



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 State of Queensland tell their stories here.

Neil **Chitty**

John **Clarey**

Lloyd **Clarke**

Noel **Gallagher**

Harold **Hansen**

Noel **Haysom**

Lance **Hayward**

Les **Ives**

Geoff **Kay**

Bill **Kehoe**

Snowy **Maltman**

Des **Moody**

Alf **Ness**

George **Rowell**

Trevor **Settree**

Neil **Thompson**

Barry **Townsend**

Ham **Tuesley**

Vic **Ugarte**

Cecil **Watkins**

Bob **Wicks**

Sandy **Wood**

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## Edited transcript of an interview with NEIL CHITTY

### INTRODUCTION

Neil Chitty started as a deck hand in the rock lobster fishery near Perth in western Australia in 1954. The first boat he operated on his own account was a frequently muscle powered dinghy but that was many years ago. He soon progressed into bigger and bigger boats and moved further north to Jurien Bay, Carnarvon and Exmouth where he entered the prawning industry. Subsequently he moved to Queensland and has continued in prawning ever since. Neil no longer goes to sea. His two sons now operate the family vessels while Neil handles the shore side of the business.

He is an industry representative on the Queensland Fish Management Authority, a position which has given him a broader view of the industry in general and an appreciation of the problems and difficulties of fishing industry management. As the interview reveals, he has great concern for the ecosystem upon which the industry depends. He also expresses concern about the threat to the industry from aquaculture and lack of quality control of the Australian product as well as from rising costs and declining prices. Neil Chitty makes a valuable contribution to this oral history of the Australian fishing industry being conducted by Murdoch University.

The interviewer is Jack Darcey and the interview was recorded in Mr Chitty's home in West Court, Cairns, Queensland on the 8th May, 1990. There are two sides of one tape.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

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

*CHITTY* Yes, Jack. Neil Murray Chitty.

*JD* And where were you born?

*CHITTY* Northam, West Australia 26th July 1937.

*JD* And were you brought up in the West?

*CHITTY* Yeah. I spent my first four, five years in the Toodyay area. My father worked on farms there and then we moved to Bullsbrook, that's not far out of Perth and spent roughly about eight years there [in a] dairy farm [and] butcher's shop my father had. Then from there we went to live in Wanneroo and I finished my schooling in Wanneroo and went to Junior Technical High School in Leederville a fortnight before I was fourteen and left school with a flourish and was going to go and set the world aflame.

From there my father went to manage a station in Leonora. Glenhorn was the name of the station and I went with him. We had some months there.

From there we came back to Perth as it didn't work out. I went and worked in Midland Abattoirs and was going to be a slaughterman but I never ever did get my papers in the two years that I was there. They kept promising them but I never got them. From there I went and worked on farms and in the meantime learnt to shear and at the age of sixteen went away shearing and used to shear in the winter time and work on farms or whatever casual work you could get between, sort of October and March at sixteen. Then [I] heard about crayfishing, what a great bit money earner it was and I went and got a job as a deck hand in 1954, when I first started at a place called Yanchep which was 38 mile out of Perth and worked on a boat called **Helen Two** owned by a chap called Theo Rose; a very hard man but it was possibly very good for us too I suppose. He was hard but you don't learn if you haven't got a hard task master and he was as hard as they come.

So from there I went [as a] deck hand there, then went back shearing the coming winter. Then went back crayfishing the following year with a Bob Ugle, a bit of an illustrious figure in the West and did a season with Bob as a deck hand; another hard task master and so forth. From there I did my season cray fishing, then went back shearing in the winter time. Of course those times we were getting two [shillings] and six [pence] a pound for crayfish, alive. That was from a mob called Genicks in Fremantle who were processors and buyers, about the only ones. The Fremantle Co-Op was just sort of in the infancy then, starting to get going, the Lancelin Co-Op and things at two and six a pound.

We all worked on percentages. My percentage was one pound which was twenty shillings those times per bag which, at the time, there was a lot of fish around and had never been exploited and never been over fished or anything. In later years we laughed about it but those early stages, if we couldn't get seven or eight bags a day, we didn't go out, whereas now days if you can get seven or eight bags a day at \$800 a bag, it's very good money but those times it wasn't very much. Then from that time it started to get a bit more professional. It was more of a, you'd call it now days, cottage type industry where people went and did a few months crayfishing and then went off and worked on whale chasers or went shearing sheep or working on the council. It wasn't a full professional life as we look at it today.

From there I went back shearing again. Then I bought a thirteen foot six inch clinker dinghy (because licences [had] no restrictions on them those times at all) and a three and a half horse power outboard and thought I'd have a go at this fishing on my own. I worked out of a little place between Yanchep and Two Rocks, a place called Egleton. My father used to lease a farm on the hinterland there and we had access there. So I started working and pulling 60 odd pots a day by hand and sort of started from there. It was fairly hard and the outboard used to be more times broken down than it was going. So I had one big sweep oar that I many times skulled my way home five or six mile against a screaming southerly and [I've] got a bit of a whinge now about the arthritis in my shoulders and I know why, from those times [laughs].

From then with the little boat I realised that I should have a go on my own and I think [in] 1958 I had a bloke in Fremantle, a bloke called Clive Bass, build a little 28 foot steel boat for me named **Hijinx** [spells name] named after the [horse] that won the Melbourne Cup that year in November. We launched that. That cost me the sum total, I think of 1600 pound with a brand new engine in it and 28 foot steel boat. It was just a boat, but it was a boat and we worked that year from Yanchep with that boat and that would have been one of the most disasterous cray seasons I think that I could

ever remember. There was very, very little there. So we'd heard there was a good fishing ground north in Jurien Bay, Green Heads way, so come the January, there was nothing caught in Yanchep that year so we were fairly committed at that time.

So I made the break and went to Jurien Bay, just north of Jurien Bay at a little place called Sandy Cape or Sandy Point. We were the only boat that fished there. A few bigger boats fished out of Jurien and they had a factory there and they used to come and pick up our crays once a day those times. Came the winter time, they'd come through once a week and we used to hold the crays in holding pots and we used to take them to Perth once a week. We lived there and by this time we had a couple of children and from there (Jurien Bay), round about 1964, or something like that (I think it was) I helped to get a school started there. We used to take the children down there to go to school and we'd pick them up when we took our crayfish down and things like that. [We] went from there and we built a house in Jurien Bay in 1966 the same year, or that was the same year that both the kids started school. It was a bit much for them to drive down over that track every day so we'd go there.

In 1966 I sold **Hijinx** which had been quite a good little boat to us over the previous eight years for the sum total of \$2,000, I think it was, and bought a boat off the Portugese called **Santo Amaro** which was a 50 footer, had a 138 pot licence. That's the year that licences were no longer any more issued, 1966 I think it was, or '67. Bernie Bowan was the man that said, well as from September, I think it was, the 1st or something, that there is no more new licences issued unless boats are actually in the process of building and they had to sight the boat and make sure it was real before they would issue a licence. We all thought that he was a fairly hard, dictatorial sort of man at the time but in hindsight, he had a lot of foresight that a lot of us didn't have, I think. From there I think the West Australian crayfishing just went ahead. They started bringing in pot restrictions and then escape gaps.

In 1966 when we bought **Santo Amaro** we were on a ballot system for Exmouth Gulf [which] was only just starting up as a prawning place. They did some surveys two or three previous years. It looked good so there was a ballot out on licences so we applied through, it was Markwell fisheries then, Theo Kailis in Cleaver Street and Theo financed us into the boat. We went to Exmouth in May 1966 to have a go at prawning. The amount of prawns there was unreal. I think my best night in Exmouth Gulf in 1966 was 3,800 pound of tiger prawns out of one-eight fathom net in one night. We threw all the kings and endeavour prawns over the side because we couldn't sell them and got two shillings and six a pound for green tigers. They paid three bob a pound to cook them or thirty cents. It was just as the dollar currency came in, 25 cents a pound. Greens were 30 cents a pound cooked. It was costing us more and more money to cook them because the price of a bottle of gas up there those times was about \$120 or something and we'd use a bottle of gas a night so there wasn't a lot of value in cooking them. We were working from another boat, **Lakanooki** owned by Markwell Fisheries that used to process our prawns and pass them on from there.

We had that year there and came back and went back crayfishing. We were there for the 1967 season and fished with **Santo Amaro** from then from Sandy Point, Jurien Bay. It was the early days of it. We'd just started to work deep water, polyurathane and polyethelene rope had come into vogue. We could work to 40 odd fathoms of water previous to that but the currents and tides were just too much for us to go deeper. With the polyurethane ropes and the styrene floats and castaway floats and things like that we could go to 70 and 80 fathom depths which had never ever been fished. We pulled some huge amounts of crayfish out of that deep water those times, 38, 40 bags per day, things like that.

*JD* A day?

**CHITTY** A day. It was only a short period which lasted about two to three weeks but when you think of it now, we used to catch more crayfish in those two or three weeks I think than they catch in a whole season now. Like everything else, it got exploited and everybody got smarter and cleverer and beat the tides and the currents and the whole fleet finished up out there, or a big percentage of them. So we went on and fished there for many years.

From then we spent the next few years in Jurien Bay which grew from a little tent town to quite a little town [with a] school. We even got electricity and a water supply and all that sort of stuff there [and an], ambulance, which was quite an ordeal to get anything those times. I think one thing that comes to my mind there very strongly: There was three of us given the job of getting this ambulance thing off the ground and the Government at that stage said, "Well every dollar you put up, we'll put up two". I think at that stage we needed something like \$2,000 or something, \$3,000 for our share from the community. We put a thing over the radio next morning [when] everybody was out fishing, saying we wanted donations. About 4.00 o'clock that afternoon we had our \$3,000. Everybody when they came in, they put a couple of bags on the ramp and everybody threw in their half a dozen crayfish or half a bag of crayfish and within, less than 24 hours of thinking about it, we had our share of the money for the ambulance and the town progressed and so forth.

In 1976/77 I sold that and I bought a boat called the **Morning Star**, a 73 foot steel boat, one of our early pioneer boats with a deep water history crayfishing. I bought without a Cray licence to go snapper fishing and shark fishing and wet fishing all up and down the coast near [the] Montebellos and things like that. Anyhow I had that for two years but it was a lot harder life than crayfishing and the money wasn't the same of course. It's something I'd always wanted to do and I did it. I found out it wasn't what I expected it to be so in about eighteen months, two years I sold that boat and I bought another Cray boat, the old **Dalmacia** and went back crayfishing from there.

I went back with **Dalmacia** crayfishing. She had a 156 pot Cray licence. At the end of the Cray season we used to go and do the snapper season because I'd done three or four snapper seasons previously with **Morning Star**. We'd go up to Carnarvon, South Passage, Cox and Dorrie and Burnier Island, around that area and trapped snapper. We used to set five traps and it was fairly hard work but it was something different. We did two or three trips there and first load we'd come back, sell to the buyers, either Geraldton or Fremantle, then go back, pick up another load. Then as a bit of a recreational thing, we used to get permission to go to the old East Street Jetty in Fremantle and sell our load direct to the public from the boat. Go up there every morning and get them out of the freezer, \$1.00 fish, \$2.00 fish and \$4.00 fish, such and such. All the public came down and had a bit of a giggle to see some of the looks of them and how to cook them and all that sort of stuff.

Then we went back crayfishing again the following year. That was 1978/79 season. We did that [for] the six weeks, white crayfish season and then came back to Fremantle [when] we had a buyer for them; pots were \$1,200 a pot which was, we thought, a ridiculous figure at the time. I finished up I sold it to a bloke called Timmy Dyke for \$225,000 which was an astronomical amount of money for a Cray boat in '79. Of course now days they're worth \$9,000 a pot but who was to know that then. Oh, I felt by that time I'd had 25 years or something, 26 years crayfishing, snapper fishing, prawning on the west coast and shark fishing, all those sort of things and had got a bit

bored with life there so [we] decided Queensland's the place to go. That's where it's all happening, they tell us.

So in 1979 after we got the settlement, we came to Queensland and they were enjoying a really good prawn season that year. At this stage this is about the time when prices of prawns had gone from five, six bob a pound to all of a sudden to \$3.00 a kilo and then all of a sudden, I think [in] '79 we unloaded in Cairns, in late '79 we got \$8.00 a kilo for tiger prawns which was unheard of, unthinkable. It'd never happen and it did. When we bought this boat called [unclear] in Cairns in June, end of June 1979, we moved over here. One of my sons and another chap who had been with me for seventeen years, Cliff Neave, we [decided] we were going to go prawning, which we did, from Cairns, Princess Charlotte Bay, that area north, Torres Strait, which was our magic year. We all thought we were going to make a million dollars.

1980 came along and all of a sudden something happened to the market and something happened to nature and said, well we won't have any prawns this year. What you don't catch, you're not going to get any money for them. So from \$8.00 a kilo in '79 to 1980 in Torres Straits we were getting \$4.60 a kilo for tigers. There wasn't a lot around either but we had hard times then. In 1982, or '81 actually we bought another boat called the **Rodessa** which was an ex-Shark Bay which was the original old one of the Norwest Whaling boats, the NOE 5, I think it was they called it. I'm not too sure.

[We] went from there and went prawning here and family concerns with boys going to sea and now, in 1990, two sons [are] out there driving them. I do the shore side of it and look after it. Just how fishing has changed from back in the '50s when we started off. We never even had an echo sounder. The first little boat I built, **Hijinx**, she never even had a compass. We used to go by stars and whether the morning star was over your left shoulder or your right shoulder and all that sort of stuff. When you got to where you reckoned the right depth was [you used] a lead line and things like that. Today well you've got all this sophisticated sonars and [positioning] systems, GPSs and satellite navigation, coloured sounders, coloured radars and many, many things that are supposedly improvements, tri gear and all that sort of stuff.

We've got to keep up with it but I feel that we're belting the fishery to death because of our wanting to achieve better and greater things and progress and keeping up with the Joneses. The fishery I believe here on the east coast is fairly well under threat. I now am a member of the Queensland Fish Marketing Authority, Board member, [an] industry representative on it. There's four of us and I've always had a bit of a bitch about the management mobs not doing the right things and things like that. When you become mixed up in trying to make laws and rules that's going to protect everybody, the fishery and the environment and everything else, you just realise how difficult and how hard it is. It's frightening to see, I think, the things happening to our environment. Fortunately I think everybody's getting so much more conscious of it. We all rubbished greenies ten years ago but I do believe that their basics are on the right track. We've got to the stage now like little things like five or six years ago we pumped our oil out of the bilges and straight over the side. [We] thought, well our's is only ten or twelve gallons out of our motor but nobody sort of stopped to think, well there was twelve or fourteen hundred boats on the Queensland coast doing the same thing. Nowadays [with] the mother boats that ply up and down the coast, we can take our stores up and bring our product back and generally service the industry. You've got tanks on board so we can put our sewerage and oil and stuff back into these tanks and the plastic linings and things like that that used to go over the side. We've got



them now, package them up and they came back to shore and [are] disposed of properly.

So the environment in Queensland here, in Cairns where we live now is possibly one of the most progressive tourist destinations in Australia or the world. Unfortunately everybody wants to just knock down two or three acres of mangrove for their little enterprise. By the time you get two or three hundred people knocking two or three acres of mangrove, there's not going to be much left for our children and our fish. It's getting proved day after day and more conclusively every year that our whole ecology starts from the mangroves and minute life and the leaves are rotting and all that sort of stuff. It seems a sad thing that all of us have gone around and chopped trees down and everything that stands up to try and go for progress. You sometimes wonder whether anybody [starting] off now doesn't physically work as hard as I did 36 years ago when I started crayfishing. Mentally we've got a lot more responsibilities, a lot more commitments, put a lot more effort into it and really I don't think we're gaining a lot out of it any rate but that's progress, they tell me.

**JD** Neil, could you talk a bit about the costs to the fisherman and the prices he's currently getting for his product.

**CHITTY** Yeah Jack. On that my belief is at the moment we're wearing a bit of our own creation from two years ago [when] we got this what they call bulk pack which was a direct trawler pack, packed at sea and directly exported to Japan, which sounded like a really magic way of us cutting out all the middle men and all that and the processors and things like that. What a lot of us didn't realise on that was the fact that human nature's got to rot the system. Up until then we'd had such a very rigorous criteria laid down by DPI and industry of the quality, maximised quality of product. It went to Japan. We had a very good name as an exporter to Japan of good quality product, well presented, all that sort of stuff, well frozen, everything like that. Well then this bulk pack sort of came along which was a quick way of short cutting things and we were going to make all this money but as I said, we didn't realise that there's cheats in the system that lower the standards.

We're allowed a 5% out of grade stuff sort of thing in species. It was a criteria previously and then all of a sudden they're allowed to have 25% out of grade, a cumulative thing of out of grade and out of species and various loose head and things like that. First of all its.... Well 25%'s the criteria, we'll pack a little bit worse than that and see if we can get away with that, which they did and of course the attitude of a lot of the fishermen was, well stick it up the Japs. They've got plenty. Who do they think they are and so forth [unclear]. Little did they realise. I think, in my opinion, the Japanese would be the best traders in the world bar none and it didn't take long for them to realise that they weren't buying true to the label.

Then of course they started making allowances for these discrepancies and of course our product prices had gone down fairly dramatically. Three years ago, I think four years ago, we were getting up to \$27 a kilo for under ten tigers here in Cairns on the wharf which I believe was a magic price, and it was. Then last year I think the best we got for under ten tigers was something like \$19 a kilo which is quite a big difference. There again, four years ago the Australian dollar was down around the 64 cents, 65 cents against the US and last year it was 70 odd, 76 cents.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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**TAPE 1 SIDE B**

**CHITTY** Yeah, well 76, that represented between those prices then and now, roughly \$4.00 on the dollar exchange. That's only one of the factors.

Aquaculture's a big threat. The Philippines has got something like two million registered fishermen in the Philippines and three-quarters of them are aquaculturalists with all the little aquaculture ponds in their yard and sell prawns to the Japanese. The Japanese of course are getting more Westernised and eating Big Macs and things like that. So they're moving away from prawns and stuff like that. [There are] many, many factors I think coming into it but we are in one respect I suppose, we're getting less for our product now than we were really five years or six years ago. We were getting \$8.00, \$9.00.

Our fuel's a big factor. In just between March last year and March this year, last year we bought fuel in Cairns here for 20.8 cents a litre into the boat. This year we paid 26.5 cents a litre. So they're a factor that's very, very large in costs and things like that. Our two boats burn roughly around about 700 litres for each boat per night so when you tacking another ten cents a litre on, it's another \$70 odd a night per boat which are costs we can't pass on. We are doing a lot of our own repairs, welding and labour on our boats. Contractors.... Five years ago [we were] paying \$22, \$23 an hour. You're paying \$35 an hour now. [They] might do the work but everybody shrugs their shoulders and tells us that they've got to put the price up to make a living but unfortunately as fisherman we've got no say in it. All we can do is wear it or do it ourselves. There's got to be a big down turn in the industry regarding effort.

There's been a lot of pussy footing. Nobody really wants to bite the bullet in management of it. Fortunately WA did it many years ago and it's possibly one of the best managed, or would be the best managed fishery in the world I think, the crayfishing industry in WA. Unfortunately we have a lot of problems here but people are becoming more and more aware every day of environment problems, our trading opposition, aquaculture and quality controls. Unfortunately we go away from these sort of things and say they're too hard, they're too hard. Give us a go but if we lose our quota, we lose our reputation and we lose our markets and we have a long hard road in front of us I think. The northern prawn fishery here reckons they want to fish the Gulf of Carpentaria and reduce the number of boats there from 220 down to 110 to make it a viable fishery. Now we have the Federal Government saying it's a natural resource so they want us to come in and they want to manage the whole fishery and charge us a resources rent. So being the suspicious nature that I am, I don't really know whether they're very interested in the management of the fishery or putting a few more dollars in their coffers. It would be expensive but they say user pay and resources tax and it belongs to all the public but in our little organisation we have taxes and fuel taxes and stuff like that. We could turn over in the vicinity of seven and eight hundred thousand dollars a year. Two-thirds of it seems to go back into the Government's coffers or more.

So I don't know. I've been a fisherman in the industry for 36 years and got two sons, one that's been there for sixteen years and the other one's been there for eight years. So we haven't got a lot of alternatives, I don't think, to become more efficient, look more towards the economics of things. I get into terrible trouble with my kids [saying] "The old man's on another economy splurge". [I] take the cheque book off them and things like that but that's the difference of hard times I've had. You can't put an old head on young shoulders, the impetuosity of youth, I suppose. They're good lads. They work hard and put a lot of effort into it so I'd like to think that the community as a whole, recreational and professional, environmentalists and everything like that, are put in the right direction. Hopefully my grandchildren will be able to go fishing too but

that's yet to be seen, I suppose. We'll just have to keep trying and people are becoming more aware of what's happening with our environment. What we felt was a U-beaut thing twenty years ago, now it's proved so very, very wrong. So just let's hope that we can bandage it up, regenerate it, rejuvenate it or whatever and keep it as the good industry that I've known for the 36 years I've been in it. Thank you.

**JD** Let's hope so.

**CHITTY** Yeah, let's hope so.

**JD** Thank you very much for this interview, Neil.

**CHITTY** Thank you.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with JOHN CLAREY

### INTRODUCTION

John Clarey started fishing when he was eleven years old. He is 74 now and no longer fishes professionally due to ill health. In this interview he tells a fascinating story of the hardships endured by fishermen 50 and more years ago. His account of walking the net in which the net was shot by men walking in water up to nose level in winter for perhaps three hours at a time, and with no protective clothing, illustrates something of those hardships; not that they were adequately rewarded for their efforts as his comments on prices and income levels reveal.

John Clarey's account of the quantity of fish in the Noosa River in times gone by is a graphic illustration of the decline in fish stocks there, and in a later part of his account he offers explanations of that decline, and measures to arrest it.

This record of John Clarey's fishing career would be incomplete if it failed to mention the fact that his wife, Nellie, fished with him for twelve years, and that John has been an invalid pensioner for twenty years.

The interview was recorded in the Clareys' home in Tewantin, Queensland, by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry on 26th of April, 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* John, would you record your full name, please?

*CLAREY* John Herbert Clarey.

*JD* And date of birth?

*CLAREY* 19th of August, 1916.

*JD* And where were you born?

*CLAREY* Mount Perry.

*JD* Mount Perry? Where is.... Is that near a big town somewhere?

*CLAREY* Oh it's about 50 miles from Gingin.... No, no, Bundaberg is 50 miles from Gingin and Mount Perry is further out than that, but not so very far. It's western, kind of thing.

**JD** What would that be, about central or lower central part of the Queensland coast?

**CLAREY** Yes, I've never been back. I've never been there since. I was only six weeks old when we came here.

**JD** So you were brought up in this area, Tewantin?

**CLAREY** Tewantin, yes.

**JD** And have you lived where you're living now all the time?

**CLAREY** No, only since we were married. I lived there [unclear]... only a couple of streets where we were [unclear] but since we were married I think we were... we rented a house for seven years, and then we came here [laughs]. Not that we owned that.

**JD** It's right on the water's edge.

**CLAREY** Yes. Then we got in a fleet of boats. We built up the bank and did the outside properly. This is the second one. We had another... in fact we built a boat shed here [unclear] We built this boat shed here and we finished up with just asbestos walling in the shed as we did in the house we rented, so we added a couple more rooms on this, on this old place here, and shifted down here, and then when we added our [unclear] yard there, and then about three years ago, we shifted down here and sold that and bought this nearby, and filled it all... it was so wet before, we had to stand on a board to mend the net [laughs] and we filled it all in, and here we are today [laughs].

**JD** That's the Noosa River is it, that runs here?

**CLAREY** Yes, it runs outside the yard, that little island there. If the backwater goes up it goes up past the old home, and becomes like... it goes out here a bit and forms two islands. This is Sheep Island and the other one is Pig Island, and my father used to work on the big old Queensland home that's on the island now. It is still the same but it's been reconditioned. An artist has it now and a fellow called Charlie Nicholas, he used to own it before, and my father worked for him because he was just across the creek, and he worked there for a few years. Then he worked on the Main Roads, and old Charlie Nicholas was the manager of the oil bores, the two oil bores that used to be up the beach on the north shore. Then Dad worked on the Main Roads for I think after [unclear] or it might have been before. I just can't remember.

We had a bit of net and they used to leave me with my aunty down here at the Council Chambers, where that is now. She used to have a shop there, and they used to leave me there and I'd play with the piano and they took me on the way back. Then Dad started fishing properly because there were five of us, five brothers, and I was eleven and a half when I left school. I used to go straight to school, because I had to go fishing before that and the schoolmaster said - and I had to go across there - "You might as well leave," because I didn't learn much anyway.

**JD** Did your brothers go into fishing as well?

**CLAREY** Yes, actually we all fished together most of the time, and Dad used to go chasing gold up at Mount Perry off and on, and he never found any. We went on with the fishing, and then we started fishing the Double Island Point. We started off on an old model Ford utility. I paid three quid for it [laughs]. We used to go to the Double

Island and shoot the fish in. We'd stand off the beach and let them go until we reckoned we had a lot we could carry. You had to carry them from one beach (Main Road Beach) across to the North Shore. We had to carry them in, of course, a case of fish on each shoulder. You couldn't stop.... pride was nothing across the top.

So we started another line until the lighthouse keeper, sometimes he'd come down and sling them three or four for us with a horse - the side, and anyway eventually we got a truck on each side which were Dodge forms. They'd only be about 24 or 25 years (1924, 1925 on). We finished up with one, I think it was a 1928. When we finally finished, we finished up with a three ton four-wheel, but we still had the Dodge utility on the other side, see. You only had to carry them down from the top of sandhills. That was easy [laughs].

Anyway, that was before the War, and after, well, we still fished up there, but that was only in the winter time, like mainly for tailor. We didn't bother with the mullet up there because we really left them here, and we'd go up there mainly for tailor, a few whiting and stuff like that. But we didn't go up there and catch fish through the winter. We couldn't handle it, we'd only just bring home what we could handle to keep us going for the winter, until the mullet came good again.

**JD** You would have been fishing during the Depression years, Jack?

**CLAREY** Yes.

**JD** And were your brothers and father all with you still?

**CLAREY** Yes. Yes, we went right through all that. That was pretty tough, but I think after the War, we had 32 crews here, and that was really tough. Besides the Depression it was tough enough after the War when all these others started [laughs]. It wasn't what they caught, it was what they frightened because they didn't know much about it, a lot of them. Yes, we got our bad times right through, any part of it.

**JD** And were they fishing for mullet and tailor?

**CLAREY** On the beach, yes. There were mullet and tailor. In those days - in the early days - once the fish got out, out of our river and up to the beach 100 yards or so, that was it. That was the end of it. Nobody chased them. Until we started with these trucks and that, then they started chasing them all along the beaches, but we still didn't go in for big hauls, just enough to carry us over. Our trouble was, when you did start beach fishing like that, you had crews from Victoria and New South Wales, and they'd set up here just above the bar, and we finished up with a mile limit, a mile up the beach. I think that was in May and through the winter, we'd give the fish a bit of a chance to get away. They were just camped there. We never [unclear] that sort of thing, we mainly fished Double Island.

The tailor season, sometimes we were based at Double Island. There was Evans, there was Bub Evans, he's well known. He's prawn trawling. They'd work from the river (mouth of the river) north of the meatworks, and we'd work Double Island from the south, and we might not even see one another [laughs] until we came over here with the fish. But anyhow, every day we'd come in with I think, about 100 cases. 120 cases or something was our.... quite a good day for us in those days. I think a lot of the trouble was the nets. They weren't as good as they are today. They had no cutting things in them and that sort of thing. [unclear] [laughs]

**JD** They were cotton nets, weren't they?

**CLAREY** Yes, cotton. We never ever used nylon and that. We had given this fishing away when nylon came in. That was a big improvement, because up until nylon came in, we all had the idea that you couldn't catch fish with white net. [unclear] but the nylon was light and we found that they didn't jump over it and they meshed all right. My first shot with a nylon net was seventeen cases [laughs]. I remember that. Of course, then mono-filament came in. Well, you'd linen before that, but you still had to haul that more or less.

**JD** Hand hauling?

**CLAREY** What we call walking it out. It's still.... you get out with the pole and you walk round until you come to the pole again, sort of thing. That's what we call walking it.

**JD** That walking technique, that was only used in the river or lake, I presume?

**CLAREY** Only in the lake, yes.

**JD** Yes, you couldn't do it at sea.

**CLAREY** It was a lake net. You had to have a separate net for the river. You see the river is.... our deepest part is 40 foot. Well, the lake net is only to five, oh roughly about seven foot of water.

