a couple of grades over what you've got." I said, "No." I said, "He was the bum that trusted me without even seeing me," I said, "No I couldn't leave and anyway," I said, "I'm enjoying the work." "But you're specialising and then you'll be sorry." I said, "Oh, I'll take my chance."

Anyway I stuck with immigration, Jack, and I really did enjoy my stay with immigration. And it was there that I first became involved officially with the pearling industry by virtue of being the.... well the title wasn't Regional Director then, they called them Commonwealth Migration Officers, but the title was later changed to Regional Director. So it might be Northern Territory.... better for the purpose of this interview, rather than changing these titles if we just refer to the position as Regional Director if that's satisfactory?

**JD** Quite satisfactory.

**LIVERIS** Actually to be confronted with the pearling industry at that point it was a bit of a shock to my system. Because all I knew about the pearling industry at that stage, was my pre war knowledge which only the two names, the Edwards and the Gregorys

which were two separate companies engaged in pearling. Beyond that, I knew nothing about it but I soon found out that the industry at the time....

Well, lets go back. Pre war they operated with Japanese labour who were superb [unclear] pearlers. [unclear] divers, engineers, tenders: their tonnages were good. Now, my enquiries revealed that.... It came to my knowledge through the employers wanting labour, because they all wanted the Japanese labour back. The industry was struggling for survival. There were quite a number of people in the industry. Now the first post war pearler to my Knowledge, was Nicholas Paspaley - known as the Paspaley Pearling Company. I think he had about three luggers and he was battling along with Malaysians, Indonesians, the odd Chinese. There was a lot of old Chinese chaps that had been here many many years in the pearling industry and he finished up staying in Darwin, but the tonnages were down. They were getting four and five tons a year. The price of pearl shell on the international market was rocketing. I think from memory, it was five or six hundred pounds a ton at the time and some of them were employing Thursday Islanders. They were difficult to control: difficult to get on board. For a number of reasons, they had major problems with them and there were a couple of Australians that I recall and now, they did their own thing but they weren't doing very well either. They battled along, but they all said, "Look the answer is Japanese labour back in the industry."

Now, I was getting increasing pressure from the master pearlers here to allow Japanese labour to come in. It was beyond my authority to do this so I wrote the first report on the industry, mentioning the [unclear] state of the industry; mentioning the fact that it was struggling for survival and I had been, by this stage, having seen the experience of the master pearlers and the state that they were in, I was more or less convinced that we should have allowed Japanese labour to come in. The Department was still wary: it was by now I suppose, getting into the '50s - early '50s - when all this happened and it may have been even just before the '50s - late '49 or early 1950 - I'm not quite sure of the date.

But being wary of public reaction to the re-introduction of Japanese following the publicity of Japanese atrocities in the Pacific. It was a very difficult decision for the Department to make and they had to be satisfied that there was no alternative source of labour. So they came back and said, "Well, yes but, before we do that we would like to try the Kalinian sponge divers. We've believe that they're very good divers. We're told they're very good divers. See if you could find a master pearler around prepared to give them a try."

Well, I went around and I did find a.... My brothers in law were in pearling at the time, because they bought out an Australian actually - they bought his boats. And they said, "Yes, we'll take one crew on and we'll give them a try." But they failed. They eventually came out: they selected them in [unclear]. I think they brought out seven or eight of them just.

**JD** Kalinas?

**LIVERIS** Kalinian sponge divers. Now....

**JD** Excuse my ignorance, but where in the world do they originate from?

**LIVERIS** Well, the island of Kalimnos is one of the [unclear] in Greece.

**JD** I see.

**LIVERIS** And they are still sponge fishing there today I believe and they're still selling their sponges down in Constitution Square [laughs]. So you can get a little piece for so much.

**JD** Were they hard hat divers?

**LIVERIS** I don't believe that they were using the hard hat method in Kalimnos nor were they operating with the method where the diver is dragged slowly behind the boat when there's not a lot of tide run and they're picking up shells as they go along, which is the method that the Japanese use, or the normal conventional divers use.

Now, the venture failed Jack, for a number of reasons. Now, first of all with the hard hat I'm told, that you've got to keep your head upright all the time and the air hose keeps the pressure down just below the nose. If you bend your head forward, the water swamps over your face and all you have to do is straighten your head up to drop it back again, but if you panic you could drown. Now they found that hard to handle. Two was being dragged behind the boat - they found that hard to handle. But they were only two of the reasons. The other reason was: you had other compatriots. In the coffee clubs each time they came in saying to them, "Why are you going out there risking your lives, living a hard life. We're earning three times as much as you are in here. Nothing will happen to you. Don't go out any more." So they weren't being encouraged to continue, but there was one last reason which I was informed about. One of the young fellows (one of the very young divers) did very well because he adapted and he did very well. He continued on in the industry. But the rest of them were rather old and I was told by my brothers in law, that operated it, that they were badly selected in the first place and perhaps, had they been a younger crew, there might have been a chance that they might have succeeded by getting higher tonnages which would have made it more profitable for them. But anyway it failed and there was the second venture that went to Broome and that failed for different reasons because a fellow died and there was accusations that someone from the opposition had cut the hose and that also broke down Jack and they were brought back to Darwin also. So that was the end of Kalinians in the pearl fishing industry.

If I recall it was at this stage the Department started to have a look at it again and saying, "Well, it looks as though we might have to allow the Japanese in." But even at that point, naturally they were wary - it was an understandable reason. They said, "Well, what we'll do, is first of all, we'll let the Riukans in. They know a bit about pearling." They can't bring in Japanese but they can bring in [unclear] or [unclear] from the Riukan islands. So they started to bring in Riukans. Now, the tonnages I believe did start to go up because they got down to four or five tons and the others were starting to get say, the Riukans were going up to twelve and thirteen tons. Now, the Thursday Islanders did a little bit better than that because they understood the hard hat methods and they worked to the normal diving methods that were employed here. I think their tonnages were good but not top. They were hard people to work with, but when the Riukans came out that gave the industry a bit of a lift but that happened and there was no reaction, I think it was at that stage the Department said, "Well, OK, but what we'll do is, we'll let just the two Japanese divers for each boat."

But it was at this stage that I've got to mention.... you see I was getting a lot of basic information about how the industry operated because there were so many technicalities in the operation, but I believe that our Department.... none of us aware of it because we had officials in Canberra and I was sitting at a desk in Darwin, but I found Nicholas Paspaley was extremely helpful here. When I went along to him and said, "Well, we'll allow you to bring in just two Japanese divers per boat." His reaction was, "They won't come out," he said, "without their own engineer and their own

tenders. Their life depends on the engineer and the two tenders," He said, "Would you go down if you didn't have your own tender and engineer? Beyond that," he said, "are you going to find me a Japanese speaking crew member or two to fit in with them," he said, "with the panic on the boat with two divers dragging behind. Sometimes we've had up to three divers on the bigger boats and someone not understanding the language and not being able to co-operate. Would you take the responsibility for that?"

And slowly with the enormous help I got from Nicholas Paspaley on these technicalities and the information was genuine, because we had to be sure, Jack, that the information we got was genuine and wasn't put to us to suit a particular person. But in my time, I've found that Nicholas Paspaley was not like that because he also made the point, and it was something I think we overlooked in the beginning too. He said, "Well look, would I be employing eight people per boat if I could get away with it with three?" He said, "The Japanese are pretty costly: I've got to bring them out, I've got to send them back at the end of three years because they want to go back to their families." He said, "I have to have an agreement and they make me stick to it. I don't mind that because they are good operators. But would I employ eight if I could get away with it with three?"

Anyway the Department eventually conceded and we allowed the Japanese in. But Jack, when this happened there was an immediate reaction. The tonnages suddenly went up to 24, 25 and 29 which made it... The industry started to boom then and a few started to come in from the sides and to catch a bit of the cream that was around, but they didn't stay in the industry very long. Once the plastics were developed to the degree that they progressed after a number of years, you see Nicholas Paspaley mentioned to me.... he said, 'We're being threatened by the plastics industry and if it is improved a lot we will eventually suffer from it.' And this did occur because all of a sudden the price of shell dropped down and it just wasn't economical to continue.

Now, Nicholas Paspaley was, to my knowledge, the first post war pearler. Actually Nicholas was a master pearler to the bone marrow, Jack you see, because the business wasn't going well after the price dropped down. Now he had some property and he had a licence to a bookmaking shop and I'm very sure he was maintaining it from his other interests to keep the industry alive purely because he was absolutely fascinated by the industry and wouldn't give it up. So he sort of plodded along there for a while and what he did then was.... The others fell out and the only one left was the Paspaley Pearling Company, but they went into pearl culture. But Jack, from what I gathered, even that was not easy because the actual technicians who insert the nucleus into the mother of pearl shell (the Japanese) there was no way in the world, I believe, that they would pass that knowledge onto anybody else.

Nicholas Paspaley, I understand, had to arrange with the Japanese company to get into this industry, but there was a price to this you see. I don't think they wanted this operation to be anything big and it was kept down. Jack, it was kept down for many years, it just didn't seem to go.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

After many years of battling with the pearl culture industry, Nicholas Paspaley eventually went out on his own. Now, I must mention here at a stage when, I think it was following his entry into the pearl culture industry, his young son, Nicholas, (I

always refer to him as Young Nicholas) came into the industry with his fiancée and a lot of his pearl culture industry was out of Darwin. And Young Nick and his fiancée spent many, I think, some years out at the base out of Darwin and Young Nick was becoming very very knowledgeable in the industry because he was working at it almost day and night out there with his father and eventually it was a sort of a two-man thing instead of a one-man thing with, I may say, old Nick on his own now. Anyway they battled on and battled on but they just didn't seem to go....

But eventually he went out on his own. And all of a sudden (he told me this) he said, "Look it's just not going and I'm almost sure they're keeping it down intentionally because they don't want it to boom here because it will affect their other areas, because they've got interests in other areas," he said, "but I'm hoping we can change this." Now, he managed somehow to get the technicians and.... I'll tell you a little bit more about the technicians separately, Jack.

One thing I was pleased to hear.... see, I knew that Nick was the one person who had battled along, struggled along, fed the industry out of his other interests and when I leaving for Greece in December 1980, I was walking in the mall in Smith Street one day and he said, "Les, I've got something I want to tell you," he said, "look you suffered all the bad news out with me, but I want to tell you a bit of good news," he said. "We've had our first sale, our own cultured pearls and it's a very big sum of money," he said. "And we're delighted," he said, "we're on the way!" So this was when I was leaving for Greece because at that stage, Jack, I'd been appointed a councillor in the Australian Embassy in Greece and I was on my way. But he said, "I'm very, very happy at this success."

But going just a little bit back to the pearl culture, Jack. Apparently the nucleus of a pearl - now to the best of my knowledge as I recall Nick telling me - it has to be of the same specific gravity as a natural pearl itself or the mother will reject, and there are rejections anyway. Now that nucleus, I understand, comes from the green snail shell from the Mississippi River and it is inserted. Now this is where I believe, the skill lies, into the mother of pearl by these technicians. I don't know whether Young Nick has acquired this knowledge at this stage or not, but at one stage it was this knowledge that the Japanese would not pass on and of course, the shells have to be kept on rafts at a certain specific gravity, at a certain water temperature and it's got to be at a certain depth; there's got to be a certain amount of plankton in the water for them to feed on. So there is an enormous amount to it but I think the Paspaley Pearling Company has got this mastered after all these years and all the experimenting and whatever, Jack, I think they have got it sown up at this stage. So I'll leave that there unless you want to ask any further questions.

**JD** I'd just like to ask you, Les. Is there a market for the meat and is there a market for the shell from cultured pearl?

**LIVERIS** Jack, this is a very interesting question because the meat I can recall them bringing it in in strands, almost like necklaces, dried out and they couldn't give it away. I'm talking pre war now, Jack, and even post war for a little time. But today, I believe that it's regarded as one of the best aphrodisiacs and the price is astronomical. The shell itself, I really don't know, Jack, whether there is a market these days for the shell. Certainly there is for small ornaments because in the mother of pearl shell - the inside of it.... I've got several pairs upstairs that I've had for many many years. That shell never loses its lustre, but I would say just for ornamental stuff. You see it was once used for buttons and this was where the big market was. Maybe some of the top

manufacturers may have gone back to using mother of pearl shell to enhance the quality of their products, Jack. I really don't know - I'm out of touch there.

**JD** Les, could I also ask you, do the pearls or the oysters in the cultured situation - do they reproduce?

**LIVERIS** I don't think I could answer that question. I believe they can, yes. I believe Jack, that the round pearl takes eighteen months to produce and I also believe that the marvey pearl (that's a half round pearl) takes about six months to produce but with the marveys of course I don't think they can make them reproduce because they've got to be cut away from the shell: the rounds are loose in the mother of pearl but I don't know about.... You see you are getting into a technical situation Jack. I'll tell you why. They use very young mother of pearl for pearl culture. Now you see, in eighteen after a round pearl, I wonder whether that mother of pearl would be too old. They're the things I don't know because I know initially they use very small young shell which used to be the A Grade shell at one stage because it had no marks on it, no worm marks, no scars - it was clean. So I really don't know.

**JD** These oysters that are used for the cultured situation would have originated from the wild, I presume....

**LIVERIS** Oh yes, [unclear]. You see they've got to keep them alive too, Jack. Remember they have special mother ships when they get these shells for culture now and they have to keep them alive. Now Paspaley's have just not long got their third ship - they've got the **Paspaley III** - I haven't seen it but I believe it's a beautiful craft. But they're really up to the eyeballs in pearl culture, there's no question about this and this **Paspaley III**, I understand, was built especially to design in Japan.

**JD** Is it used to fish from - the **Paspaley III**?

**LIVERIS** I think it's a sort of.... No, no, not to fish from - it is a mother ship.

**JD** It's a magnificent vessel - I've seen it.

**LIVERIS** It's one that services different areas. The pearling luggers that they fish off are different altogether.

**JD** Right.

**LIVERIS** I think it would be fair to conclude this note on the industry itself, Jack, by saying I in my long association with Nicholas Paspaley, I've got to say that I've found him at true blue master pearler. He was fascinated by the industry. Actually devoted to it and I don't think that he could have given it up if he tried because he actually died in his office, as a master pearler. And that was Nicholas Paspaley.

**JD** And now his son has taken the business....

**LIVERIS** Young Nicholas has now taken over, but I would say, had it not been for the devotion and dedication to the industry of Nicholas Paspaley, the industry would have died in Darwin following the collapse of mother of pearl shell with the introduction of plastics on the world market. And it was only that Nicholas was so dedicated and swung over to pearl culture, that the industry remained alive.



**JD** What sort of a man was he?

**LIVERIS** Nicholas Paspaley was a quiet man. You couldn't call him assertive: he was a very private person, Nicholas Paspaley. But in my dealings with him I found him very honest, forthright: the information he gave us we found to be genuine. I found him, to me Jack, always a gentleman. Good to deal with - a pleasure to deal with actually. You'd never be reluctant to go along and say, "Well I'll go and talk to Nick about this and just see what he thinks about it." And you knew you would get a forthright view and a very well informed one at that, Jack, based on years of experience and absolute fact because I wasn't able to disprove any of things he told, not that I tried because I soon found out that it was pretty genuine stuff. Because speaking to a couple of other Australians around who were in the industry at the time, all they did was confirm that. Whatever Nick said was usually confirmed by - invariably confirmed by them. So I finished up with a great admiration for the man because of his dedication. It cost him almost a king's ransom to keep the pearling industry afloat because he loved it so much.

**JD** His name is still very prominent in Darwin, isn't it?

**LIVERIS** Very much so. Very, very much so. But I think with due regard I think Young Nick is also now becoming prominent in it because I think he's doing as much for the industry. He hasn't let it go. I think he picked up the threads and carried on where his father left off and I believe, doing it very well.

**JD** Good.

**LIVERIS** I do wish them well.

**JD** Thank you for that. Could we just come back for a moment to the Japanese and their involvement in the industry? There must have been many problems in clash of culture and language and so on? Were you aware of that sort of problem?

**LIVERIS** Well, strangely, Jack, there were few problems. Now the reason being that the only time that the Japanese were in town was usually during the spring when the run of the tide was too strong for them to do any pearl fishing, so they were in town. Now their quarters were invariably (I think in all cases) right on the water front, mainly at Granthus Bay and they didn't leave their quarters very much. They stayed in their quarters a lot so they didn't mix very much. Now it's interesting to note too, that I would say, there were times [when] we must have had close to 100 Japanese pearlers in the Darwin area with all the boats around that had them. I don't recall, Jack, any particular trouble that arose between say, the local population of all kinds, and the Japanese pearlers who were here. When they went in to do their shopping, they did it very quietly and went back to their quarters. You didn't see them in the hotels having a few drinks and sorting of getting into trouble there and more than that you see, generally at the end of three years they wanted to go back home and they stayed about a year before they asked to come back again when there was a change of crews again. To my knowledge, Jack, I think I can recall one person who'd been here many, many years - one Japanese person remaining in Australia.

**JD** They didn't ask....

**LIVERIS** No, they didn't ask. They wanted to go back. I think their own culture was very deeply ingrained in them and I think they had a very strong loyalty to their

homeland. I don't blame them for that because I have a strong loyalty for Australia so I could understand that.

**JD** Was that your experience with other ethnic groups?

**LIVERIS** No. It was a little different there because some of the Malaysians wanted to stay and some of the Indonesians wanted to stay and the odd Chinese chap who was engaged in pearling (there weren't very many of them) they wanted to stay, but this was not so with the Japanese.

**JD** Yes, that's interesting isn't it.

**LIVERIS** Very interesting.

**JD** Les, to come to your own story. Looking around your office here, I notice a number of certificates and awards, would you like to mention what they are?

**LIVERIS** Well, yes Jack. Actually, I was appointed a Notary Public by the Chief Justice at the time because when I was working in Immigration we had a lot of migrants who needed something like an international JP and Notary Public filled that requirement. It was very convenient for them and I still have done a few certificates since I retired actually.

And then there's the Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal and my Order of Australia Medal, but Jack, I've got to make a comment. Seeing you asked me to speak about them, I've always felt that those two awards, the Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal and the Order of Australia Medal, really belong to the team that I worked with, not myself, but it's the way it goes and the leader of that team gets the award. But they really don't belong to me solely, they belong to the team.

**JD** Well that's undoubtedly true too, but they're not awarded for no effort, I'm well aware of that.

Les, you've been retired for a while now.

**LIVERIS** Actually Jack, I haven't done any work since April 1982. I was forcefully retired because I had a very bad heart attack in Athens and I spent up to a month in Athens hospital which I didn't enjoy. I then couldn't travel for four months and I was flown back to Australia and retired. I finished up having by-pass surgery in Royal Adelaide Hospital and here I must make a comment Jack, because I spent a month in an Athens hospital and about fourteen days in the Royal Adelaide Hospital and all I can say is about the Royal Adelaide Hospital is that they were superb. Every single person that I came into contact with - every single one - they were absolutely superb. It was like heaven and I found, as a result, the by-pass surgery really turned out to be a bit of a joy ride.

**JD** And you're keeping well now?

**LIVERIS** Oh yes. I've had seven good years since by-pass surgery. I couldn't move very much before it - I didn't have a choice really, but I'm glad I went on with it.

**JD** How are you keeping yourself occupied now?

**LIVERIS** Well I do a bit of gardening. In the last six or eight months we've acquired a black kelpie dog from Adelaide - she's a bitch actually, but a beautiful dog - and that keeps me a little bit busy. I go fishing with my brothers in law: they go fishing about once a week or so. We go dragging nets of prawns just across the harbour.

I see an odd person like yourself Jack, and I thought after a very busy port folio, like Immigration, I would find it hard and I did. It was a strange period really because before by-pass surgery I lived from day to day and I wouldn't plan more than a day ahead and I wasn't interested in anything that was more than a day long. And then after by-pass surgery, when I started to recover, I started to miss the responsibility and the action of Immigration because Immigration was a very interesting one Jack. It was a fascinating job, but I slowly got used to it.

You see, I got into the National Accreditation Society for Translators and Interpreters and I did three years there and I got into to the Bicentennial Authority and I did a couple of years there, but I found Jack, that if I got involved in anything it.... You see I came out of the war with a very serious anxiety state and it developed and developed and it got pretty bad. I think the crisis came with my heart attack and if I got involved in anything - even anything voluntarily - you see I'd dearly love to do some work for the National Heart Foundation, but I find I can't because any sort of commitment causes me great anxiety - whatever it is. And it's sad really because it's one area that I would like to do some work on and I can't, so I just potter around. I'm not saying that time's dragging. Actually there aren't enough hours in the day, but I'd like to do something more than that - something for the community really - because I shouldn't be saying this myself, I have done a lot of community work when I was working especially and even after. You see I was involved with the Greek Orthodox Church - one of the things.... All right I will tell you this.

I always felt that I should have done more for the Church than I did but working in Immigration I didn't want to get knee in the Church because I didn't want anyone influencing me in any decisions I made. I wanted to be my own man totally. I didn't want to be anybody's. Now I think you could understand that. But I always said to myself that when I retire I'm going to give them a year's voluntary work and you know, it's strange how that opportunity came.

In Immigration we ran a welfare area and I knew a lot about community welfare. Well, I knew a little bit about community welfare. And the president came to me one day and said, "We want to set up: we're getting a welfare working but we don't know how to start. Do you think you could help us in the selection of the officer and train [unclear]?" I said, "Look, it's just the very thing I want to do." And I finished up giving the Greek Orthodox Community a year's welfare work. I set up the office for them: I trained two operators (three in fact) and they've taken over themselves now. They're going like the old proverbial prairie fire now. That kept me occupied but even then I found it was effecting my blood pressure - it was going through the roof. So I finished up giving up all these voluntary things and I won't even go to a function now because I find a lot of noise does the very same thing to me. Actually I've led a quiet life and I find as long as I'm quiet, I'm fine, but if I get involved in anything that causes any anxiety, I'm not. But otherwise, very happy.

**JD** Good. Long may you continue and thank you very much for your help on this subject.

**LIVERIS** Thank you Jack, I've enjoyed it.

**JD** Thank you.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

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## Edited transcript of an interview with LEX MANNIX

### INTRODUCTION

Lex Mannix is a third generation fisherman from Victoria. After war service he returned to fishing in Bass Strait catching shark and crayfish and later went scalloping in Port Phillip Bay. He then moved to the Northern Territory and was employed in the Fisheries Branch as a technical officer and given the task of teaching trainee fishermen on an Aboriginal settlement. Despite the establishment of a modern processing plant and the provision of three fishing vessels together with their dinghies and gear, the scheme was a complete failure due to a variety of factors including cultural problems and the unsuitability of the fish stock for commercial exploitation.

Lex worked for two years on the settlement and then handed over to another officer and returned to Darwin where he became a fisheries inspector engaged on enforcement work. The interview gives an insight into the difficulties entailed in bridging the cultural differences between the white and the Aboriginal cultures.

It is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry and was recorded in Mr Mannix's home in Darwin by Jack Darcey on the 21st May, 1990. There are two sides on one tape and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE ONE SIDE A

**JD** Lex, would you record your full name please.

**MANNIX** Conrad Douglas Mannix.

**JD** And your date of birth?

**MANNIX** The 16th June, 1924.

**JD** And where were you born?

**MANNIX** Queenscliff, Victoria.

**JD** Was your father a fisherman?

**MANNIX** Yes. He was a fisherman. He was born in Queenscliff or Port Melbourne.... Anyway he started fishing in Queenscliff when he was about I think, twelve, fourteen year old, with his father who was also a fisherman.

**JD** So you're the third generation fisherman?

**MANNIX** Yes. Bill Mannix, my grandfather, Con Mannix, my father. My grandfather was born in Port Melbourne and he fished with an uncle from Port Melbourne when he was only, oh ten or eleven year old. Then they moved down to Queenscliff and he fished from Queenscliff those days. The first boat, actually was a 26 foot open boat built in Queenscliff. They were all open boats, no engines those days. I think he gave up the beer for twelve months, anyway, to pay for it. I know that. It cost 26 pound a foot. That's what they cost [and?] a dinghy. He had to have a twelve foot dinghy; cost twelve pound [loud voices in background].

**JD** What was he fishing for?

**MANNIX** Barracouta mostly. All the boats there those days fished for barracouta and some of them, the bigger boats were crayfishing; cray boats as well.

**JD** And you married the daughter of a fishing family too, didn't you?

**MANNIX** In later years in Tasmania?

**JD** Mmm.

**MANNIX** Yes.

**JD** So there's a lot of fishing in your background one way or another. Do you have any relatives still in the game?

**MANNIX** Ah, no. I had a cousin at Flinders in Victoria. I think he retired about three years ago. [unclear] I left Queenscliff when I was in my second grade at school. My father moved to Flinders in 1931.

**JD** Still fishing however?

**MANNIX** Oh yes. He moved there permanently but before that my grandfather and his two brothers and their brother-in-law, old Ben Chidgey who was a fisherman. Chidgey's an old fisherman from Queenscliff. They used to go to Flinders every summer crayfishing and they had huts on the beach at Flinders and they camped in these huts on the beach. Then when the crayfish season was finished they'd go back to Queenscliff to spend the winter in Queenscliff. This went on for years until eventually, when I was eight year old, we moved permanently to Flinders. Also three of his cousins moved to Flinders at the same time. Also at that time a lot of fishermen left Queenscliff, like the Todds went to San Remo, [unclear] Stevens went to Welshpool, some of them went to Apollo Bay, Ferries went to Apollo Bay. Some of them went to Lorne. They more or less opened up all the other ports from Queenscliff, to my knowledge and from what I've heard.

**JD** To come to yourself again, you went to school in Flinders then, did you?

**MANNIX** Yes. I went to school in Queenscliff for two years and then I went to school in Flinders.

**JD** When you left school, what did you do?

**MANNIX** I left school when I was fourteen and went fishing with my father.

**JD** Out of Flinders?

**MANNIX** Yes. When I started fishing it was shark fishing. The only fishing I ever did was shark fishing and crayfishing.

**JD** That's long lining?

**MANNIX** Long lining for shark and crayfishing yes. The boat he had when I started fishing was a 32 foot boat with a well. Those days there wasn't a great lot of well boats around and when you got up between 30, 40 foot, it was a big boat, even then in Bass Strait, outside of the old two masted crayfish crafts that they had for quite a few years before that. We used to go down the Straits crayfishing.

**JD** You served during the War in the armed services?

**MANNIX** Yes in the Air Force from 1942 to 1945.

**JD** And then when you were discharged you went back to fishing, did you?

**MANNIX** Went straight back fishing with my father.

**JD** And then you stayed in fishing in the Bass Strait area?

**MANNIX** Then later, after the War, we had another boat. Father bought a 35 foot boat from Ray Friend at Lakes Entrance. It was built in Queenscliff actually by Peter Lock, one of the old boat builders those days, a boat called the **Nautilus**. We had that for a few years. Sold that to Cliffy Day a crayfisherman from King Island. Young Clippy got drowned. He fell off the back of the **Nautilus** just out of Currie Harbour. Then we bought another boat, the **Gloridia V.** from Ockey Church of San Remo, 48 foot. That was built by Bull Brothers at Lakes Entrance. Then I went off King Island crayfishing, Flinders Island, Deal Island; never got to Tassie. Then in the season we'd go crayfishing and then when we'd finish crayfishing we'd go sharking. That went on from year after year, crayfishing in the season and then shark fishing.

**JD** How did you come to come up to the Northern Territory then?

**MANNIX** Spent two years before I came up here scalloping in Port Phillip Bay. At that time I'd been fishing for quite a while and I saw this job advertised in the Fisheries newsletter and needed a change. Didn't feel like going back out in Bass Strait and got sick of a few of the deckhands [unclear]. Hard to get good blokes to work for you. So I gave this a go.

When I came up to the Territory I came up as a technical officer employed by the Fisheries Department located at Maningrida. Maningrida was a settlement, or is a settlement still about 500 miles east of Darwin, between Darwin and the Gulf of Carpentaria. At Maningrida there was a fish factory with freezers, ammonia refrigeration. There'd been two officers there before me who I'd never met. When I arrived there there were three 26 foot boats which were built down in Newcastle. They didn't have any refrigeration. They had iceboxes, air cooled twenty horsepower Lister motors in them. When I arrived at Maningrida they'd all been sunk. They'd all been under the water. The engines, none of them worked. The radios had all been under the water, echo sounders, the whole lot. None of them worked. We had two fourteen foot dinghies, three outboard motors, I think one of those worked, and a broken down landrover. Wasn't a bad start [unclear]. My job was to teach the Aboriginals any

knowledge I had. I didn't know what type of fish was there or what could be caught. There were gill nets, six, seven inch gill nets. What they were mostly catching were shark, black tip shark, whaler sharks, swordfish. They were, in my opinion, unsaleable. The Aboriginals wouldn't eat them either.

**JD** Did you find the Aboriginal people were keen to learn?

**MANNIX** Well, yes. I found they were keen. I had seventeen of them working for me. There was one Head fisherman, Silas Roberts. He was very keen. They were keen to learn but then again, when you turn your back, they'd sit down and it was hard to keep their mind occupied, really. They seemed to be satisfied as long as they caught enough for themselves and the community. That's all they worried about.

**JD** Did they have some of them who were acting as skipper on a boat or how did it operate?

**MANNIX** Well we didn't have any boats. We only had the dinghies see, because all the boats had been sunk. We still had a factory worth probably half a million or a million dollars or pounds (it might have been pounds those days, I'm not sure). I don't know who started the fishing venture but whoever did got the project up and running without even finding out what fish were there to be caught, what type of boat you needed, what sort of gear you need to catch them. After all, as it turned out, there wasn't a great lot to be caught. You couldn't catch any reef fish there. There was a few barramundi but nothing like other parts of the Territory where you got the big mud flats where you had the Liverpool River and we'd get the odd barramundi, catfish and a few [unclear] and salmon but not in real commercial quantities, in my opinion. So that's why I think it probably started in the wrong place. I think some people might have been ill informed or something. I don't know. I can't work it out but it certainly wasn't a viable proposition when I was there.

**JD** Was the catch processed in this factory?

**MANNIX** Yes. It was a real modern factory. It was ammonia refrigeration but it was all new. It was a good factory, good freezers, plenty of room, plenty of space. We processed the catches, shark, salmon, catfish which was distributed around the settlement. We did send fish into Darwin for the other Aboriginal settlements, send it into Darwin and wherever they wanted to distribute fish that was available to spare. You see in Maningrida the Aboriginals wouldn't eat shark. They just wouldn't eat it at all. So we did send that out. Where that went, I don't really know. If they got enough for themselves, their families and friends, they were quite happy.