**JD** Could you describe that walking technique?

**CLAREY** Yes. What we had in the early days was one net and one net-boat and one what we called a "chasing dinghy". That was about seventeen/eighteen foot long, and it was only about two foot six wide, and it had out-riggers on it, and longer paddles, and two men would be in that, and two men in the other net-boat. You'd go away say, 200 yards, that sort of thing. You'd put one maybe out with a stick, and then you'd go further on, say another 100/150 yards, and in the meantime, the net-boat would put one out with the pole, and the other one would shoot the net. When he got about half way round, he'd wave his hand or his hat, so right, you'd start plonking the water with the stick to chase the fish and chase the fish into the net, which you did, yes. The fellow on the pole, he had to put a hook on the end. He put a corner on the net to stop the fish as they came around. They'd come around in to this corner and find themselves going back in to it. At the same time fish would be coming around the net that way, and they'd still be chasing the net-boat, to bring them round you see. Most times if you could do it, you had one man on each pole, and they could really keep up with each [unclear] running round and round. You closed it up and then the two men, one would get in the pole. He puts the pole down across here and the other fellow was able to turn them, and we called it a tandem tube. You made a bridle on it and a single rope and that would be tied on the pole and the bloke on the pole, he'd adjust it so that it came properly on the pole, you didn't have any trouble holding the pole up, see.

And away you'd go. That net was 200 meshes deep where the pole found it and it went out for two bundles. That's roughly about 28 yards each bundle. They'd take it out and it came down to about 33 foot meshes deep, whatever you were using. Some meshes you used were 40 meshes deep, or three and a quarter, whatever, and that was.... you could take it down to that. Then as you threw it, it used to circle. You'd what we call "lap" it. One would follow up behind the pole, the bloke on the pole he'd have to put his foot on the lead line to keep it down. The other fellow would walk

behind him and what we call "lap" it. He'd throw the net right over the cork line and in the finish, when you come right to the finish, you just get the pole up and throw it over, and then all the fish were in the bags then. You wouldn't get anything meshed at all hardly, you know, it's cotton nets, you might get fifteen, twenty fish, something like that. But all the fish would be all loose in the bags then, which is a good idea because in the water, hot water, today when you're meshing a fish, if you get too many in the net, they'll go bad. Well, not go bad really, they what we call "bake". The flesh goes all dead-white.

**JD** Because of the heat in the water?

**CLAREY** Yes, the heat in the water. You see people hanging the thing over the side of the boat and put their fish in it to keep them fresh. Actually they're only slowly cooking them because the water's hot. It gets really warm.

**JD** What depths of water would these men walk in?

**CLAREY** Well, I was five foot nine and a half, and as long as I could keep my nose out, you couldn't depth [laughs] walking. Yes, one day I went in the....it was too deep for me and I had to walk on the lead line with my toes [laughs]. A big toe on each one [laughs] to keep my nose out enough, and when they stopped pulling on the boat [laughs] they used to [unclear] you down.

**JD** What did you wear?

**CLAREY** Oh well, flannel shirts, mainly oilskins.... what they call oilskin coat. They used to be hand-made and you'd treat them with linseed oil and that sort of thing. Oh, if we'd only had wet-suits in those days [laughs]. I used to.... we'd be in the water for about two and a half to three hours actually. It took that long to walk. That would be 1000 yards of net, 1200 yards, something like that, and in the winter time, if we had the big waves, well, it would be a bit hard to take it all [laughs]. We'd be up to our ears with the [unclear] I remember. The boats in those days, they were not like today, ten or twelve horse power in those days, that was the lot [laughs].

We actually, our first motor boat was only powered by a three horse power motor. Even I, when I started on my own I used that for thirteen years, one little three horse power motor and it pushed the boat, and besides that, two net-boats which were nineteen, twenty foot long. But going back to these little chasing boats [laughs] chasing dinghies we used to call them, we'd pull them up across the net-boat ahead of the out-riggers so as to save time [laughs]. We didn't have enough power really when wind hit you and that sort of thing, tides, oh it saved the little waves a little bit.

**JD** You worked with a crew of four?

**CLAREY** Yes, four men mainly. When you got in the deep water though, generally it's likely that letting the lead line over business, one would take the pole. That's when you got down to about 20/30 yards across the circle, and the bloke holding the tandem, he'd get out of there and he'd go back, and it took two men to hold the boat. One would be on the stern in the water, one up on the net. He's pulling on the pole and settling the fish, and the fish would all.... The other one would be perhaps on the bow, holding the bow push. When the circle got so small you had to hurry up and get the boat around so that you'd get the stern straight on with someone pulling them on. He didn't pull all the net on, he just pulled the cork line on and left all the net what we call the flue (that's all the depth of the net) in the water. Well, she had that cork line and lead line in the boat, and the only fish we'd get was loose. Then you follow in the



lead line over the cork line. You'd throw the trawl over, and the fish wouldn't get out, and then you'd cut them off and roll them in, not unlike the prawns today when they get a big haul.

**JD** John, sometimes you worked a number of crews together?

**CLAREY** Yes. It was five.... there were five crews in the work in the river, in those days.

**JD** This would be pre-war, wouldn't it?

**CLAREY** Yes. there was only one patch of fish in the river, in the whole of the river we only had this one big patch. So one of my uncles, he was....oh there was one, two, three.... There were three of the uncles for one crew, and another fellow, and he said, "Oh, what say we join our nets together, and keep this batch in?" Because you couldn't pull on to that side of the river. He had that all on the island here, because of the bank there was a nice slope. The other was too steep. He said, "No, one in all in," he said, "it's the only patch in the river," and right, they agreed to that. They joined the two nets together because they were only about 150 yards long, and you couldn't breach them with one net. So they did this, and trapped the fish in, and they held up all the traffic, which were four boats and all in those days. They all understood. We held them up for about a quarter of an hour I suppose, before the tide slackened. Anyway they all waited then by us until we shoved them in, and we finished up.... Oh, I would say we got our share out of our own net, because when we backed it up when they hauled it in, we put our net behind and, of course, when they're rolling in sometimes they busted the net, because they netted too many, see. We had our net all ready around out there, and when we hauled it in we had our own share in the net [laughs].

But anyway that only happened about once when they joined the two nets together like that, but generally managed to find enough. It happened only the one year I think.

**JD** That was fishing from bolas net as well?

**CLAREY** Oh yes, we had everything pretty well. We had a mackerel and cod, practically every type of fish. I know the mackerel was eleven pounds [laughs] and because it was unusual to get a mackerel in the river. They would have been spotty mackerel.

Anyway I got a black eye that day. We had to run the lead line nearly as far down as possible. I bent over hauling it in to keep the lead line down on the bottom, and this big mullet flew up out of the water, and he blackened my eye! [Laughs] Anyway that was the.... and put them all in to the ice-works over here from them, and all outside we had sheets of iron, used all them up, and laid them all out, and then we took them all up to [unclear] all round the lawn and all round the house. It was a pity really [laughs].

**JD** What sort of price did you get for them, do you remember?

**CLAREY** They would have been ten shillings, round about that [laughs].

**JD** That's a box?

**CLAREY** Yes, a box. They would have been about 70 pounds. I know, I can remember we would have got ten shillings a case.

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

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** John, that price of ten shillings a case that you referred to on the other side of the tape, was that a normal sort of price that you'd be looking at?

**CLAREY** Yes, that would have been.... apart from the winter time, that we got cut down in the winter time, and we got big hauls. But the fellow that owned the fish-works then, he didn't get cut down at all. We found out since he had an agreement with Fresh Food and [unclear] which he.... though these, and he had the same agreement, and they ran their own fish team. The railways taken them, and how should they.... and they never ever cut down under sixteen shillings a case. So this private enterprise bloke was making six shillings a case, and without cutting us down in the winter time. When he cut us down to five shillings well, we lost eleven shillings, double.

**JD** He was putting it over you in other words?

**CLAREY** Yes, besides that he had back-loading from the rural. He had all the produce, groceries and so on [laughs]. That's what we had to put up with let me tell you. I think, if I remember right, my best pay for a year was 500 pounds.

**JD** John, did things improve from the fishermen's point of view when the Fish Board came on the scene?

**CLAREY** Yes, yes. Yes, they did. I think that was one of the best things that ever happened in those days. Well, I think the Fish Board itself is still a better proposition than what they've got today.

**JD** It's gone out of existence now though, has it?

**CLAREY** Yes. Yes, it's finished with now, done. I fished for buyers some of the time, because they offered a better price which was.... oh I think was about one and threepence a pound.

**JD** For mullet?

**CLAREY** For mullet, mmm. And the Board gave.... I think they were only a shilling. It was still a lot better than what private enterprise was. But in the private bloke, he only.... he paid fifteen shillings for whiting, but we had to refuse to catch them to get that. He used to want whiting [laughs] but we wouldn't catch them for ten shillings. Anyway he said, "Fifteen shillings," so we caught some for fifteen shillings, and in those days, it didn't pay to chase whiting because, even with the net when they were caught, you were.... whiting net in those days were up to two and three quarter inch mesh. Now today, it's two inch. We learnt that you couldn't sell it. They wouldn't take it. The mullet had to be a pound and a half before it became a.... well, ten shillings a case. If he was under a pound and a half, he was only five shillings [laughs]. What's

your average mullet today? He's only about a pound and a half, two pounds. That's the sort of thing we had to put up with.

**JD** Mullet is still not a very expensive fish, not a high-priced fish from the fisherman's point of view?

**CLAREY** No, not really. No, he's.... he's only got a wind today where he's.... well, where he's.... what will we say, where he's popular. You go further up say, to Murchison, well barramundi and mackerel and that sort of stuff. I think mullet ..... I don't know how far down the mullet are popular. I don't think they're very popular much further down than the Clarence River.

**JD** Have the numbers of fish reduced would you say?

**CLAREY** Oh yes, I think so, oh yes. They used to be so thick in the river, between the two lakes, that some days we used to just go up and have a look at them. [laughs] You could practically walk across the river, and when a shark attacked them, it would be just like thunder through the night.

**JD** Jumping out of the water?

**CLAREY** Yes, the noise they'd make. One haul we had in the winter time, to give you an idea of what fish used to be here, we had no idea what was here either, although we fished the big lake and that, which is more or less where the majority of fish come from. There were five patches coming down. Well, we got about 250 cases of mullet out of the fifth one, and I went home and had something to eat. We didn't take them out of the net, we left them swimming around in the loose net, put something around on the outside to keep the sharks off, and my brother and I stopped there over night with them. I came home and by the time I got back to where we had the net on the island, it was about eleven o'clock at night, and all of a sudden dogs up the river started barking. You could hear this roar, just like wind. I jumped in the boat and went back on to what we called the whiting bank. It was a bright moonlight night, and the whole of the bank was just black and [laughs] and roared like a great wind in the trees and, of course, when I got down to where we go down to fish along the bank in the net, they just went dead quiet, and I'd say they were roughly about two and a half hours going past, and [unclear] a double line of them at that time, and counting what had gone out before that one patch, they were fifteen miles long. I mean when they got there. You can imagine how those fish would have come out of the mouth of the river.

**JD** You wouldn't get that sort of quantity now, of course?

**CLAREY** No, not here. If we have oh.... I don't get to the lakes at all hardly now. I wouldn't have much idea, but to my knowledge I'd say 1000 cases to go to sea, would be about oh.... comes out of here now, a bit over.... still the.... we'd see one or two thousand cases. We'd [unclear] but that's again, over the last few years, that's about what I used to make, when we'd go out. Of course, now, you've got the rain, everything, most of them would be washed out, and that would be the same all along the coast. They would be washed out and maybe a lot of them would be parked in Moreton Bay in the northern rivers and that. They'd hang around here and there. Well, it could be some sea life but I think the rains could....

**JD** What about the tailor? Have those numbers held up?

**CLAREY** No, I think a lot of the trouble there, Jack, is the traffic from the beach. Too much traffic.

**JD** Recreational people?

**CLAREY** Yes, oh four-wheel drives and that at the beach. In our days when we fished there were only.... if you broke down you walked home. But now, you've got to look both ways to cross the beach [laughs]. No, the fish won't tolerate noises like that. Actually we had a holiday, my wife and I, for one year, and the only fish we had for two weeks were what one of the fishermen gave me on the way on the way up [laughs]. Fish, we never caught anything.

You do catch them of a night. They come in when it's quieter. The tailor one year on Double Island, there was nothing, nothing for weeks, and then the south-easter came in, and we went for a walk down the main beach from Double Island, and we walked down five or six miles, and it was just a solid great mass. It was too dark to do anything, but they were tailor and we didn't reach the end of them. Thousands of cases! But oh, they're not like that now. I think they stay out wide.

Actually on the reef, I've heard of tailor being caught out, we'll say the north reef. It's unusual to catch them out there. It would have to be eight or ten miles out. Oh I think they're there all right, but they just won't come in with the traffic, which is a lot of the problem.

**JD** Apart from the reduction in the catch, what are some of the other problems that confront fishermen nowadays?

**CLAREY** Well, I think traffic noise is the biggest problem, beach traffic and river traffic. Of course, there's nothing we can do about that [laughs]. I think that is a lot of the problem today. The amateur, he does.... they tell me they outdo the professionals in fishing. I don't know. That's what they say. They've really got no record of what they catch, only what we hear of, you know. I think myself, I think a [unclear] that a closed season is the only answer, because I've heard if traps.... Say Fraser Island have a tailor of tallow cast full of tailor fillets sold, and they've gone off and they just tip them out and refill them. Nothing can stand up to that.

No, I think we should have a closed season, one in three, something like that. Nothing set for mullet and tailor, not just this little bit of Fraser Island which is useless in my opinion. I don't know but.... what's the good of protecting tailor in say a mile of beach? [laughs] It doesn't give much here, does it? But it all boils down to in my book that you're taking too much out if you're putting nothing back. Even the prawns today, in a good season here years ago, every prawner around was.... fifteen or twenty prawners here, easy, I think, and they all caught at least five and six, seven hundred pound of prawns every day, and I think they need protection too. That's what I think. I think it's down to let them spawn one in three anyway. It's relatively hard but we've got to do it, haven't we?

**JD** You feel it's being over-fished?

**CLAREY** I think so, yes. You take from all the amateurs and that, and besides all the professionals, and the equipment they've got today. Well, they don't even haul the net in today, they pull it in with trucks, and some of them even have cranes, electric cranes [laughs], apart from just tipping them into the truck. Oh that is [unclear] in a five ton truck, that is not right. At least you can do that. We had cases and that and all the weight that was on them was in the one case. Instead of having say five or six ton

of fish, and what's the bottom one like? Now you get bulk. All the roes squeezed out of them and that, no. No, I think the time will come when they will have to have bag limits, and the close season to let the fish spawn.

**JD** John, you've been out of the professional fishing for some years now.

**CLAREY** Well, about ten years, yes. I find I just can't catch anything much any more. I used to be a great mackerel fisherman. I haven't been out there for eleven years. The bar is so shallow you can't get home, and you walk round, and that sort of thing. It's not worth it.

**JD** You've had some health problems too?

**CLAREY** Yes, yes. I've been on an invalid pension for about twenty years or more.

**JD** Did you enjoy your fishing career?

**CLAREY** Oh yes, yes. Yes, there were [unclear] feed [laughs]. Three years, four.... we haven't done anything else. We've had no education. I wanted to be a mechanic. I think I got enough of that too [laughs] what with the old trucks and those engines, we kept all them going. So yes, I still enjoy it.

**JD** Right, John, thank you very much for talking to us.

**CLAREY** Yes well, that's all I've been doing.

**JD** Good, thank you.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

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The following paragraph was added by Mr Clarey to clarify some of the information he gave during the recorded interview:

When we lived in the rented home over the seven years, we saved enough money to buy the land we are now living on and after seven years we had saved enough money to have a good size boat shed, but we lived in it for ten years to save paying rent. Then in that ten years we has saved enough to get a better home built and that is what we sold three years ago to build the home we are now living in on the same spot as the boat shed was built on in 1946. It is right on the water's edge overlooking the Noosa River. That is when I left my brothers and started fishing on my own with another man. We had two net boats and a motor boat which was powered with 3 H.P. engine. We only fished Double Island to save getting out up to our nose in water in the winter time in the lakes. It was winter time that we went up to Double Island fishing.

Disclaimer





## Edited transcript of an interview with LLOYD CLARKE

### INTRODUCTION

Lloyd Clarke started fishing before he was thirteen years of age. Now at 73, he is still fishing commercially.

When his father came to the Caloundra area he established the first ice-works in Queensland outside Brisbane. He also transported the fishermen's catches to the railway, thus allowing commercial fishing to become a year round activity in the area.

In 1954, Lloyd pioneered the barramundi fishery in the Gulf of Carpentaria, supplying inland towns by air from Karumba. He also did some prawning in the Gulf before the days of the massive expansion of that fishery. After several forays into the Gulf for barramundi fishery, he returned to Caloundra where he still operates, fishing now mainly for mullet in and around Bribie Passage.

The interview gives an insight into both the Gulf and Passage fisheries, the methods employed, the problems encountered, and marketing and management difficulties. Though he does not mention this during the interview, LLOYD Clarke won a Royal Humane Society award for his part in a sea rescue, and Vance Palmer's story, **The Passage**, though fiction, was based on his family.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry, and was recorded in Mr Clarke's home in Caloundra, Queensland, by Jack Darcey, on 23rd of April, 1990.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** First of all record your full name.

**CLARKE** Yes, my name is Lloyd Clarke. I was born on 3rd of March, 1917, in a place called Coochin Creek [unclear] on Gympie Road.

**JD** And were you brought up in that area, Lloyd?

**CLARKE** Yes, I was one of a family of nine and sixth in place, and I went to Coochin Creek school, which is now Beerwah State School.

**JD** That's in the Glass Mountains?

**CLARKE** In the Glass Mountain area, yes.

**JD** And could I ask you, what did your father do?

**CLARKE** My father in those days when I was born, had already entered into the fishing industry, in about 1917.

**JD** And before he was fishing, what did he do?

**CLARKE** My father was born at Upper Caboolture. He came to Beerwah when he was about twelve years of age. He never went to school there. He immediately went into assist the family on a selection of about 300 acres, in the timber industry. He followed through and went into scrub falling in the very early days.

**JD** That was in the Beerwah area, was it?

**CLARKE** On the Blackall Range at Mount Mellum. He was falling scrub. He had already selected property on the Gimpie Road. My mother ran a small dairy farm on that little selection.

**JD** And you were brought up on that farm?

**CLARKE** Right, yes. In that very area, on that 22 acres. It's right opposite the school at Coochin Creek. Mother didn't have to cut our lunches. We were able to jump the fence and cross the road and we were in the school grounds, so we were able to come home for our lunch every day.

**JD** And your father then entered fishing?

**CLARKE** My father, as well as I can recall, was already in the fishing industry, operating from there. Mother ran the dairy farm, and Father, when he left off scrub falling, was fishing in the upper reaches Coochin Creek. That's adjacent to Bribie Passage.

**JD** What sort of fish was he fishing for?

**CLARKE** Principally mullet or mixed variety: bream, whiting and tailer and jewfish and so forth.

**JD** Your family and your wife's family too, have a history of fishing, don't they?

**CLARKE** Not so much my wife's family. My wife's family, they're old residents of this area, and pioneers of the area.

**JD** But your great-grandfather and your grandfather were also in fishing, were they?

**CLARKE** My grandfather not so much, but my great-grandparents were. He came from England, of course. He left England in 1873 on 23rd of March, and arrived in Brisbane on 24th of July, the same year. Set up at Upper Caboolture with a family of five children. My father was born at Upper Caboolture.

**JD** To come back to your own entry into fishing. Did you go fishing straight from school?

**CLARKE** Yes, as a matter of fact, in 1922, Father decided that he would get out of the Gympie Road property. He bought into Caloundra in the area where we're sitting now. That was in 1922.

**JD** And came down and fished in this area, did he?

**CLARKE** Yes, well, of course, he didn't have to move the plant all that far, just by water down Coochin Creek to the northern end of Bribie Passage, and he was there. Of course, it was a little more than that in those days. Access to the railway was up to five hours' journey, you know, and not at all in wet weather, because the roads were impassable.

**JD** That would be a horse and cart transport, would it?

**CLARKE** No, when we came here first he had a T Model Ford. He had given away the horse and cart at that point, and when we arrived here we had a T Model Ford.

**JD** So you would have finished your schooling, and then what did you do?

**CLARKE** When I finished my.... we came here in 1922 so you know....

**JD** You were quite young.

**CLARKE** .... I started school at Beerwah and finished my schooling at Caloundra State School. There were sixteen children going to school. There were four Clarkes. One teacher, she conducted school - all classes.

**JD** Caloundra's a vastly different place now, isn't it?

**CLARKE** Very much so, yes. We have high schools and primary schools and a large population.

**JD** When you left school, did you go to work with your father in fishing?

**CLARKE** Yes, it's funny how. You know, when I look back at it I make a bit of a joke of the situation. You see there was a change of teachers to the school, and a chap by the name of Harry Dilger came to teach school, and by that time, of course, the years had passed and I had arrived at an age when I thought I was an adult, and wouldn't be thirteen until 3rd of March the following year. And we had a little bit of a difference with Harry. I wouldn't say an argument but a little difference between old Harry Dilger, the head teacher. And he wrote a note to my mother and he said, "Well I think Lloyd's finished at school." He said, "I've taught him all I can," and he didn't write it but I think he had it in mind, "I've taught him all he knows but he still knows nothing." I know that was what was in Harry's mind. It may not have been but Mother accepted the note and suggested that there was only one thing left for Lloyd, and that was the fishing industry. I was then I suppose as tall as my eldest brothers, and not very knowledgeable, but I thought I had that knowledge, and I was able to pull on the shorts, and go straight into the fishing industry before I was thirteen.

**JD** Your brothers had already joined your father, had they?

**CLARKE** Yes, I had three elder brothers in the fishing industry with Dad, and two elder sisters.



**JD** So then your father and the three boys including yourself?

**CLARKE** Yes, yes. Well by this time, of course, Dad had built in Caloundra an ice-works, which manufactured the ice we required, and also supplied the little bit of ice that was required for the local town, and the people in the fishing industry also here. It was probably one of the few ice-works that was on the coast.

**JD** Would there have been electrical power here then?

**CLARKE** No electric power. It was run by an old petrol starter - kerosene operated. In fact, what my father did in Caloundra was to bring the industry into an all year round industry. Up till then it was a seasonal thing because without ice you couldn't handle fish from Caloundra to Brisbane, only in the winter time. So in fact, what it did was help the other fishermen and gave us the opportunity of operating an industry that worked for 365 days a year. We were a big family, the Clarkes, and they had to be in full occupation.

**JD** So you would have supplied ice to the other fishermen in the area, and would there have been cool-room facilities up there?

**CLARKE** Yes, also they could have ice and in fact, what it meant was this, there was transport to Landsborough to the rail available to them for their fish.

**JD** Your father transported them?

**CLARKE** Oh yes, we carted our own fish to the rail. That was the only means of transport to Brisbane. It went to the rail and then was transported to Roma Street, and was picked up there and delivered to the fish market.

**JD** Did you also transport other fishermen's product?

**CLARKE** Yes, he would carry other fishermen's fish to Landsborough for them at cost.

**JD** Yes. This was on the T Model Ford, was it?

**CLARKE** On the T Model Ford, and probably by this time, he would have got rid of the T Ford and it was probably a Chev Six, a '24 or '26 model, which would have been a bit bigger truck.

**JD** Lloyd, could we come then to your own career in fishing? After you started with your father here, and your brothers, what happened then?

**CLARKE** Well, I carried on in the family fishing unit right up till the War, and by that time, of course, I was 22 years of age, and married at that stage. So during that period, in 1937, we had a very sad loss to the family. I lost one brother actually in a very serious boat accident.

**JD** Did the other brothers stay in the industry?

**CLARKE** Yes, as a matter of fact they were in the industry right up until the War. Then one of my brothers bought a dairy farm, and went into dairy farming, and the other brother pulled out and went into the bee-keeping industry, which left me then. I took

over the plant, the old home that was my father's, and I carried on and refashioned it and carried on the fishing industry in Clarke's name.

**JD** And your father retired?

**CLARKE** Yes, well Dad was sort of getting on in years. he would give any advice that we wanted and he would mend nets, but he wasn't active within the catching of the fish.

**JD** That was fishing in this Caloundra area, but you've also fished in other areas, haven't you?

**CLARKE** Yes, I fished this coast actually through to MacKay. We used to follow through to get a bit of experience, you know, back of beyond or a little further north, you heard of the stories, and I suppose distant hills looked greener. But Caloundra to me has always been home, and a place where you could always hack a living out of the fishing industry.

**JD** You were fishing for mullet, what else?

**CLARKE** Well, of course, we had the seasonal run of mullet which was considered the sea mullet season, in which we would venture on to ocean beaches. But you didn't necessarily have to go on the beaches in those days to take big hauls of fish. Bribie Passage was very well stocked with fish, all varieties. We caught mullet, tailer, and mixed variety: jew, whiting, bream, black bream, and trevally and various other species, flathead and so on.

**JD** This was pre-war?

**CLARKE** Yes.

**JD** What sort of prices were you getting then?

**CLARKE** Oh mullet in the early days, you know, you were lucky to realise ten shillings a case, and that was an 80 pound box for a case of mullet, pre-war. It improved a little bit, towards the end of the War and during the War, but not a great deal, because during the War, of course, the activities of fishermen were cut down in Moreton Bay. There were areas where you weren't permitted to fish. For instance we weren't allowed on our local beaches, and there was a curfew on the Passage, Bribie Passage, by night. But during the war years, it was rather difficult. There were other things that we were engaged in. I was manpowered to assist with the Army.

**JD** To assist the Army? What were you doing then?

**CLARKE** Well, it's a long story and it's something that we don't talk about round here. The fishing industry, of course, was exempt in those days, and we built up a business here that had to be looked after and maintained, and not only did we supply the troops.... because most of the troops in Australia were training in the Landsborough Shire just north of Caloundra, which was considered one of the major training areas for troops within this area. So, apart from supplying them with fish, the ice-works was the cooling store for the beer and perishables and the like. You know, there was a job to perform and it was done.

**JD** Could I ask, what sort of boats and gear were you using then?

**CLARKE** Well, right from the early days, Dad always had a reasonable type of boat. You know it had to be managed properly, and his philosophy was that if you couldn't afford something, you didn't buy it, and that was the real power. So we had spare gear, and we maintained it. We had good boats. We'd mostly carry the surplus nets in event that during the winter there would be big hauls of fish which were local in those days. We would load the boat with 300 cases of mullet and do the trip to market over night. You could do that in winter time because it was a seven hour trip, and the fish would carry.

**JD** What size vessel would that be?

**CLARKE** One of 32 feet. It had a good beam and it was shallow draft.

**JD** And the fish were iced, of course?

**CLARKE** If they were iced in the early part of the afternoon and they were kept in the shade, they would carry to Brisbane and be fit condition for human consumption.

**JD** Were the fish shared.... the mullet sold in the round or....?

**CLARKE** In the round, absolutely yes. All our fish were supplied to the market in the round. Wet fish as they call it. Apart from the fact that if we did a little bit of outside line fishing and the price was down to a low ebb for mullet, we would go out and catch ten or fifteen cases of schnapper, just off Caloundra, and that would be the only species that we would consider cleaning.

**JD** That schnapper fishing would be line fishing, would it?

**CLARKE** Line fishing, yes.

**JD** Yes. What caused you to move further around and even into the Gulf of Carpentaria?

**CLARKE** Well, after the main winter run, when we were a family unit here, I built a boat.

**JD** Yourself?

**CLARKE** Yes.

**JD** Oh, what size?

**CLARKE** It was about 30 feet in length and a good sea-boat with a flush deck. It hadn't been designed for off-shore work and along the coastal. We used to run the beaches to Double Island and beyond up to Sandy Cove, on to the Capricorn Group of islands. Probably make it a 50 mile day. That was as far as you went.

**JD** How did you learn your boat building skills?

**CLARKE** Well, I imagine it came naturally. My great- grandfather was a spiral staircase maker in England before he came to Australia [laughs] so I imagine that's

where it began. There's not much difference when you start building twisted timbers when you're facing a little boat or a spiral staircase, it's something that you just take up and learn by watching. My father was a bush carpenter. His father was a carpenter. Right now he could make slip fences or a shed or a set of cow bails house, you know, and make that out of timber that he had split out of a great log with a set of mould wedges. So you know, it wasn't much different when it came to building a boat. You knew what you wanted and you just fashioned it to your own liking.