**JD** How were the Aboriginals that you were training selected? Were they just all the young men in the community or young women, or who selected them and how was that done?

**MANNIX** Well they were already employed when I arrived. They were employed from.... I don't know. I think my boss in Darwin may have employed them. I don't really know but there was, I think, sixteen or seventeen of them. Silas, he was the Head boy, more or less. He would be the only one that you could really have a conversation with. The others were pretty primitive. They couldn't speak English. [unclear]

**JD** Did they work hard?



**MANNIX** They worked hard while they were under supervision. The moment they weren't under supervision, they'd sit down under a tree and have a bit of a nap.

**JD** Were the elders of the community involved in the organisation at all?

**MANNIX** No, not to my knowledge. Silas, he was the Head fishing boy because he came from Roper River initially. He didn't come from Maningrida. He was educated down at Roper River but the other elders in the community, I didn't have a great lot to do with. I don't think I ever saw them. I was there for '67, '69, over two years and I wouldn't have even known who they were.

**JD** Did you live in the community area or where you separate?

**MANNIX** Where the fishing factory was, it wasn't quite in the settlement. It was around about a mile out of the settlement. We had our own power plant. We weren't connected to the settlement power so we didn't have a great lot to do with them. They used to come down of a morning, the fishermen. They would come down and start work and go out in the dinghies, pull nets and put nets in and that sort of thing, come in and we'd fillet fish and so on.

**JD** Were there any other white people on the settlement at the time or near the settlement?

**MANNIX** Well there was the superintendent of the settlement. There were about 70 Europeans on the settlement, mostly school teachers. They had one gardener, a mechanic, superintendent, a manager who looked after the administrative part of it and that sort of thing but no other white people had anything to do with fisheries. We actually were a separate unit from the settlement itself. We weren't controlled by them. I was actually my own boss and I answered to Darwin, even the superintendent at the settlement.... I used to work in with the settlement. He'd come down and he used to store a lot of gear in our freezer if we had the room (most of the time we had plenty) and that sort of thing. Outside of that, I didn't really have a lot to do with them. There was also a Forestry unit on the settlement too. They had a saw mill there. So all up there would be about 70 and Aboriginals, probably a thousand. They had not long come in from the bush or the stone country out the back. They'd all been brought in by the Government. I think there was something like eight to ten different tribes that had been brought in to the settlement just before, or not long before I had arrived there. They were mostly primitive people.

**JD** Was it a mission settlement?

**MANNIX** No. It wasn't a mission. It was a Government run settlement.

**JD** Were the Aboriginals paid for their efforts?

**MANNIX** Yes they were paid. That's something that I didn't have anything to do with. They were paid, actually by the Welfare Department which would have been done through the main office at the settlement itself. I had nothing to do with their wages and money. In fact I couldn't even tell you how much they were paid.

**JD** Were the women employed in the processing at all?

**MANNIX** No. We had none [loud aircraft noise].

**JD** The three vessels that were there and had been sunk, had they been sunk by cyclones or something, had they?

**MANNIX** No. They hadn't been sunk by any bad weather. They'd just been neglected and, I don't know; filled up with water and just sunk [laughs]. They hadn't been sunk by bad weather or cyclones or anything like that.

**JD** They were never....

**MANNIX** To my knowledge, I don't think they ever caught any fish. They certainly didn't when I was there because all the engines, none of them worked. When I wanted anything, I couldn't get anything from the Government anyway.

**JD** So it was a pretty disheartening sort of an exercise?

**MANNIX** Well it was to me after being fishing for so long down south and that sort of thing. I hadn't see anything like that before. No one seemed to worry too much about it.

**JD** Would you say the scheme had any success at all? Did any of the Aboriginals end of in fishing?

**MANNIX** At Maningrida, no.

**JD** Or anywhere else?

**MANNIX** No, I don't think so. At some settlements they did try at other places other than Maningrida. Up at Bathurst Island they had a fisheries project started there. They had one at Elcho Island and different settlements and missions. They started different projects over the years. They'd been round most of them and I think it's always the same story that none of them really got off the ground commercially as far as fishing commercially and selling fish on the open market. As long as they get enough for themselves and that sort of thing, they were quite satisfied. I don't think they should have done that at Maningrida, before they spent all the money on the factory and the freezers. They could have done the same thing with a deep freeze and a couple of dinghies to see what could be caught there before they went into it.

**JD** Were there factories on these other settlements?

**MANNIX** Nothing like Maningrida. They would have smaller, probably smaller freezers and dinghies and I dare say in some of them they've still got fishermen that go out and catch fish and just supply the settlements, catch a few for themselves and distribute them around the settlements but none have ever been viable as far as going on the market commercially. Only one, probably Millingimbi, a few years ago they had oysters with the Aboriginal women getting them off the rocks there and putting them in boxes and sending them to Darwin. I have seen that but I haven't seen that for a long while either. As far as commercially fishing and sending the fish on the open market....

**JD** And you stuck it out for two years?

**MANNIX** After two years, yes, before I came back in to Darwin. Yes just over two years, '67 I was there and came back in about '69, '70, something like that.

**JD** Did someone else take over from you?

**MANNIX** Yes. I was transferred into Darwin and another fellow took it over who was there for maybe twelve months before he left. He went back to Western Australia somewhere. After that the whole factory and that was closed down. Professor Messel took the house over for his crocodile research station, that was our Fisheries house that I lived in there but I don't know whatever happened to the factory, boats or gear. I haven't been back.

**JD** To come back then to your own circumstances, what was your role when you came back to Darwin?

**MANNIX** I came back to Darwin as a... I was still an extension officer. I went to Groote Eyelandt researching a prawn taking programme a few times. Then I went into the enforcement side of it, travelling around the Territory in the enforcement side.

**JD** As an inspector?

**MANNIX** As an inspector.

**JD** That must have been quite an interesting job in these arts?

**MANNIX** It was very interesting, yes.

**JD** Were you based in Darwin all the time?

**MANNIX** I was based in Darwin up until the cyclone.

**JD** Tracey?

**MANNIX** Tracey, Cyclone Tracey. Then after Cyclone Tracey I don't think any Fisheries officers had any houses left so we moved out to Gove which is [unclear]. They had eight houses out there, I think it was, and we moved out there for just on two years. I was in the extension side of it then, extension officer, the same as I was on Maningrida. Out there I rigged up some long lines and caught some shark, another chap and myself fished in a little 22 foot boat and sent samples of all different types of shark down to Tasmania to be tested for the mercury levels.

**JD** And how did they test?

**MANNIX** I think they didn't fare too well because of the mercury. I don't know if it had anything to do with the bauxite mine at Gove or not, but I think the levels were around about the same or may be a little higher than they were down in Victoria.

**JD** This interview is continued on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** Shark was not a viable proposition as far as commercial enterprise goes. Did you try anything else?

**MANNIX** Shark wasn't a viable proposition and also, I might be a bit critical on this point, but I don't think that you can compare the shark up here in the tropics, like the black tip variety, with the same fish you get down south like the gummy shark, the school shark. It's a different type of fish altogether. The texture's a lot different. Well it's even been sent down from here to Victoria. They don't take to it very well so it's not very viable.

**JD** How long did you stay as an extension officer with the Fisheries Branch?

**MANNIX** Oh, [pause] about four or five years. I travelled around quite a bit on different settlements. I went down to the Roper once. They wanted to start some fishing project down there. So I went down there and spoke to the Aborigines that were interested. They'd had a grant of, I think it was those days around about \$10,000 from the Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra. I sat down and talked to them for a couple of days. For \$10,000 they wanted something about 40 foot with enough beds to sleep half a dozen people on and this sort of business. I finally got it through to them that they couldn't get that sort of equipment and boats for that money. They came up with little sixteen footers with diesels in to go down river. This was for barramundi fishing, go down the river and just little portable freezers which would have been quite viable, in my opinion. They got two seventeen footers, sixteen, seventeen footers with diesels in. I thought they'd be better than outboards because they're not very satisfactory on settlements [unclear]. They had two nice little sixteen, seventeen foot diesels with ice boxes in. They had their ice plants. They could have taken their ice down in ice boxes and so on.

It looked very good. They could have gone down the river and fished for a few days and caught enough fish to supply the settlement. They went down a couple of times and next thing, they were running up river to the licenced store bringing the grog back to the settlement. Next time I went down there they were sunk. That was the last time I saw them. Another one of the fishing projects.... That wasn't a loan, that was a grant.

**JD** Do you know of any one of the projects that has been successful in terms of fishing?

**MANNIX** No, no. None at all.

**JD** So what did you do with yourself then? Did you continue with the Fisheries Branch?

**MANNIX** Oh yes. I went in the enforcement side of it as a fisheries inspector travelling around the Territory. In those days we only had about five inspectors to cover the whole of the Territory. That was mostly big Toyotas and dinghies, outboard motors. We didn't have a patrol boat. We were supposed to get one every year but every year there wasn't enough money because we'd put in a tender for the boats and there wouldn't be enough money. The next year there'd be another one go in and then the tender would be higher and the price would be higher and there'd be no money. So we just finished up, we didn't have a patrol boat until, oh 1980, I think it was. Before that we had the dinghies and just travelled around chasing poachers up the rivers, commercial fishermen coming up past the river closure lines and that sort of thing. Quite an experience.

**JD** They were mainly to do with the river fisheries and estuaries, were they?

**MANNIX** Barramundi, all barramundi. See the barramundi fishery is mostly fished on the mudflats. The rivers are closed at certain places. They vary up the rivers. One might be eight mile up the river; some were closed at the mouth; other rivers they might be further up to close the closure line. Fishermen, the commercial fishermen would fish mostly the night. Those that did, if they thought they could sneak up the river in the middle of the night passed the closure line, thinking no inspectors were around, sometimes we'd be waiting for them [unclear]. I was quite successful till they wake up to that and put their nets out a bit earlier [laughs]. It was quite an experience really.

**JD** You'd have seen a lot of the Territory, wouldn't you?

**MANNIX** Yes, quite a bit.

**JD** And you stayed with the Branch then until you retired, Lex?

**MANNIX** I retired about three years ago.

**JD** Yes and what have you been doing with yourself since?

**MANNIX** Well I've been playing bowls, going mud crabbing. Fishing doesn't mean a great lot to me [laughs]. I spent 40 odd years in it but I like to go out crabbing, take a few friends out and do a bit of crabbing, catch a feed of crab.

**JD** You're filling your time in alright?

**MANNIX** I'm filling my time in alright.

**JD** Yes, right. Well look, thank you very much for talking to us. It's certainly been an insight into the efforts to get an Aboriginal scheme going. It obviously hasn't been too successful though.

**MANNIX** No. I think that as long as they've got a couple of fishermen, two or three of them there that have got a dinghy and outboard and a couple of nets, they can go out and catch enough for themselves and enough for the settlement and for their friends, they're quite happy to do that. That's the way it's been. To try and make it commercial, it just hasn't got off the ground and is just throwing good money after bad, really. They're happy to go out and catch a few fish and when they've finished eating, go out again.

**JD** Right. Thank you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Lex Mannix of Darwin, Northern Territory.

END OF TAPE ONE SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer







## Verbatim transcript of an interview with GRAHAM MCMAHON

### INTRODUCTION

After a very varied and colourful early life in outback Western Australia, Graham McMahon moved to Darwin where he joined the Northern Territory Police Force. During his years in the Force he was engaged in many aspects of police work including search and rescue. He also spent much time canoeing on the northern rivers and thus gained an intimate knowledge of the Territory.

Along the way he became a tour operator, President of the Police Association and he obtained a commercial fisherman's licence. Eventually he retired from the police force and became a full time barramundi fisherman. He has served on a remarkably large number of industry committees and associations including being President of the Northern Territory Commercial Fishermen's Association of which he is the only life member and he has been Vice-President of the Northern Territory Branch of the Australian Fishing Industry Council. Graham McMahon has an extensive and detailed knowledge of the Northern Territory and its fishing industry and has made a very notable contribution to it. He also tells a good yarn.

The interview was recorded by Jack Darcey in Darwin on the 22nd May, 1990 and is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry. There are two sides on one tape. The interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE ONE SIDE A

*JD* Graham, would you record your full name, date and place of birth please.

*McMAHON* My full name is Graham McMahon and I was born on the 12th September, 1936 in Kalgoorlie in Western Australia.

*JD* Were you brought up in Kal?

*McMAHON* I was brought up in Kalgoorlie. Both my grandparents, I should say grandfathers, on both sides had been teamsters and camel drivers in the early eastern goldfields exploration days. My father was a foreman on the Lake View and Star gold mine complex which was one of the biggest gold mines on the Boulder block. My mother was a schoolteacher. She was a special teacher to problem children, especially Aboriginals in the goldfields area. I had a fascination for the bush right from a child. I used to wag school a lot and ride a pushbike all over the place. There is a town called Broad Arrow, 25 miles from Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie which is about the same distance. I used to pedal to them and back. When I wagged school, that was my excursion. That was where I went to.

My parents were both very strict and I ran away from home very frequently. I was always fascinated with the bush and with northern Australia. When I was about thirteen years old I made an attempt to go north when I ran away from home, jumped on a train and travelled to Leonora. I walked from Leonora up to Mount Ida, quite a distance as I remember it. I got a job on a station called Ida Valley. A gentleman called Paddy Collins was an old Ora Banda gold prospector and he'd struck gold and bought Ida Valley Station which at that stage had been deserted for a number of years. Life was pretty rough on the station. Paddy Collins only had sufficient money to buy a half a million acre station and he stocked it with about 5,000 sheep. I arrived at the station in time for the first mustering and shearing on the station which was carried out by Paddy who was 70 years old and a mate of his and myself. I learnt a lot very quickly and loved it. I learnt to shear, press wool and basically grade wool. Approximately six weeks after running away, the Police and my father turned up at the station and I was made to go home. Paddy Collins subsequently made sure that his shearing in the next two years were carried out in the August school holidays and I was picked up from home in Kalgoorlie and taken up to the station where I assisted him with his shearing. I was taught invaluable lessons by Paddy.

I was threatened by my parents of being placed before the courts as being uncontrollable if I ran away again and I was forced to stop home until I was sixteen years old. At sixteen years I left home without telling my parents. In the next two years I worked on sheep stations, wheat farms, wheat silos, wheat carting, shearing teams, timber mills throughout Western Australia. Through working with Paddy Collins I was able, at seventeen years old, to get a job as a wool presser on an eight stand shearing team which I considered quite an honour. Mind you, I did tell the boss I was 21 years old.

When I just eighteen years I bought a new motor bike and headed north with the intention of having a look at the north west. I had a friend as a pillion passenger and we walked the bike through the Pardoo Sands which was a horror stretch in those days between Port Hedland and Broome. The motor broke down near the Wallal Downs Station and a cyclone dumped rain in the area and the roads became impassable four to six weeks which we spent at a nearby stock inspector's camp. The gentleman was a gentleman and made his place very available. Food was very scarce. We only had rice, dried beef and we used to walk down the 80 Mile Beach which is a couple of miles away, caught shark etc for food. After leaving there I worked in Broome and Derby on the wharves and got a job in Cockatoo Island where I spent a number of months working on the vessel the **Yampi Lass**, [a] BHP Australian Iron & Steel vessel which ran between Yampi and Derby. I drove a work boat there transferring survey parties between Cockatoo Island and Koolan Island. I left Yampi after a humorous incident which involved a strike and an American boat that wanted to play cricket on the island and wasn't allowed to. Through a misunderstanding between the engineer in charge and the second engineer in charge, I was the meat in the sandwich. The strike was broken and the engineer in charge allowed the Americans to play cricket and I transferred the whole group with much grog to the unloading wharf on Cockatoo Island, was met by the second engineer who abused the heck out of me in front of all these drunken Americans. I'd had enough. I threw his hat into the water. He came to hit me so I threw him into the water and that was it. I was then asked to leave the island [laughs].