**JD** Do you go out into the bush and cut your own knees and things?

**CLARKE** Yes, you cut all your knees and then fashion the keel. It was milled at our local mill and the timber supplied from there, and then we just fashioned the moulds and built the boat around it, and then fitted it out with an engine, and did our own repairs. There was no refrigeration. Just an ice-box for the fish.

**JD** What sort of engine did you put in?

**CLARKE** I started off... there was no diesel available in those days, so I put in a three cylinder engine - to run on kerosene.

**JD** And the you went further afield in that boat?

**CLARKE** Yes, I worked it for a few years just prior to the War, and then I sold it and tried to join the Air Force, and missed out. Then I was back to where I had started. No boat, no fishing nets, no nothing. I think I sold the whole lot for 100 pounds, so that was the end of that, so you know, it was only just starting afresh. These things could happen and you accept that.

**JD** What about your next boat?

**CLARKE** Well the next boat was the same boat only I stretched it and enlarged it to 36 feet, and I had a diesel engine in, and that was something in those days, a diesel engine in a boat - a 36 feet fishing boat. We were really set up, and that was just after the War, and I went to bigger and better things from then on.

**JD** And the bigger and better things took you into the Gulf of Carpentaria?

**CLARKE** Yes, that's right. That's exactly right. I bought an ex-Army boat and it was sold, and there were very few boats available in those days, and they weren't designed or set up as fishing boats, and they had to be converted. So you go back to the drawing board and fashion something and that was the boat that I fashioned and took to the Gulf in 1954.

**JD** An old Fairmile, was it?

**CLARKE** Yes, it was a small Fairmile, 73 feet.

**JD** And what attracted you to the Gulf?

**CLARKE** Well, by that time, of course, I was looking for more experience, and I wanted to get away from Moreton Bay and have a look at a bit further than I'd ever been before and, of course, the Gulf appealed to me because it's a place that we all know about, and it was wilderness country, and it was virgin country that had never been fished, so I went overland to the Gulf to have a look at it. I realised the potential

that was there, but no market to get your fish to. So I went into Mount Isa and it had a population of 6000 people. So I said, "Well, these people will eat a quarter of pound of fish a week per head," and that's the basis of what I set this venture up on.

**JD** So you took your boat round from Caloundra here?

**CLARKE** Oh yes from Caloundra to Brisbane, and by that time, of course, I knew my way around. I knew the engineering works that could fit refrigeration and things like that into that boat. We also.... by that time I'd built up a certain amount of confidence and my knowledge of the industry.

**JD** So you steamed around to the Cape?

**CLARKE** Oh yes, we had to go via Torres Straits. There was no other way of taking a 75 foot boat in those days. You had to go right through to the Torres Straits and back into the Gulf, which was unknown country, as far as I was concerned. So was the rest of the coastline and beyond. Gladstone, I'd already been there a few times.

**JD** Were you confident about your navigational skills?

**CLARKE** Oh absolutely, you know, you've got to be confident when you go into a set-up like that, and there were other things that you had to be confident about, not only navigation. I knew I could handle the boat to there and I had no qualms about that at the time anyway.

**JD** Did you have a wife and family at that time?

**CLARKE** Oh yes, my wife and family - and the kids were at school. I had one daughter just about ready to leave school. They were at school in Warwick, at a private school, at college.

**JD** Did it mean then that you were separated as a family?

**CLARKE** What it was, when we moved into the Gulf, I moved in first and my wife and daughters didn't join me until March the following year. I went in in October, 1954. They joined me the following year in March.

**JD** How many crew did you have on this vessel?

**CLARKE** We started off.... I had a few that wanted a ride to the Gulf, of course, it was difficult when you were there because you had to get them out, so when I got them there, I told them to go home. I was left there with enough crew to carry on, about four persons to help me, to carry me through at the Gulf, and that was the start and we didn't need a great number at that stage because already the wet season had set in, which meant that the monsoon was on. You know all things stop in the Gulf when the wet season comes on.

**JD** Did you live on board?

**CLARKE** Lived aboard. I also arranged with the Department of the Interior to take over a lease on some buildings as a shore base.

**JD** And what sort of fishing were you doing up there?

**CLARKE** Well, a bit of everything. It was an entirely different set-up from what we were doing, and any fishing that I'd ever experienced before. In the Gulf, of course, it's mainly gill nets. Again it's a matter of quality net and much bigger mesh.

**JD** What were you fishing for?

**CLARKE** Barramundi and king salmon, and there were a couple of other varieties but they were the main two varieties.

**JD** Is that fishing done in the rivers or in the open sea?

**CLARKE** No, it's done in the rivers and along the coastal shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

**JD** Could you describe the operation, Lloyd?

**CLARKE** Well, we had to determine the method for production in the Gulf. The Fisheries Department in Brisbane gave me the right to determine that, which was a great help. Also the Government favoured the scheme because it held a potential for getting fish into inland Queensland where you had plenty of beef and mutton but never any fish. So they could see the potential.

Well, there was an old parliamentarian that was a member for Mount Isa, in that area. He got going there. He was able to get us a subsidy on the air-freight of sixpence a pound. Anyway it didn't come to me. The people got the benefit of that because it was sold in Mount Isa and retailed at sixpence a pound less than we would have normally got. But it did help because it was subsidising the air-freight.

**JD** Were you the first to fish commercially for these fish in that area?

**CLARKE** Oh I believe, Normanton was the sea port for the Goldfields. At Croydon were the people who had set up a little bit there. A chap by the name of Smith, he fished a little bit in the upper reaches. The first stage of an organised industry being set up, Lloyd Clarke can claim that. He was the first.

**JD** What sort of length of net were you using?

**CLARKE** Well, various length depending on the tidal flow and all these sorts of things. So on the foreshores on the Gulf of Carpentaria, you could use up to three or four hundred yards of net, and that was more than you needed. In some instances, if you set 25 yard net it would be that full of fish within twenty minutes you would just have to sit there for a day and pull the fish out of the net. I have taken up to four thousand pound of barramundi out of one twenty yard net in one hour for one set.

**JD** That's incredible, isn't it?

**CLARKE** Well it is as that picture shows.

**JD** Yes, yes. They wouldn't be getting that sort of catch now, surely?

**CLARKE** It's still going on and it's amazing the production that's still in the Gulf of Carpentaria, not only in prawns but in fish. You know I recently read in the **Fisheries Newsletter** that there were 70 commercial fishermen met (and these are barramundi operators) met fishermen that operate between the Northern Territory and Queensland

border and Cape York, at a commercial fishermen's meeting in Karumba. Although, of course, they've brought in regulations now, and various places are closed for certain times of the year, which must assist them.

**JD** How many times in a day.... Could you describe a day's work? What happens?

**CLARKE** Of course, in the lower Gulf of Carpentaria, there is one tide in 24 hours, so you are limited to work within that range. When the tide comes in and you get a twelve foot tidal range it is not as big as the west coast but it's sizeable, and when you get that water pressure flowing and the massive jelly fish in the water and all other things that drift with the tide, you've got to select the area where you set your net. So most of our nets were set from the bank out and anchored to what is called a drumnet. And very often after twenty minutes when that net was set, you knew by the feel of it and the fact that your drum and everything had sunk, and you knew that the pressure was on, and the fish were in it, and you knew what to expect. So you just lifted the anchor, the net was unset, and drifted back and along the bank. It had to be held in by a fixture, and you just proceeded to take the fish from it.

**JD** The net was hauled by hand, was it?

**CLARKE** No, it was run from the shore in a half circle and an anchor dropped to anchor it in that position against the tide. Then you fastened an extra drum and flotation on the surface and you could tell by feeling the net as to the effect it was having and the fish it was catching.

**JD** Would you shoot that net only once on each tide?

**CLARKE** We would probably put two, one on either side of the river, and set them to anchors. We did have the authority to set across river. That didn't mean anything in those days because after 30 miles of tidal river.... So, you know, it's not as though you drained off a total area and it was left dry and the fishery destroyed. You only got the fish that were actually in that area and hit the net.

**JD** You caught other types of fish beside barramundi in nets, didn't you?

**CLARKE** Yes. Yes, we caught other species, you know, such as blue salmon, jewfish and there were two varieties of catfish - one was yellow. It was only to give us some variety in our marketing, our market in Mount Isa. It was well sought after and it was a fish that was priced in accordance with its value, and it was a variety which gave people a range of selection. That was what they needed.

**JD** Was Mount Isa your total market?

**CLARKE** No, we sent it on to Brisbane and we sent it on to Townsville, any over supply that we had, and we sent it down to Alice Springs and various other centres throughout the inland Queensland.

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

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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**TAPE 1 SIDE B**

**JD** Transportation must have been a major problem in such a remote area, Lloyd. How did you overcome it?

**CLARKE** Well, I had to look into the transportation and that was the problem. I know I had no second thoughts about the production of the fish in the Gulf of Carpentaria, after having a look and doing a little bit of a summary on that in the early stages. The transportation was... because roads around.... you know the roads through to Cloncurry, it was over.... Mount Isa in those days was something like about 350 miles away by road IF you could get there. So we had to have a look at some way of getting our fish out and, of course, air-freight was the only thing that was possible. Very fortunately for us, for this operation in the Gulf, was the fact that at that very same time TAA then introduced a DC3 into the area, to do.... I don't mean the Gulf line for their passenger line, but to do their what they called the "channel country run", which ran around the channel country, and they only did that once a fortnight. So let that plane go every second Wednesday and I was able to take it, and we were handling up to 26 charters a year for a DC3.

Apparently it was as big as a passenger aircraft. That plane was.... the [unclear] was about 7000 pound of fish. Coming down a little, we could get a little more on depending on the amount of fuel. They could take the air-hostess rate off plus the [unclear] kit. They didn't remove seats, but we were able to get up to seven to seven and a half thousand on sometimes. A little less if the petrol tanks were a bit full.

**JD** Was there a problem with the airline in terms of the sort of the odour of the fish being left in the aircraft?

**CLARKE** No, because back in those days, they'd fly many things in there. They'd take a fair amount of freight with them right around to the various communities round the Gulf. The Aboriginal settlements on Mornington Island, and up at Domigee Mission, and those places, plus the other towns, so they had a cargo bay on the inside. So what we were able to do, we had these special sacks made that lined them. They were canvas sacks or bags, and these fish were highly frozen, and they came immediately out of the freezer boats, straight to the airport which was only about a mile from where the boat was anchored at Normanton, and straight into there, and when they got to an altitude, of course.... I've flown on that plane, and when you sit in you need a military overcoat on, you know, to be comfortable because when you get five or six thousand, seven thousand pound of fish in the plane, you've got in fact, a coldroom. There was no problem there. They accepted that. They did it for years. They were looking for freight. It was a business arrangement and we made certain that we did the right thing.

**JD** As other fishermen came into the fishery, did they also air-freight their....?

**CLARKE** Yes, a chap set up over in Burktown just about when I was ready to leave the Gulf in 1958, and after I pulled out TAA flew his fish for him for quite a few years. And that was it. Then the road transport came in. The roads got better because they put those beef roads in, and you got road transport in, so it was gradually faded out as they got more passengers and they didn't want the freight. You know it was one of those diverse flying ventures.

**JD** And now I presume the most.... it's mostly by road transport?



**CLARKE** Oh, I think it would be road transport, because air-freight today, I don't think you can afford to have it, because in those days TAA air-freight was reasonably cheap.

I could charter an aeroplane, a DC3 aircraft then, for 86 pound an hour flying.

**JD** You wouldn't do it now. Then you got it to Mount Isa and sold the fish to retail outlets.

**CLARKE** Yes. We supplied.... see we were both wholesaling and retailing in Mount Isa. We'd supplied Mount Isa mines and the catering section. We supplied TAA in Brisbane in the catering section, and we sent a bit on to various other places. Some of TAA's catering sections in Sydney and Melbourne we supplied. And as the planes.... when they got to Brisbane they could forward it on, you know, to Sydney or wherever it was needed. We also supplied fish down to.... wherever we could get on to the small aircraft that would fly it in on some of those little service runs throughout the centre, we were able to put fish in it. It became very popular because you had plenty of beef and they had plenty of mutton and fish was a luxury.

**JD** And when you got it to these small towns, you'd sell it to the local retailers?

**CLARKE** We would supply it at a wholesale rate to those small towns and then they could get the benefit of the retail side of it. We had a little retail shop in Mount Isa where we retailed to the public, and we pushed it over to the other shops that used it for their outlets, and various hotels, motels and whatever.

**JD** Did you fish any other areas for barramundi besides the area round the Norman River?

**CLARKE** Oh yes, we had a speed of about ten or twelve knots, and we could move right across the lower Gulf 100/120 miles west or up the peninsula as far as the Mitchell River. You know we had a range of about 300 miles. There was no problem there and the areas that we fished in.... if we fished in one river and it's not as though you could fish it out, because you were not able to get back within a month.

**JD** And is it a seasonal fishery?

**CLARKE** Strangely enough it wasn't, although there is a season attached and I'm confident that that still exists. There's a local variety of fish, and when the seasonal starts.... when those seasonal fish (migratory fish) start to run in early November (October/November) they're a different type of fish to what the locals fish, and you look and say, "Well, he's a mangey looking fish, and I wouldn't eat him anyhow." Then the next run of fish you get are beautiful fish that are a sight for sore eyes to look at.

**JD** These barramundi live part of their life cycle in the river, do they, and part in the ocean?

**CLARKE** Yes, actually that is what happens. They can be caught in an outer channel from those rivers that don't come in flood. It may come in flood and they get left behind in there for years and years, until it's just a lagoon, and then a flood will release them, and you get a variation then in size, which is the age of the fish and the size of the fish. And the upper reaches of the river, to some of those rivers that are dry sand beds in the upper reaches, and above the tidal reaches of the river - like the Flinders River. There's a few isolated holes along the Flinders. The Flinders River is not like the Norman, big rock holes away from salt water in the upper reaches. This is a

typical place for these fish. The small barramundi go into these areas and they live in these areas and then they're brought out by flood rains and back into the tidal reaches and the sea.

**JD** Did you have charts for these rivers and coastal areas?

**CLARKE** Well, the only charts that were available in the early days were the Admiralty charts which were not really accurate, but I was pretty fortunate and I fossicked around and I got some old land charts of the area (at this stage in properties) and they were accurately marked with rivers in them. Whilst, you know, they didn't give you the tidal range and all the depths, or anything like that, you got that by trial and error. But they were very accurate and I was fortunate enough to get them right across the areas that I worked and there was no problem then.

**JD** You'd have to proceed with great caution though, I imagine?

**CLARKE** In the early stages. What it is is local knowledge, and you go round like a flying fox. You go along the coast and with your binoculars at night and, of course, at times of the year the vessel was drawing five foot six. So you know with three feet of water on the river bar, you can't cross until you get a tide, so with one tide in 24 hours, if it changes to night time, you've got to move at night. So you go along and with the local knowledge you can pick up the formation and you know exactly where you are, and once you get into the rivers, you're right. You've got depth from then on.

**JD** You had your wife and daughter with you for some time, didn't you?

**CLARKE** Oh, my wife accompanied me and she was the cook on board and did the housework and the bookwork and things like that, and my daughter also. I had my two daughters actually. As my son got older he was in those early stages, he was on correspondence, and then when he went to Scotch College in Warwick, the second eldest daughter was brought from school, and that left two at school, a daughter and my son, and the other daughter joined us in the second year. Then one of my daughters at seventeen years of age joined the Nursing Service.

**JD** How many years did you continue fishing up there?

**CLARKE** We were there for five years, the first time, and then I went back and had another go in 1967 until was 1973.

**JD** Did you ever try prawning in those parts?

**CLARKE** Yes, we realised the prawns were there because this was the main method of finding where the barramundi run was, because that was the feed for the fish, both the salmon and the barra. And if we were in an area where there were prawns we realised that there were fish in that area. It wasn't until I came out that I realised the possibility and the potential for the Gulf, because it was when I came out first in 1958, that the prawning industry had extended from Moreton Bay to Bundaberg and Tin Can Bay and along those areas. In about 1958 the industry was in full swing, and the export market was opened up. It was then that I came home and I was able to share it with them. It excited many people.

**JD** Did you actually fish for prawn or trawl for prawn?

**CLARKE** Only in a very minor sort of way. I rigged up a prawn trawler which we were able to drag behind the boat, and I tried various spots in the Gulf. We saw mud boils and we were able to catch the prawn, and realised that they were there in plentiful supply.

**JD** In the bays you were in in those parts, navigation must have been a problem, lack of buoys and lights and so on. Was that the case?

**CLARKE** Well as I said before, if you were going any way across the Gulf, once you got into the open sea, there were no problems until you got into Mornington Island there - the biggest island there is and that's rocky outcrop. So then, of course, you approach that with caution and in fact, eight hours. So the rest is no problem. You know it was just a slide-rule and dead reckoning and I was never ever taught the art of navigation.

**JD** Were crocodiles a problem with the barramundi fishery?

**CLARKE** I never ever felt threatened by a crocodile while I was in the Gulf. Whilst our nets were torn when they attacked the nets and became entangled in them, I was never ever threatened or felt that I was threatened by them at all. We worked all rivers across the Gulf and up the peninsula, and there were many, many crocodiles in the rivers - and big ones. I've seen crocodiles there that would have measured to seventeen, twenty feet long. We've caught them entangled hopelessly in the net, sixteen feet. I've probably caught twenty crocodiles, fourteen foot six, in the net. Many others ten or twelve feet. But we were never threatened. Graham Barnett, a chap that I employed, that I took to the Gulf (as a matter of fact he's still there) he was attending the net one time and there was a live crocodile tangled in it, and it surged away and the net got caught in his fingers and tore them pretty badly, but he wasn't bitten by the crocodile.

No, I was never threatened by them but they were a nuisance in many instances. If a crocodile attacks a net and it comes to get a fish, should he become entangled in the net, he'll just roll up in it, you know, and within twenty minutes he'll drown. We never had any great problems with crocodiles.

Today it makes you wonder what's happened in the Gulf when you hear reports of people being attacked and taken by crocodiles. I think that what's happened in those areas is that a crocodile if he's fed, and he's fed off the end of a stick, and he's encouraged to jump for it, he's going to jump into a boat eventually and take someone out, because he's been taught. But, of course, that wasn't the case. If we thought they were a nuisance even to our nets we would take them and skin them and their hides would be commercially sold. No, I never felt threatened by crocodiles.

**JD** What about sharks? Were they a problem?

**CLARKE** Plenty of sharks, particularly in the.... just along the coastal region at certain times of the year. Most of those, grey nurse and big tiger sharks, frequent those areas, in the early summer months, and yes, the big hammerhead sharks, tiger sharks and grey nurse attacked the nets, but not in the upper reaches. They only penetrate normally up the rivers for about the first eight or ten miles and beyond that, only small sharks.

**JD** There's lots of other sort of stinging creatures and poison fish and that sort of thing in the area.

**CLARKE** Yes, jellyfish. They are a menace because that's the reason for the size of the net. At certain times of the year we could only use eight and a half inch net. It allowed the jelly fish through, otherwise if you use a smaller mesh you find you've got five tons of jellyfish against the net that no anchors, nothing, would ever hold it. So it just washed away. So we had to avoid those areas. Mainly you set the net on the lee side so that if there was much jellyfish you would be able to run the current and pull the contour of the river, so you could avoid it to a point.

**JD** In those early days in that very remote area, living conditions must have been pretty rugged.

**CLARKE** Well, we were fortunate I suppose. My wife was very capable and able to make home more or less wherever we were. We had a very good boat. It was comfortable. We could accommodate ten. Water was the problem in the lower Gulf because there was no water other than catchment, and we had to protect our water, and that was very vital because you know, you couldn't over-use water. There were times when we had to wash our clothes in salt water, and that wasn't always convenient either because the muddy waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria, you know, leave everything loaded with mud, and smelt of jellyfish and stuff like this. So yes, there was a problem but, you know, you get over it, there's a way around them.

**JD** Did your health suffer, do you think?

**CLARKE** I don't think so, no, I don't think so. I think the fishing industry in general can get you down, but if you're strong enough, you'll survive, and I've survived it this much to 73 years, and I'm still active. I'm not a pensioner. I'm active in the fishing industry today. As a matter of fact, it's only a month ago that I had to get a certificate - a Launch Master's Certificate. That's how tight the regulations are getting at this point.

**JD** To go back to the Gulf, what about medical aid if things did go wrong?

**CLARKE** Medical aid was available through the Flying Doctor Service from Cloncurry and Mount Isa, when it was established back in Mount Isa, and whilst we had the radio, we could get a message out through Thursday Island, Darwin or Cairns, or even Townsville radio. So when we had need of help, there was always the radio, yes.

**JD** When you left the Gulf, you then came back to fish in this part of the world, did you?

**CLARKE** Well, of course, when I left Caloundra in 1954, I had been established here with the ice-works that was set up. I leased it to the Fish Board at that stage and they put a chap in to run it, and it had been operated here as the Fish Board depot in Caloundra. So when I came back, what I did, I took over those premises again. It was our own, the ice-works, the freezers, the whole thing. It was built right on the northern end of Bribe Passage. The whole thing was there and still a going concern.

So what I did then, I just slipped back into that and back into fishing and carried on with the mullet harvest and the beaches in Bribe Passage and the general fishing activities there.

**JD** Your son joined you, did he?

**CLARKE** At that time he was almost ready to leave school. He had two years to go, then following that, when he finished at school, he joined me, yes.

**JD** Is he still with you or has he launched out on his own?

**CLARKE** No, he's been in the fishing industry ever since he left school, and I fitted him a boat in the Gulf. He went to the Gulf and did prawning when prawning was along the Gulf in its hey-day. He worked there for five years and then he came out. He's been back in Caloundra now, and he's back in the fishing industry. He has other interests, but he comes into the fishing industry, he and his two sons, and we work as a unit still here at Caloundra.

**JD** In your years in the industry - in various facets of the industry - you'd have seen many, many changes.

**CLARKE** We've seen many changes and I suppose the one that I can recall, because it hit the industry so very heavily, particularly the mullet industry here, was in the early 1960s, when we got a kerosene taint in the mullet harvest in Moreton Bay. Strange enough this didn't apply to fish on open beaches south of Moreton Bay. Amity Point, from there down, the fish were clean. Once that sea mullet went through Moreton Bay and they picked up the polluted fish, they didn't need much of an excuse to condemn the lot if they took out a sample. If the sample tested a kerosene taste, then the whole consignment was condemned, unfit for human consumption, and that went on for almost fifteen years. The mullet industry in Moreton Bay, and north of Moreton Bay, was completely destroyed by pollution.

**JD** Is it still a problem?

**CLARKE** There is a slight trace of it still there, but there were several things done, and I suppose you can only say that... form your own conclusions as to what happened to that industry. But it's pretty obvious what happened. It was sewerage fall-out from Brisbane, at Luggage Point, and the pollution for the paper mills on the Pine River, because it was very polluted by the paper mill there. You know fish coming out of those areas, they were unuseable. You couldn't eat them. They were absolutely unfit for human consumption. And this is where this came from, and it's the fall-out, and the mullet being a bottom feeder, he absorbs that into the cells, and the moment he goes in to the pan and it is heated, it amplifies that and that's where it showed up, and fish that had the kerosene taint - and I think it was from detergents and things like that.

There were several things that happened in Brisbane round about the time that this started. You got I suppose, an explosion in the prawning fishing industry in Moreton Bay, with bilge being pumped out. We got motor transport that converted from petrol to diesel which blasted on our roads and the run-off down into our sewerage system and immediately into the rivers. We had several oil refineries established in the mouth of Brisbane River. We had the jets that took off out of Eagle Farm with a supply of 600 gallons of kerosene on take-off, to fall out over the immediate area, and I imagine all these things made a contribution towards this perversion and this kerosene taint that we got in the mullet. It was also detected in other varieties of fish, and even in the prawns that were caught in the immediate area.

**JD** Have you witnessed a decline in catch?

**CLARKE** Oh, it's very noticeable in the last ten years, the decline. See, prior to that and twenty years ago, Caloundra would have produced something like about twelve to

fourteen thousand cases of mullet a year, supplied to the Brisbane market. It was second only in supply to the metropolitan market. That's when the Fish Board in its hey-day controlled the marketing system in Queensland - I think 36 depots in Queensland. And Caloundra was always considered a producing area for mullet in quantity, and that goes back to the very early days, when this whole area was a mullet-producing area. We had the sea-grasses, we had everything that was the natural habitat for mullet, particularly in Bribie Passage. It was the home of mullet.

**JD** Would you say that applies to other species, tailer and whiting and so on?

**CLARKE** Absolutely. You know following our mullet season prior to twenty years ago, and what I'm saying now is when the pollution affected the mullet, we still did have tailer. That wasn't affected by this pollution. We had bream in quantity. We had whiting and various other mixed varieties. But today there is no quantity of tailer here. I think there's a reason for that. You see we've got a lot of activity along our beaches with board - sail boards, outboard activity, all sorts of progress, population and the tailer, not necessarily here, whilst it can be an estuary fish, can also be a deep water fish, and I think our migration path for tailer has gone off-shore. They move to Fraser Island and Breaksea Spit. They move up there to spawn. Twenty years ago we caught here somewhere between three to five thousand case of tailer following the mullet season. We don't get tailer now. Just an odd fish but no quantity.

**JD** Would you say the destruction of the mangroves has affected the fishing, the food chain perhaps?

**CLARKE** Well, I imagine that's for the scientists to say, but I don't think that's played a great part. I think that's probably one small part. I don't think that in our immediate area here, that we've lost mangrove, we've gained more.... I'd say that in Bribie Passage, irrespective of the suggestion that there are areas that mangrove forests have been taken from, I would say - and with my knowledge of over 60 years operating on this Passage, apart from the time that I was away in the Gulf - I can say now in all sincerity that there were 500 acres of mangrove more on Bribie Passage at this stage (and there is a reason for it) than there was 60 years ago.

**JD** What's the reason?

**CLARKE** Well, the reason is this. Over 60 years ago, we had a pinched entrance on the northern end which held the water, and this Passage here was more like a lake in those days, and it didn't have the tidal range that it's got now. When the Bar opened up at the northern end of this Passage here, it allowed a different flow and a different tidal range. It flooded then with salt water and a lot of the area that was just wetlands on Bribie Passage, became salt, and the mangrove took advantage of this and they've grown over that in forests.

You see back in those days we had tidal ranges of about two foot six. Nowadays it goes to about four foot six, due to the fact that the northern end of this passage is opened up and it allows more water in it now, and the tidal range within the Passage is gained by about eighteen inches to about two foot during the spring tide.

**JD** What other problems have you seen as confronting the industry?

**CLARKE** Well, I can't speak for the southern end of Moreton Bay. I speak for the immediate area because now I've spent a lifetime in it. I've watched it. You've got to to be successful in the industry. I would say that our biggest problem here is the fact that there is a population explosion in the area. It's become a playground for boating

and for people and all the things that are thrown in to make up this whatever you like to describe it.

**JD** What about the recreational fishermen's effort?

**CLARKE** Yes, it's tremendous. Individually it may only be a small amount, but collectively it's enormous. In many instances it exceeds that of our commercial effort.

**JD** This interview continues on side A of tape two.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

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## TAPE 2 SIDE A

**JD** We were talking about the problems of pollution. Another form of pollution perhaps, is litter in the waterways and ocean. Is that a problem here?

**CLARKE** It is to a degree. We're not like the Sydney beaches at this point of time. There is a fair amount of litter in the form of plastic bags of various sizes, mainly bait bags, other plastic containers and the like.

**JD** There seems to be an explosion of population along this coast. What would be the population of the immediate area of Caloundra?

**CLARKE** I imagine Caloundra is rapidly expanding. What they call it now is Caloundra City. They've taken the whole of the Landsborough Shire, so you see it's a fairly big area. That's not only the population that play on those waterways here and the immediate area. See, south of this centre is Moreton Bay. We're at the northern extremity of this bay, so you see in the Caboolture Shire you've got the whole of Bairie and Torbul, Donnybrook, and those areas that are growing just as far as here. Then immediately south again you've got Deception Bay and Scarborough. So the whole of that area, when Moreton Bay is under the influence of say any south easter or cyclone, most of those people will come and play in this Passage, so it throws a tremendous strain on all this. It would be hard to estimate the number of people and the boating activity that's confined to this area under those conditions.

**JD** Apart from the litter and pollution aspect, do the recreational boaters, or users of water, does that affect the fishing?

**CLARKE** It affects our mullet industry in more ways than one because Moreton Bay and Bribie Passage (or Punicestone Passage as it is better known) you see we've got no major rivers. We have about eight sizeable creeks, Coochin Creek being the biggest, Mellun Creek comes into it. It's a very small river but quite a sizeable creek. It was the home and the natural habitat for many prawn species, which that species moves into the creek at certain times of the year.

Yes, they do have effect on that side of the industry, and I imagine on the ground fish too, such as bream and that, because there's a heavy take from the angler, or what you call the recreation fisherman. His take would exceed that of the (particularly that type of fish other than mullet) would exceed the commercial effort. But all activities in the area, I imagine in more ways than one, will affect our mullet industry, particularly

in our migratory run and adjacent to the bar at the northern end and along our beaches. We get a lot of interference.

**JD** Do you get support from the fisheries' officers? Do they supervise the people?

**CLARKE** While I suggest it is available, it never comes in time to give any benefit. Now what you've got to do is you report the incident. What happens is if someone interferes - and it has happened here where water-jet skis are playing in the immediate area where we are set up to take a haul of sea mullet on the northern side of our bar - if they play in the area immediately in front of us deliberately for hours, and we've had a deal of arguments with these people over the area rights, and we can never get the true right of the fishermen, not from our organisation nor from the Fish Management Authority. We can never get them to explain to us whether we've got a right to be there or whether we've got a right to defend ourselves and our industry from all the interference. I've asked at special meetings and I've asked directly on the phone. They say that it is available but you can never find it, where it is, and to this day I don't know where it is.

**JD** It's particularly difficult I would imagine because in say, the mullet fishery, where it's quite seasonal, isn't it?

**CLARKE** You see, this is absolutely right. Our sea mullet run lasts for about six weeks, and what happens in that six weeks is, if interference occurs, which it does every year, and we lose many thousands of kilograms of fish, and in many instances up to \$20000 worth of fish in one hit, that we could have taken.

**JD** It's a big step back isn't it?

**CLARKE** Well, it's a step back in as much as you wait for twelve months of the year for this to come about, this seasonal run, and then it's taken from you just by the interference from someone that's.... We've suggested it being deliberate but you can't prove it.

**JD** Is it the lack of communication between the recreational people and the professional, do you think?

**CLARKE** No, I don't. I think it's attitudes today, and I think when they look and say, "There's a team of fishermen over there," they know perfectly well our boats are properly marked and set up on the beach. We're set in a position where we've been catching fish for 100 years. Now you know, people know that this will happen, and it's people in the immediate area that know that those activities go on, particularly at that time of the year. We've asked for support, we've asked for some of it to be advertised, we've asked for it to be advertised in the tidal books for the next three months or whatever, that if you find fishermen in certain areas they are there for the purpose of their livelihood and for the taking the run of the sea mullet and migratory fish. But we can never get anything there put up to the public to show them. Whilst I'm of the opinion that most of them.... some of the people that interfere with us, you know, are well known to us.

**JD** Are the fishermen's (professional fishermen's) organisations affective at all, do you think, in Queensland?

**CLARKE** No, they're defective in many ways. As far as I'm concerned it's only to receive our levty that we're forced to pay, and I say this in all sincerity. No, when they do a job, they should be doing a job for our industry, but they're not doing it to help



us in their immediate area, and I can't see any long term benefit from it. I think it's got to change.

You see if I have a complaint today, by the time I put it in to our QCFO branch, it goes to State Council, and then on to Brisbane, I've forgotten what the problem was about by the time they do anything about it. What we've got to have is something immediately, a hot line which we could ring and get immediate attention.

**JD** There are two bodies are there not? There's the Professional Fishermen's Organisation, and then there's the Fish Management Authority. What's the sort of relationship between the two?

**CLARKE** Well they're both statutory bodies. When you get that sort of organisation working you can't get much assistance, not directly to the industry. They may be there to have targets for the long term, but you know, you want it immediately. The Fish Management Authority as far as I'm concerned, they're pretty arrogant, and I say that with all sincerity. You can make a phone call to them and you can't get much commonsense. What's happened in this area today, these blokes have been selected from other sections of other industries. They're brought in to this. They don't understand the fishing industry, they don't understand the way that it works.

**JD** This Fish Authority, is that part of the Queensland Department of Primary Industries?

**CLARKE** It's made out of three other government departments: Fisheries, Primary Industries, Boating Patrol. The Fish Management Authority, they control the fishery, the Primary Industry, they do the scientific side and research, and the others are on that side of it, policing management.

**JD** Supervisory....

**CLARKE** The supervision and the policing.

**JD** And policies, yes. What about marketing? Who's the authority there?

**CLARKE** Well, strange enough we haven't got it now. We have got a marketing system here in Queensland, but you know, they sold the Fish Board out from under the fishermen. Now we had depots throughout Queensland, something like 36 depots along the Queensland coast, and it was all controlled by the Fish Board. Well, a few years ago the Queensland Government decided they would disband the Fish Board and break it up, because I imagine they could have their reasons. You see, there were some owner/operators come in to it on the processing side which broke up the main effort of the Fish Board. That reduced the profit, I suppose, for want of a better word. I suppose it interfered with their management side of it in Brisbane and the profit that was in it for them in those days, and if they were going to [unclear] I suppose there was only one thing to do was get rid of it, and I imagine this is what happened. It was sold to....

**JD** Ractus Speke?

**CLARKE** It was sold to Ractus and Sons, the fishermen. He's sold or broken it up now at Bundaburg and I understand that that depot has gone. There was a suggestion that

Mooloolabah depot is on the books as not showing profit and looks likely to go at an early date or some time in the future.

No, we haven't got a fish marketing set-up in Queensland equivalent as to what we had when the Fish Board was in control, for the simple reason that just recently we've gone through a hard gut mullet run. That is the wash-out fish from the northern rivers. They are the sea mullet species. They're classed as sea mullet if we catch them on the ocean beach. They range in size from about twelve inches to about fourteen inches and they're not in roe. We've just experienced a run of fish and there's large quantities to be harvested, but at 40 cents it does not pay to catch them. So a few years ago we would have been guaranteed a price through the old Fish Board, and about 60 cents for those fish, or a price which was in keeping with the times.

**JD** There was a guaranteed price, was there, a base price?

**CLARKE** No, it was a marketing system that goes up. You could put a reserve price on it, but the Fish Board looked after the fishermen and as far as I'm concerned we were looked after reasonably well. If there was a glut on, of course, you expected the fish prices and values would come down as far as that was concerned and the market opened up again. That was the cause and I suppose that happens with all harvest, whether it be fish or produce.

**JD** Turning away from that a little bit, would you say the fish product generally is well presented in Queensland?

**CLARKE** I'm of the opinion that it is in some instances. There are I suppose, fish that are not presented 100 per cent, but I would say the Caloundra fish always had the reputation on the Brisbane market and always got the benefit of the better prices. Our fish was always considered to be put on the Brisbane market in first class quality and condition.

**JD** What about when it gets to retail level? Is it still well presented?

**CLARKE** I imagine today, of course, in the retail sector, you've got a lot of imported fish to compete against and this sort of thing, and whilst mullet is not looked on as being the number one table fish, we're a bit spoilt in Queensland. I suppose you've got the various reef fish. Probably if you added it up you'd have twenty first quality species that would be looked on as being better [unclear] than mullet. Due to the fact that mullet has been the backbone of the industry prior to prawning, for 100 years, and there was a time not many years ago that it represented something like 68 per cent of the total fish produced in Queensland for the market. So, you know, it's got to have a value there as a table fish.

**JD** Does it concern you that fish of lower quality are often presented to the public and sold under the name of high quality fish? Barramundi's the classic example perhaps.

**CLARKE** You know it's the name barramundi that excites people, because you know, it's become Australia wide now. When I went into the Gulf in the early days, you could put it on the market and they wouldn't have known what it was. You know it's advertised today and people know what it's about. You can get a piece of say black king, or a bit of trevally or samson fish or anything, and you take the skin off it and if you present it with a bit of parsley and call it barramundi, a lot of people would eat it and think it was nice and they wouldn't know the difference. But people are getting educated and they will tell you they're a lot wiser now, and they know the texture and flavour of good fish. In the old days you could eat a bit of fish - mostly imported fish.

You wouldn't know whether you were eating a bit of wet cardboard or what you're eating and that's about the food value that would be in it.

**JD** Do you think the industry promotes itself well enough to the public?

**CLARKE** I don't think we really do and, of course, you know, we're compelled in Queensland to supply the Fish Board which was our marketing agents for all those years, and they did a fairly good presentation and they had the thing under control but, of course, it's out of control at this stage. They haven't got it any more. It's spread over and over a great number of people, [unclear] the product at all different levels. That not only applies to mullet, it's all fish, or filleted fish. It applies to our prawning industry and all those. If you get 20 blokes killing prawns, you get 20 different varieties of cooking, because they don't all cook to a standard, and then again, it goes in and out of the refrigerator, up and down in temperature and, of course, it deteriorates. There's many instances you can go in some of these outlets today and I wouldn't even feed it to my cat, because you can smell it before you get near it.

**JD** The image, the poor image, tends to become industry wide.

**CLARKE** Yes, it does and it's surprising you know, people will say, "Look I'll eat a piece of smoked, because at least I know that it's smoked and cured," as against they've imported something else and they think they're eating that. You see this is the same thing that should be done with our mullet. There should be a processing side that caters.... Our mullet is a beautiful fish. Now all our surplus fish in the winter time have the roes taken out, go through a smoking process, and are put on to the market. Certainly it would compare with our overseas' imports.

**JD** We import a great deal of fish now, don't we?

**CLARKE** Yes. If I were to read up my **Fisheries News Letter** I suppose it would give me a fair indication. You know you've got to keep up with these sort of things.

**JD** Do you see any other major problems facing the industry?

**CLARKE** I do. I think that fishermen haven't got the chance of diversifying to all that extent. The Fish Management Authority today, you are forced into a system whereby you get permission to do certain things within the industry. For instance, I've got an entitlement to operate on the beach as a beach seiner or mullet. I've also got an entitlement to fish in the Passage. I've got a line fish entitlement, and these sort of things. But to get into other sections of the industry, and make a year round activity for yourself, like a very new industry - you know tuna is a thing that's coming in - well, to go into that I just can't take my boat and go into the tuna fishing industry. I think there's too many regulations. I feel that the old fisherman today had been sent to work with one hand tied behind his back. Now he's got both hands tied behind his back, and I think that's the way it affects most fishermen.

**JD** Will the industry.... all the fisheries in Queensland pretty well are limited entry now, aren't they?

**CLARKE** They are limited, yes, and it's wrong. You see, for instance, when we were talking about it before, we get interference on the beach and our activities are cut down, so is our pay, right? We have a limited season. What can we do in the meantime? You see, you can't go on the dole, you've got.... well anyway, I don't want to go on the dole. But I can't go because there's not another section of the industry

that I can go in because it is controlled. I think that those sort of things have got to be taken into account. If we are forced out of an industry they should make provision for us in another section without us having to buy our way in at a price something like anything up to a hundred thousand dollars. That's wrong. Our activities are curtailing right now immediately, but you cut off our income something else should be opened up to it, because this is not something that's going to go away. It can only increase, and that's where our take in this area, we've got back to about 3000 boxes a year now on the beach. It's only the price of that product that makes it viable for us.

**JD** Well, it must be difficult for a young man to get started in fishing nowadays.

**CLARKE** Yes, it is, it's difficult. I've got two grandsons who have come into the industry. One's 22, the other one is... come up in June he'll be 21. I've encouraged them. I've given them all the encouragement I can and I've advised them along these lines, that they've got to get a piece of paper that gives them the authority to be in charge of a boat, and they have both sat and got their Master Fisherman's licence.

**JD** It's becoming so expensive that it's almost impossible for the average young fellow anyway, to get started, I would think.

**CLARKE** Well it is today. Recently David (that's the youngest of the two grandsons) he sat his exam, and he got his Grade Five ticket. It cost him \$400 and he worked his sea time and then he sat for his Master Fishermen's licence. The fee attached to that was another \$300. He's always lost the time in sitting for it. Well, you know, when I came into the fishing industry, I think back in those days it was ten shilings a fisherman's licence. Well that's all I needed. I could be in charge of a boat, and I never had any more than that until recently. I could not be in charge of my commercial effort on the beach now, even though it might be that I row. Recently I had to give reasons why I could be in charge of a vessel in the sea, and that isn't more than a rowing boat.

**JD** And that's after how many years in the industry?

**CLARKE** That's exactly 60 years in the industry now.

**JD** Lloyd, thank you very much for this interview. It has been most interesting to talk to you. May I wish you and your family all success in the future.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Lloyd Clarke of Caloundra, Queensland.

END OF RECORDING ON TAPE 2 SIDE A

TAPE 2 SIDE B UNRECORDED

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with NOEL GALLAGHER

### INTRODUCTION

Noel Gallagher has a wealth of experience in the processing and marketing of seafood products, both in Australia and overseas. Early in his career he became the general manager of the Clarence River Fishermen's Co-operative, and later became the Director of the Queensland Fish Board.

Following that he spent some ten years as consultant to many overseas' companies and governments in Asia and the Indian Ocean basin. He was also involved in consultation on joint ventures with the Soviet Union and in New Zealand.

Currently he manages his own successful business in seafood merchandising, trading under the name of Australian Seafood Traders of Brisbane, Queensland. In this interview Noel Gallagher discusses many aspects of fish marketing, including the need for promotion and good product presentation, the mis-labelling of fish, the fragility of Australian fisheries, the potential of our deep water fisheries as well as of aquaculture and mariculture. In all of this he presents a balanced viewpoint which clearly is based on very wide experience.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry. It was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Gallagher's office in Morningside, Queensland, on 18th of April, 1990. There are two sides of one tape and the interview starts at 023 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

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

**GALLAGHER** Yes, certainly. Noel Ambrose Gallagher, born at Maclean, Clarence River, northern New South Wales on the 7th of December, 1929.

**JD** And you spent all your life in Australia?

**GALLAGHER** No, I had ten years, from 1969 to 1979, in Singapore, and approximately one year based in Dunedin, New Zealand. But apart from that, yes, my life's been spent in good old Australia.

**JD** Did you have a background of fishing in your family?

**GALLAGHER** No, I'm the son of a farmer who lost everything that he owned in the great Depression, and only by winning myself fortunately, a State Bursary, was I able to get educated, otherwise I would have been like a lot of other people in those days,

stranded in the streets if you like. My father was a great respecter of education, and he drove me pretty hard. From a family of eight, myself, my brother and my sister were all fortunately bursary winners, and through that good luck if you like, or good management on my father's part, we were able to get a good education.

**JD** Could I ask you how far you went in your education?

**GALLAGHER** Yes, I went to Leaving Certificate in New South Wales' standard. I couldn't afford to go to university which was quite expensive for poor farmers those days, and then did correspondence courses with [unclear] institute in accountancy. I did some study in promotional law as well, and I did a correspondences course which was attached to the CSIRO, though not directly with them, in food science and technology.

**JD** And it was through that course in food science and technology that brought you into the fishing, was it?

**GALLAGHER** Well, my father who wanted me to stay on the land, did not want to forgive me very much about departing from the beef cattle and the crops - cash crops - and going into the commercial fishing industry, and I thought I was going to get struck out of a very modest will at one stage, but it didn't happen. He forgave me because he saw that I liked it and did well at it.

Yes, it was the.... I think it was in the fascination I had, having been born at Maclean on the lower Clarence River, which was the supplier of about one sixth of the fish to New South Wales. The fascination of that industry all around me that got me involved and got me keenly interested.

**JD** And did you start off first at Maclean River.... Clarence River?

**GALLAGHER** Yes, well that was my first involvement with the commercial fishing industry. I had done a fair bit of study of fishers in the other sense, and did a lot of studying during my food science and technology course of refrigeration. So it all sort of came together. The environment in which I was raised, the training that I had, and then suddenly a vacancy for a fairly good position for an eighteen year old as I was at the time, and so I served my first ten years at Clarence River Fishermen's Co-operative, starting off as the sub-accountant at the age of eighteen, and then graduating to manager's secretary at the age of 22, and finishing up as general manager of the Co-operative Society, I think when I was about 27, or something like that.

**JD** Would you like to go on then from that and outline the rest of your career?

**GALLAGHER** Yes, when I was at the Clarence River Fishermen's Co-operative, I built up a sizeable interstate market here in Queensland, and was challenged by the Queensland Fish Board about the activities of the Co-operative, and finished up in a High Court action against the Queensland Fish Board. The Chairman of the Board in those times, must have been impressed because he was thrashed six to one in the High Court, and then immediately approached me [laughs] to join the Queensland Fish Board, which I did, and I had my next ten years, first of all as general manager of the Queensland Fish Board at the very early age of 31, and finishing there at the last two years as Director of the Board, and looking after the research and development as well as the management side. It was during that period that the Queensland Fish Board got

inself involved in export, and during the latter years that we built what is now the Brisbane Metropolitan Fish Market.

Then I wasn't happy about some of the structural changes in the Queensland Fish Board, and especially ministerial appointments of the Chairman of the day, and when I was approached from Singapore by the development Bank of Singapore, and a company over there that wanted someone experienced, I took up a ten year assignment based there. That assignment was primarily to get companies in which the bank was involved, out of trouble, or rather set down the guidelines that would lead them from disaster path into profit. I managed to succeed mainly in that, but I also was given other assignments in Somalia, South Yemen, India, Vietnam (during the war period too, quite dangerous assignment) the Philippines, Sarawak, and generally around the Indo-Pacific region, including one assignment to the Seychelles which was quite interesting.

When I completed my ten years at Singapore.... sorry, during my ten years at Singapore, I got involved with none other than the giant - or rather my company got involved - with the giant corporation called Suribbnod of the USSR. There was a joint venture set up between the company that I managed to get out of trouble and the Soviet [unclear], the [unclear Soviet unclear] which is now called Marisco Private Limited. I think it's probably the biggest processing organisation in Singapore.

When my ten years were up in Singapore, I took an assignment with Future Challenge Limited in New Zealand, who also had an involvement with the Soviet Union in fishing, and I was aksed to set up that project - that joint venture - based at Dunedin, and I did so. Not only were fishery's matters involved but the processing and the international marketing of the deep water species that were just coming into prominence in New Zealand, and contemporaneously with my assignments in New Zealand, I set up my own company back here in Australia - a trading company - N A Gallagher and Sons Pty Ltd, trading as Seafood Traders of Australia, and that had its tenth birthday last December. Of course, I was able to bring into that company the contacts that I had made in the previous twelve years at Singapore and around the Indo-Pacific region, and the South East Asian region, and also became agent in Australia for Fletcher Soviet bloc or Fletcher Challenge, and we managed to build a sizeable business from those contacts.

That just about sums.... I think it must be fairly unique that my 40 years have been divided equally. Ten years with the Clarence River Co-operative in the various designations that I've described. Ten years with the Queensland Fish Board; ten years as a business consultant based in Singapore and ten years in my own private business, consulting with New Zealand and setting up a trading operation on this now.

**JD** It's been a great career. Congratulations.

**GALLAGHER** Thank you. Probably unique but those ten years haven't happened by design, it was quite by accident.

**JD** Could we come back then to the marketing of fish in Queensland? You would be very knowledgable about that aspect of the fishing industry here. Could you tell us what happens in the marketing of fish in Queensland? It's an auction system I gather.

**GALLAGHER** Well, prior to my arrival as general manager of the Queensland Fish Board, the Government of the day had set up the Queensland Fish Board and later on another board called the North Queensland Fish Board, and they gave it statutory powers and it actually had the monopoly for marketing all fish and crustacea within the

fish supply district, which covered the entire coastal region from the north right down to the New South Wales border. And in those days we, the Board operated under compulsory marketing legislation and it was rather a regimented system. The fishermen had to supply through the Board. The Board was telling them that they needed compulsory marketing to protect them against themselves. Prior to that.... prior to the setting up of the Queensland Fish Board, they were, I understand, exploited very heavily by the agents and the private entrepreneurs. The marketing was quite disintegrated, disorganised is probably a better word, prices were usually good when there was nothing to be marketed and probably low when supplies exceeded demand.

So the Board actually, although it was criticised in many quarters because it had the monopoly, the Board had good representation amongst its members from the fishermen, and it also had representation.... it was represented.... it had representation for the consumer, and the Government also, of course, which was putting up the money, made sure that it had a government chairman and another representative. It functioned quite well and fortuitously it was reasonably well geared to be able to take advantage of the export markets when Queensland became an important producer of prawns, mainly along the eastern seaboard, but also in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The Board also had a major role to play in stabilised marketing, especially the fish that were subject to seasonal gluts, not only prawns, but mullet - sea mullet especially - tailor and in the north of Queensland, the Spanish mackerel. The Queensland Fish Board those days had market stabilisation schemes, whereby auction markets were conducted in the main provincial cities and, of course, in Brisbane, but there was a reserve price and if the quality was good and the product was processable or storable for long periods, the Board then took the surplus. Fishermen were paid promptly and organised marketing was the end result. It was quite good actually.

**JD** Does that Fish Board still exist?

**GALLAGHER** No. As corporations took over from the private individuals, and as development along the eastern seaboard of Queensland got greater and greater with the advent of tourist facilities, the destruction of the mangroves, and the noise by power boats etc, the local industry as I knew it, started to wither, started to diminish, and the Board found it uneconomical in most of the depots and branches to continue operating unless they vastly increased the commissions. As I understand it - this happened, of course, while I was overseas - they did call in some management consultants, and a review of the whole operation was done. The Government finally decided to phase the Board out as the main operator. It removed a lot of the compulsory marketing legislation which weakened the Board further, and finally a sell-out to private enterprise took place. I suppose it was inevitable.

**JD** So the situation now is that the fisherman sells his catch to a private processor or exporter or purchaser anyway, at a negotiated price. Is that right?

**GALLAGHER** Yes, that's correct. They still have access to an auction market which, of course, is not operated by the Government, but operated by enterprise now. For instance, the central fish market here in Brisbane - I shouldn't call it central, but the Brisbane Metropolitan Fish Market - is owned by a very good company called A Ruptus and Sons, and they give the fishermen the options of one, selling at auction, by accepting a guaranteed priced, or if they want to pack the products interstate to Sydney or Melbourne markets, they offer a facility for doing that.



That same situation applies in the main provincial areas, but the industry has changed in pattern considerably since 1975. As I said, with the advent of corporations owning the major part of the fleet, especially the important prawn fleet, they have a fully integrated scheme whereby they own the trawlers, they have their own processing plant, and they do their own marketing, both domestic and international. They also make offers, and because they've got competitors they must make reasonable offers to the ordinary fishermen, the owner-operator, and so stability had come more these days because demand is in reasonable balance with supply, and the export market, especially with prawns, lobsters, scallops and the like, the export market is able to take care of the surpluses at reasonable to very good prices.

**JD** Thank you. From your background of experience in the co-ops in New South Wales, could you comment on why it is that the co-operative system seems to have survived in New South Wales where it hasn't in other states? Is there some reason for that?

**GALLAGHER** Yes, the reasons are many I think in New South Wales. Firstly the co-operative societies are protected to some extent, by compulsory marketing legislation, and the fishermen are shareholders in that co-operative, and because it provides an important local facility, and because they have their money invested, of course, their loyalty in the main, is ensured.

Secondly the Sydney fish market is probably the most lucrative, the most attractive market in the whole of Australia, if not the world, and it is very nicely placed, just about equidistant between the Victorian and Queensland borders, and road transport, rail transport, and refrigerated transport by both rail and road are available. The product can be landed through the co-operatives in very, very fresh condition, and prices generally are good in that market because of the three and a half million population for a start, and because of a big preference these days for fresh fish, compared with frozen.

But certainly the co-operatives are having problems in areas where development and over-fishing - especially in the schnapper and big fish areas - have taken place, and volume is down and expenses are up, and the cost of handling charges to the shareholders in some cases, is a little bit out of proportion, and some of those co-operations may have to close. But by and large the scheme which has been going since 1953 has been a great success, and where the main co-operatives have suffered in terms of estuary supply, due to development and the noise factors that I mentioned earlier, the number of boats that are now hunting the estuaries, they have had the support of the prawn trawlers, which can be depended on to supply substantial quantities of product for at least nine months of the year.

So once the mullet and the tailer and those fish that used to be there in many thousands of tons on the eastern seaboard gradually diminished, the trawling industry - the ocean trawling industry - has compensated. So in the areas where the co-operatives in New South Wales have the support of those trawlers, they're providing a good service, they've packed the product very well, they have seats on the New South Wales Fish Market Authority. The industry is very well represented and as I said, because Sydney fish market has access to three point five million people and is equidistant between the Queensland and Victorian borders, the co-operatives as an institution, and as for providing facilities, play a good role, and I think they are there to stay, especially with the support of compulsory marketing legislation.

**JD** Have you noticed any changes in dietary habits in Australia in regard to the eating of fish?

**GALLAGHER** Well yes, with the advent of increased migration now, our habits in terms of fish consumption have altered significantly. There was a time when items like octopus and squid and silver bibbies and little yellowtail, and all these little fish would be just cast overboard. Now they're in reasonable to excellent demand in the main markets, especially where migrants are.... migration has been heavy, and I refer this to Melbourne in particular. But there was a time when, I think just after the War - World War Two - Australians ate less than three and a half pounds, that's less than one and a half kilos, of fish per annum. Now we are experiencing consumption, I think of fish and crustacea, it's getting up towards thirteen kilo per capita per annum.

Now, that has been a progression since World War two, and especially since we've had Mediterranean immigration, from that region I mean, and also in more recent years, a lot of Asian migration. So the fishing industry has prospered from migration, although the per capita consumption improvement probably is not entirely attributable to migrant intake. There has been better preparation, better promotion, within the respective states, and a better availability. Fish these days is not subject to the same seasonal peaks and troughs, because with the advent of processing factories and our access to good quality imports, people have fish available for twelve months of the year. That also has assisted I think, in - I won't say twisting the dietary habits - but modifying them to what they were 20, 30, 40 years ago.

**JD** Do you feel that in Australia we advertise or promote and present our seafood products adequately? I know there are sections where it's done magnificently. You mentioned Sydney fish markets, and you see retailing the fish there as well done as you would anywhere in the world. What about the ordinary retailer? Do you think he presents his product well?

**GALLAGHER** Let us talk about presentation right from the time it's received from the fishing trawler, I think the co-operatives and the handling agents and various groups do a good job, and realise that the proper handling, weighing with reliable weights, and the packaging, is of good standard, that the rewards will be [unclear]. So there's not much product these days, except in isolated areas like Eden, where there's still a mis-use of ice I think - there's not enough of it - the fish gets to the metropolitan markets and to the wholesalers in reasonably good condition. But sometimes it all breaks down at a retail level. We have a lot of people and a lot of them are migrants, who have not been trained in the reasonable presentation of fish presentation, and this is where I think, there is a bit of a stigma. There are some magnificent shops. For instance in the Sydney fish market complex in Deep Street, Claremont, there are some magnificent shops there that would probably parallel - or even supercede - the presentations in the USA, Canada and Europe, but in some of the suburban shops, and indeed in some of the country shops, we have the unfortunate experience where we see fish mixed in with hamburgers, meat pies, salami.... you name it, they've got it, and it looks a bit of a pity that we don't have specialist retail shops done out in the style that we see around the Sydney fish market.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** Because of the importance of the presentation, do you feel there's a need for better training facilities for people involved in presentation and marketing of fish?

**GALLAGHER** Yes, I do. I believe that our budgets - the industry budgeting - for promotion and for training, is very inadequate, and I think the industry itself, is a bit

selfish in this respect. I think that you could say that 70 per cent or even higher, of the ethnic population involved in fish presentation and retailing, should be trained, and there ought to be something done whereby they don't get a licence unless they come up to a certain standard of presentation, and health care of the fish, of course. I mean [laughs] health care of the people, by presentation and good quality.

There is an excellent job being done by the New South Wales Fish Market Authority. They have quite a good budget, albeit still not enough, and they have a highly trained staff that engages in the training of schoolchildren, and they have adult classes, and they do lots of things by the way of pamphlets and advertising. They are doing wonders I think, for the metropolitan regions of Sydney, and the larger provincial cities of New South Wales.