So I came to Darwin with the idea of going to Cairns because I was going to try cane cutting as an experiment. Whilst in Darwin I started playing Australian rules football. As a youngster in Kalgoorlie I'd been approached by South Fremantle to play reserve football in Perth with an idea to league football and so on but my experiences had precluded football. I followed the football and started playing football here which led me to stop here over the years. I had my nineteenth birthday in Darwin. The



population was about seven thousand then, a lot of whom were coloured. I made friends with them and loved the Darwin life-style. I started amateur fishing with the coloured people who were my mates.

I worked with the Health Department for several years and at 21 was doing several jobs including filling in for dietitians at the hospital who were absent. They couldn't employ them at that stage. I was in charge of the kitchen for approximately six months. I was ordering for the kitchen supplies. I was making up menus, doing salt and fat free diets until the local newspaper got onto the story. I was also the drugs clerk and fill in pay clerk. I was going flat out at that job. I joined the Northern Territory Police Force in 1958 and was the first local to be recruited for 30 or 40 years. They had a policy of only recruiting southerners at that stage. I met my wife and was married in Darwin in 1959. We have two daughters.

After about four years in the Force I started to get detailed to do the bush patrols round the top end area. The patrols were called shooting patrols because in those days the population used to go out bush and shoot a lot. That was the done thing right throughout Australia, shooting magazines and it was a so called sport in those days. I was also concerned with the buffalo shooting in as much as it had to be regulated and people were licensed for certain areas. I carried out all the search and rescue work until 1967. The job followed me wherever I went in the Police Force. It didn't matter what job I had because I was the search and rescue person until 1967 when I transferred to Alice Springs in charge of the CIB there. Whilst in the Police Force I knew all the safari operators that existed in the area east of Darwin, Frank Muir and Alan Stewart and Tom Opitz.

I helped Tom Opitz at Cooida start his organisation which is now known as Jimjim and Yellow Waters. With my wife I formed the company which started the first day tours out of Darwin. The Police Force and I had an arrangement. I was put up on the mat.... in those days there were only four officers in the Police Force and there was only about 100 men all told; pulled up on the mat by an inspector who informed me he knew what I was doing and what was going on but it was OK by him and the rest of them because they'd had a bit of a talk. Seeing that I was doing all the search and rescue work and I had more four wheel drives than they did [laughs], my wife would be allowed to continue the operation as long as the Police Force could call on the equipment whenever it was required. Whilst in the Police Force I served in general duties. I was in charge Traffic Section, Darwin. I was in charge Katherine Police Station on a temporary basis. I was in charge CIB, Alice Springs. I was in charge Prosecuting Section, Darwin. I was the NT Police Association President for a number of years.

Whilst in the Police Force I took most of my leave in the Northern Territory. I knew the Kakadu escarpment and wetlands very well. I canoed most of the top end rivers including the Alligators, the Adelaide, Katherine. I've canoed from Katherine right down to the Daly River Crossing which is quite a long way, Victoria River, McArthur River. That was my deal in those days. I was always on the water. There weren't dinghies as there are today. They were heavy wooden or fibreglass dinghies and as such, a canoe was a much better way of getting around. I used it very, very extensively.

In early 1971 I was retired out of the Police Force because of an injury and I took a personal stand to campaign for protection of what is now called the Kakadu Area. The NT Reserve Board had lobbied for establishment of the National Park from 1965 but by 1971, seemed ineffective and they were unable to achieve any results. They appeared to have reached a deadlock and I took on the role as a private person campaigning for the establishment of a park. There were rumours that mines were to be established in

the area and that the area was to be divided up to allow intensive cattle and feed lot raising. Being a boy from Kalgoorlie, I didn't particularly object to the mines but I thought that the National Park should be established first and that the mining should come afterwards. I realised that a stand had to be made and I made many public criticisms. Eventually Ian Barker, now a QC and Collin Jack-Hinton, now NT Museum Director, joined me as private individuals to form a committee. Others joined, namely George Chaloupka and Vern O'Brien. We lobbied, campaigned and criticised. Public servants O'Brien, Chaloupka and Jack Hinton were silenced by the Governments but by 1972 we had a ground swell of opinion support throughout Australia in response to our efforts. In July 1972 the area was made a wildlife protected area and later declared a national park.

During the above time I held a commercial fishing licence and I think that is significant in as much that it's been my experience in the commercial fishing that most of the commercial guys are pretty well conservation minded. I'd been fishing for barramundi as an amateur since 1954. In 1975 I was elected chairman of the NT Commercial Fishermen's Association and during my time as chairman we fought for conservation of the barramundi against the then opinion that barramundi stocks should be exploited more. This opinion was held by government people or government politicians and bureaucrats. I found the professional fishermen I was associated with were very conservation conscious, knew their subject well, knew the biology and life history of the fish and through their own efforts, brought in measures to limit licence numbers, limit net length to fishermen. They introduced a ban on the commercial taking of fish during the breeding season and suggested buy back arrangements to lessen fishing effort and many other conservation measures.

Also whilst chairman of the Commercial Fishermen's Association we had to fight for our right to fish in the waters adjoining Aboriginal lands which in the Northern Territory consist of something like 80% of the total coastline. We achieved some understandings with the Aboriginals there which stand today in as much that present licence holders are allowed to fish in areas but new licence holders have to respect the areas that are set aside, not including sacred sites. I tried to work in with politicians and bureaucrats. However I've come to a conclusion that bureaucrats always assume the worst and when you make any suggestion in relation to conservation put forward by fishermen, the bureaucrats seem to double the suggestion or lengthen the measure, thus making fishermen very distrustful and reluctant to make any of their knowledge available.

I served on a number of committees in the fishing industry. I was the Chairman of the NT Commercial Fishermen's Association, Vice-President of the NT Branch of the Australian Fishing Industry Council, a member of a now defunct Barramundi Advisory Committee for three years. I was the Northern Territory delegate to the then Federal Australian Fishing Industry Council. I was a member of the Northern Territory Fishing Industry training committee, a delegate to the Standards Sub-Committee of the Australian Fishing Industry Council, member of the Northern Territory Fishing Industry Research & Development Trust Fund. I was a member of a co-operative in Darwin, as the Chairman of the co-operative and I was the delegate that established the fishing zones in relation to the Taiwanese foreign fishing ventures and the Australian Fishing Zone. I was made the only life member of the NT Commercial Fishermen's Association. I am at present rebuilding an old vessel, restoring it, and I hold a Master Five Certificate of Competency in relation to fishing.

**JD** Congratulations. You've got [laughs] quite a background there, haven't you? Graham, could we have a look at some of the problems confronting the fishing

industry in these parts? What about the recreational effort? Is that a worry to professional fishermen?

**McMAHON** Well, no. The professional fisherman doesn't see the amateur effort as being a significant problem. It is a problem in as much that it is used as a political tool which is used by the amateur fisherman and now the politician, as they perceive it as a popular cause, to limit commercial fishing. However the commercial fishing has been reduced (I'm talking about barramundi) to such an extent now that we are well and truly under any measure of what is called the maximum sustainable yield, even allowing for amateur effort. Amateurs tend to go to accessible areas, billabongs and so forth where they can drive a four wheel drive, put a boat in the water and where the conditions aren't too harsh. So in effect they're limiting their effort in that degree. They are fishing during the breeding season which concerns commercial fishing. It is not a matter of numbers of fish that count. At this stage, it's perceived by an amateur when he can't catch a fish in some area, be it salinity, temperature, water temperature, bait movements or whatever that the fish are not biting at that particular stage. He then assumes that the commercials have netted the complete river out and complains bitterly to his politicians. Politicians I see.... I'm cynical about them after this number of years up here. When elections come on, politicians bang two drums. One is Aboriginals and Aboriginal land rights and two is professional fishermen.

**JD** The question of presentation of barramundi particularly, in some of the southern states there are all sorts of trash fish sold under the name of barramundi. That must be of concern to barramundi fishermen?

**McMAHON** I'm now at present a member of a government committee called the Barramundi Fishery Advisory Committee. Until I started raising a few questions just recently, it was assumed that some 70-80% of NT fish was exported. I am a partner in a fish retail shop and because my other two partners are fishermen, we've got a fairly good idea what's going on in the barra fishery. I'm sure that the Government recognises 60-70% and I say 70-80% of the Northern Territory barramundi is remaining within the Territory now and is consumed by the tourists and the local population. So really, there's only some 20% of the barra catch now going interstate.

To fill the gap that the barramundi or the demand that barramundi has caused interstate both from the Northern Territory, Queensland, they are marketing all sorts of fish as barramundi because of the price they can get for that fish. It is a State problem, a State by State problem where State authorities are reluctant to move because they are affecting their own local fisheries and they're not going to stamp out the practice of barramundi substitution. It doesn't really affect the Northern Territory because Northern Territorians are getting barramundi, though barramundi is getting scarce here too in as much that with the Government policy of reducing the numbers, there's not so much fish being caught.

**JD** What about the matter of competition from overseas importations of fish?

**McMAHON** As I was stating before, because the numbers of fishermen have been reduced in the Northern Territory, and because of the increasing demand for barramundi, it just can't be met. The interstate people are importing barramundi which is raised in the main, through aquaculture methods throughout Asia. It's a smaller fish, has a different taste altogether to wild salt barramundi that we catch and it really is giving barramundi a bad name in the southern states. However, as I stated before, 80% of our catch is being consumed here and I can see the time when 100% of the catch is consumed here. So it doesn't really affect the fisherman as such, it's more the consumer. The consumer is being sold fish that isn't barramundi or is barramundi of an

inferior quality. We, as an industry, are trying to get a law passed in the Northern Territory where the place of origin of the barramundi has to be stated in its final selling place. I don't know that other states would even consider this but we're very conscious of our good name in the Northern Territory.

**JD** Graham, what's the relationship now between your fishermen's organisations and government? Do they listen to you?

**McMAHON** There used to be a spirit of co-operation and we could go and negotiate but the fishermen have had too many rugs pulled out from underneath them. They're very distrustful of anybody that has any official standing these days. It's a pity that some common sense couldn't prevail in the argument. However, I have a criticism of fishing bureaucrats that I never ever see them and I'm only 200 yards away from their office. A year, two years will go by in the boat that I'm building and I don't even see any Fisheries officials in the area whatsoever in the middle of a very busy fishing area. Yes, I see extension officers going out and drop and trap line fishing but I don't see them taking any interest in the barramundi scene as such. They have their research officers etc but there was a great spirit of co-operation but that's fallen by the way now. The fishermen refuse to co-operate with the Fisheries in view of the stance being taken that we are responsible for the destruction of the stocks, when in fact it's the other way round. We know it but we conserved the stocks when the days of exploitation were called for.

**JD** Would you say that the Fisheries Department or Branch, perhaps doesn't have the resources to adequately supervise [unclear]?

**McMAHON** I've got to giggle at that. It's a phase in the Northern Territory now where other fisheries are developing. There's the drop and trap line fishery. There is a demersal trawl fishery and it's struggling but it's surviving. So in actual fact there are more fishermen here but this has only occurred in the last two years. Before that there was a dozen local prawn boats. Most of the prawn boats up here are owned by out of staters that don't live in the Northern Territory. The barra fishery is some 33 guys, about 20 crabbers etc. When you look at the numbers, there's almost as many Fisheries Department officials as there are fishermen.

**JD** Would you say then that the management techniques that are being applied are not as effective as they might be?

**McMAHON** Well, by management technique, the only technique I see is to keep making regulations. It comes back to consultation. Fishermen don't trust the officials who refuse to leave their air-conditioned offices and I see it as empire building on the other side. They can't come up with pie in the sky schemes and make it look as though they're performing, they can get more staff and more promotions and so forth. I'm afraid it's a very cynical view I have now but I've had to come to that conclusion over the years. Some years ago there was a lot of co-operation and we were getting sense on both sides. I was the chairman of the Crab Fishermen's Association. I was the inaugural chairman of the Crab Fishermen's Association. At that stage the Minister for Fisheries was a person called Steve Hatton who I have a lot of respect for. Steve was Minister. He, at a crab fishing meeting, said, "We're all walking out of the room. You make up the regulations you want. We trust you to be intelligent and sensible people. Come back when you're finished", which we did, which was accepted and it's now held up as a bit of an example how to do it. It doesn't occur now. All that seems to have gone by the board and it's controlled by regulation. More and more regulations are coming in making it harder and harder to comply.

**JD** Is there any vehicle for communication between the fishermen and the Department? Is there a magazine or meetings or anything like that?

**McMAHON** Well there are various consultative committees now. Each fishery has a management plan and a management body which consists of those people concerned in that particular fishery. Ideas do flow but there is a lot of distrust. That's the way I see it and a lot of cynicism.

**JD** This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE ONE SIDE A

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## TAPE ONE SIDE B

**JD** Graham, could we talk about enforcement in the Northern Territory? Who's responsible for it and how does it operate?

**McMAHON** The Police Force was given Fisheries enforcement powers some years ago and what has occurred, I think because of political pressure, the politicians see good value in promoting barramundi as an amateur fishery. The regulations are trying to tighten up all the time on the barra fishery and it's got to the stage now where the Police are watching the barra fishermen all the time. There are nearly as many Police as there are barra fishermen and fishermen know now, the professional guys, know now that several times a year or more, they're being observed through binoculars etc and that they receive constant attention and visits from the Police wanting to make sure that all the regulations are being carried out. If you go away from the fishing life and think of yourself, that you drive a motor car, and that's probably every time you get into it, you commit some offence. There's some regulation that you're not obeying that you don't know about and the same applies to the barra fishery. You have to know what all the offences are because the barra fisherman gets a lot of attention, more than the fishery deserves. The fisherman's got a licence that's worth \$150,000, most probably a boat that's in that vicinity. They're not going to risk their livelihood, their boat, their way of life by poaching etc. It's not done to any degree. I know the Police have to be there to make sure that the fishery survives, but it's gone beyond that. It's gone into a nit picking exercise at this stage.

**JD** What about the ecology? Is that a problem?

**McMAHON** It's not at this stage though on the Mary River there has been a barrage erected which is trying to halt the incursion of salt water into the wetlands of the Mary River system. It is of concern to both amateur and commercial fishermen as to the migration of the juvenile barramundi upstream for the development of the first three years of their life. Part of the life cycle of the barra is that as they reach maturity from fry, that is that they're about six inches to nine inches long, they travel upstream and any obstruction over an area that has previously been used as a waterway may have serious effects on future stocks. It's of a big concern to both amateur and commercial fishermen. We have to watch the environment. We have to watch the pollution of the rivers from mining areas and we watch with some concern what happens in the uranium mines but to date there hasn't been any problems that we can foresee or that we have seen. We have to be on our toes to watch what's going on as far as having [unclear].