We don't have a very big budget at all in Queensland. We did have a Fish Promotions Committee, of which I am a member, but we don't have the population. Brisbane has one point one million, the total State is under three million - under two and three quarters I was going to say, but I think we might have improved a bit on that - whereas New South Wales and Victoria have nearly eight million people - or nine is it - between them. Melbourne doesn't do enough. It doesn't do enough because it's a rather [unclear] in as much as they still have lots of agents doing auctions, doing private treaty sales, who have an interest in the wholesale disposal of the product in good condition, but they don't have any programme beyond that to train the handlers and the retailers of the product, and as far as I understand it, they have very little literature going out to the public, or the would-be fish eaters, to enhance fish sales.

Something will have to be done about that because it's around Tasmania and Victoria, where there's been an exciting development in the deep water fisheries, where the orange ruffie, the dorys, and other good white fish they've discovered in the last decade. Tasmania, through its Development Authority, Tasmania's done an excellent job, I believe, considering the size of its population, but then because of what I said about the deep water fishery, and because of Tasmania's growing aquaculture industry, they need to do quite a lot, not only at government level, but also at private enterprise level, and industry level. That is being done. It's being done quite copiously by some of the companies, and if you like to go down to the Tasmanian Fisheries Development Authority, you're able to pick up pamphlets there illustrating a wide range of Tasmanian produced produce, including lobsters, scallops, all those exotic fish and crustacea that they have there, and they're doing a good job.

I'm not sure what's happening in South Australia. Certainly it gets reasonable publicity through its entrepreneurs. In Western Australia, of course, you don't have the population to match Victoria and Sydney, but I think the private operators there and their main wholesalers, I think they do a reasonable job. But I'm not aware of any specific training plans and I would like to see a greater involvement of Government and industry, especially amongst the new migrants, in training, especially at retail level. That must be, I believe.

**JD** Do you see the mis-labelling of fish as a problem in the industry?

**GALLAGHER** Well, racketeering by way of substitution has been going on in Australia since just after Captain Phillip landed but [laughs] it is a problem of some dimension, especially amongst the exotic fishers, especially barramundi - it seems to get singled out. Barramundi being an Aboriginal name is synonymous with a large scale fish. It's got a lot of charm and character and history about it, and it's the fish that the tourists especially pick, and the one that the high-class restaurant or hotel likes to have on top of the fish menu. However, barramundi is produced, as you know, entirely in the

tropical north of Australia. We produce probably about a thousand tons, but sometimes in Australia, three times that quantity is actually sold.

Now in the olden days - or should I say going back ten years or so - one suspects that the balance was made up of improper substitutes. These days with fishing going on in New Guinea and western [unclear] and on the Indonesian archipelago, genuine barramundi is available. It is being caught by competent fishermen with very, very good trawlers, freezing at sea apparatus, and Australia does have access to another thousand tons at least, of choice barramundi fillets, of the proper species - *lagos calcarifer*. However, people don't stop at that. There is a move now in Western Australia to have Nile perch, which has been called Nile perch ever since the Pharaohs, to have it called Kenyan barramundi, because it has similar but not identical characteristics. I believe that if that's allowed to happen - and it's the subject of an appeal before court these days - I believe that will be a tragedy for barramundi. But some people are alleging that due to the fact that it's being sold in Australia now as barramundi, it would be the honest thing to call it imported Kenyan barramundi. I don't agree at all with this even though I'm an importer of Nile perch, I believe that that fish, Nile perch, is a great fish and should be promoted in its own right.

But there are substitutions of other fish as well, and I believe hake imported from South America, crimsley from South Africa, was used for just.... in the country fish shops anyhow, to cover anything from whiting down to schnapper [laughs]. I don't know whether that goes on in the same dimension as it used to, but certainly hake was a great provider for all the range of fishes that were up on the fish shops' board, and I happen to know one fish shop, it used hake to cover schnapper, bream, whiting, reef fish, and I think sweeper. So that's the sort of thing that goes on and unless the penalties have stiffened up, and unless again there's an education programme - especially amongst the new migrants - to tell them that they can get these other species at reasonable prices, if not from local sources, from imported sources, then perhaps the substitution racket might diminish a little. I hope it does.

**JD** Talking about imports. Nowadays we import a great quantity of fish in to Australia, don't we?

**GALLAGHER** Yes, we have an import bill of about 480 million dollars, and it's growing. Fortunately, we are able to export about 550 to 585 million dollars worth of prawns, lobster tails, abalone, scallop and other shellfish, which means that from the Federal Treasurer's point of view, we have a fishing industry that's paying its way in terms of balance of payments, but we do have an enormous import bill, and that is mainly in white fish.

Now, in the days going back to the 1940s and '50s, when the per capita consumption of fish was low, and where the coasts weren't so well developed, and the estuaries had reasonable supplies of fish, local production was reasonably in balance with consumption. These days for the reasons that I gave you earlier, Australia's about 70 per cent dependent on imported fish, and people are rather surprised when that is revealed because they look at our continent, and they see it as a huge island, enormous coastline, and they wonder why on earth Australians have to import fish. The facts are that until recently when orange ruffie and deep water species were discovered off South Australia, principally Tasmania and Victoria, that the Australian coastline is relatively barren, and easily fished out. We have a very narrow continental shelf, running down the eastern seaboard, and we've only got out 20 to 30 kilometres, and we drop away to enormous depths, and hitherto, the conventional fishing methods had not been able to cope with those depths.

Along the eastern seaboard, and indeed around Western and South Australia, we have a reasonable pelagic industry with tuna, but Australians operate that reasonably efficiently, but the Japanese, Koreans, Taiwanese, and other Asian fishing nations, are the main exploiters of it these days. They are prepared to stay at sea up to three or four months at a time - in fairly large vessels admittedly. They don't have the lifestyles that Australians have and so they don't worry about coming back to home and mother and the pub so frequently as the Australian lifestyle dictates. So whilst we have a reasonable pelagic fishery (that means fish that swim on top of the water or just below the surface) we don't have the attitudes to fully exploit it, and that attitude is differing. A lot of the migrants are prepared to get out there, and work much harder than the Anglo-Saxons, and take more risks, and so the balance might switch a bit there, but that fishery, especially southern bluefin, is currently in danger, although fishermen in Western Australia and South Australia, would argue differently. I don't know enough to debate the issue, but I think that covers part of your question anyhow.

**JD** Thank you. It would seem unlikely then that there will be much expansion of our overseas' markets with the possible exception of crustacea?

**GALLAGHER** Yes. Export I think, will be confined to the crustacea, and southern bluefin tuna perhaps. When you consider that modern aeroplanes sport is able to land fresh tuna in ice in the Tokyo market and can bring up to \$14000 a ton or something, you can just imagine.... No, it's much more than that. You can just imagine that there is potential there, but the fishery is weakening I think, and that may not be a sustainable export. I think that we have found all the crustacean grounds that we are going to find close to the Australian coastline, so I can't see any great room for expansion in the prawns or the lobster tails. The scallop industry especially in the southern states, is in trouble, so we won't see very much.... so we'll see a diminution of exports there, I think, and apart from the orange ruffie where North American demands and some parts of Europe have imposed their big demand, I see the deep water fisheries of southern Australia providing reasonable potential for expanding exports of Australia's fishing products.

**JD** In Western Australia, there is considerable concern at government and industry level, that the apparent effort to overseas' companies to come into the processing field in Australia. Is that a problem on the eastern seaboard as well?

**GALLAGHER** Well, I think it's a problem that's starting to emerge. Just as certain Asian countries have bought into the meat industry, they have bought into the fishing industry. I don't know the dimension on the east coast. I would share the concern in Western Australia because lobsters especially, are our greatest crustacean export. Well, I think it parallels the prawn export, and if we have a country - a foreign investor - involved, and especially where that company is a marketeer, you have the propensity for.... I was going to use the word incestuous associations, I might as well use it commercially anyhow, and that in the end can spell danger to the producer.

At the moment, or rather hitherto, you had fishermen doing the producing, mainly owner/operators in Western Australia. You had them in the main owning their co-operative societies that were doing the processing and the marketing, or if they were not members of the co-operative, they could sell to private entrepreneurs who had to compete with the co-operative. But that could change if part of the fully integrated scheme among fishermen of producing, being involved in the co-operative, in both processing and marketing, broken down by the intervention of a foreign investment. I see damages there, yes.

**JD** What do you see in the future for aquaculture in Australia?

**GALLAGHER** I think aquaculture needs time to develop. There should not be any knee-jerk approach to it. I believe in Tasmania, the industry generally is healthy, although there have been some failures. Certainly Australia needs aquaculture to bridge some of the gap between local production and imports. The climate in Tasmania and parts of southern Australia is quite satisfactory. Pollution problems in that area are minimal, at least that's my understanding, and so the salmon, the salmon trout industry of Tasmania, should prosper, given the right technology and, of course, the right attention.

In the temperate zone of Australia, I don't see a lot of prospect for aquaculture, but in the sub-tropical and tropical north, I believe there will be a reasonable emergence of the prawn industry, and that if carefully cultivated, and with the appropriate government support, at both financial and technological and scientific levels - I shouldn't say both - at all those levels, that is, I think, a bright star in Australia's future as a prawn exporting nation, and also bridging the gap, believe it or not, between imports of certain prawns in our domestic trade consumption area.

So Australia - especially the tropical north - offers a good environment for mariculture of shrimps or prawns. In north Queensland, I believe we have an environment that is very, very free of pollution, land and electricity are reasonably cheap compared with south-east Asia, the main producer of these aquacultured prawns - or maricultured prawns - and I would advise anyone going into mariculture of prawns, or indeed aquaculture of fish in Tasmania, to make sure they have the right advice, to make sure that they engage good experts and good technologists and good operators in their respective fields. If they do that and their investment dimension is adequate, I believe aquaculture in Tasmania, and mariculture in sub-tropical and tropical Australia, will be a success.

**JD** Thank you, and thank you for this excellent interview. It's been a great pleasure to talk to you and may I wish you all success for the future.

**GALLAGHER** Thank you. It's a pleasure to talk to you, Jack, and this is my 42nd year in commercial fishing industry, and it started at eighteen and now 60. I said it was broken up into four different lots of ten years. There's two years of that that belong to the interloping periods if you like, where I did professional consultancy work.

**JD** Thank you again.

**GALLAGHER** May you have a good tour of Queensland and that you find some interesting personalities, as I'm sure you will.

**JD** Thank you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Noel Gallagher of Australian Seafood Traders, Brisbane, Queensland.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW







## Edited transcript of an interview with HAROLD HANSEN

### INTRODUCTION

Harold Hansen is 88 years old. He started fishing with his father in South Australia when he was a boy of fifteen years of age. He fished for whiting and is credited with having found the richest ever whiting patch. He also was involved in snapper fishing and used several methods including hand lining, long lining and netting. Later he was involved in scalloping and prawn trawling off the Queensland coast.

He left the industry for some years and was involved in earth moving and dam sinking. During the War he was engaged in road building in the Northern Territory. Later he returned to fishing and he now has two sons in the industry.

The interview was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Hanson's home in Bundaberg, Queensland for Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry on the 28th April, 1990. There is one side of one tape. The interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

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

*HANSEN* Harold Andreas Hansen.

*JD* And what was your date of birth?

*HANSEN* 12 September 1910.

*JD* And where were you born, Harold?

*HANSEN* Port Pirie, South Australia.

*JD* Did you live all your early life in South Australia?

*HANSEN* Yes.

*JD* In that....

*HANSEN* Actually we shifted to Spencer's Gulf [and] actually started fishing there in later years.



**JD** Your father was a fisherman for a while?

**HANSEN** Yes in later years, yes. In fact fished for a while.

**JD** And did you start off fishing with him?

**HANSEN** Oh just a little bit. I went away but I came back when he passed away and I came over, took over with a chap who had his boat working a half share. He taught me to fish then.

**JD** About how old were you when you started fishing?

**HANSEN** Probably a little over fifteen when I started fishing.

**JD** Where did you start?

**HANSEN** At Cowell in Spencer's Gulf.

**JD** You were fishing mainly for whiting in the early days, weren't you?

**HANSEN** Yes, all whiting.

**JD** You became quite well known in the whiting fishing?

**HANSEN** Yes, yes.

**JD** You were reputed to have caught the biggest catch ever of whiting.

**HANSEN** Oh I don't know. We found the best whiting ground at Smokey Bay, the biggest ground in that area that was ever located.

**JD** And it's still called Hansen's Patch isn't it?

**HANSEN** Yes. There is Sam Good's Patch also [laughter].

**JD** Yeah. Was that your partner?

**HANSEN** Yes. [unclear]. I think that had a touch of beach about it, another ground [unclear] that I found in later years.

**JD** Were you getting a good price for the whiting then?

**HANSEN** No, about five shillings a dozen those days; sometimes down to four [shillings] and six [pence].

**JD** Was that in the days before ice?

**HANSEN** Yes. Before we had ice up there there was a steamer once a fortnight. You couldn't get ice on that but we sent the fish without ice. Sometimes we'd come in there with fish but couldn't get it clear away. The snapper freezer would be fully loaded with snapper at Streaky Bay by the time it got up there. You'd have to throw

the snapper away. I know the Wilkies had 800 all cleaned ready and had to dump the lot over the side.

**JD** How did you get your whiting to market?

**HANSEN** By rail from Ceduna to Port Lincoln. It was iced at Port Lincoln, shipped to Adelaide and then shipped off to Melbourne. They'd be re-iced at Port Adelaide and sent off to Melbourne then to Borricks Fish Market, Melbourne.

**JD** Did you lose many?

**HANSEN** Not after we got ice. We lost a couple of lots before we got ice.

**JD** After a while you went into snapper fishing, did you?

**HANSEN** Yes. We did the snapper fishing.... I did a little bit at that time while we were still whiting fishing. When we dissolved the partnership, I started on snapper and whiting fishing on my own.

**JD** Were you hand lining or were you netting?

**HANSEN** Whiting?

**JD** Yes.

**HANSEN** We were hand lining for the first year. The second year we started netting. We did nearly all netting from then on.

**JD** And what about when you went into snapper? What technique were you using?

**HANSEN** When we went into snapper we just used the ordinary bait for a start and hand lining and eventually did the long lining. We used squid if we could get it. A lot of times we couldn't get it.

**JD** How many hooks would you shoot?

**HANSEN** Oh, 115 on each line. I only had two lines. I used one mainly but if there was a lot about and I got a good patch, I'd use the two lines for one night.

**JD** Were you fishing on your own, Harold?

**HANSEN** No. I had a chap with me when I snapper fished, part time. I used to fish on my own quite a bit.

**JD** What sort of boat did you have?

**HANSEN** Boat.... Oh about [a] 23 footer with a sail and a car engine in, [using] petrol.

**JD** Did you sail much?

**HANSEN** Mostly, yeah. Those days you used to sail to save petrol because you couldn't afford petrol, the price we got. Snapper, the top price was four pence half penny.

**JD** A pound?

**HANSEN** The lowest price I ever got was a penny half penny. I didn't catch any more after that.

**JD** It would hardly pay the transport, would it?

**HANSEN** At that time I never sent them by rail, as a buyer started up in Ceduna.

**JD** Was weather a problem, bad weather at sea?

**HANSEN** Oh at times, yes, you know. You had places to go for shelter and lay off till it fined up. I was fishing one night, the clouds were very low and we were just going out. We shot the line and just let the line go and clouds came all over and just hit the boat as we came into [unclear]. We estimated it would be about 50 knot an hour. We hung out for the night alright. There was this other boat, [a] 45 footer alongside us, had the engines running all night. She [was] diving down and the water was coming over her bows and kept flying off her stern as she dived down into the next sea. Next morning I started the motor and tried to go for shelter. The engine stopped because of water in the tank so we set the sail and sailed to Laura Bay then for shelter. At high tide the big sea came over and filled the sail up and we managed to get the sail emptied and get rid of the water in the boat. We lost our fish and we rounded the point and the storm was very heavy. We came into a heavy rain squall but we managed to get around to Laura Bay and anchored there. We lost all our drinking water and we ended up in the shallow the next morning. She was high and dry by the time we got up.

There's one snapper patch in South Australia in the Smokey Bay area that today, I am the only living person who is aware of it, only now it's a very small patch. You could just take 300 fish there, just in a couple of hours. I'd be down there once a day.

**JD** Harold, after years of fishing in South Australia you came over here to Queensland?

**HANSEN** Yeah, that's right.

**JD** What did you do while you were here?

**HANSEN** Oh I started on earth works with Frank Watson, Joffre Watson, that's his brother (Bessie's brother).

**JD** Yeah. About when was this? Would it have been before the War?

**HANSEN** No the War was on.

**JD** It was during the War?

**HANSEN** 1939. The first job was at Dalby putting in the water tower there, scooped it out to hold the water tower at Dalby.

**JD** Were you using a horse drawn scoop?

**HANSEN** No, no, tractor.

**JD** Tractor?

**HANSEN** Yeah.

**JD** And then you went back to South Australia fishing after a while?

**HANSEN** Yes, eventually, after about two and a half years or something.

**JD** Yes and where did you go in South Australia?

**HANSEN** I went back to Ceduna and fished from there then.

**JD** Did you have a different boat?

**HANSEN** I bought a boat and went fishing there then.

**JD** A bigger boat, was it?

**HANSEN** Yeah, only a 22 footer. Matter of fact we had to rebuild her up again to get her in order. She'd been out of order for about three years. My brother came over and we corked her all up and did her all up and started with her. Eventually, after about two and a half years or something like that, we sold out. Him and another chap bought the boat and I went back to Queensland and worked again on the tractors there for a little while.

Eventually we got a truck, doing a bit of contract work. Then I got called up, went out to Mt Isa. No work here so I went out to the Isa and made roads with the CCC. Then eventually the job was closed down and then I volunteered to go to the Territory then to No 3 Bore, the other side of Camooweal. I was supposed to go there for six months we were there eighteen months before I got a holiday. I managed to get a discharge after that [and] got back home.

**JD** And went fishing again, did you?

**HANSEN** No, no. I came back and hired trucks then and went timber hauling. Eventually timber [unclear] in a couple of places. The job cut out in one place and finished up I had a little tractor and went dam sinking then on [unclear] dairy properties which had first priority then in the War. After about twelve months the farm had sold out and then I went out to Jacobs Well on the coast. I intended building a little kiosk and that then but the mosquitos were just too much [laughs]. We had to give it away. Finished up going back to machinery. We did about two years there. We sold out and went fishing.

**JD** What, did you buy another boat?

**HANSEN** Yes. I had a boat, the **Miss Peggy**, the one I lost on the Southport bar. There was quite a lapse with one thing and another for a while. Then eventually, that's

when I came back and bought another little boat. I finished up trawling up here up at Gladstone.

**JD** You mentioned that you lost a boat on the bar. Was that down at Southport?

**HANSEN** Yes, down at Southport, the Southport bar.

**JD** What happened?

**HANSEN** The rudder broke off; the rudder shaft broke; no steering. Of course we didn't know till we headed for the bar. She went aground and we got her off but finished up on the beach. Got the reverse[?] to work and went up on the beach. That was the end of it. We couldn't get her off. We tried all sorts of things.

**JD** Just couldn't get it off?

**HANSEN** Some time after that we did buy a boat, a 42 footer called the **Birong**. Terry and I bought it between us.

**JD** Terry's your son, is he?

**HANSEN** Yeah. Terry's my son. We worked off Southport for a while and they got very scarce so we decided to come up here.

**JD** Up to?

**HANSEN** Up to Yeppoon, really, first. We went to Gladstone and I worked along the coast then. I had another little boat, 36 footer that Allan and I bought her up. We worked up here on scallops and prawns. Then eventually Terry got a boat then on his own after us. Actually I sold him the **Birong**. He sold it [and] got a bigger boat then eventually. [That would] be about it I think.

**JD** You've got another son fishing too, Alan?

**HANSEN** Yeah, Alan. Yes, he's fishing too.

**JD** He's just recently built a boat, hasn't he?

**HANSEN** Be about seven years ago he had one built and he's just recently built another one. Got another one built at a foundry. A steel boat he's fishing with now. Got skippers on both of them.

**JD** Doing alright?

**HANSEN** Yes. He's doing alright. Matter of fact, this year's the first year he's done any good here. Before he went north. He always went north and he went up to Townsville. He's still here this year, so far. I don't know what he'll do later on. We don't know yet.

**JD** Did you ever go fishing with the boys?

**HANSEN** Oh with Terry I did, after I retired. I went up to Bowen helping out at times and down around Southport.... down around Yeppoon, rather (I'm sorry) and up to Cape Upstart and that with him sometimes. I haven't been out for quite a while now.

**JD** No. How do you fill your days in, now that you're retired?

**HANSEN** Oh well I'm always busy. I've got a steel lathe out there. I do a lot of turning where Alan had his workshop. When he got this boat built I did a lot of work. I'm always doing something.

**JD** You're staying well? You're keeping well?

**HANSEN** Yes. I keep really well. I've had no sickness, really.

**JD** Good. Well thank you very much for talking to us Harold. Thank you.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Harold Hansen of Bundaberg, Queensland.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

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### **Addendum prepared by Mrs Bessie Hansen**

#### **Record of the life of HAROLD ANDREAS HANSEN**

I was born at Port Pirie, South Australia on 12 September, 1910 but spent my early years at Cowell on Spencer's Gulf. My father died when I was fifteen so I came in from the farm on which I was working and used my father's little boat with a man who taught me a lot about fishing.

At seventeen years an older man took me into partnership and we left Cowell early in 1928 to go to Venus Bay. We had to do two trips with a two tonne Model T Ford truck to transport two nineteen footers and two dinghies. We fished for whiting for nine months and kept the fish alive in crates which we anchored in four foot of water at low tide, as no ice was available and then carted the fish 145 miles to Port Lincoln to the iceworks where they were iced down and put aboard the steamer for Adelaide. Again the fish were iced next morning and then railed to Melbourne to either Hills or Borrott's Market where they were auctioned by the dozen. King George whiting were hand lined and weighed eight pound to eight and a half pound to the dozen. At times the fish arrived in poor condition and were sometimes sold to the zoo for three pence per pound and we would receive an account for the freight.

During the latter end of 1928 we went to Smoky Bay. Boats were transported this time together on a four or five tonne solid rubber tyred truck. We were the first to start whiting fishing in the area around Laura Bay and Saddle Peak, South Australia. I found the biggest patch ever known in the area. There was still no ice and fish were sent to Port Lincoln twice weekly by rail and the catch for two of us was between twenty and 30 dozen daily. We made our own boxes out of kerosene boxes or whatever was available. (Kerosene cases used to hold two four gallon tins).

Again these fish were iced at Port Lincoln and sent to Melbourne. Late in the season quite a lot of consignments were lost through lack of ice. The price was five (shillings) and six (pence) to eight and six a dozen. A kerosene case held eight dozen. Freight was 25 shillings from Ceduna to Melbourne. We carted the fish fifteen miles to the rail.

In 1929 a small iceworks opened up in Ceduna so I built a big ice box. Ice was five shillings for a 112 pound block at that stage. I started netting for whiting using four lengths of nine ply cotton net 22 and I got snook also. I started using beer boxes holding 25 dozen whiting, approximately 200-250 pounds. I went fishing for snapper than at Laura Bay, hand lining, the price being six to eight pence a pound and was sent to Adelaide.

From 1933 I fished for snapper from Ceduna and used set long lines and caught big quantities, the price being as low as one and a half to four pence per pound. W. Hill started buying fish, also Les Nicholls and transported it to Adelaide. I finally gave up snapper fishing after sending 83 big fish to Adelaide market, three and a half pounds each and after paying freight I got a cheque for nine pounds. There was a ban on long lines in 1935 so I went back to whiting and fishing.

I went to Queensland for two years, then back to Ceduna in a Willy's Knight car which I bought in Toowoomba for 25 pounds. I bought a sixteen foot boat with a three horsepower Penguin motor and my wife and I lived in a little shack in the sandhills on a private property as mentioned in a book **For They Were Fishes** released in 1987 written by Evelyn Wallace Carter, page 170. I then bought the **Esme** which was 22 foot and rebuilt her and fished from Ceduna. I returned to Queensland in 1941 in a Chrysler ute as I had sold the Willy's for 36 pounds.

I have fished the Queensland coast from Southport to Cairns over the years on scallops, prawns etc except for a few years with machinery on dam sinking, timber felling and road making with CCC during the War years. There is a snapper patch in South Australia in the Smoky Bay area that today I am the only living person who is aware of it. In a couple of hours I could take 300 fish but it is only a small patch now.

I have had setbacks over the years in the loss of my trawler **Miss Peggy** on the Southport bar and ten years later I lost the **Arapunga** up near Gladstone, Queensland but I was still in debt for her. I bought the **Advance** on time payment so I made monthly payments on both boats and made the last payment on each in the same month.

It is interesting to note the changes over the years as to navigation aids from the sailing days with nothing to go by but one's own knowledge. Today my son's trawlers are equipped with showers, toilets, air conditioning, television, videos, microwave, echo sounder, satellite navigation, auto pilots, radar, snap and dry freezing plants, rad phone and the mobile net phone, the latter being of so much comfort to the family at home, whereas when I was at sea in the early days, nothing was known of me until I returned home.

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## Edited transcript of an interview with NOEL HAYSOM

### INTRODUCTION

As a young biologist Noel Haysom began his career in sub-Antarctic, Macquarie Island where he carried out research into penguins. Later he joined the Queensland fisheries and was involved in early prawn surveys both on the Queensland east coast and in the Gulf of Carpentaria. He was heavily involved too in investigations into the crown of thorns starfish problem and into possible damage to corals resulting from oil spills.

In this interview he discusses these matters and also other problems such as pollution and fish toxins. Noel Haysom became an administrator of Fisheries for the Queensland Government and was Director of the Fisheries Service and later Deputy Director of the Division of Dairying and Fisheries in the Department of Primary Industries. In the interview he gives a comprehensive overview of Queensland Fisheries and tells something of the administrative problems involved in their management.

Upon his retirement in 1987 he accepted the role of Queensland Project officer for this oral history of the Australian fishing industry being conducted by Murdoch University. The interview was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Haysom's home in Brisbane on the 20th April, 1990. There are five sides on three tapes and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

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

*HAYSOM* Yes. It's Noel Melville Denis (spells name) Haysom (spells name).

*JD* And when were you born?

*HAYSOM* 24th December, 1926; a Christmas baby [laughs], hence the name, Noel.

*JD* Yes, of course. Where were you born?

*HAYSOM* In Melbourne but I came up here to Queensland at a very early age. I was only about three and my father was a musician with the... He played in the Melbourne Regent Theatre Orchestra and came up here to Brisbane when the Regent Theatre here opened. They were only supposed to stay for six weeks but it became six months and six years and so on.

*JD* Your father was also an artist, wasn't he?



**HAYSOM** Yes, yes, quite an excellent artist. He's well represented in the local galleries here.

**JD** You'd have been brought up in a very cultured family then?

**HAYSOM** Yes indeed. Incidentally, it's rather interesting: one of dad's fellow students at the Melbourne Art School was a chappy named, Buckmaster and many years later I met a young fellow named Buckmaster who turned out to be the elder Buckmaster's son and he was a Fisheries biologist with the Victorian Department.

**JD** [laughs] You sort of had a parallel....

**HAYSOM** Yes, a parallel career.

**JD** Could you outline then your education, Noel.

**HAYSOM** Yes. Well I was educated at St Joseph's College, Gregory Terrace, which is quite a well known school up here; produced some very good footballers (I wasn't one of them) and I was there for a long while. I was in my tenth year when I left so I went right through the primary and secondary areas. I lived only a matter of 100 yards from the school. That was very convenient for a while and then I became one of the furthestest away. I moved out to one of the outer suburbs, rural suburbs of Brisbane. Incidentally, one of the, not a fellow student but he was at the same school some years after me, was a Peter Connarty who was the Chairman of the Commercial Fishermen's Organisation up here in Queensland. Poor old Peter died a year or two ago but it was an interesting sort of a connection.

**JD** And after school you went on to university presumably?

**HAYSOM** Yes, yes, Queensland University. Did a degree in marine biology.

**JD** And then you went to employment?

**HAYSOM** Yes, well I was doing a post graduate course in the late '40s and I suddenly had the opportunity to go down to the sub-Antarctic with the Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition. So I grabbed that and spent thirteen months on Macquarie Island, a marvellous place for a biologist.

**JD** What were you studying down there?

**HAYSOM** Well just about everything. We were carrying out a survey of the elephant seal population and penguins. There are enormous numbers of penguins down on the Island. The biggest penguin rookery in the world is [on] the southern end of Macquarie Island; 600,000 Royal penguins in one dense mass [laughs]. One of the jobs we had of course was counting them and surveying the rookery and a lot of other things. We were involved in collecting a wide range of material down there, specimens.... Everybody wanted specimens of course. It was very early days in the ANARE operation. We were the second party that went down to Macquarie Island.

Incidentally, years later I spent quite a bit of time over a two or three year period on a survey up in the Gulf of Carpentaria where the prawns were found and in a lot of ways [it was] very similar to my activities at Macquarie Island except that the climate was

quite different, was the exact opposite but for the isolation, and a lot of interesting biology [was] involved.

**JD** Must have been a wonderful opportunity for a young biologist?

**HAYSOM** Oh yes, yes; yes indeed.

**JD** Before we leave Macquarie Island Noel, it seems to me that one of the great problems in those isolated areas where you've got a group of people living in close proximity and they can't escape from it, that you have to learn to get along together. Was that your experience?

**HAYSOM** Oh yes, very definitely. There were twelve of us in the year that I was down at Macquarie and [we were] living in a very depressing climate. It wasn't terribly cold down there. It was usually just a few degrees above freezing but it was always wet and miserable. So it was a very depressing climate and it certainly affected people [laughs]. In the party ahead of ours the cook and a photographer faced each other over the kitchen table with a meat cleaver and a carving knife and [unclear] certainly amongst our crew, although they didn't get to that stage, two of the people involved weren't on speaking terms for most of the time that they were there. They were in my hut. There was just the three of us in the hut. They didn't speak to each other but they'd speak to each other through me and that was a bit disconcerting at times but certainly....

In those days too (as I said before, it was very early days in the ANARE and they didn't screen people the way they do these days. Nowadays they put them through psych tests and all the rest of it. In some ways of course I think it resulted in a much more colourful collection of people in our parties. Today's group are all sort of very much.... I won't say they're actually clones, but certainly they've eliminated some of the colourful characters.

**JD** They're less compatible?

**HAYSOM** Yes and no! [laughs]

**JD** Did you get any sort of training or counselling as to what to expect in the circumstances that you found yourselves?

**HAYSOM** No, not in those days. It was a matter of.... I went for an interview and then I got a letter saying I'd been selected and I went down to Melbourne, got straight into preparing stores for the trip and then away we went. I had a crash course in preparing bird skins and that was all the training we had.

**JD** And biologically, or in terms of your profession, it was a worthwhile experience I gather?

**HAYSOM** Oh yes, yes, yes. I probably missed out on some things, because I was half way through an honours course and I had twelve months away out of a three year period, so I probably missed out on some things but I gained in others.

**JD** And did you go back to your studies?

**HAYSOM** Well I had to finish off the honours degree when I got back and a lot of that was writing up. I wrote up some of the Macquarie Island material as my honours

thesis. I was at Macquarie Island in 1949, early '50 and graduated with the honours degree in '51 and I joined Fisheries in May '51. So that was the only sort of experience outside the University I had before I joined Fisheries.

**JD** Did you join Fisheries in response to an advertisement or how did you come to join?

**HAYSOM** [laughs] I can't remember very much about that. I think I may have got onto the job through a contact with a friend. It wasn't in answer to an advertised position. In fact it wasn't a biologist's post when I joined. I was an assistant to the ichthyologist which sounds a very high-faluting sort of thing.

**JD** Say that word again.

**HAYSOM** I was the assistant to the ichthyologist.

**JD** Oh that's the study of fish, is it?

**HAYSOM** Yes. An ichthyologist is somebody or other who studies fish. In those days the post of Government Ichthyologist was held by Tom Marshall who was a taxonomist. He was not university trained. He'd worked in the Queensland Museum for many years. He started off as a technician there and he became assistant to a gentleman called Ogilby who was one of the world's well recognised ichthyologists and Tom followed in Ogilby's footsteps at the Museum. He got transferred during the Second World War to Fisheries. I probably don't know quite why he got transferred to Fisheries at the time but he then stayed on in Fisheries which was part of the Department of Harbour & Marine in those days. He built up quite a collection of fish there and started to build up a library which has now grown to a very, very fine collection of books. We've named the library after Tom. He was a remarkable bloke in his profession. He had a remarkable memory. He'd get hold of a fish, you see, and he'd say, "Um, I think I've seen that on page 247 of the proceedings of such and such a Society", and sure enough he'd be right within a page or two.

**JD** Noel, would you outline your career in the Fisheries Department. I'm not expecting you to give us every detail, but at least the highlights.

**HAYSOM** Yes. Well as I said, I started off in 1951 as assistant to the ichthyologist and then later the position was changed to assistant ichthyologist and then I became a Fisheries biologist about ten years later. That was when we first got paid as professional scientists. Then somewhere along the line I became a bit more involved in administration and became the, I think it was called Assistant Executive Officer in the Department, and then Executive Officer and then I became the Assistant Director of the Fishery Branch (when it was formally made into a branch). Then later on, I think, I became the Assistant Director of the Queensland Fisheries Service and then the Director of the Queensland Fishery Service and finally the Queensland Fishery Service was disbanded and we became part of the Department of Primary Industry and put into a division with dairying people and I became the Deputy Director of the Division of Dairying & Fisheries. I was on the Fisheries side. I didn't know anything about [the] dairying side. That's where I finished up in 1987. I've been retired since then.

**JD** So you spent some 36 years....

**HAYSOM** 36 years, yes; not in the one department but in the one sort of....

**JD** Involved with the industry, yes, through the administration and research. Could we have a look at your research interests as a biologist in the Fisheries?

**HAYSOM** Yes, well, a bit of a jack of all trades sort of situation. In fact in the early years that I was at the Department we really didn't get into research as such. We were employed largely as, I suppose, biological advisors, you know. They expected us to know everything about everything that was happening right throughout the State and we became knowledgeable about a lot of things but experts in nothing [laughs]. It was a bit like a sort of GP situation in medicine. Some problem would occur and we'd be sent to have a look at it and you'd ask a few questions and look at a few symptoms and then give people an answer [laughs] and that was it. It wasn't what you'd call really investigative scientific research. Later on I got involved a lot in some of the survey work.

I think the only.... In the first five or six years, the only work that you could say was research work was an investigation we did on the stealing of some oysters from a lease down in Moreton Bay. We carried out quite an investigation on the oysters and I think we could prove that.... Oh we couldn't prove that the oysters had come from the lease from which they were supposed to be stolen. We could prove very definitely that they didn't come from, the lease that the culprit said that he got them from so we were all looking forward to this being tested in a court of law and the chappie pleaded guilty so we never, ever actually heard it in the court room. It wasn't a bit of work that you could publish in any paper; but I did get involved, of course, quite a bit with Tom Marshall as a mentor in identifying fish. So I wouldn't say I was a professional ichthyologist, but at least I had a reasonable knowledge of taxonomy in the fishing game.

**JD** As a Departmental person, did you have an opportunity to publish the results of your findings?

**HAYSOM** No. As I said, we weren't really involved in a lot of research work as such. A lot of the stuff we were involved in, we'd write a report and they'd say, "Well thank you very much. Go and give us a report on this", you see but I did publish a number of papers over the years, mostly on survey work and perhaps administrative work and management. I did publish one small paper describing a new species of fish but that was the sum of my efforts in ichthyology.

**JD** Noel, could you explain a bit more about the new species of fish that you discovered.

**HAYSOM** Yes. The scientific name was *ichthyoscopus fasciatus* which sounds a bit of a mouthful but the banded stargazer is it's common name. I picked that up on a prawn survey up along the Queensland coast, the Challenge Survey which took place, I think in the late 1950s. A vessel called the **Challenge**. It was owned by a fisherman named Evans Paddon and the survey was funded by the Commonwealth Government and it searched for prawns right up along the Queensland coast over a two year period. I spent some months at different times on board and on one of the trawls I got this funny looking fish and thought, "Gee that looks a strange one. I've never seen anything like that before in the literature" and of course it turned out to be something new. So I described it [unclear]. The Challenge Survey.... Incidentally Evans Paddon is quite a well known fisherman on the eastern seaboard. He was a very famous sculler. I think he was world champion professional sculler on several occasions and his father was also a world champion before him; a big powerful man, and boy he could row a boat [laughs].

It was an interesting survey, perhaps not very well planned, systematically planned, but it was more of a prospecting type of survey and it went right up along the Queensland coast beyond Princess Charlotte Bay. All new ground. That area had not been trawled on in any way since, oh 1910 or '11 when the Fisheries Research vessel, the **Endeavour** went up along the Queensland coast. Incidentally, the **Endeavour** was lost coming back from Macquarie Island about the time of the.... It was bringing back the Antarctic party from Macquarie during the early years of the First World War and disappeared somewhere between Macquarie Island and Hobart and never seen again. The vessel's name lives on in the common name for a species of prawn on the Queensland coast, the endeavour prawn; *metapenaeus endeavouri* is the scientific name actually, but it's known commonly as the endeavour prawn or deavouris. The fishermen usually call them deavouris, but that was an interesting sort of connection. As I said, **Endeavour** trawled there way back in 1910 or '11 and nobody else had trawled on the Queensland coast until the **Challenge**. When I say the Queensland coast, the central and north Queensland coast. There'd been a lot of prawners operating in southern Queensland and there was a government vessel called the **Bar-  
ea-mul** which did some trawling off the southern Queensland coast but the area that I was on, [on] board the **Challenge**, it was all new country and every trawl that came up, you were waiting for it to come up to see if there's something new and exciting in it.

Later on I of course was involved in the Gulf of Carpentaria survey and again that was virgin ground and I was present for the first trawl that came up on the vessel there. I had that same thrill and got terribly disappointed because a lot of the trawl shots that came up out of the Gulf had nothing in them, or if they did have trash fish, they were very, very much common old garden varieties. There wasn't the sort of thrill that there was in trawling on the east coast where you were near the coral reefs.

**JD** Was it the same vessel?

**HAYSOM** No, no. The **Challenge** was a fairly big Danish seiner from the New South Wales coast. Evans ran a very good ship. We fed very well on board and he provided clean sheets for all the crew and insisted that the fo'c'sle was always kept very neat and tidy. We went through a cyclone up at Brampton Island. Of course in those days there wasn't the sort of warning systems that there are now. I remember we'd been out trawling for a week or so and called in at Brampton Island. Evans said that he was going to catch up on a bit of shut eye and the rest of us went ashore to sample the flesh pots of Brampton Island. The weather just got worse during the evening and by the time we decided to call it a night and go back to the boat there was a howling gale blowing and we just couldn't make it. Poor old Evans had to be at the wheel house all night with the engine running trying to hold the ship on the anchors. The cyclone had blown out next morning and we had to recover the anchor at some stage.

**JD** That survey along the east coast proved the grounds I presume?

**HAYSOM** Oh yes. That survey found some of the grounds off Tin Can Bay, Fraser Island area and in fact Evans had some of his boats (his other boats) fishing those grounds some weeks after we did discover them. He was talking to some of his skippers. They were making some very, very good catches there off Fraser Island. Further north we didn't get onto.... We got onto some promising ground which later on proved to be quite good prawning ground, but we didn't make any really spectacular catches up there but certainly we got a lot of information on the type of bottoms and the species of prawns that were there from the different areas but perhaps not a great deal in the way of spectacular results in the later part of that survey.

**JD** The survey would have been on the inside of the reef?

**HAYSOM** Yes, oh very definitely, yes.

**JD** I believe there's an enormous variety of prawns, many different types of prawns?

**HAYSOM** Yes. Particularly along the Queensland coast. There's.... I can't remember how many there are but you're looking at perhaps 25 or 30 species. Not all of those of course are commercial types but there are quite a few of them. There are three species of tiger prawn. There's a couple of species of endeavour prawns; several green backs or greasy backs, as they call them; banana prawns. They're all commercial species but then there's also a whole string of other stuff that nobody really is interested in.

**JD** What other investigatory work were you involved in?

**HAYSOM** Well I was.... In those early days I got involved in monitoring the aftermath of the grounding of the **Oceanic Grandeur** which was a big tanker that went ashore in the Torres Straits; hit a rock there or a reef that was, I don't think it was uncharted but it was shown in the wrong position and it spilt a lot of crude oil into the Torres Straits. From a Fisheries viewpoint of course, there were a lot of pearl oyster farms up in the Torres Straits at that time and they were very concerned about those. There was a condition which affected the oysters shortly afterwards and of course the local people blamed the oil for this, but we did a lot of investigation on that and couldn't establish any connection with it. I think it was purely and simply a condition which coincided rather than was caused by that but it was an interesting period.

I suppose at that stage I was one of only a handful of biologists that had had experience with an oil spill in coral reef areas. Probably as a result of that, along with the other biologist that was concerned with that **Oceanic Grandeur** monitoring, Ernie Grant, we were later on called to give evidence at the Royal Commission on oil drilling on the Barrier Reef which was a two year investigation. While certainly a lot of the investigation into it dealt with matters other than the biological side of it, we were certainly interested. I got involved in some investigations later on in actually spilling oil onto corals. There was some concern over possible differences between different types of oil. I think the **Oceanic Grandeur** had what they call Sumatra crude oil and of course they were concerned that perhaps drilling on the Reef, if it did strike oil, it would be a different type. So they were wanting to see what differences there would be between this crude oil and the fine type of oil and we carried out a few tests. They weren't very elaborate tests but they certainly were some of the few experiments that were done on the effects of oil on coral.

I had to give evidence in the Royal Commission and that was quite a traumatic experience. I might add that some very well known biologists were called on to give evidence, not on what work that they'd done, but perhaps on their ideas and theories about the effects of oil...

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

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## **TAPE 1 SIDE B**

**HAYSOM** ... the effects of oil on coral. This particular biologist was talking generally about the nature of the Great Barrier Reef and coral biology generally. What he hadn't

realised, of course, and a number of other people that gave evidence before the Commission hadn't realised this either, there were these QCs (very eminent lawyers) and they had a two year crash course in biology of a very specialised nature. They'd been listening to evidence from all over the world and so forth and some of the biologists took them a bit cheaply. This particular biologist was giving his opinion about the properties of the reef and so forth and they got him to say the same thing about three different ways. They approached him from different directions and at the end of this they said, "Well that's not quite what you said at such and such an investigation", you see. They had the minutes of this other Inquiry some six or seven years earlier in which this gentleman had said the exact opposite [laughs]. So he was rather disconcerted and of course here am I coming up to give evidence. I wasn't looking forward to it at all but anyway the lawyers, or at least the people who were leading me were I think trying to make too much out of the experiments that we did. As I said, they were very simple experiments. They certainly showed and corroborated evidence overseas that corals have a very efficient mechanism by which they can protect themselves against oil. They give off a lot of mucus and they certainly can survive contact with quite a lot of oil for a period of at least a tide. What the experiments that I did didn't give any indication of, was what long term effects the contact with oil might have or what effect it might have on reproduction and all those sort of things.

Some of the people were trying to make a bit too much out of this. So I was being very, very careful in my evidence that I didn't extend myself beyond what the experiments had shown. So I gave (eventually) the evidence and I was led through it by the lawyer appearing for our side and then I was cross-examined by the two QCs for some of the conservation people. Of course I was expecting to be really rigorously examined on the work that I'd done but I got a very great shock because after asking me my name and age and so forth and address, the first question they asked me was, "I believe you incurred some expenses on this work?" I said, "Yes" and they said, "Who paid these expenses?" I said (not quite thinking), "The Mines Department." The two QCs turned to each other and raised their hands up and said, "Oh the MINES DEPARTMENT, did it?" I felt such a fool and I couldn't think straight.

If I'd have quickly thought, of course, I would have been able to say, "Yes. Well, of course the Mines Department pays your expenses and it pays the expenses of the Chairman of the Commission and all the other people involved in the inquiry" because the Government had appointed the Mines Department to handle the expenses of the whole Commission. So there was nothing sinister about it but they made a big deal out of it. Anyhow the old Chairman, he bought in and said, "What was involved?" I said, "About a train fare up to Gladstone and a week's living allowance on board the boat." He said, "How much was the living allowance?" I said "Three dollars a day" [laughs] and he said, "I think that's peanuts, so let's go on" but it was certainly a traumatic experience to be grilled like that over some scientific work. Quite different from the normal sort of publishing where most of your critics are fairly friendly.

**JD** The upshot of that enquiry was that the Reef was banned as a drilling....

**HAYSOM** Drilling was banned, oh yes, yes. There was a moratorium put on it. It was a pity really from some aspects that they didn't go on with the research side. The experiments that I carried out [were] sort of giving some indication that if there were trials carried out, that they should be directed towards the long term effects rather than the immediate effects and of course everybody was worried about the immediate effects at that stage.

**JD** Noel, the Great Barrier Reef obviously plays a very, very important role in Fisheries in Queensland and one of the worries in more recent times has been the starfish. You were involved in that?

**HAYSOM** I was certainly involved in that. I think the starfish first appeared about 1966, if my memory serves me right and we were getting these persistent reports of some starfish eating all the coral up at Green Island off Cairns and we hadn't heard of anything as dramatic as that and eventually the boss said, "Well look we're getting these persistent reports. You'd better go up and have a look at it". So up I went and I'd never seen anything like it. The book **The Day of the Triffids** had just been published and it was rather like that. A frightening sight when you see these thousands of starfish plastered all over the coral and making an awful mess of it. Anyhow I came back and had a look through the literature. Not that we had a great deal of literature on starfish in our Fisheries library, but I eventually located a small paper.... not a small paper, a fairly extensive paper that had just been published by Sir Maurice Yoase who was the guru on the biology of coral reefs and Sir Maurice was the leader of the British Museum expedition to the Great Barrier Reef many years ago. He had just published a review paper in the journal **Advances in Marine Biology**. The review paper was called **The Biology of Coral Reefs** (I think) and I thought, well if anybody should know anything about it, it's Sir Maurice. So I looked at the paper and there it was, "Corals appear to have no major predator". I thought, "Well if my Green Island corals don't have a major predator, what have I just seen?" So anyhow I eventually found a small paper in a very remote publication, the results of some expedition to the Red Sea. A gentleman named Tom Goreau, who was a fairly well-known coral biologist from America, and he had seen an infestation of starfish, the crown of thorns starfish, in the Red Sea. He obviously hadn't seen anything like the situation that I'd seen, but he certainly realised that it had quite a major or a potential major impact on the coral reef biology.

Anyway, what we decided to do was to, because we had nobody on our staff that could get involved in this sort of work, we got a young student from the Queensland University that was doing a masters degree at the time and we employed him to have a look at the starfish problem and he was working under his supervisor, ie Dr Endean from the University. Anyhow I suppose everybody's heard of all the controversy that has gone on about the crown of thorns. I won't go into all of that but certainly it was such a new phenomenon that people took violently opposing sides and they're still arguing about whether it was caused by man and his activities or whether it's a cyclical phenomenon that's probably been going on on the Reef for donkey's ages. The young bloke that we employed is still with the Fisheries Department. In fact he was the Branch Director a year or so ago. He's got a new designation at the moment. I'm not quite sure what he's called now but he and his team certainly did a lot of work right up and down the whole of the Barrier Reef; did a lot of good work on investigating the regeneration of coral after crown of thorns attack. His name is Bob Pearson.

**JD** The Reef does in fact regenerate after an attack?

**HAYSOM** Well certainly some of the corals come back. It takes some years before you see anything happening. There are probably very tiny ones appearing before that but really the place looks like a desert for the first few years. Then the quicker growing corals start to make their appearance and grow very, very rapidly but some of the slow growing corals may take donkey's years to re-establish. In fact one of the theories is that maybe they don't ever come back in some situations.

Eventually the Department decided to take over the supervision of the project and I got the job of supervising Bob Pearson and his team of workers. Unfortunately I



couldn't dive. In fact I hadn't even had much experience in snorkelling, let alone scuba diving. So the first time I went out to supervise their work, you see, I get into the water with some [laughs] snorkelling gear on and I'm swimming around wondering what they're doing down at the bottom of the ocean. I could see them down there and then they'd swim away and go over the edge of the coral and disappear into the deep blue yonder. They could have been playing poker for all I knew at times [laughs] but that was a fairly common phenomenon for a lot of older supervisory biologists in those days. Diving was just becoming popular. The young people were involved in it and a lot of the older people never really got involved. It was a marvellous sort of way of seeing what was happening on the bottom, whereas previously biologists were really having to rely on indirect methods of observation.

I remember when they went off over the edge of the coral ledge and disappeared from sight, I suddenly looked around and here am I in the middle of the ocean, no land in sight, towing a dinghy, not knowing very much about snorkelling and wondering whether a shark was going to take me [laughs].

**JD** Just to round out the story of the starfish Noel, is it still considered to be a major problem on the Reef and what measures, if any, can be taken against the creature?

**HAYSOM** Well it's certainly still a problem. The early infestation, some people used to call them a plague of course but we prefer the term infestation.... The early infestation swept right down, a long way down the length of the Barrier Reef and then it petered out but there have been recurrences of the phenomenon. Right at the moment there's a lot of damage being done to some of the reefs in Queensland and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is actively carrying out work on it. Whether anything can be.... Well, something can be done. They have carried out various activities to clear starfish from parts of the Reef using divers to physically collect them, in some cases injecting them with various poisons and so forth. They've used a whole range of different types of substances to kill the starfish. The sheer numbers and the areas in which they occur make it rather difficult to control except in a fairly limited area. You can protect, say some acres of a small reef for a while and some of the places they have protected have been some of the favourite coral viewing areas where tourists are or are areas of particularly fine coral growth. You could do that but to carry out a protective campaign over the whole of the Great Barrier Reef or even a segment of it would be an enormous task.

We did investigate.... Professor Suihiro from Japan had a system of putting a barrier to starfish migration. He used some form of copper sulphate gel. The copper sulphate was bonded with another chemical so that it wouldn't dissolve into the sea water very quickly and he had these in perforated plastic tubes. He had a scheme putting a barrier of this right across the whole width of the Great Barrier Reef. We carried out some field trials with it but the sheer complexity of trying to lay this down in an open sea.... I mean he'd done some trials in a swimming pool but we tried it out in the open sea and it was quite impractical. It did certainly stop movement of starfish when they came in contact with it but it wasn't a practical proposition on such an enormous area.

**JD** Noel, do you know of any other threats to the reef or its ecology?

**HAYSOM** It's certainly difficult to find something or other that [is] a greater threat than perhaps oil spills and crown of thorn starfish aggregations. The Reef is of course under threat, or parts of the Reef are under threat from people's activities, whether they are perhaps pollution on the mainland and everything gets washed down through the oceans. The ocean is the great dumping ground of the world unfortunately. Until we do something about that, there is always a possibility of [the] effect of some

impact. Fortunately, [of] course the reef is well off the coast in most areas and distance gives it some protection from pollution with perhaps some of the inshore areas such as the mangrove swamps and sea grass beds being much more susceptible to pollution in that respect. People themselves, just their everyday activities, tourists walking over the reef trample coral down.

The starfish... I haven't mentioned anything really about the connection between Fisheries and the starfish plague. Of course coral is a marine product under the Fisheries Act up here in Queensland, so from that point of view the Fisheries Department were very concerned about it because we were responsible for the protection of coral. There are coral collecting licences granted by our Department and we were concerned from that point of view. As well as that of course, one of the problems with the crown of thorn starfish is that it kills off the living coral over very large areas and so there's a resultant change in the fish populations there. You get an increase in some of the fish that are herbivores and disappearance of some of the other types of fish. So it can affect the commercial fishermen exploiting these.

Another danger, I don't think it's been conclusively proved, but that is because the starfish remove the living coral, you get colonisation of the bare areas by various other organisms, botanical organisms and so forth. One of the theories is that the organism that causes ciguatera, I don't know whether you've heard of the term? Ciguatera is a type of fish poisoning and it occurs in tropical areas. The ciguatera is supposed to have its origin in a little single celled organism.... Yes this organism is eaten by herbivorous fishes and then those herbivores are eaten by larger carnivorous fishes and so forth up the food chain, and of course the poison (ciguatoxin it's called) is concentrated at the top of the food chain amongst the big predators (big voracious predators). It's a cumulative poison, so some of these big voracious predators are loaded with it. If you happen to eat one of them, you can get some very nasty effects. In fact ciguatera can be fatal. It has some very unusual symptoms at times. It affects [you] in a lot of ways. You get vomiting, diarrhoea and aches and pains and depression, but one of the funniest symptoms that people get is.... Not everybody gets it but it's a very common symptom, you get a reversal of the sensation of heat and cold [laughs]. Some American Naval officer during the War was recovering from a bad case of this and was seen to be blowing on his ice cream to cool it [laughs].

Anyway ciguatera has an enormous potential for impact on the fishing industry. Not just in Queensland here but right round Australia and in fact it already has had a fairly big impact but if we ever get a mortality from ciguatera, you can just imagine what it's going to do to the buying public. They're going to go right off fish all told. It's only just a few fish that cause it. It's one of the earliest medical problems in Australia's history, because I believe Captain Cook's crew came down with a bad attack of ciguatera while they were coming along the Queensland coast. It's not only a cumulative poison in fish but it's also cumulative in the human being so that if you live in, say tropical Queensland, particularly in areas where ciguatera is common and you eat a lot of reef fish, you could well have a load of it in your system very close to the threshold, and you only need a little bit more and it puts you over the threshold and down you'll come with it. So there's a lot of cases have occurred in north Queensland.

In recent years mackerel, Spanish mackerel has been involved in ciguatera cases. Previously it was always thought that the culprits were some of the biggest bottom predators; fish like chinaman fish, paddle tails, red bass, coral trout which is one of our premium fishes too. It can be a bad one and more recently we've had Spanish mackerel implicated, but fortunately not Spanish mackerel from the northern areas where the major fishery [is]. Spanish mackerel from down in the areas a bit north of Fraser Island have been implicated. It must be a localised situation there, but some of

that Spanish mackerel has caused some real problems because they're big fish and there's been a case just a few years ago at the Princess Alexandra Hospital here in Brisbane. Most of the medicos in southern Queensland didn't know about ciguatera but they quickly learned because somebody served up a big Spanish mackerel in the staff canteen and about twenty or 30 doctors and nurses all went down in a heap. Fortunately in Australia there hasn't yet been any fatal cases. There have been certainly in the tropical parts of the Pacific but we've only had a couple of close shaves here.

**JD** This Spanish mackerel that you've mentioned is quite a big fishery here, is it not?

**HAYSOM** Yes. As far as food fish in Queensland is concerned, it was probably our second top species. Mullet would have accounted for 45% of all the fish taken in Queensland and mackerel (Spanish mackerel) would have been about 10%, [to] give you some idea of.... I'm speaking now of the days when I was involved in statistics. In recent years proportions may have changed a bit but it still, mackerel is still a very big thing, particularly in the northern part of the State.

**JD** Talking about fin fish Noel, and the Spanish mackerel, marlin is also a fish of some consequence in Queensland, is it not?

**HAYSOM** Oh yes; not in the commercial sense, but it's certainly the subject of a very considerable game fishery along the coast, particularly in Cairns. Cairns is almost the marlin capital of the world. There have been some magnificent catches there. Yes, well I got involved to some extent with the marlin fairly late in my career. I would have been Director of the Queensland Fisheries Service at this particular time and we were having some problems. There was a lot of opposition to the operation of Japanese tuna fishermen off the eastern Australian coastline. They were taking marlin and there was a particular hotbed of controversy about the area up off Cairns which is right in the middle of the game fishing area you see. At the time, of course, the operations of the Japanese tuna boats was controlled by the Commonwealth Fisheries people.

Commonwealth Fisheries had never, until this occurred, had never really had any contact with amateur fishermen. The State's people, of course, had had a lot of contact with amateurs and various problems associated with the conflict between amateur fishermen and commercial fishermen and similar sorts of things. Commonwealth Fishery had never really dealt with the amateurs. In this particular case, of course, the game fishermen were.... You've got to realise game fishermen are partly made up of captains of industry, a lot of professional men, and are fairly well educated. They know how to use Fisheries' statistics from world wide sources. The commercial fishermen at that stage probably would never have known such commercial statistics existed (but they do now). Of course it wasn't really a problem for the commercial fishermen. It didn't really concern them very much at that time. So it was basically a management problem between the amateur game fishermen and the managers, and Commonwealth Fisheries weren't getting the message at all. I had quite a bit of correspondence with them and it wasn't getting through. I remember at one stage one phrase I used in a letter I sent to them was, "We spell tourism with a capital T up here in Queensland." [laughs].