**JD** What about predators?

**McMAHON** Well we have a ban on the breeding season, as I've stated a number of times, and when the fishermen go out at the end of that ban, which is the 1st February, generally there's fresh water flowing in the river systems and out to sea. It is a time when there are a lot of sharks around so that for the first month or so, there are a number of shark caught. Then the sharks either move off shore or we remove the territorial sharks from that area and it quietens down.

Crocodiles are a constant problem although I don't call them a problem as such. I'm firmly of the belief, if you've got a crocodile hanging around the net, is that he's most probably assisting you by frightening fish into the net. They'll mangle some fish but you can live with that. He's assisting you, you're giving him a feed and he's frightening the fish into the net. Occasionally crocs get some meshes round their snout and then it becomes very interesting. You've got a twelve, fourteen foot croc who is very much of the opinion that he doesn't like you and you're doing your darnedest to release him. My way of doing it is that I've got a whore, a lady. We don't call them whores, we call them ladies in the fishing game. I give the croc a bit of a poke with the lady and force him under water for a while till he runs out of breath to a degree and then I'll pull him up and cut the net off his snout. This is a very interesting experience for people who haven't seen it before. There's a lot of white water and thrashing with crocs very violent etc but I think that what I do is what most fishermen do. We don't destroy the crocs needlessly. Occasionally a croc may get entangled in a net. I think that they get frightened by other crocs or sharks and they'll roll in a net and drown themselves but that's a pretty rare occurrence. It doesn't happen a lot. As I said before, we tend to have a lot of experiences with crocodiles and it's borne out that we're not really doing any damage from the fact that the crocodile populations are expanding in all the areas that we operate in. We're not thinning crocodiles out at all.

There are many, many stories on crocodiles but one of the ones that I frequently tell to people who say crocodiles can't see nets is that they should be out there on a day that we call cool and bit of a south easterly blowing and there's a bit of quiet water somewhere, a bit of sun and a crocodile with his head up on the cork line of the net fast asleep. He's using the net as a resting place. Fish do the same. Fish love to lay in a net and sleep there. How you catch them is you go to the net gently and then give the net a violent jerk which frightens them and you'll get that one fish. You shift the net and catch a fish. The story there is that, give the net a pull with your outboard and dinghy or give it a shake yourself. Fish and crocodiles can see nets.

I've got to tell you a story of some tame crocs that I've had and I'll tell it in the vernacular. I used to fish the Adelaide River in what is called Number One Creek which is a long creek. It would be a river anywhere else in Australia. It's about twelve, fifteen miles long with good water, a couple of hundred metres wide in places narrowing down to 50 metres. In that creek lived a crocodile which I called Shithead and when the ladies were around I used to call him Edward, Ed for short. He used to follow me. I was crabbing and barra fishing in those days and Shithead used to follow me up and down when I was fishing. He'd follow me over about five miles of water. As he came to a net he just dived underneath it and came up the other side and kept coming along with me. I had another one called Arsehole in Creek Number Two. He was Solomon when the ladies were around or Sol for short. He was very much a favourite of mine. When I was in the area where he was.... They're very territorial, crocodiles. They don't move. Territorial can mean a hundred metres. They don't move out of that, or 200 metres. They don't move much out of that area where there are a lot of crocodiles. Anyhow, I used to turn up at that area and yell out, "Arsehole, arsehole, where are you" and he'd used to come out like a Disney character. He was swimming too fast for

himself; his snout out of the water and he'd come boring over to the boat. I used to feed him bits of fish and chicken and so forth. Crocodiles love anything that's white. They'll play with the white buoys, white foam. They like to take them in their mouth and just gently squeeze it. They'll then let it go again.

I'll finish off by telling you crocodile story that's very humorous. I had a fishing mate called Wally Wegschaider. He was an Austrian, had been a buffalo shooter. He used to think I had a big down on him when I was in the Police Force. When I was out of the Police Force Wally was determined he was going to get even with me. I did him a favour one day and we finished up the best of mates ever since. He announced to me that he was coming fishing with me and I was a bit worried about this man that could lift 44s onto the back of trucks who didn't like me [unclear] and was coming fishing with me. We were fishing out of dinghies on the Daly River the year after Cyclone Tracey, 1975. I had a lot of experiences with Wally but Wally told a very humorous story about a crocodile. He always insisted that I'd caught a lot of fish and I'd have a dinghy full of fish and I'd fillet them and I'd put the carcasses over the edge of the river when it was in flood and he said that I'd bought a big black crocodile into the area, fourteen foot crocodile. He always called it my croc. He saw me one day several years after we went fishing and he said to me, "Your big black crocodile nearly got me the other day." Of course he's got a very deep accent, Wally. You've got to understand Austrian, I reckon, to understand his English. He said, "Your big black crocodile got me the other day." I said, "Yeah, how was that Wally?" Well Wally lives on the banks of the Daly River in what is called Dargey's Farm. Dargey had the Daly River [unclear]. There is a rock bar goes across and in the dry season the water goes down, it's clear water. There's a little channel and you can walk knee deep across this bar and then you have to go chest deep for, oh ten feet and then you come up onto the rock bar again. He said, "I went across the rock bar [unclear]. I shot a pig on the other side. You know me, I'm strong. I was coming back with this pig on my shoulder and rifle in the other hand and I walked down into that deep part and your crocodile came at me. It was coming at me so I threw the pig at it and it didn't want that. So I got my rifle and I held it and went bang and nothing happened. I pulled the trigger and I expected it to go bang, nothing happened, wet bullets." He said, "The crocodile kept coming at me so I hit him on the snout with the butt of my rifle and it grabbed hold of the rifle and pulled it out of my hand and then let it go and then it sunk and then it was coming at me again with its mouth open. I thought what will I do, what will I do?" So he said, "I grabbed it with one hand on the bottom jaw and one hand on the top jaw and I was looking down its throat and I thought, what will I do, what will I do?" He said, "You know what I did?" I said, "No, Wally" He said, "I spat and I spat and I spat and I drowned it." [laughter]

**JD** Alright. Thanks for that and thanks very much for this interview Graham. Best of luck to you, mate.

**McMAHON** Thanks very much.

END OF TAPE ONE SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





## Edited transcript of an interview with VENA OLIVER

### INTRODUCTION

Vena Oliver is the wife of barramundi fisherman, Ken Oliver of Borroloola in the Northern Territory. Vena was a nursing sister and Ken was a veterinarian when they decided to change careers and enter the fishing industry. Their first venture in the industry was reef fishing from North Island in the Sir Edward Pellew Group in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

One of the many problems fishermen face in northern Australia is weather conditions and in a vivid account, Vena describes a cyclone and its aftermath when it struck the North Island during their time there. In addition to outlining their experiences in fishing, Vena discusses many aspects of family life in a remote area and the condition of the fishing industry in Arnhem Land and adjacent areas. It is a moving story.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry and was recorded by Jack Darcey in the Oliver's home in Borroloola, Northern Territory on the 14th May, 1990. There are two sides on one tape and the interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** Vena, would you record your full name, date and place of birth please.

**OLIVER** Vena Anne Oliver. I was born 6th September, 1948 in Latrobe, Tasmania.

**JD** And your husband is Ken Oliver?

**OLIVER** Yes, Kenneth John Oliver. Ken was born on the 8th April, 1947 and he was born in Maryborough in Queensland.

**JD** How did you come to get into fishing?

**OLIVER** Well Ken, his father had some history in fishing. He was on the coast of Queensland north of Hervey Bay at a place called Toogoom and he was a citrus farmer but also did a bit of fishing on the side, mostly for mackerel. Ken sort of, [was] not so much helping his father (he was only a kid at the time) but the stories and then as he grew older, the professional fishermen were around there. He used to go out with them. A lot of them were old German fishermen and they used to get into a lot of processing where they would sell a lot of fish fresh but then they would smoke a lot of them, kipper, things like that. He was fascinated by that, absolutely fascinated by it and of course amateur fishermen, he met amateur fishermen who would fish all day and all night. He went through school in Queensland. He went to Agricultural College



and did animal husbandry there. Then he worked in the bush, as they say, in western Queensland for some years on cattle stations and sheep stations. When he was about 21 he decided.... Well I should say first he did a year of university, didn't do very well in his first year and he decided, well he'd give that away and went bush for about six or seven years. Then he decided he would go back to university so he got in touch with the university and they said yes he could go back and finish. He'd started veterinary science and he could finish it. So he finished veterinary science in Queensland.

When he finished he was in a quandry what he was going to do or where he was going to do it, except to go bush. He came to Alice Springs and I was working in Alice Springs at the time as the theatre sister at the local hospital there. So we met there and we married there and he had a veterinary practice there for some years but Ken still always hankered to go fishing. He used to come up here to Borroloola every possible opportunity amateur fishing. We had two sons and by the time Hugh, the elder, was about four or five, I suppose, Ken enjoyed veterinary science but he realised that he was just putting so much time into that practice that this child was growing up and he didn't know this kid. By that stage we had James who would have been, just a baby. So he had the opportunity to sell the practice and he did and he put to me that perhaps we could come up to North Island for a while and see how we enjoyed that. So we agreed that we'd give it a go. So that's really how it started. Jim was just one when he came up here. Hugh was just about to start school. He was pre-school age. So we initially came up.

**JD** Why Borroloola?

**OLIVER** Well I guess mainly because from Alice Springs it was the nearest sea [laughs] that had a road to it, anyway. In fact in the Northern Territory there are very few places there is a decent road goes to within cooee of the sea that is not controlled by Aboriginal land or pastoral land or something. So that was, I think, the main reason. Also because he had come here amateur fishing so he knew the area. So I guess in some respects it wasn't such a gamble. He knew what the fishing was like.

So he got in touch with Fisheries to see if he could get some sort of a licence and at that time they were just starting to take some control of the Fishery. Up until then Joe Blow could almost literally come off the street and say, "OK I want to go barra fishing" and they'd just write out a ticket, he pays whatever and away he went. There was no control over where he fished or how he fished to a big part[?] nor whether he was viable or that he was going to be true to fishing or whatever. It was just about that time they started to bring a bit of control into the fishery. They still went on a bit and said, "Oh well, we're not sure about this bloke, whether he's really keen. He's obviously a vet. He's obviously going to dabble on the side like our [unclear] or whatever" [laughs], the hobby farmers. So [unclear] chaps who were in the Department of Primary Industry which is involved with Fisheries here, of course it's now [unclear]. At that time it wasn't but it still was very closely linked. They sort of said, well you know, "This bloke's mad on fishing, that's all he ever thinks about." [laughs] So they said, "Yes, we'll give you a reef licence." Here they call this an offshore licence, an inshore licence, a barramundi licence, a [unclear] licence and a [unclear] with larger fishery licence. So he initially got the offshore licence which was a reef licence. We went out and lived on North Island and Ken....

**JD** When you say North Island....

**OLIVER** There's a group of islands here at the mouth of the McArthur called the Sir Edward Pellew Group which was discovered by Van Diemen actually then was later

explored by Flinders during his circumnavigation. He did a detailed study. He named them by directions and there's a North and a South and a West and a South West and a Centre. The biggest island is called Vanderlin Island which was named by Tasman and obviously North is the most northerly one of the group. It's an interesting island. It's about, probably two or three kilometres wide at its widest point. It would only be about probably ten, fifteen kilometres long. It's the only island in the group that has no feral animals on it. So it was of particular interest to the Conservation Commission because they feel that this group of islands here is a crossover point between the New Guinea and Cape York wildlife, especially the birds and of Arnhem Land. So they were interested to have some sort of foothold there because, as I say, there's no feral animals there. The other islands have got dingoes and some have got goats, all those sort of things. So while we were there they actually came and did a big survey. They made Ken sort of honorary ranger there while they were there.

**JD** Did you live ashore?

**OLIVER** We lived ashore, yes. We had buildings there. We had, I guess, separate rooms. We had one room that was a kitchen area and then we had another which was a guest bedroom and then another one which was our bedroom. Then we had an ablution block and there was another shed that was sort of a workshop come school room for the kids.

**JD** Had you put it up yourself?

**OLIVER** Some. It had been put up initially.... Actually a chap here now who's a butcher here, Joe Douglas, he initially started it; coming up from Alice Springs [laughs]. He was a butcher in Alice Springs, came up and liked it out there and started to put up a bit of a building and sort of got added onto over the years. Then he left the area and what was there he sold to the Fittock family. Their son now runs a tourist operation here and owns the caravan park. They decided to leave out there and they gave Ken the opportunity [with] a couple of mates from Alice Springs at the time, three, four of them, and they bought what was there. We had no land tenure whatsoever and we couldn't get any. The islands went under an Aboriginal land claim and most of it was given to the traditional owners, most of whom now live here in town. In fact at that time there was no Aboriginal people living in the islands at all. There was a chap on Vanderlin Island who's half-caste. He is a professional fisherman. He's got a barramundi licence and Steve has always lived there. His father was a Scotsman, he was a shipwright. He taught Steve his fishing, some ship building and the other many crafts that Steve has. He lives out there. There's a weather station on Centre Island which Mt Isa Mines put there so they could have some land tenure because they wanted that as their deep water port if they ever put in a mine up here. Then there was ourselves on North Island. Since then, as I say, a land claim was granted and there is a small settlement on West Island. A few Aboriginal people live there and on South West Island, it's almost all sacred land. There's big burial grounds there. North Island was granted to the Aboriginals only last year but on the same sort of tenure as what Cobourg Peninsula is. That is that it is given to the traditional owners but leased back to the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory [unclear] as a wildlife reserve. That's what's happening now and there is nobody living there permanently at the moment but they are hoping to have a ranger out there. So we went out there and sat down [laughs]. So we lived as a shore planter (this is a local term for a fisherperson who fishes from a land based camp) and Ken just had a fourteen foot dinghy. [There was] a lot of reef off the islands to the north east. Reef fishing was just, it was magnificent, just wonderful.

**JD** What species?

**OLIVER** A lot of what they call nannygai which are red emperor, a lot of golden sea perch. Then there was sweetlip.... Mostly the commercial fishery does a lot of parrot fish and those sort of reef fish, stripeys, [unclear]....

**JD** Is it a coral reef?

**OLIVER** It's not coral reef like the Great Barrier Reef. It is more sort of what they call bombies. It's not sort of that area. The water's murky. It's not real clear either as what you get over there. It's clearer than a lot of the rivers are but it's not that beautiful. You can't see down through clear water at all. I guess 'cause you don't get the sun filtration you don't get that type of coral. Certain areas east of Vanderlin you start to run into that type of coral reef but not close in. The prawn trawler fleet from Karumba use those islands to refuel and shelter and to offload their catches onto the mother ships. They used to use Paradise (named after Lord Paradise) quite a lot during the dry season because we get a lot of south east winds there and in Paradise Bay there's good shelter from the south east weather. So we used to get a lot of trawlers in there. That's one of the main reasons the Conservation Commission want us to be there because they wanted some sort of control over what they did out there.

So we used to fish mostly for, I suppose, the red emperor and the golden snapper. You never sort of really got tonnes and tonnes and tonnes. You'd probably be flat getting a tonne a year, for a season. I should suppose say we never worried about that much but financially Ken was still doing large animal work down the station. So he just sort of was finding his way, more than anything.

**JD** What was your market?

**OLIVER** Mostly to Karumba. We would send it back on the prawn fleet to Karumba, yes. That for us from there was the easiest way.

**JD** In fillet form or....

**OLIVER** Oh fillets, yes, 90% fillets. Occasionally somebody would want whole fish and we would send whole fish back but generally it was fillets; a lot easier to deal with, I suppose. The set-up at the camp wasn't ideal. We had a goods tank which had good water but it wasn't endless, of course. Ken, I suppose, coming from a veterinary science background, was very particular with cleanliness and what you put up with. His great quote is that "people eat with their eyes". So he has always been very particular with his product. He's always striving for great heights and he was never 100% happy with the situation out there.

**JD** Did you have freezer facilities?

**OLIVER** We had freezer facilities but just household freezers, the big sort of commercial type ones and we had generators, of course. It was adequate but not ideal. We were lucky that we had the prawn fleet coming in that we could offload on to them as we were going through because otherwise, to get fish out of there, you would have to have some sort of freezer facility to transport the fish here. So we did that for two wet seasons, we stayed out there. Then, as I say, we used to go out to the station in the dry season. Ken would do cattle work.

Then the third season we went back out there, we were just about to leave at Easter time, in fact we should have left but, things got held up and whatever. Then they told us this cyclone's coming. So there we were. We had a couple of old chaps who came up to caretake the place for us. Then they just sort of got there and so Ken said, "Oh we'll wait until after Easter" so we can settle these chaps in. Then this cyclone started to blow up and he said, "Oh well, we'd better wait to see what happens with this." We had a few false alarms, cyclones going around us, you know. Luckily Ken had been through quite a few cyclones himself in Queensland. So he wasn't as blase as probably a lot of people were. We had a lot of these false alarms. In fact, only a couple of weeks before he'd been to Darwin with Steve Johnson who is this half-caste chap on Vanderlin Island and he said to Steve, "Oh they all reckon that we don't get cyclones in this area. Have they ever been through Vanderlin Island?" He said, "1948, Ken". He said, "I can remember I was only a kid and we sheltered on Vanderlin Island. I remember it was up wind of a goat farm. We got pelted by goat shit all the time." [laughter] He said, "If you look down around the river you'll see that there's no mangroves of any size. They were completely wiped out in 1948." When Ken came back he took particular note of that and it was true. You can see butts every now and again of what had obviously been a big tree but there are no big mangroves in this area, obviously even still. You can go through the north especially around Blue Mud Bay which is just on the coast from Groote Eylandt. They've got a lot of timber there in the mangroves; they were huge. Yet here, obviously, they have been devastated.

So when the cyclone warning came we tracked it and tracked it and then, of course, it came in and it came right across. We didn't get the eye where we were but the other side of the island where the trawlers were all sheltering, they went through the eye. It was just horrific. It's been recognised as the strongest cyclone that ever crossed the Australian coast. Course we got winds estimated at 280 kilometres an hour and the wind instruments at Centre Island Weather Station stopped working and got blown down. So they couldn't actually give a true reading. They gave an estimation with what they had been able to get readings from on the devastation. Also the trawlers had their barometers. They kept tracking.... One chap in particular, I think, a Swedish guy, he just kept making notes of where she kept going in between times because the eye was at Walker's Point. So they were able to make some sort of estimate with that. We were in our camp and unfortunately it was supposed to have passed us and hit the Robinson River. About this time at night, about sixish, just twilightish but not quite, it was cloudish but not too dark. Ken suddenly said, "I don't like the look of this. The sky's changing. It's going to come in here." If it had been left to me, I had never been through a cyclone in my life before, I had no idea what they can do or where you're supposed to find out where it's coming from or going to. I would have thought, oh it's nothing yet. [unclear]

We picked ourselves out a bit of a shelter when it was getting dark up over the first lot of sand dunes with some rocks but they were probably a bit higher than this table. We couldn't stand up but we could sort of crouch around in there. We decided well that would be a good place to go because it faced a hill so was relatively sheltered. So Ken said, "I think we'd better get out of here." So we packed up what gear we wanted. During the day we'd packed everything away and tied down as much as we could of the gear we had out there. We took clothing and food and things like that and water with us. We went up to this shelter. By ten o'clock, about two hours later [unclear]. We would have got there by about half past seven, eight o'clock, I suppose. By ten o'clock we would never have been able to move. I don't think we would have survived if we'd stayed in the camp, mainly because we would have been sand blasted.

We were able to get back down there the next day about probably.... Ken had gone about one o'clock in the afternoon. He walked down with a blanket around him, it was still blowing up the sand but it didn't worry you. By about three it had calmed down

enough that we could go down. It had sand blasted all the paint off the steel, right back to basic steel. It was just incredible. We had a measure, rain gauge out the back and it would have been probably 500 yards from the sea, it was full of salt water. Just amazing. The strength of the wind was just.... I can't imagine that wind can do.... The beach was totally changed. You wouldn't have known it. It was just totally changed. What had been sand dunes were just moved for miles. There wasn't a leaf on a tree all seaward side. It was just absolutely bare down to the wood. All the beach sand had been blown in for miles and miles. Boats had just been picked up and just dumped. Our dinghy was on the bottom. Ken had tied it with a brand new rope and it had just snapped it. That's how it went. There was dolphins washed up on the beach and fish and turtles without their shells and it was just terrible. I think that worried the kids, all of us but the kids especially. It impressed them then more than anything, the devastation. They just felt terrible. We were able to get one dolphin back into the water but the other one was just too far gone. You couldn't do anything.

Of course typically, we don't realise these things, but our communication was with radio, obviously, to Darwin, VJY Darwin with Telecom [which was] by now, our main communication. We had a self tuning aerial and of course, it just went west. Goodness knows where it ended up [laughs]. So we had no communication at all. Fortunately because Hugh was on School of the Air, we had a little 25 watt radio which we had taken up to the shelter with us, so it was still dry, as was the battery. So we were able to get contact by about five o'clock.... No, it would have been earlier, probably about half past three that afternoon.... We'd only just got back to camp and walked around to see what was there. It was the last lesson of the day for the School of the Air. I was able to get through to one of the other families, Brunette Downs Station and they were able to get on to Emergency Services and tell them that we were alive and that we were OK and not to worry about us. We had food and water. Such are communications, of course, the Navy was not informed. They were coming down from Groote Eylandt and they had no idea that we were OK. They knew there was a family on the island. They knew who lived on the islands and where and they knew there was a young family on North Island. So, of course, they came straight to us and, of course, the sea was just belting in. They came in. Fortunately one of the ratings had been in here before and there is a bit of a creek that breaks through half way along the beach and they brought in a rubber duck and they luckily hit where this creek breaks through. Otherwise, if they'd hit the beach, they would have just been mincemeat, I think. Well they came up and saw that we were OK and went off again.

After that, of course, we decided well, probably the island wasn't the best place and there was very little left of it. It would have been a big job too, to rebuild it again. We just didn't feel that it was worth it when we couldn't get any land tenure and [were] never likely be able to. We were going back to the station anyway, so we went back to the station. A chappy came through the year before with the boat that Ken has now brought, from Karumba. He'd been up around Groote and Gove mackerel fishing, he and his wife. Ken just fell in love with this boat straight away. In fact I can remember vividly sitting at the kitchen in Paradise Bay and could hear this engine coming. It's an old Gardiner motor and you could hear this going plonk, plonk. I can remember Ken saying, "Listen to that motor. Oh, that's a good motor, you can hear it; slow revving bugger, that's what you like." [laughter] So this chap sailed in or steamed in. It's a steel boat. He bought it from a chap and it had been built at Sydney. The owner must have had shares in BHP because it had more steel in it than BHP had [laughs]. So it, as I say, had a Gardiner in it and it's got a three tonne freezer and it's nearly 38 foot long. So Ken was quite.... It was pretty well what he wanted, really. Brian was trying to get out. He's a man in his '50s and was thinking of getting out of the industry. He had a barramundi licence which he used in Queensland and he had the Territory mackerel licence, or offshore licence which is mackerel. They talked about it and Ken said what a nice boat it was and I suppose Brian stored that away, and Ken did too.

Then after the cyclone people rang up to find out how we were and as time went by, Brian got in touch with Ken and said, "If you're interested, I'll be willing to come to some agreement about the boat." So Ken went up to Karumba and saw Brian and they agreed on a price and in fact Ken bought the boat. While Ken was still working Brian leased it back off Ken and he worked it still with his barramundi licence because he kept that separately. So he did that and at the end of that season we went up to Karumba and we got on the boat and went mackerel fishing.

We left Karumba. It was supposed to be a land breeze, well it was blowing and all these blokes are saying, "Well, don't worry Vena, it's just a land breeze. It's bound to be placid outside." Of course, by the time we got to the fairway buoy, we were taking water over the front [laughs]. Well Ken didn't notice it but the kids and I were green. So we decided to go back and so we went back to the first buoy and sat there for the rest of the night. Then the trawlers started going past and Ken's saying, "Oh it can't be that bad. It doesn't matter if they're 50 or 60, 70 footers, they're going out. Must be alright." By daylight we decided we'd make a run for it to Mornington Island and it wasn't too bad. The kids and I were a bit sick but we got our sea legs after a few hours. We went across to Mornington Island and then we came from there across to the Vandelins. We sheltered here for a few days. The wind got up a bit and we thought, well it's about 70 nautical miles from the top of North Island to the bottom of Groote. We could do it in one day, no problem, but we didn't want to tackle it unless it was pretty sure.

So then we took off and got to Groote Eylandt. We fished around there for a while; had some reasonably good fishing. Beautiful water. It is just beautiful up around there. Those islands are just absolutely wonderful. Then we went up to Gove and we fished out from Gove around the Wessel Islands and the English Company Islands round there, just Ken and I and the boys. Then Peter Fittock who is as I say, in tourism now, he was then a barramundi fisherman. He bought his boat up and went mackerel fishing up there as well with us. We had a great time. It was really a great experience. We were away for about, I suppose it was about five months, five or six months.

**JD** You lived on board?

**OLIVER** We lived on board all the time, yes. We got [unclear] three bunks, one was a double bunk and two single bunks. We got cooking facilities and things like that. We have a cat [laughs]. Actually it wasn't too bad. Because we had the kids we probably made an effort more to go onshore than we probably would have done if had just had been a couple of adults. We'd go and have a barbecue every two or three nights. We'd go beachcombing every now and again and things like that with the kids. It was just lovely being out there. You'd go to the beaches and there'd be no set of human footsteps anywhere, although then you'd go to another beach.... We went to a beach on Groote Eylandt and we were walking along beachcombing saying, "Isn't this wonderful." Not a soul in sight, we walked round the first set of sand dunes and there's this four wheel drive track [laughs] all the accompanying cans and rubbish and what ever. It was fascinating and we met some lovely people all round different places. Of course word soon got out that Ken was a vet, as well, on the side. Of course most of those places had no veterinary services whatsoever so we'd end up doing a few consultations on the wharf and [laughs] things like that.

After that we went back to Karumba and then Ken did another year [in the cattle] season. Then he decided we would see what we were going to do from there. The mackerel were alright but not really that you could set up solely as a fisherman. Ken was brought up more as a master fisherman in Queensland. You'd sort of work all the fish, you don't sort of just target one fishery and he didn't like doing it. So he decided

that he'd like to see if he could get a barramundi licence. By then the Territory had closed barramundi fishery and there were probably about 40 licences current. The Government wanted to bring it back as much as they could. Initially at that time they were going to bring it back to 35 licences. So the only way he could get a licence.... For a while they were frozen altogether. You couldn't buy a licence. Then they decided, once they got it back to a certain number, they would allow people to transfer licences. So he just registered with Fisheries that he was interested in a licence if one did come up and eventually a chappy in Darwin decided....

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**OLIVER** Ken eventually got his licence and we decided we'd come and settle at Borroloola. We had a caravan when we went out the station so we towed that up here and lived on a block of land up here for a while and we decided we would make a go of it. Ken initially went to sea [and] employed just one old chap. He had been a station cook and had also worked for some years on the boats going on the freight run from Adelaide across to the northern ports of Tasmania. So he had quite a bit of sea experience. So they went out that first year. By the end of the year Ken realised that he needed somebody else, another pair of hands. So since then he's always employed two people on the boat. He fishes mostly outside around the river flats, in some small creeks around the estuary, and around the islands. Mainly he doesn't fish in the river because, apart from the fact that there are fewer creeks.... When I say the river, in the Northern Territory rivers actually aren't open to the fishermen as such inside the mouth but because there's an estuary, the river forks at what they call the Batten which is probably about 50 kilometres, I suppose, from here at Borroloola. That is considered the mouth because it then forks and becomes the Delta System. So all the Delta System is considered part of the sea and so the fishermen are allowed to come in to the Batten.

As I was saying before, because this area is one of the few areas where there is a road that comes right through the town and then you get access right through the river and also then on to the sea, there's a lot of pressure from recreational fishermen. So Ken just likes to keep a low profile in the fishery. He actually has quite a good time. In fact Ken is a very outgoing person [and] becomes extremely involved with people. We have got amateur fishermen that come up here all the time. They come up with freezers from down south, with freezer loads of lamb to swap. We barter it for fish or just because Ken's been nice to them and shown them a hole somewhere. He usually keeps an eye on fishermen and he sees the blokes going around. Those who are just tourists, just trooping around, he doesn't worry too much about. If they're obviously keen fishermen, and you can tell that they really don't know where they're going, he'll watch them for a couple of days and then he'd decided, "Oh well, they obviously know what they want to do." So he'll get his map out and say, "well this is a good place to go" and "that's a good place to go and so on. Of course fishermen are grateful if they happen to catch fish [laugh] and they do. He gets on really well with the majority of them by far but of course there's always a few. They see commercial fishermen going passed and think, "Oh well, I can't catch them today. That's the reason I didn't catch a fish today." So he keeps out of the way for that reason.

Also just simply because of the noise. We get a lot of people. It would be nothing to have 40 camps down on that river at any one time with their one or two dinghys each.

So there is a lot of noise pollution up and down the river itself. So he sort of tends to keep away from that. So he spends most of his time outside.

**JD** This is also an Aboriginal community, isn't it?

**OLIVER** It is, yes. There's an Aboriginal community, a land based one here in Borroloola but there's two or three of the elders who actually did come from the islands. One old chap actually did live out there. He was born on North Island. He in fact worked for the Macasans years ago in beche-de-mer. He's an extremely interesting man to talk to. Johnson Timothy, his name is. Personally, he loves the islands but he's an old man now. He's not interested in living out there but his family, that's his descendants, are the traditional owners of the area. They don't use the islands themselves that much. They have a bit of a settlement there on West Island that some of them go out to and they've got homes out there and that sort of thing, they drift out there and back into town a bit. South West Island is sacred to them and no Europeans are allowed to set foot on there. It has a lot of burial grounds and significant sites, ceremonial sites and things like that on it. When the Europeans came here, it is actually quite interesting because during the War it was one of the observation posts that they had around. You've probably heard of Curtin's Cowboys, the Northern Surveillance Group. Well they had a surveillance point out there on South West Island. The island's actually quite hilly. They're not flat at all. They're actually rocky outcrops. They used to go out by dugout canoe. It would take them two days to row from here out to the islands with the supply. They reckoned that they had to get them so well balanced, if you didn't part your hair in the middle, they'd capsize [laughs].