Anyway I happened to be down at a meeting. It wasn't a meeting, it was a game fishing meet at Tangalooma (which is down in Moreton Bay near here) and there were game fishermen from all over Australia assembled there. My Minister was there and the permanent head of the Premier's Department, a chap named Keith Spann at the time, was also there. Apparently the game fishermen had really no idea of what I'd been doing; all they knew was that they weren't getting any response from the

Fisheries people in Canberra. Well some of them I tackled Keith Spann and said, "Look, we've got this problem and we're not getting anywhere" and Keith came over to see me. I'd only been Director of the Fisheries Service for a very short time and I was a little bit concerned. Here I was, still on probation [laughs], when the Head of the Premier's Department comes over and says, "Hey, what are you doing about this problem?" Fortunately I was able to say to Keith, "Look, we are having a problem with the Commonwealth Fisheries people. They're not really listening to us and I said, "A fortnight ago I sent all the correspondence I've had with them across to your office..."

**JD** This interview continues on side A of tape 2.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

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## TAPE 2 SIDE A

**HAYSOM** .... With a request that you persuade the Premier, Sir Joh Bjelke Peterson, to write to the Prime Minister about it and see if we can sort of get some action from these Commonwealth fisheries officers." That rather stopped Keith Spann in his tracks because I don't think he'd seen the correspondence up until then. Anyhow, whatever action he took then certainly we got some action. There was a committee formed which included myself as the Queensland State representative and the Director of Fisheries in New South Wales and representatives from the big game fishing people in Queensland and New South Wales and the Commonwealth fisheries officers. We got a reasonably satisfactory solution to the Japanese activity up there [unclear].

**JD** Noel, could I ask you.... Is tuna fishing probably the yellow fin is it, that would be caught up in these places?

**HAYSOM** Yes.

**JD** Is that a big industry here?

**HAYSOM** Well not for the local fisherman. The Japanese take a lot of yellow fin and big eye tuna off the east coast of Queensland. They've been of course pushed out a lot further than they used to be. We can't really compete with them on the sort of fishing methods that they use. However some of our fishermen have been trained to look after tuna for the Japanese sushimi market. It's a very specialised market and you've got to look after the tuna right from the moment they're hooked to when you dispatch them to the Japanese market. Then even after that they've got to be well looked after. If you do look after them well, you can get some very high prices for them. One fish could bring you in thousands of dollars and in fact some of our fishermen have gone out with comparatively small boats, just a single man or a helper, and they only need to get one fish and they've made quite a profit on their trip, but it's not, as I said, a big fishery in Queensland, unlike the southern blue fin fishery.

**JD** Is there an international agreement operating for the yellow fin and big eye?

**HAYSOM** Oh yes there are various international agreements. I don't know what the present state of the art is but yes, there's a lot of activity in the international sphere in regard to tuna.

**JD** The Japanese fishery would be outside the reef, I presume?

**HAYSOM** Yes. Oh very definitely, yes. Up in Cairns in the period I was talking about, however, they were coming in very close to the outside, into the reef.

**JD** Noel, in fairly recent times the Gulf of Carpentaria has become a major fishing ground in Queensland I believe. Were you involved in the establishment of that fishery?

**HAYSOM** Yes. Well there are two fisheries in the Gulf largely. There's the barramundi fishery which existed before prawns were discovered there. I really didn't have very much to do with that at all but I certainly was involved with the Gulf prawn fishery right from its inception. It's the northern prawn fishery, including the Northern Territory and part of Western Australia in that now, as well as the Gulf itself. That fishery which is managed jointly by the Commonwealth and the various States and Territories concerned is one of Australia's top two fisheries. It's a very big concern, [a] huge income earner and [has] a lot of capital equipment tied up in it in boats and processing plants and so forth.

I was a biologist still when that started off and 1963, I think was the year the survey started. What had happened was, there'd been various reports of sightings of prawns swimming on the surface in the Norman River and if people looked around Australia for similar conditions say to the Gulf of Mexico where there were big prawn fisheries in America, naturally people of course said, "Oh I wonder what the Gulf of Carpentaria would be like?" A big expanse of shallow water with some big rivers running into it and so forth. So it was eventually decided that it be jointly funded, this survey, by the Commonwealth fisheries and the Queensland State Government, and the CSIRO would have the technical or scientific oversight of the survey. It was decided to confine the survey to the south eastern corner of the Gulf, that's between Mornington Island and Karumba, and it would run for two years.

The original leader of the survey party was Jim Thomson who was a CSIRO scientist at the time, a principal scientist. He pulled out at the last minute and went onto other areas. He was Professor of Zoology here at Queensland University. He's now in the Northern Territory. I think he's Vice-Chancellor of a University College up there. Anyhow Jim pulled out at the last minute and his place was taken by Ian Munro who was another principal research officer with CSIRO Fisheries & Oceanography. Ian was a taxonomist, in fact Australia's leading taxonomist. I know that it's always been, in some ways, a disappointment to Ian. It meant an interruption to his speciality, his career, and in some ways he did resent being taken away from his main life's work, but he certainly did a marvellous job of organising the survey and in the aftermath of the survey ensuring all the different reports and so forth were collated and issued and so forth. There were initially four of us in the survey party. Ian was the leader, I was the Queensland Fisheries Biologist and there were two technicians, one from CSIRO and one from our Department. The team was later expanded and a couple more biologists added and various other people came and went and some of them stayed on and some of them didn't.

It was a very remote area in those days of course. The only way you could get in was by sea or the weekly DC3 service. You could come in by road as long as there hadn't been any rain. As soon as the wet season started, the road went out for four months. There wasn't even a reliable telephone contact with the area. There was one of these single line, what do they call them, community lines or something from Normanton to Karumba and as soon as the first storm started, of course, there'd be a lightning strike out in the plains somewhere and your telephone would go out and you couldn't get out to repair it for four months. So it was a pretty primitive area. There wasn't much at Karumba. Ansett were operating a hunting lodge there in the buildings that

belonged to the old Catalina flying boat base which existed there during the War. Harbours & Marine had a boatman and a coxswain (a coxswain and a boatman) who lived in two little cottages down near the mouth of the river. There was a crocodile shooter and his wife, a couple of pensioners and the staff of the lodge which numbered about three white people and two black. That was all that existed at Karumba before we went there.

Well part of the organisation of the survey involved an undertaking by a processing firm, Craig Mostyn Pty Ltd who were into, they were involved in, I think, fruit and probably rock lobsters in Western Australia. I'm not quite sure what their full background was, but they agreed to co-operate with the survey. They were going to establish a processing plant in the area. Initially they brought round a shipboard processing plant. A vessel called the **Laakanuki** and they moored her alongside the old jetty at Karumba and there she sat for some years before they built a full scale land building. They built some.... They had an engine room and the old tanks there and they had a mobile freezer and they took over the old petrol tank [which] belonged to the WW1 Catalina flying boat base and filled that up with fuel for the trawlers. Of course they had a small staff of people in case we caught prawns and they were ready to process. Bob Taylor was the Craig Mostyn manager and I believe you're going to talk to him a little bit later.

So anyhow up we go in the middle of 1963. We had a trawler under charter, a small trawler from Bundaberg called the **Rama**. A gentleman named Hector McLaren owned and skippered it. Craig Mostyn had six trawlers also from Bundaberg that came round and were going to form the nucleus of a commercial fleet if we struck prawns. Three of the skippers took one look at Karumba and left again the next morning. I might talk a little bit about them later on but three of the boats stayed. I can't remember their names now, the **Kestrel**.... No the **Kestrel** wasn't there. Anyhow, it doesn't really matter. We set up a base in one of the staff cottages belonging to the lodge. The scientific team slept and cooked and ate upstairs and we took over the underneath part of the house as a laboratory, a workshop. Initially it was pretty primitive. Karumba's a terrible place for flies and sandflies and you name it, every pest you can find. Of course here we were handling lots of fish and prawns that were deteriorating in the heat and so forth and there'd be flies everywhere. Things were rather primitive and hard on the workers until we managed to get the area flyscreened under there which took some months before we got the equipment up to do that.

I can remember going up to Karumba on a pre-survey reconnaissance when we made the arrangements for the cottage and one of the things we did was to arrange a flight by one of the bush pilots at the time [of] a light aircraft. Of course one of the things that we were hoping to catch in the Gulf were banana prawns and on the east coast, bananas were known to congregate in large schools and stir up the mud on the bottom. They form what they call mud boils and we thought, well we would go looking for mud boils in the Gulf. So we had an initial flight out over the Gulf and we're looking down from the air [laughs] and of course the south-eastern end of the Gulf is just one big mud boil. It's [a] huge muddy area and we thought, there's no way in the wide world we'll be able to spot any mud boils in this so they abandoned the idea of using aerial spotting. Now as it turned out, when we finally got on to the prawns, they certainly formed mud boils but they were a lot further off the coast than we had expected from our earlier expectations and of course the fleet has been using aerial spotting for quite a few years now.

What we were doing was, we divided up the survey area in the south-eastern corner into a grid pattern six miles by six miles. The survey was based on that grid. There was a rather amusing little story associated with this; I think this happened about six

months into the survey. It was in the summer time and an electric storm came along and there was a lightning strike on the Rama. It hit the aerials of the radio and the skipper, who I think was Noel Sykes at the time, was talking on the radio. It knocked him flat on his back on the wheel house floor and made an awful mess of the radio itself. Anyway Noel recovered and we went out to sea one or two days later and the cruise plan called for us to start at the fairway buoy which was about six miles off the coast, a very, very shallow area there and the mouth of the river is six miles off the coast. We followed the course of the river, the channel of the river, until we got to the fairway buoy and then we were supposed to go six miles north, do a trawl shot, then another six miles north, do another trawl shot and then turn west and do another six miles, another trawl shot. Anyhow we carried out the first two trawl shots and then when we swung round to go to the west the compass needle is still sitting on north and it appears that the lightning strike had frozen the compass. It was just [a] sheer accident, [that] it happened to be frozen on north and when you reach the fairway buoy at the mouth of the Karumba River, you are normally facing due north. Nobody noticed. Every time anybody glanced at the compass, [laughs] we were on course. Anyhow that was one of the problems.

There was a lot of mucking around had to be done to get the vessel into use again. They removed just about everything that had any metal on it. We put a wooden steering wheel on it and for a while there we were steering with a hand bearing compass. That was one of the little vicissitudes. There were no good maps of the area in those days. The nautical charts were based on old Flinders' charts and a lot of the coastline was just shown as a dotted line with sort of a notation such as, "The coastline is thought to be five miles further to the east than is shown here." We eventually got hold of an aeronautical chart and enlarged it or reduced it until it was the same scale as the nautical charts and had them reproduced. There were so many strange things there. We weren't familiar with the coast. We weren't familiar with the tidal regime in the south-eastern corner. You only get a single tide per day there and we found out in the first week of the survey that we bumped on the bar of the river when we were coming in each evening. We only did one day cruises for the first few weeks to settle down and we were coming in at 6.00 o'clock every night and every night we bumped on the bar. We couldn't understand this. With the progression of tides it should have been alright but that was what it was. It was a single tide a day and low tide occurred at 6.00 o'clock in the evening all that week.

Anyhow things eventually improved. One of the things that disappointed us of course was that for a long while we never caught any prawns. You might catch the odd occasional one, but we'd been led to believe that this was going to be our national prawn bonanza and for something like eleven months we peppered that south-eastern corner and the biggest catch of export quality prawns we took was ten pounds of bananas and we got that at the end of the first week of the survey (I think it was). We got a few big catches of very small prawns around in the shallow waters during the summer months but of course we were looking for export size prawns. Anyway, after eleven months of getting nothing but trash fish and the odd.... We hardly had enough prawns really to have a feed for ourselves from time to time. Ian Munro was saying to me one day, "We ought to give some thought to this. This survey's supposed to run for two years and we've caught nothing in eleven months. We'd better think in terms of what we're going to say to the Government. Are we going to put in a report at the end of the year and say, "Look! We think we ought to just cut our losses and give it up." So just as he'd been talking about this, suddenly one day out of the blue, up came 600 pounds of bananas, very, very close to where we had first found that ten pounds in the first week. Of course we didn't look back after that.

We started to learn a bit more about it and it appeared that the bananas used to school up. Because of this peculiar tidal resume, the banana prawns only used to

school up for a few days in each month, at the time they called the double tides. That was when the single tide regime changed over into a double, and in some cases a triple tide, during the day. There wouldn't be much amplitude in the tide in these days and so there wasn't a great deal of current in the water. That was when the banana prawns used to school up, and they used to school up close to shallow channels that ran out from the coast. Now these shallow channels.... The floor of the Gulf in that area is very, very flat. To give you some idea, the, what was it.... The two fathom line (I think) was ten miles off shore. The echo sounder traces that we took made the whole of the Gulf look like a billiard table and you'd go for six miles and the depth might only increase from five to six feet. It was only after we had been operating for a long period that we became aware of the existence of these shallow channels. They WERE shallow. They weren't more than a fathom or two in depth and they'd be fairly wide too. You're looking at half a mile or more wide. The prawns used to congregate in these channels and of course Ian Munro eventually worked out what was happening and he made a number of predictions and produced some prediction charts for the commercial fisherman and that got them on to some of these schools a lot quicker than they would have otherwise....

Echo sounders were no good to find them. You might miss a school of bananas by about twenty yards and you wouldn't have even known they were there. Of course later on they brought in the aerial spotting that used to put the boats onto the prawns very, very quickly. Yeah, those early months we went with virtually nothing and it came good. Of course as time went on more and more boats started fishing with our trawler and it eventually developed into the huge fishery that it is today. Some of the catches the boats made in the heyday of that fishery.... Enormous masses of prawns and a boat would go through such a mass and just drop its trawl. You virtually just bounced your trawl off the bottom and brought it up straight away. If you left it down there ten seconds too long, you might'nt be able to get the net on board, there would be so many prawns in it. Lots of boats broke their nets because they just had too much in the net. Of course the great thing about it was, there were no trash fish with those sort of catches. You didn't have much of a problem to sort the catch. You just shovelled it into the hold; pure prawns!

**JD** Has the size of catch gone off now?

**HAYSOM** Oh yes, yes. Apart from the survey work that I was involved in in that team, and it was of course a team effort. I wasn't there for the whole of the two years of the survey but later on I got involved in the management regime of it. I was originally a member of a committee called Norpac (I think it was) and there may have been another name before that. I think it was the Northern Prawn Research Committee, but anyhow; there were a number of these advisory committees which were concerned with formulating a management plan for the fishery in the first place and then when the management plan was in place, monitoring it and changing the management plan and generally looking after [the] Fishery. I was involved in that area in various capacities for quite a few years.

Of course they eventually made it a limited licence fishery and one of the problems in putting the management plan together was determining who would get the rights of participating in the management plan. At that stage I think I made a rather bad administrative mistake which certainly affected the fishery for a long period of time. In hindsight I perhaps should have argued more strongly against the admission of a lot of fishermen but you've got to realise in those days the Queensland fishermen were pressing very, very heavily for Queensland fisheries for Queensland fishermen. Our Minister was quite sympathetic to their attitudes and if I had gone against this policy to any great extent I would have probably found myself out of a job. Mind you, I was



also a Queenslander, but it did, I think, in the long run result in a lot of fishermen getting access to that fishery who really had no rights to it. They weren't really interested in it. They had no intention of going there and fishing it and they just wanted to safeguard their interests. One of the people at least who got a licence in the fishery got it on the basis of the fact that he had previously fished the Gulf which was one of the main criteria, viz that they had to [have] fish[ed] the Gulf at some time in the past. Well his only activity had been.... He was one of the six trawlers that went around in 1963 and had overnighted at Karumba and while he certainly had taken a few shots (prawn shots) while he was trying the Gulf, he should never have later got Gulf entitlement on such a meagre activity.

Of course once there was a limited licence fishery, that licence became worth quite a bit of money because they sold the entitlements very often to some of the processing companies who were trying to build up company fleets. As a result there had been a build-up of too many boats in the fishery and they've been trying to get rid of them every since and buying them out and that sort of thing. Quite a management problem.

*JD* It's become to a significant degree a company show now, hasn't it?

*HAYSOM* Yes. One of the problems, of course, is the remoteness of the area. An individual fisherman.... In fact I can remember some of the fishermen that arrived there in the early days, they had absolutely no idea what the conditions were like. They'd arrive in the place and say, "Well where can I get water or fuel" and so forth. I'd say, "Well you can't get any unless you're tied up with one of the companies", because potable water was very, very scarce. The water in wells there had very, very high fluoride levels so that it couldn't be used for drinking. It couldn't be used for processing. It could be used for showers and toilets and that sort of thing but the only fresh water supply in the early days was from a small well down at the point. They just sort of thought.... They could get water to stop themselves from dying of thirst but the companies just did not have the water to fill up their tanks completely. Food was another problem, very expensive. So it really needed the backup of a company to provide....

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

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## **TAPE 2 SIDE B**

*HAYSOM* So it really needed the backup of the companies to provide the support for the fishing fleet. They had to supply spare parts and fuel and food and water. The fishermen couldn't do that when they were out at sea and they certainly couldn't expect to do all that sort of thing once they got back into port. Incidentally there were a huge number of companies at one stage interested in going there. Of course land was fairly scarce, water was very scarce but there was something like 120 companies made application to go to the Gulf. It was extraordinary. Of course they all thought they were going to make fortunes up there. Eventually the big operators were Craig Mostyn, Raptis, Kailis and Verboon later on, oh some of the others.... I just can't remember their names now but there were quite a number. Some of them went to the wall of course eventually and eventually the main thrust on the processing side swung round to the east coast. When communications got a lot easier you could bring trucks in and out in all weathers. It became much easier to have a processing plant on the east coast at Cairns or Townsville and that avoided all the problems you had with staff in an area like Karumba.

We had some problems in staff on our own team actually [laughs]. People got a bit light headed and all sorts of funny things happened. I remember one of our technical assistants on the one occasion throwing his clothes and his watch into the river [laughs] and he wasn't drinking or anything like that at the time. Someone rather obviously got at him and somebody else ran off with the cook at the lodge. I had to explain to.... He was a young fellow that joined us straight from school. I remember his mother rang up and wanted to know where he'd got to. She hadn't heard from him for a while. I had to explain to her that he'd run off with a 30 year old woman cook from the lodge; was last seen heading off for Western Australia [laughter].

**JD** They used to call it "going tropo" didn't they, in the Army?

**HAYSOM** Yes, that's right. Of course, if you talk to some of the fishermen up there you'll get all sorts of tales about life there. It was a pretty frontier sort of a town. They used to call the downstairs bar "the animal bar" [laughs] but of course there used to be ringers coming in from the cattle stations too and they were pretty tough boys. There were some brawls at different times between the different groups. Nowadays Karumba is quite a township and the entire population at one stage, we all used to sit round three tables in the bar but now it's a town with a, probably a permanent population of five or six hundred and swells to a lot more than that during the main season. Got bitumen roads, a supermarket, you name it.

**JD** Noel, have you any idea of how many trawlers were involved in that northern prawn fishery at its peak, say?

**HAYSOM** No, I'm sorry. I couldn't tell you really. It was certainly in the hundreds. I just can't recall the exact number. It probably fluctuated anyhow quite considerably. I can't remember what the absolute peak was.

**JD** It's a seasonal fishery now, isn't it?

**HAYSOM** Well it was a seasonal fishery then too. The bananas of course used to start around about March or April and [was a] very intensive fishery looking for these big boils and so forth. Eventually, by about July or August, they would have run out and the fishermen then turned to tiger fishing (tiger prawn fishing) which is a much less spectacular fishery, more like the conventional prawn fishing that we have on the other areas of the Australian coast. Not the same spectacular catches as you got with banana prawns and certainly more trying. It was night work and instead of catching 7,000 pounds of prawns in two minutes you might have got 1,000 in a matter of half a night or something like that. So it was a different sort of fishery but everyone used to think that the banana prawns were the big thing and tiger fishing, that was something that you had to do if you missed out on some of the bananas. As time went on, it swung round the other way and tiger prawn fishing became really the bread and butter of the fishery and the banana fishery became the cream on top. The bananas of course were very susceptible to too much fishing and the tiger prawns were much more reliable.

**JD** Noel, having spent many years on the scientific side of fishing in Queensland, you then moved across to a more administrative role. That brought you into contact with all the fisheries in Queensland, I'm sure. Could you list those fisheries?

**HAYSOM** I don't know about listing them but I can give you a bit of a run down. I hope I don't forget any. [It was a] varied fishing picture in Queensland. Most of the State is in the tropics and so you get a great deal of variety. The other thing is of course that the Queensland coast runs north and south so you get quite a variety of

conditions. Climatically, it gets very hot in the north and I won't say it gets cold in the south but it's certainly a lot cooler in the south. So you're running over a large range of degrees of latitude. So that in itself produces different conditions and so forth and different species. It's certainly quite a varied thing.

Well perhaps looking at it chronologically, when fisheries started off in Queensland it was very largely centred on the oystering and pearl oystering fisheries. That was where the big money was and we had a very big pearl oyster fishery in the Torres Straits and we also had a very big edible oyster fishery, mostly in southern Queensland. We had a bigger oyster fishery round about the turn of the century than New South Wales. In those days a lot of the divers used to die of bends. The Harbours & Marine Department annual report used to list the casualty list every year and they'd run into, in some cases, probably dozens of divers dying of the bends, being taken by a shark or a groper or something.

There was a great tragedy that hit the pearling fleet in Queensland, when was it... I'm not sure whether it was just at the end of the last century or the early years of this century, but a very intensive cyclone hit the north Queensland coast and sank practically the entire pearling fleet. You're looking at a hundred boats or very close to it. There was a very big death toll. There's a memorial up in the north to all the pearl divers and the crew members that perished in that accident. It was a great tragedy. Of course in those days there were small fisheries scattered along the coast to a very small scale, mostly catering for a bit of fresh fish to the local populace. The Chinese got involved in that a bit in a few places like Cairns and perhaps other areas.

Probably the first fishery (I've forgotten that) would have been Beche de Mer. There were people, certainly in north Queensland anyhow, there were Beche de Mer fishermen operating up in north Queensland long before any other sort of fishing took place. There's the famous story of Mrs Watson. She was the wife of a Beche de Mer fisherman and they had a camp on Lizard Island and while her husband was away, some of the local blacks came onto the island and attacked them. She escaped with a Chinese cook and a baby in a ship's tank and floated away to some other island. Unfortunately it was a bit of a tragedy. They didn't survive the trip but the tank itself is in the Queensland museum. I can remember looking at it when I was a small kid but it's still there. Of course the story is well known in the north.

What else is there.... Oh as time went on, of course, the fin fisheries developed a lot. They started fishing for Spanish mackerel in north Queensland. In southern Queensland it was mostly mullet and tailor along the beaches and in the estuaries. As time went on people started fishing for bottom dwelling reef fishes. Some of our famous food fishes like coral trout and red emperor and so forth. Prawns were originally a small operation in the rivers. People used to get out with scissors nets and walk across the mud flats catching prawns that way. They started a few little beam trawls in the river adapted from some of the nets that were used by the Greek fishermen in the Mediterranean. We had quite a few Greek fishermen in Brisbane. Eventually one of them, George Denaro, came to see us and said.... We said, you are using all these trawls and they have never been prescribed, they aren't legal really. So George came along to us and he drew a plan of what the trawls were like and it was incorporated into the regulations and the river beam trawl became legal. There were various adaptations of that introduced into other areas, the Fitzroy River at Rockhampton and in much later years, into the Noosa River.

Then of course we had the development of the otter trawling for prawns which didn't take place until the late '40s or early '50s. They'd been fishing in that way down in New South Wales for a few years and some of the New South Wales boats came up

and started up otter trawling in Moreton Bay. Of course some of the locals followed them very, very quickly and before we knew what had happened, there'd been a very big expansion of the otter trawl fishery for prawns and it went from there until we got up to the Gulf. Now there are prawn fisheries right round the whole coastline of Queensland.

What else was there.... Crab fishing of course, the famous Queensland mud crab and we also had the sand crab which is known as blue swimmer down south or manna crab sometimes. Queensland is the home of this particular crab (we like to think so anyway) and we call them sand crabs. They're mostly taken in pots and nets.

Oh yes, a later development again was the scallops and the scallops are a bit different from the scallops that they get down in Tasmania and Victoria. They're what we call a saucer scallop. They're very fast swimming. They belong to a different family and they originally started catching them in the prawn trawls. Couldn't catch them with dredges as they do down south. They can swim too fast. Eventually of course, instead of just using conventional prawn trawlers, they put a larger mesh cod end onto the trawls but it really started as a sideline to the prawning fishery in central Queensland. Now you've got specialised scallop fisheries.

There was a fishery for dugong of course, the big sea cow, mostly in Moreton Bay and in the Maryborough area. There was still a dugong fisherman in Maryborough when I joined Fisheries, a fellow named Billsborough (I think his name was) and he was still catching the occasional dugong and rendering it down for a medicinal oil; supposed to be very good. They're totally protected now. There's still some dugong taken by the Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginals for their own consumption.

We had a vigorous whaling fishery for quite a while based on Tangalooma down in the Bay. That of course has ceased to exist and Tangalooma's now a tourist resort, a time share resort actually. I have a week down there [laughs].

What else have we got.... There's turtles. Again turtles are now totally protected but there was a turtle soup factory on Heron Island for many years. Also there were turtles taken in north Queensland for quite a few years after they were protected in southern Queensland. The rock lobsters; of course we don't have the same enormous rock lobster fishery that you have in Western Australia but we have a different sort of lobster here. They're coral rock lobsters. They apparently won't go into a trap very easily so they're mostly fished here by hand or by spear. The main area is the Torres Straits. They're a pretty big lobster but not [in] the quantities that they get in, say the southern states or Western Australia which is the real home of rock lobsters.

We don't get much in the way of a shark fishery here as they do in Victoria. There are small quantities of shark taken here, mostly freighted down to Victoria but the main.... If people talk about a shark fishery here, they're really talking about the shark protection fishery where there are mesh nets and lines set off the surfing beaches for the protection of bathers. Unfortunately we don't have a mussel fishery here either. I like mussels and we do get a small mussel here. It's very small and it's got lots of hairs in it. It's not very good to eat.

The pearling I mentioned earlier, has really ceased to exist in the same form that it had in its heyday. What has happened now is that they have established all these cultured pearl farms in the Torres Straits and the pearling luggers now (there's not very many of them, I think there's only about ten or twelve left), they're mostly involved in fishing for pearl shell to take to the culture farms, not for use themselves as mother of pearl; but there has been a bit of a revival in trochus fishing in recent

years. That's used for mother of pearl purposes. I think it's probably something to do with the world shortage of oil and they're getting away from the plastic buttons and going back to the original trochus buttons. I think that's probably just about....

**JD** Is there an abalone [fishery] in this area?

**HAYSOM** No. We do get some abalone on the Reef but not in sufficient quantities to warrant a fishery for them. Oh incidentally, we do have of course coral, and coral limestone is a marine product under our Fisheries Act and certainly we licence people to take corals for specimens. They're fairly tightly controlled as far as the area's concerned. In fact, they may have disappeared since I retired, but I'm not sure. I know there were all sorts of conservation moves that said that we should abandon the idea but coral limestone of course is fished for in.... put the "fished" in inverted commas, in Moreton Bay and that's a very big operation, mostly for cement. The operation is licensed under the Fisheries Act. We are talking about the most expensive fisheries licence in the world. They pay a pretty big price to the Treasury for that one.

**JD** There's the barramundi fishery, of course, in the northern rivers.

**HAYSOM** Yes, yes. Well it's one of the estuarine fishes of course. If you look round the coast there are an enormous variety of fishes that are caught in a wide variety of nets. You've got seine nets and mesh nets and tunnel nets and fish traps and so forth. They grade into each other as you go round the coast of course. Barra is mostly in the Gulf and the tropical east coast and it is, of course, managed separately. It's a limited licence fishery and there's a special closed season on it. A very valuable fishery though, the barramundi; commands a very high price on the market.

**JD** Noel, is aquaculture at all prominent in Queensland?

**HAYSOM** Yes. Well, we've had a form of aquaculture here for a long while with the oyster industry, but aquaculture for fish and prawns is [a] comparatively recent edition. It was only just coming in a few years before I retired. I think that's the way a lot of the fisheries in the world are going and I see no reason why you can't expand in Queensland as people get a bit more experience. There are certain [unclear] on some lucrative operations starting up here.