As far as our fishing industry's concerned, here locally it doesn't affect Ken all that much. Every now and again some one will say, "Oh Ken, is fishing in a sacred site" or something. There are in fact very few that are actually close to the sea. There's a couple of rocks, just rocks out in the river, in the sea, that are sacred. I shouldn't say sacred, significant, to the Aboriginal people in some ceremonial thing. Ken is always very particular. He never ties up to them. He will always anchor away from them. They are in fact allowed to fish up to the high water mark but he never goes close to them for the reason that it's not worth the hassle. A couple of times some of the local Aborigines have complained that he has. It's gone through the Fishing Council. He's gone to them and said, "I'm having hassles" and they've looked in to it and it's never come to anything.

The other thing that Ken always does, he never throws carcasses overboard on the boat. They collect them into one of the dinghys and then they throw them up on the side and sea birds take them mostly. Probably the occasional crocodile will go up and get them. Because of years gone by, most of the fishermen that have fished here have chucked their carcasses over the side. The catfish population is just quite horrific. One time we'd get very few catfish in the river. Ken feels that probably throwing carcasses over the side is not in the best interests. Also, of course, it does attract crocodiles to the boat which is also another reason he won't. There was one case just north of Karumba in the Staiton River where one woman was taken when she was trying to get onto a boat by a crocodile. They hadn't even started fishing but obviously that crocodile was a wily old fellow and had seen the commercial boat come up there for years on end and decided on his tucker. He just waited there and when she got over the side, just went snap. We don't have a problem with crocodiles around the boat much here but he just feels you're asking for trouble, or causing problems, anyway. So they usually take them and put them on the bank. Occasionally we get complaints about doing that from tourists mostly, if they might stink. They usually take them way over the top to a little creek somewhere but occasionally you get the occasional



complaint about it. I think generally when it's explained to people why it's done, they can see the reason for it.

Generally throughout the Territory, Aboriginal land rights has made a big impact on the fishery. For all intents and purposes, Arnhem Land is closed to fishermen because under the Aboriginal Land Right Act, they have control of land to the low tide mark, whereas under Territory legislation they have access to the high water mark and therefore that's quite a bit of difference. The fishermen tend not to go up there and also the Aboriginal Councils try and get the fishermen out of the area as much as they can. They often have fishing rights over the areas as well as land rights. So that pressure is coming on to the fishermen as well, so they tend not to go too much near Aboriginal land. Consequently 80% of the Territory coastline is controlled by Aboriginals.

On top of that, the Daly River which is on the western side of the Territory, the Mary River which is just east of Darwin and the Roper River which is just here on the bottom side of Arnhem Land, have all been closed to commercial fishermen as well. So that's also cut the fishery back considerably. The Roper River, in fact, the Minister closed it at the end of the last fishing season and the Fishing Industry Council have taken out an injunction against that. The Government was advised by the Judge that rather than have an injunction served, it would be better to reopen the river until there could be some sort of discussion. So at the moment it is in abeyance and we still don't know what's going to happen but the Queensland Professional Fishermen's Association have recently decided they would like to have this case go to Court. They would like to make it a test case because they would not like to see the closing of rivers be adopted throughout Australia as a method of management. Of course, the majority of fishermen are against it because it's their livelihood but they're also against it as a management principle. They feel it's not a good management principle to close a river. All that does is put the pressure on another river. So they feel, most of them very sincerely, that they would prefer very much to have more of a management input. So at the moment the Roper River closure is in abeyance.

Here in Borroloola we have got quite an active group called the Gulf of Carpentaria Fish Management Group, or Gulf Management Group. It extends from the Roper River to the Queensland border and it's made up of representatives of the barra fishery, crab fishery, amateurs, tourist operators and the police as enforcement officers, and also the Conservation Commission has a representative. The Gulf fishery, as I was saying, involves all these different groups and we've been very involved with it, both Ken and I. The main aim is to try to get some sort of balance with the environmental groups and the tourist groups and the professional groups to try and get some sort of management into our river systems all along this coast. We don't necessarily want to be told what to do but we want Fisheries to be able to say to us, "This is a large [unclear] area. This is an area where the fishery is not a big viable fishery. It is a very fragile fishery, commercial and recreational." We want them to be able to put roads into every little creek so that they spread the effort right across the coast so that they can say, "This fishery will only support two commercial fishermen", whatever they come up with but at least do something.

So far we have come up completely against a brick wall. Our local Minister, Mr Reid, has certainly said, "Well our big interest is tourism and development and you can go and" (do the other thing). When we've asked for management we've been told they don't wish to do specific management here or specific research here. That's all being done in the Mary River in Darwin. Of course we know the Mary River's close to Darwin so research is easily carried out by officers from Darwin. We also know that the Mary River's an entirely different system to this one. It's part of the water shed of Kakadu

escarpment. They have miles and miles of wetlands, entirely different setup altogether. Of course, it's since been closed by the Minister and now we've discovered the last few days there is going to be a multi-million dollar development by one of the local pastoral barons and Japanese interests. The Minister came down here and we had a meeting here. I went as the representative because Ken wasn't able to go and I firstly put it to him continually that we wanted management of this river. What were their scientific reasons for closing the rivers? We got absolutely a brick wall.

As we've been saying, there are only 27 licences in the Territory at the moment. We have good rapport here in this group. We've all pulled together. We get on well with the tourist side. We get on well with the recreational side. There's no great animosity at all. One of the tourism people said what we all know, that there's only about 70 blokes in the fishing industry. It doesn't mean much against the rest. So we're not going to get much say whatsoever. Therefore the big push here is tourism. If that's where the dollars are, they've decided to push, push, push. That's where it's going to be.

So when they closed it, I personally wrote to the Minister and all the other fishermen representatives around the country. I put it to them that if they close this river, where do we go? We have made a commitment as Territorians to this town. We've built a home here. We've got our boat. Ken's bought his boat. He's put a lot of money into his boat and into his licence. We can't sell that because there's no future in the barramundi industry. Who's going to buy a boat that has no future in that? Who's going to want a home in a town that can't have that industry? Our boys may not be in the least bit interested in fishing but they should at least have the opportunity if they want to. I put it to them that how would other people feel in the community if suddenly by a stroke of the pen the Minister decided that there'll be no more service stations, there'll be no something or other. It is just so wrong to just suddenly decide by stroke of a pen that they're going to wipe out one whole industry.

What makes it ironic for us is that our chief Minister, Mr Perrin, has a fish feeding industry in Darwin at Doctors Gully. You can't go there to amateur fish. You could legally commercially fish off it but, of course, you'd be putting your head in a noose if you did. Obviously he doesn't own those fish. Those fish come up there and feed every day by his wife and employees and he charges tourists to go down there and feed the fish. That is a completely separate little entity really. It really makes you cynical. Fishermen get really mad when you consider that they now buy back a licence for \$750,000 only. They've taken no notice of the commitment that they've made to the area they live in, to the house they've bought, the boat they've got or to the general part of the economy. [unclear] So we just feel that closing the river is not a management thing and we just feel that there should be more consultation. There shouldn't just be these political decisions made where a person's livelihood is just taken away from them without really having very little input into it whatsoever. What about the recreational fishery? Every second man and his dog goes fishing. We just haven't a voice at all; no voice at all.

It's difficult in places like this and Vanderlin with education and with health, all those sort of things. We're lucky. Our kids are healthy. If they're not, the nearest hospital is Katherine so they have to be either flown or driven to Katherine 600 kilometres down to Katherine by road. It's two hours by plane. We've a basic health system here, a couple of health sisters, but there's no medical training, medical people. In fact Ken often gets asked by people round the place because his expertise is probably more than most of the people that are here anyway.

**JD** What about education for children?

**OLIVER** There is a school here and facility wise, it's very, very good but because the Aboriginal population tends to be drifting, they have homes in town. They also have out stations either on the islands or further up the coast or on their billabongs or wherever. They tend to drift between one and the other and a lot of the kids drift with them. So the attendance rate at the school is probably about 30/40% which has a lot to do with the school standard. Therefore the school standard is generally low.

The other thing is in the Territory they have two curriculum. One is called the urban curriculum which covers all urban schools in town. Then there is the community curriculum which covers Aboriginal settlements. Well Borroloola is an open town and not an Aboriginal community. The school is still using the community curriculum which is a lower standard than the accepted standard for ordinary every day Australians on the street, Perth, Sydney, wherever. So the kids here are behind the eight ball before they go away. School goes to year seven. There is what they call a posh primary which is really just to fill in the legal requirement to stay at school. So we therefore have to send our kids away for high school and tertiary, of course. They have to be educated away from this area [loud banging noises in background]. That doesn't only apply to fishermen, of course, that applies to everybody. So we have to make a big financial commitment to send our children away. Our son Hugh is going to Townsville next year. Well that's a big financial commitment to have to send a child to a boarding school for five years, probably and then on to tertiary education, if he wants to. We've got two children. It's a big commitment and it's also a big decision. It means our children who are twelve or thirteen when they go away will probably never be with us as a family unit again. So that's a problem too.

Another thing that's possibly against us, you're paying almost double for virtually anything you buy here. So most of us buy out of town but then to do that you've got to organise that. You've got to arrange for transport etc. So as families, there's a lot of pressure put on families living in places like this. I don't think governments take that into consideration at all. I guess that's about it.

**JD** Right. Thank you very much for this interview. It's been wonderful to get your view point as a wife and mother in these remote areas. It's been great to listen to you speak so very, very well. Thank you.

**OLIVER** Thank you.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Vena Oliver, wife of Ken Oliver of Borroloola, Northern Territory.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with **DANNY THOMAS**

### INTRODUCTION

Danny Thomas was originally a West Australian but has lived most of his life in the Northern Territory.

After moving to Darwin he became the manager of the Commonwealth Cold Store, a position that brought him into contact with many of the fishermen of the area. Later he joined a company involved in joint ventures with Japanese interests and prawning and later still with Thailand joint venturers in fin fish harvesting.

He has been prominent in fishing industry councils and currently is chairman of the Northern Territory Fishing Industry Council.

In this interview he discusses many aspects of the industry particularly in the Northern Territory and including the need for controls, cyclone losses, training of personnel and developments in the industry and its management. He is a strong advocate of industry management of the fisheries.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian Fishing Industry and was recorded in Mr Thomas' home in Darwin by Jack Darcey on the 19th May, 1990. There are two sides of one tape and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** Danny would you record your full name and date and place of birth please?

**THOMAS** My name is Daniel Langoulant Thomas. I was born in Perth, 3rd November, 1928.

**JD** Did you grow up in Perth?

**THOMAS** Yes. Education in Calvin[?] High School in Highgate in Perth and the Christian Brothers at Highgate in Perth.

**JD** Did you finish your Junior and leave school or did you go on? What happened?

**THOMAS** Finished the Junior Certificate in '44 and then worked for a short time in ammunitions factory and then started an apprenticeship with the Western Australian Government Railways at Midland Junction as a mechanical fitter.

**JD** Did you finish that course?

**THOMAS** I finished that in '49 with a diesel certificate and welding certificate etc. After completing the apprenticeship I worked with the company, Dalgety's, throughout West Australia putting in shearing plants and 32 Volt lighting plants and that type of equipment. It was after the war - bit of a boom time for the wool people and they were all converting their old houses over to new power sources and things of that nature. And then I joined a company, Tropical Traders and Credisons [sp?] who had a fairly extensive involvement with crayfishing industry which was getting off the ground in Western Australia at that time and this led me to partial involvement with the direction of their processing factory in Lancelin Island and then on to boats. **Tropical Star** was one and another which I finished on was called the **Nadi Mar** and at that time I got married in 1953 but didn't see any real future in the crayfishing industry at that time so my wife, who had been in Darwin, and I, thought that there was better possibilities up here and like myself, had wandered around a fair bit on and off, so we came to Darwin in March 1954 where I worked with the Commonwealth Government. The Northern Territory at that stage of course, being totally a territory under the control of Canberra much to most people's dismay and dislike [unclear] that's the facts of life.

So we went on from there and had five territorial children - two girls and three boys - and we developed a very stable and happy life here in Darwin. I myself, then became the manager of what was called the Commonwealth Cold Stores in Darwin and this catered for all the business houses - Qantas, Army, Navy, Air Force - all foods in the way of frozen foods and such contained in those premises and at the same time, we catered for the local fishermen who required their fish to be frozen and handled and packaged and freighted elsewhere and in the main, it was barramundi fishermen of course, at that time and the likes of the Aritas [sp?] brothers, probably one of the principle ones. Tony Spanelli developed after a while. One of the old timers from Howards [unclear] was Joe Jenkins who had a hand missing but he used to manage okay. Fellows from down the Daly River, Charlie Dargie was a well known character. The Daly River had a lot of characters there who brought up fish to Darwin. It was pretty tough times for them - that roads were pretty primitive. But they brought their fish up to Darwin, fellows like Tom Deaga was a Latvian (lovely old fellow); George Lavata - his wife who lived down there with a family. There was quite a number of others that were part time crocodile shooters and that too: Perry Brothers and fellows like that who used to bring a bit of fish up occasionally. [unclear] out at Port Stewart - Sandpan Creek - which is a good fishing spot. At that stage it mostly centred around barramundi, but times were tough as far as.... very primitive roads and things like that so they had a tough time. It certainly wasn't much money anyway - I can tell you that!

But they used to handle it [at the] Commonwealth Cold Stores - the fish - we used to freeze it and then it was bagged in washed out potato bags and sewn up as whole gill gutted fish and air freighted off to the likes of Melbourne and Sydney to restauraners and people of that nature. We did try one lot to Perth to a fellow called George Powell, who had a processing factory called Planet Fisheries up at Carnarvon way but it didn't go off too well. They said the fish was a bit tainted with muddy flavour or a weedy flavour and it wasn't very good quality they thought. But as time went by of course, the barramundis became the king of the fish in the north of Australia.

In 1968 I joined with a man called, John Heckman, to start up a prawning operation out of Darwin. It was one of a group of licences which were called for by the Commonwealth Government for people to start up a budding prawn fishing industry here at Darwin and in these waters around here and there were six licences all told that were let, as I recall. There was the Tiperary Company; the company that I was involved with was Northern Research Pty Ltd; there was Northern Fisheries from Katherine - they were part of the Katherine Meatworks; there was Kailis Good Island (it was an off spring of Michael Kailis and his operations); there was another one attached to the mining company, called North Australian Fisheries they were called and I forget the furthest one, but anyway.... Don Kiokio [sp?].

And then I started fishing operations, most of them in a joint venture of some sort. The one I was with was Northern Research Pty Ltd and we started with chap and his company called, Nippon Suzan Kaisher and we built four initial trawlers in 1970 - Australian trawlers - although we had started the company with twelve Japanese trawlers and I myself had gone out on these trawlers at various stages. We did a lot of fishing at those times up off Papua New Guinea and West Irian before the days when of course, they didn't have the Australian or the International 200 mile fishing zones in those days so you go within twelve miles of the coast anyhow. It was quite good waters up there: we did a lot of fishing up there. However, the Australian side of it was developed in 1970: we built four vessels. We built in '72, four in '73, four in '75 and then of course we had the cyclone that came along and we lost two boats in the cyclone of Christmas 1974.

**JD** This is Tracey?

**THOMAS** Tracey, yes. That was Tracey. Vessel then Ardeman, which is still in the harbour - was never salvaged - and another boat the **N R Kendall** which was sold for salvaged and some other people raised it and re used it under a different name.

**JD** Did they just sink at their moorings?

**THOMAS** Well, one of them the **N R Kendall** sadly, two of the crew were killed on it (were drowned). One got ashore - in fact actually I was here in this house with my own family with our own problems, and just as there was a little bit of grey in the morning, we felt that the winds were dying down, I got out through what was left of the front door and balcony and got down below and the engineer off this vessel, Kendall, arrived at my house. He walked from Larakeya where the boat had been turned over and through the aftermath of the cyclone, he'd come here to see me. So we went back down there and found the bodies of these other fellows. One was a Japanese fellow who was the general manager at the time of the company group who was on the boat, and the other one was Don Hocks from New Zealand who was an assistant engineer on the boat. We had eight boats in port at the time and we lost two and the other six were extensively damaged in various ways. There were blown up on beaches and blown under wharves and god only knows what. Probably though, we didn't suffer as much as other companies did: they suffered a lot more.

But we recovered from that and we went on. Although prawning after that time, probably from about 1978 onwards, the number of vessels involved in the prawning increased considerably and the effort increased considerably so that instead of smaller vessels with one single net they became very big vessels with two and four nets. The investment became extremely high with one million dollars a boat and things like this, so people had to work long hours - around the clock you might say - trying to get enough prawns to keep their head above water and so the prawning industry started to decline at that stage, I'd say. And very noticeably the sizes of the prawns started to

get smaller so that economics of selling the prawns became pretty poor and you needed a larger size prawn. So what happened the company I was with in.... So in 1984 the company felt that it wasn't able to viably operate (at that stage, we had a fleet of 20 vessels) given that throughout the world there was a very major development in the way of aquaculture prawns and Japan was still the major market for it and the smaller size prawns just couldn't be sold economically and that was the major part of the catch now.

**JD** Has that decline continued to the present day?

**THOMAS** Well what happened since then they've brought in closures. So they have two closures a year now in an effort to stop the overcatching, if you want to put it that way, or just the catch effort anyhow and also to give the prawns enough time to spawn and to develop in size so that by catching a more economical size prawn, which is still able to be sold at a viable return for the boats and that's the main purpose of that.

**JD** Have many of the boats that were in the industry in this area moved out?

**THOMAS** Well, in our own case of Northern Research, we sold 20 boats to various places. We sold some to Papua New Guinea and we sold some to Bangladesh, to Nigeria, to Burma and I sold some to another type of fishing down out of Lakes Entrance - scallop fishing - so that was 20 boats that went out of the fishery. But since then there have been a number of vessels that have had to for economic reasons, sell their licences etc to move out of the prawning industry up here and a lot more will. In fact the industry has started with Commonwealth Government assistance, a buy back scheme to buy out licences, in particular, so as to reduce the number of active boats in the prawning industry, but still these are problems of boats, but still, they have a management committee looking at the sale of boats to other countries. In fact, interestingly enough, my eldest son, Mathew who followed a bit in my footsteps through the company, has been an engineer on prawn trawlers and more recently on barges, has accepted an engagement to go with a vessel, the **Courageous**, as the delivery of a vessel to Argentina. So what I hear nowadays too of course, so many companies because of the economic difficulties, are looking at these sort of sales to a, be able to sell back their licences to the government buy back scheme and b, try and sell their vessels to an overseas [unclear] countries of interest.

**JD** Has the price of the prawns that are caught here, declined or has it remained stable?

**THOMAS** The prawns prices were quite low last year for what's called the whites or banana prawns, something down to \$6 or \$7. This year they're doing a lot better - they're being sold for around \$9 so that's quite a good increase, whereas quality of prawns are not available this year I understand. The catches are quite poor. But I've no doubt that in the longer term with the aim at the present time to reduce the prawning fleet by as much as 50 boats, if that is successful then I believe that there will be a fairly stable and successful and viable operation in the longer term, but there'll be a few years of tough going for a while though, until it's all settled that way.

**JD** Are the boats virtually all company operations or are there owner operators?

**THOMAS** I guess that fifty percent of the boats are owner operators and the other fifty percent would be company boats and that.... At the present time I'm talking about there are 230 vessels licensed in the prawn fishery, but I myself, after the shutting down of the Northern Research operation which, as I say, had 20 vessels, we also had

a live processing factory here in Darwin which we processed something like two shifts at one stage of the game - we were doing about sixteen tonnes of prawn a day: we were processing and packaging.

But we shut down and I again, joined with Mr John Hickman in a joint venture operation with Thailanders for dorsal fin fish in the Afafura Sea which is north east from Darwin virtually (in 100 mile off shore I guess in average distance off shore) using Thailand boats and crews and they catch schnappers: to a greater degree quite a variety of other fish in the way of travallies and cods and a number of lesser value fish in the way of scads and fins and fish of that nature (it's quite a large variety of fish) but by far, the better value fish is the schnapper group that's caught which is probably about forty percent of the total retained catch on board the boat that's of any value.

We have also started a small processing plant here in Darwin and we process probably around 60 to 100 tonnes of fish per month and meantime the rest we sell to our carrier boat to market in Singapore and in Bangkok where that [is] probably 400 tonnes a month, I guess. At this stage also, then we are developing an Australian content by coming in with individual boat owners who have the interest to get involved with this sort of fishing, taking shares in boats because we believe that the best way is that if you have a man that's got a share in the boat, he's going to take much more interest in it and has much more drive in operating the boat. Also a prawning fishing company at this present time, although they have interests in West Australia operating on scampi and red prawn, and I have a number of boats that we believe we can convert into this type of fishing which is a forerunner to I think, a longer term Australian operation in this Afafura Sea region. Others of course, are operating in a dissimilar way up off Western Australia they haven't developed as far as we have in our own processing facilities and things like that at this stage. In the early days of starting the prawning industry, the company I was with as I mentioned, Northern Research Pty Ltd we were in a joint venture with Japanese, Nippon Suzan Kaisher, these people were very knowledgeable about the fishing industry and certainly about prawning, and they brought down a man here called, Tats Goga, who everybody who knew him up here respected his ability and knowledge in prawns and the operation of equipment etc for catching prawns and his immense ability to be able to pass on that information to people. Communication sometimes can be difficult - in the early days when we had Japanese boats a lot of sign language went on but by the same line the captains and that seemed to be able to have some understanding of English and there wasn't really any major in being able to deal with them and work with and so similarly, even today with the Thailand vessels that I am involved with at this time, the same thing applies. The captains and fishing masters that they have on board the vessels are such that they have perhaps more exposure with people who are English speaking etc and they either communicate, not in a steady English sentence, but certainly enough to be able to converse and crack a joke and things like that. And that makes it a lot easier in this sort of operation.

Back in the 1970s when we started our vessel operations with the first of the Australian boats into the prawning industry, with Nippon Suzan Kaisher, we had two Japanese crews and two Australian crews and regularly daily radio communications were quite a problem at that stage because again, whilst our friends were able to communicate when we talked face to face, with a bit of sign language, it certainly wasn't very easy on the boat to record catches and things like that or to speak about things that maybe more concern to them, but however, with Japanese in the office they were able to communicate with them and then pass on the information so it was resolved.



But it was apparent at that time though that there were so many boats looking and interested in the northern prawn fishery that we formed a branch here of the Australian Fishing Industry Council. This was an Australian wide organisation for fishing industry and each State had some law of already existing committees going in their own States and one was formed here and the initial chairman of that was Mr John Hickman and myself as the secretary and it took in all the major companies and a great number of individuals as time went on, joined it. About 1973 to 1976 we battled with the Commonwealth to put forward a management plan for control of the fishery because we could see that it was going to be overfished even at that stage. But more importantly then as we were building Australian vessels, we didn't have the experienced crews to man these boats and this was quite a problem. But it was seen that the only way out of it was we'd have to train Australians to do the job - that was the only way out of it. So we formed a Northern Territory fishing industry training committee of which I was the chairman, and we ran a number of courses through the Northern Territory TAFE college at that time, and we recruited a man from Western Australia, Dim Cole, who had some experience down in Western Australia in this field and he started courses here for deck hands and at the same time, we organised through the TAFE, a brief engineering course to give people the opportunity to be able to take up the position as engineer on trawlers.

Given at that time up here in the Northern Territory there was no rules and regulations in existence for skippers and/or engineers. I mean, anybody could drive a boat at that stage - didn't matter who you were. So that whilst [unclear] recruited skippers for boats really they were people from West Australia and/or from Queensland in the main, who had been involved in the fishing from a boat of some sort, preferably a prawn trawler because there had been some operating on the east coast of Queensland and they were a bit of a pig in a poke: some of them turned out okay and others didn't. However, you take the good with the bad - that's all you could get.

And the son-in-law we turned up a lot of deck hands who themselves became skippers and they did quite well and the fishing industry training committee itself has gone on to be a very strong force up here now. We're training people for not just to be crew people on boats, but in the processing field or now particularly filleting of fish and handling of fish: how to prepare fish for market because it is becoming a very important side of the fishing industry up here now. At the same time, we have just started to get some aboriginal people in to do courses and things like that, so they've spread themselves very thoroughly and they're doing a pretty thorough job now right up to the present time.

**JD** Do you get many women as crew?

**THOMAS** Yes. There's always been a fair sprinkling of women crews on prawn trawlers particularly. You've got to imagine too that usually the vessels are away for the early part of the year for as much as five months and during that time in the operations that we run from Northern Research for instance, we use the carrier boat to go and meet the boats at sea, pick up their prawns, deliver fuel, their food, had engineers that did repairs and things like that, so we kept the boats out there as much as possible on the fishing grounds. And the crews themselves became, happily, a very self sufficient in any case, but the women's touch was much appreciated as far as cooking and general I suppose, stop all the boisterous on board the vessels and things like that. Certainly pretty well every vessel I had now, I've always had one or two women on board.

**JD** Did you get graduates from the Maritime College, Launceston?

**THOMAS** No. It came much later. We started with the Maritime College down there (I'm just trying to think of the number of years ago that it got started), but we go back perhaps about 1980 when it really got started and after that, we've now started a scholarship up here in the last few years, call the John Hickman Scholarship as a matter of fact to send young fellows down there to enter the college. I think two of those only have completed the course at this stage, and we've got three going there at the present time.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** Danny could you comment on the management of the industry in these parts?

**THOMAS** Yes certainly. In particular I guess my most involvement has been in the past, with the prawning industry where I think I previously mentioned that we started a branch of the Australian Fishing Industry Council here in Darwin in about '73. And we battled with the Commonwealth at that stage to eventually form a management structure for the northern prawn fishery which was the first of its kind in Australia. It took in the three states of Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia but also the Commonwealth. So it was quite a remarkable development at that stage in fisheries management, but it was very necessary in order to try and bring in some regulation and be able to try and properly manage the resource because there was a danger of it which is probably still a problem at this stage, of being fished out. And that has developed quite a lot also where government in those days were reluctant to give any power to the body, it was really an advisory body, but slowly it has turned itself around now where it is with a major industry input, the actual managing body. It structured itself with loans for the sake of by back schemes which are guaranteed by government but nonetheless the industry has its own management schemes for running these sections of its total management package. It has a scientific group which takes in advice from CSIRO but the management group decides on its own issues so that it is a total industry managed committee or council.

So are other states now: I note that more recent days and I've just come back in the game to the national scene as the chairman of the Northern Territory Fishing Industry Council, following Eddie Kemp who was chairman for some years, and at the recent meeting (the first I went to), a lot of the issues that are there on a national basis are still there of course, however the present government with a new policy, have decided on pooling an Australian Fishing Management Authority which was a body going to be structured between government and industry. They will have the full responsibility of management of Australian fisheries throughout the whole of Australia and this is a fairly major step. They will be responsible still to the minister, Mr Kieran, but in actual fact the authority will have a management board, they will have various specialised sections and they will be responsible for the total operation or management of fisheries throughout Australia. There are a number of groups under that which will be formed into sub committees you might say, for the tuna boat owner operators side of things. The south east coast fishery: again the northern prawn fishery will come in under this group. Like the other management structures for different species and areas will all be under the operation as Australian Fish Management Authority.

**JD** Is this linked with the change that's looming or perhaps has already started of the Australian Fisheries Service?

**THOMAS** Yes, well the Australian Fisheries Service will be inactive in the sense that once this Australian Fishing Management Authority takes over, it will only have a very nominal effect in the industry and still be running their export inspection service side of things, but apart from that, they won't be really doing any of the management functions that they do now. It will all be taken over by this new authority. And that's a good thing from industry point of view, where industry will be able to have a say, let's put it that way, in its destiny whereas now, there's a great number of perhaps bureaucrats who believe they're doing the right thing, but really they don't have the same insight to industry as the individual people do that are involved with it and it's a different ball game.

**JD** You'll need a considerable secretariat, won't you?

**THOMAS** Yes. That structure has already been formulated in principle and it's also been structured as far as financing in principle, is concerned at a much less cost than what the Australian Fishing Service is costing us at this present time. [unclear] industry at the meeting I was at just last month, certainly has addressed that particular area in question very carefully because they're going to have to pay fifty percent of it and so naturally enough, they're very very careful about where the dollars going. And so that's a great thing.

But industry as a whole is consolidating itself, I suppose, around Australia today and looking to be more efficient, more cost effective and to be able to get the best return they can for the available particular species that they're harvesting, given that the Australian waters have a limit, so that in the past the activities have been mostly in shore you'd say, within 20 miles of the shore I guess, most of the activities have been and the fisheries of prawning and lobster, and smaller type fish - the gem fish and all these sorts of things - have been totally taken up by active fishermen at this stage. The off shore fisheries are now starting to take off [unclear] orange roughie, there's far more managed control and effect on the tuna industry as you'd probably be aware and more so it's coming up here too I think, with other off shore species of fish. So the Australian industry is going to have some limitations in total in the near future so they'll become managed and limited entry fisheries, so that Australians in the future, will be looking to go internationally I'd say, similar to other nations. We're possibly closer to some of the southern ocean species of fish, such as we know Russians and Japanese and lord knows what, go down there fishing for now. So I think that will be opened up eventually to Australians.

**JD** You relate to your own affairs, Danny, and your boys are involved in refurbishing a vessel at the moment aren't you?

**THOMAS** Yes we are. Well, I'm in partnership with Graham McMahon actually: he and I have taken up a seventeen metre ex fishing boat, although it was used more recently before we got hold of it as a tourist type boat on the Adelaide River, but we're refurbishing it at this present time to become a fishing vessel. We would like to have achieved a prawn licence for it which was possible but looks like we may have exceeded the date of requirement however, we may still challenge that. Needless to say, yes, we're rather keen to get out there and be able to catch a bit of fish and hopefully myself, in retirement, be able to feed myself and my wife.

**JD** Let's hope so. Anything else that you'd like recorded on this record?

**THOMAS** Well at this time I just thank you for the opportunity to say a few words to have it recorded. The last time I was in this position I was cycloned, which was a very difficult time and we had a number of boats smashed up and we had people drowned

around the place. It was a very very difficult time: very stressful time when I think about it. But fortunately, none of my own family were injured and we all survived okay, but we had some sad times as far as our own company was concerned down here. And the boats - interestingly when we tied up the boats after stopping the operations of Northern Research, we had eight boats in the harbour here on buoys tied up waiting for sales overseas and a mini cyclone came along and blasted them all off and wrecked them to a greater degree, under wharves and lord knows what, again - just over night - happened like that. Just a mini freak storm. So it was reminiscent of the [unclear] in 1974. That's about it. In the industry I think you take the good with the bad: we all get a few knocks but you've got to get up and just keep going.

**JD** All the best for the future and thanks very much for this interview.

**THOMAS** You're more than welcome. Thank you.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

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