**JD** Noel, during your years as an administrator in the fisheries, what would you see as the major problems that confronted you?

**HAYSOM** Well I would go back a little bit earlier than that. I was more in the biological area. Management of fisheries in Queensland and indeed right round Australia was (originally) a very simple sort of thing. Fishermen got involved in the fishery largely because their fathers had been fishermen or their brothers, or they lived in a fishing community and that was one of the only sort of occupations perhaps that was available locally. Some of them just liked the life-style; some sort of reason like that. There was no real incentive to get into the industry because you were going to make a lot of money out of it. So they were the incentives. The fishing was [a] pretty simple sort of thing. There was beach seine fishing, some of the things I mentioned a little bit earlier and most of the management problems were really either solving a conflict of interest between groups or individuals. Perhaps the perennial one of solving a conflict between the amateurs and the professionals. That's existed for a long while and will continue to exist for the next century or more.

The levels of catches were comparatively small. They've made some big catches of mullet and tailor sometimes on the beaches but that was usually a couple of crews

would get together and exploit some of the big shoals that were passing along the beaches but the proceeds would be shared between a group of ten or fifteen fishermen. So there wasn't a great deal of management problems. The worst crimes in those days, I suppose if you talk about crimes, but the worst breaches of the regulations were dealt with people being unlicensed.

Stake netting was a no no. Stake netting was a peculiar.... It wasn't a peculiar method, it was a very simple method. It involved setting a long net on poles or stakes driven into the mud and into tidal areas. They were very long nets. At times up to half a mile in length and they would be set into [a] tidal area, usually at about the top of the tide, getting on to the top of the tide and then they would be left there as the tide drained away. Of course as the tide drained away, the fish got caught in the wall of the net and some of them get meshed in the net and might come right out of the water and others would be just caught in the base of the.... It was really like a big long fence. The big problem was, of course, it was wasteful. The fishermen were lazy. It was a passive method of fishing and fishermen would put the net up and then go away and when they came back some of the fish would be dead and the gulls would have eaten the eyes out of them. The worst thing of course was that it became very visible to amateur fishermen and there used to be [a] hue and cry about these professional fishermen killing all these fish and so forth.

So staking was only allowed in certain areas and under certain conditions until they got an alternative method called tunnelling off which was a much more active type of fishing. It was the one that caused the most problems. I must tell you a story about stake netting. It concerns one of our inspectors years ago when I was a young biologist, a fellow named Chicka Bradbury. Chicka used to operate one of the patrol boats down the Bay and he had a boatman who was supposed to be his crew man who was a little bit simple. He used to leave the boatman behind and Chicka used to patrol on his own in the Bay see and of course he'd be tearing all round the place in the dark and used to sing to keep himself awake. Anyhow, Chicka happened to anchor up this night and he thought, oh he'd go out on patrol later on in the morning when the tide drops a bit more. He dossed down for a few hours' sleep and when he woke up he found that a professional fishing crew had set a stake net right around his boat. They hadn't seen him in the dark, you see. So Chicka gets up and goes over. The fishermen are asleep and he knocks on the door and he says, "You've caught me", he said, "Now I've caught you." [laughs] They used to have a good relationship really and Chicka was one of nature's gentlemen and the fishermen said, "Oh well, come and have a cup of tea and you can write up the case." [laughs]

Anyhow, getting back to the management side, as time went on of course, and the more valuable fisheries came into existence like the prawns.... You only have to get a very valuable fishery and get good catches and big people wanted to come in. So there was a tendency then for people to buy into the fishery that perhaps weren't traditional fishermen. They'd be professional men but they'd have money and they would buy a boat and put a crew on. You'd get, very often, too many people in the fishery. This is a problem all over the world with a valuable fishery; too many fishermen. There's a famous saying about, I think its, "Unmanaged fisheries become unprofitable" or something like that. There's what they call the "Tragedy of the Commons." I don't know whether you've ever heard of that sort of thing, but you know the old commons that used to be in existenfce with townships and villages and everybody could use it but after a while it became nobody's business to look after it, but if and when you've got a arm, you look after it yourself, but if it's free to all, everyone tries to put too much in in the good times.

*JD* This interview continues on side A of tape 3.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE B

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### **TAPE 3 SIDE A**

*HAYSOM* Alright. As I swung away from the biological side and got more and more involved in management, the management problems were developing in Fisheries in Queensland and not only in management problems, but the administrative problems in our Department. Around about, oh the mid-'60s I think it was, may be the late '60s, the Government decided to move Fisheries away from Harbours & Marine where it had been for a long period of time and put it into the Department of Primary Industries. I think this [was] largely because fishermen were starting to take a greater interest in the management; not so much in the management, but the way that the fishery was managed and they thought, well the Primary Industries would perhaps be a better department to manage Fisheries.

One of the things that politicians forgot was what to do with the boating patrol which was serving two masters. It was policing the Marine Act and responsible then to the Port Master, and policing the Fisheries Act and responsible for that side of things to the Chief Inspector of Fisheries. So you couldn't very well divide the patrol easily down the centre. Anyhow the Government's reaction some weeks after this decision was made was to put the Fisheries people back to Harbours & Marine. That caused a backlash amongst the industry people who had been fighting to get it over to Primary Industries. So some weeks later, back we went to Primary Industries you see; starting to feel a bit like a ping pong ball. So we were with Primary Industries for, I think, two and a half years the second time until there was another election and this time they had decided to upgrade Fisheries.

In the period we were with Primary Industries incidentally, we had our status increased a bit. They formed us into a Fisheries Branch. We got branch status. So anyhow, at the end of the two and a half years with Primary Industries, in their wisdom the Government decided to make us into a semi-independent sub-department. They created the Queensland Fisheries Service by amalgamating the Marine Parks section from Forestry with the Fisheries Branch from Primary Industries. They put us under the.... although we were a sub-department and sort of semi-autonomous, they put us under the overall control of the Department of Aboriginal and Islanders Advancement [laughs]. In some ways that seems a very peculiar department (for Fisheries) but you've got to realise that in Queensland a lot of our Fisheries were heavily involved with the Islanders particularly, not so much with Aborigines, but certainly with the Islanders, the pearling fishery and the trochus fishery. Large sections of our Act were indeed phrased to protect the interests of the Islanders.

Anyway we stayed with them for three years. At the next change of government we went back over to Harbours & Marine again, I think with the idea of reuniting us with the boat patrol. So we were with Harbours & Marine for another three years and then back we go to Primary Industries again. Now all this sort of moving backwards and forwards, we had all these changes in [the] Department so frequently in a short passage of time. We had changes of Ministers as well which is always a bit of a trauma. At the time too there was a lot of difference of opinion among some of the higher administrators. It really caused some morale problems amongst the more junior staff. I can remember at one stage some of my mates in other State Departments

saying, "What's happening up there in Queensland? All your biologists are applying for jobs with us."

Anyhow there were a range of factors involved. Some of it was sort of personal, some of it was the movement and so forth. A very complicated sort of a situation but the end result was that people were unhappy. So it was resolved eventually I think when the permanent Head of the Department at the time appointed a chap named Tom Reardon, one of nature's gentlemen. He happened to have been the Deputy Director at one stage of the Aboriginal & Islanders Department. He'd been stationed on Thursday Island for years. He had a lot of experience in resolving personal conflicts and so forth. He was a great friend of the Director and at the time the appointment was made he was the Minister's private secretary. So he came over and I became his deputy. I was given to understand that my job was to get the 1976 Act into place. The fishermen had been complaining for months [about] all the shilly-shallying that was going on. "When are we getting our new Act?" Con Reardon, on the other hand, although he didn't know anything at all about Fisheries, he took it upon himself to heal the morale problems we were having. He did it very successfully. He had a very good relationship with the Minister and the Minister's staff and so forth. He did a very good job.

So, as I said, I got involved in the 1976 Fisheries Act. It was an Act that was directed towards solving a lot of these new management problems. When I say new ones, the old Act had been based on the simple management problems that I mentioned earlier, whereas we were getting into this area where obviously some of the Fisheries had to be reduced in size and we had no power under our Act at the time to limit licences; unlike the situation in Western Australia where they'd had a very lucrative rock lobster fishery for quite a few years and they were very early into the business of limited licensed Fisheries. The only way we could limit the licensed fishery was to close an area or a fishery by the sort of normal conservation methods and then issue permits for people to operate. That was using a conservation measure to achieve an economic objective and [there was] a bit of controversy involved in that and not a very tidy way of doing it.

Anyhow we got the new Act and we got into limited licensed Fisheries. We didn't have the experience that Western Australia had in this sort of management and also we had the problem that our Fisheries were already over-manned with fishermen and boats in a lot of cases. So you had the job to cut back, whereas in Western Australia they instituted these limited licence regimes very early in the piece and they expanded them as they could but if they didn't like it, they wouldn't let it expand. It's a bit different from having to rein things in when the horse has already bolted. So we got into that problem and limited licence fishing is a real management headache. The fishermen, for a start, weren't terribly au fait with it. It was something new to them and some of them objected and others wanted it. So it was quite a job to get it in. The fishermen themselves, of course, over this period were becoming much more vocal. In my years in the Department they didn't take a great deal of notice of what was going on but as things got tighter and they had more money invested and so forth, they wanted to have a greater say in the whole thing. They had been badly organised.

While we were with Primary Industries the first time, Primary Industries had instituted the formation of a fishermen's organisation under the Agricultural Council set-up but the fishermen themselves were inexperienced and they didn't sort of perform very, very well. Their choice very often of chairman was largely on the matter of, "Who's got a bit of time" [laughs] rather than whether he was skilful in management of organisation and that sort of thing. However they were learning too and as time went on they got quite skilful at industrial action and so forth. The standard of debate in various committee meetings and so forth improved enormously. The Queensland



Commercial Fishermen's Organisation, I think, became quite a model for the rest of Australia. The Chairman in fact has gone to the National level. They were very unfortunate actually. When he left they had a very good replacement in Peter Connaty, who I mentioned earlier had been at school with me. Unfortunately Peter died very suddenly and it's a great loss, I think, to the industry that he did pass on at such an early age.

The fishermen have now.... As time went on they not only got much better at pushing their cases but as time went on in very recent times, they got interested in not just in having their say or advice, but in becoming part of the decision making process. They lobbied the Department of Primary Industries very heavily this way. We had brought them into the Fisheries Act itself rather than the Agricultural Council and then they wanted to be part of a body to be set up which was a Fisheries Management Authority, so that they actually sat on the body that managed their Fisheries. Primary Industries certainly had.... although their top administrators and so forth had not had a great deal of expertise in Fisheries, they certainly had a lot of expertise in the industrial side and so forth and they agreed to form this Authority. So we had another Act passed which brought this body into existence.

When they started off I don't think there was anybody on the Authority who had any real knowledge of Fisheries management. None of them had read any text about Fisheries management or the theory of Fisheries management but they certainly did a good job as far as man management was concerned and they learnt pretty quickly. They had some good young biologists who were able to advise them on particular Fisheries and the Authority has in fact worked very, very well and they've learnt very quickly [laughs]. I don't know whether you're going to talk to Dave Mitchell later on, but he has been actively involved in the Authority for quite a number of years. He just recently retired but he keeps involved because the industry have asked him to be the Chairman of the Management Committee for the Northern Prawn Fishery so it's obvious that he's held in fairly high regard in the management area by the industry people.

**JD** To round out the interview and to finish your own personal involvement in the industry, or account thereof, you retired, what some three years ago?

**HAYSOM** Yes, getting on for that now, in 1987.

**JD** And what have you been doing with yourself since?

**HAYSOM** [laughs] Well of course the day I retired I was informed by my Divisional Director that this history project was in train. He'd just had a letter from the Executive Officer of FIRDC and he knew that I had always been intending to write a history of the Queensland industries and he said, "Would you be interested in being the State representative on this Commonwealth project?" I said, "Can a duck swim?" So I fell right into that and that's kept me fairly busy moving up and down the State and collecting photographs and literature records and talking to you.

I've had a long ambition to build a model railway and although I haven't laid any track yet, I've got some of it. The base board is almost ready to receive the attention. I've bought myself a personal computer and I've been going through the throes of learning how to use that. I haven't been playing as much golf as I would like. I joined the local bowls club but haven't played a game yet. So it's been a fairly busy period. Unfortunately I've had a spinal operation about a year ago and that sort of did slow me down a bit but that's behind me now. I'm thoroughly enjoying this history project.

**JD** Noel, it's been very interesting to talk to you. I can't recall a better interview. Thank you very much.

**HAYSOM** [laughs] Thank you.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Noel Haysom of Brisbane, Queensland.

END OF TAPE 3 SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with LANCE HAYWARD

### INTRODUCTION

Lance Hayward grew up on Curtis Island where his father and uncle were fishermen. At fifteen years of age he obtained his first professional fisherman's licence which was for catching barramundi in the Fitzroy River. In his subsequent career he has engaged in many fisheries - prawn trawling, crabbing, oystering, scalloping and reef fishing. He has had long experiences as a crew member and skipper of a variety of vessels. He also fishes on his own account.

In this interview he gives a clear description of many of the methods employed - netting, trapping, trailing or wogging, hand lining, prawn trawling; and also discusses problems confronting fishermen - such as weather conditions, prices, pollution, competition from aquaculture and the impact of amateur effort.

He speaks, too, of crew problems, fishermen's organizations and relationship between industry and government.

Lance Hayward is experienced in many types of fishing and sees the industry from several perspectives which adds to the value of this, his contribution to the Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry being conducted by Murdoch University.

The interview was recorded in Mr Hayward's home in Gladstone, Queensland, by Jack Darcey on the 29th April 1990. There are three sides on two tapes. The interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

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

*HAYWARD* Yes, Lance Arthur Hayward - H A Y W A R D.

*JD* And your [date of birth].

*HAYWARD* The third of the fourth 1954 [3.4.1954], in Yeppoon on the Capricorn coast.

*JD* Just north of Rockhampton?

*HAYWARD* Yes.

**JD** Were you brought up in Yeppoon?

**HAYWARD** No, I went to Keppel Sands. My parents lived at Keppel Sands which is a bit further south down the coast, about 20 miles I suppose, a little fishing village more or less. At the age of about one and a half years I was taken to live on an island which I was brought up on until the age of fifteen, and have been back there almost every year since at some part of the year.

When I turned fifteen I also worked on boats up and down the coast.

**JD** May I ask what island?

**HAYWARD** Curtis Island, a place called Yellow Patch just about 2 miles around the lea side of Cape Capricorn lighthouse, in a little estuary there.

**JD** And how did you come to live on an island, was your father a lighthouse keeper?

**HAYWARD** No no. My parents, father and uncle, were fishermen and they used to come from Keppel Sands to there (which was about 32 miles or something) in a 16 foot open boat and fish and go home once a week. And they decided that was too much trouble so they moved us all to Yellow Patch and we lived there and just took the fish in when we had fish. And we lived there all our lives - net fishing and crabbing, and later picking oysters. Getting all the oyster leases around the area. Mackerel fishing, that type of thing. Just fishing.

**JD** Was there a school on the island?

**HAYWARD** No, no school! I did correspondence, I got half way through grade 5, that's the schooling by correspondence. That's all my schooling.

**JD** And then you left school and went fishing yourself?

**HAYWARD** Yes. All through my younger years I worked with Dad and Uncle George net fishing and picking oysters and that, right from when I was about 4 or 5, and just did school when there was no net fishing. But in my last year, my grade 5 year, it took me two years to do half the grade's work and the school said well, it's a waste of time. So they just said don't bother, and that was that. And so I just went fishing.

At the age of.... I could stand correcting, it could be sixteen but I think it was fifteen, I got my first professional fisherman's licence and I've been licensed ever since.

**JD** Lance, when you first got your professional fishing licence what were you fishing for and where were you fishing?

**HAYWARD** Fishing for barramundi from the Fitzroy River, and I didn't have a licence at the time but because I was from a fishing family I just assumed I was allowed in there to do what I liked. But it so happened that I had two nets set and the fishing inspectors found them and couldn't find me, or didn't know who they belonged to, so they confiscated them. One of the nets was easily recognisable and I'd bought it off a fellow, another fisherman, and they knew it was his net so they went and grabbed him and he told them that he'd sold it to me. And so they came to me and said, "Look, you can't do that. Come and get your licence and you can." So I went up to the office and they gave me my fishing licence, and that's it - I was barra fishing then.

**JD** They didn't charge you at all?

**HAYWARD** Oh no. I thought it was pretty good. Glen Daniels his name was, the head fisheries inspector at the time. He was quite a decent fellow. So anyway we just fished on, I just fished on then and I used to chase barra for about three months of the year in the Fitzroy when they used to come back up to the fresh water. And then I think I went on a trawler, an uncle of mine gave me a job on a trawler to Townsville and back for three months.

**JD** That was for prawns?

**HAYWARD** Banana prawns we were chasing. We did a bit of tiger prawning but the boat was considered an average boat those days, but it looks like a matchbox now. Thirty-two foot long and you'd have to get out of the bunk to roll over you know - a two person boat. We used to pull one 5 fathom banana trawl - if you did that these days you'd be laughed at. So that was my stint at banana prawning for probably five or six years. I went back to net fishing, oystering and crabbing.

Then later I started to reef fish when I could get the opportunity, but with the family's boats originally they weren't good enough or big enough, and Dad had no interest in reef fishing, he was happy to stay in the calm, you know. But we built, actually, three boats on the island - three big boats - with hand tools. A hand saw, a hand drill, screw drivers and hammers and that sort of thing, no power.

**JD** Your father, uncle and yourself?

**HAYWARD** Yes, and my other brother helped us. I'm the eldest in the family, there were seven children in the family but I'm the eldest. At that time, when we built the boats, up to fifteen I think I was when we finished. The smallest one was a 30 footer and the biggest one was a 50 foot.

But he still had no interest. We went and did a couple of trips at the locals and that, but he had no interest in reef fishing. But I liked it and so from then on I pursued it a little bit. I worked on one particular boat for eight seasons straight. I went back and worked on the same boat to the Swains, chasing trout mainly. Those days we used to wog, not hand line, but just wog like trailing with a lure, a fly.

**JD** It's called trawling?

**HAYWARD** Trolling. Yes. We call it trailing.

**JD** Trailing, yes. You called it wogging?

**HAYWARD** Oh what we call wog - it's really a fly, right! But it's a big fly. We just call it wog - say you're wogging. And you've got to keep jerking it so that the wog swims like a fish.

**JD** So it's a form of hand lining?

**HAYWARD** Yes, it's a form of hand lining. You only use one line, it's a wire line - you have to use wire to get your depth. And then you wog along the side of a reef. It's all in very close proximity to the coral, because the trout are in the coral mostly. And you have to get it close enough to them so that they'll come out and strike at it. Like if it was 20 feet away the largest majority of the fish wouldn't even bother; but if it was 5

feet away from him he'd have a go at it. And that's the biggest trick of learning to get your wog right where the fish are, and so as you go along the contours in the bottom you have to keep shortening and lengthening your wire line because it goes down at a certain angle. And also as you go along the side of a reef you have to stick to the edge of the reef, you can't go down a straight line, you have to follow the coral so that your wog is actually following the bottom along.

**JD** Are you using an echo sounder for this?

**HAYWARD** No. All eyesight. All in 50 feet or less of water.

**JD** You can see the bottom?

**HAYWARD** You can see the bottom of The Swains in even fair conditions in 50 feet. I've been in later times, like as in just last year I went out to the League, which is about 400 miles out, and the water out there - you can see the bottom in 100 feet all the time. And you can see it in 150 sometimes.

**JD** It's incredibly clear!

**HAYWARD** Yes. At The Swains you can see bottom. On the big tides when it gets dirty you can see bottom in 25 feet. But in reasonable conditions you can see bottom at 50.

**JD** That coral trout is a very highly regarded fish, isn't it?

**HAYWARD** Well, it's the best paid reef fish there is. The only other fish in this State that pays more money is pearl perch, we don't get very many pearl perch. They are a deep water fish. I don't do much deep water fishing, there's not many people here that do. Coral trout is the big money, so the best money, and as much as a lot of people think they are being caught out I think they've reached a level where they will probably stay that way. Personally, I could be wrong. I've been fishing for them for eighteen or nineteen years and they were a lot thicker when I started. The best catches we used to record in those days were the number of fish, because we used to have a competition. There were two of us working on the boat besides the owner and we both ran a dory each. And we used to compete for a bonus at the end of a trip. We both could catch them fairly well, and on big days we used to count them and my best day ever was 487 trout. That's a lot of trout!

**JD** Yes.

**HAYWARD** We used to average between 200 and 300 every day.

**JD** About how many hours fishing would that be?

**HAYWARD** That's probably eleven and a half to twelve hours in the dory. You are in at the first bit of daylight and you only come in and unload your fish and have a drink of water and go again. And at lunchtime you probably have about twenty minutes for lunch, half an hour, and then you are back in the dory again. And you don't come out of it unless there is a lot of fish to be processed, and the owner couldn't keep up, and even then the other dory man was above me, and he used to come out and process while I would stay in. And we wouldn't finish until the sun was down and you couldn't see where you were going, and then you'd come back in. Because with wogging you'd find that there was never ever a pattern. Oh, I tell a lie! Sometimes you'd find them biting in the morning and not the afternoon for five days straight. But apart from that,

because you are fishing one reef and then the next, you just trail around and you go to the next one, and you might do ten or twelve reefs in a day. And you can't find a pattern to them and you might find half past four, five o'clock in the afternoon, all of a sudden you get 50 fish. So you've just got to keep at it all day, every day.

**JD** And you lived on board?

**HAYWARD** Yes, we lived on board. We used to average three weeks, sometimes four weeks at sea. We used to bring home five and a half thousand pound [lb] of fillets. The best trip I think we ever did on trout would have been probably fourteen or fifteen days, but mostly around twenty days to twenty-two days sometimes. And it used to be because we could get so many trout the boss wouldn't let you have a fishing line in the dory, because it involved a steep lift in lower priced fish. He just wanted the quality. And our best trip ever was 97% by weight, trout. But we used to get around 90 to 93 all the time, except when we were mackerel fishing.

**JD** Then you stayed as a crew member for, what, eight years you said?

**HAYWARD** Yes, longer on other boats, but on that particular boat I worked as a crew member for eight seasons. Eight straight seasons. And then in the slack we used to work.... We used to work from the 1st April, we'd go to sea, and finish up around just before Christmas. And then from then another three or four months. Most of those years I used to go back to Yellow Patch with my family and net the crabs. Other years I'd just go somewhere myself and net the crabs because I had my licence - I could do what I liked. But most years I used to go home - go home in my own right because I bought a small boat - and just live there with the family and net fish and run my own fishing in my own right. I did that a few years, too.

**JD** And then what was the next step in your career?

**HAYWARD** Well, I moved to Mackay from.... we lived on the island and that was it, you know. I moved to Mackay and I did three years up there, and that's where I got my first skipper's job. I also worked on that same boat again up there one year, and then I got my first skipper's job. That was a 52 foot concrete boat and I never actually got it to sea. I did a fortnight's work on it, got to the Percy's, a cyclone came down the coast so I stayed at the Percy's. In the middle of it, when it looked like it was going to get there, I tried to get into the little estuary there - a little estuary where you go in between the hills and the rocks into a little hole inside, in the island, and I couldn't get in because it was raining that hard the water running off the hills on the island. They had about 4 foot bloody overfall at the mouth of the gully, and it's only 20 foot wide in between two cliffs, and a 52 foot concrete boat. A bastard of a thing to handle - couldn't handle it at all, hardly, you know! So I stayed out and copped a flogging. Lost my aluminium dinghy and my brother's timber dinghy, and was just left with one dory. We came back to town and I got the sack because I didn't get to The Swains. So that was that - that was my first job.

And then a family friend from down this way, who had his own boat and had retired, had built a boat for his nephew who was in Mackay - they were all in Mackay at the time. He lived there with his wife and his nephew. I got to know his nephew a little bit and I ended up running that boat for them. I ran it for about twelve months and did quite well actually. Just reef fishing. And three fellows were partners in the boat, actually, and they were fighting and so John got me to run it and run dead. So I got off. Then they wanted to sell it, so I offered them a silly price and they obviously didn't accept it, so I got put off.

And then I went back net fishing. I did about twelve months net fishing up there, just around the beach. I had a 16 foot aluminium [boat] and I put a net shoot on it and we used to have 200 yards of whiting net, and I used to just leave the Fish Board wharf in Mackay when the tide was coming in, go out, and it's about 10 miles from there to Hay Point. It's nearly all beaches and estuaries, you know. It's all beach and a few estuaries. We used to just run the beach - my young brother and one deckie who worked for me for about 4 years I suppose. We used to run the beach and if you'd see a patch of fish you'd shoot them - whiting, mullet, bream, anything; and do four hours, back in, unload at the Fish Board and go to the pub. I lived down there for twelve months and made plenty of money. Survived, anyway! It was quite fun actually.

And then I came back down here and ended up at Gladstone and I've been here since. Fourteen or fifteen years or something! I've had quite a few skipper's jobs here, in fact I'm skipping now rather than on my own boat because it's too expensive that one. You know a breakdown on that boat costs you \$10,000 because an outboard is worth \$13,000 each and it's just too dear.

**JD** So what are you fishing for now, Lance?

**HAYWARD** Right now I'm reef fishing. We've been working The Swains for trout - but not so much trout. We still target trout but if you get a patch of sweet lip or even rubbish fish, if they want to bite you catch them because there's money in it. The boat I'm driving carries 10 tonne so there's no point in throwing them away you know.

**JD** You are still hand lining?

**HAYWARD** Yes, hand lining. I've done about.... it's all guess, I've never ever kept track but I've kept books on it, but I've never ever counted them, you know. It would be about five or six, could even be seven years of trawling. I did 26 months on one boat straight so that is straight through every season, and apart from that six, eight, ten months at a time on different boats. All aspects of it - scolloping, king prawning, tiger prawning and banana prawning. I've done all of that.

**JD** That was on the east coast?

**HAYWARD** Yes, all between Bundaberg and say Cardwell (north of Townsville). I've never trawled much north of Townsville. I've been up to Rockingham Bay, which is Cardwell, and that's it. Cardwell is the bottom end of Tully and that area.

I don't like that scolloping very much, that's hard work.

**JD** Is it?

**HAYWARD** It's not actually so bad now with the daylight closure - although you've got to stay at sea longer. It makes it a bit awkward if you are 30 miles from an anchorage when you've got to stop every day. But in all the time the last scolloping I did was when they brought that first daylight closure in - and that was my last trip scolloping, the first week of it. But the killer of that - to me anyway, I know a lot of blokes do it and make a lot of money and I could have too - but I didn't like working day and night, day and night, day and night, until the boat was full. And most owners won't have it any other way. If they think you are going to anchor up and have a day or night off, well you are just not good enough and that's that. So that was the end of my scolloping. Oh, I've done it a bit through the years just when I have to, you know, but I prefer to night prawn or banana prawn. I went from here on a boat called the



**Bindarree**, I did twenty-six months on her, I did two seasons in the north in a row as in the Bowen/Townsville area you know. We'd work our way up and work around Mackay - it was pretty good there at times, and then when it sort of dropped off we'd go to Bowen, Bowen to Townsville, that area.

Oh, and the red spot kingies, I did fairly well. That was about five years ago and four years ago I would think. I didn't keep an accurate book the second year but the first year we were up there - about 70 days we were there - we worked for 52 nights and brought home \$52,000. That wasn't too bad for that time. But my little thing that I like is banana prawning because I've done well out of it. Probably fluke more than anything but I've done well out of it. This year I haven't taken a boat on but most other years I take one on for the season that is just finishing now and I just do eight weeks or whatever, and I mostly get between \$30,000 and \$50,000 for five to seven weeks.

**JD** Do you have aerial spotting?

**HAYWARD** No, we can't have that here. A few of us got together and we were going to do it here but the problem here is that the prawn doesn't ball up very much and when it does it is not big enough to show a mark. On rare occasions it is, but not very often. The big lots I got was not last year but the year before and the year before that. Not last year, the year before, we got three and a half thousand pounds [lbs] in four days, that was mostly scratch. You could see a bit of it on the sand but not a lot. The year before I was lucky enough to find a big patch to myself - all the boats were a couple of miles away and didn't twig to what I was doing until I had a good lot on. I got four and a half thousand pounds [lbs] out of it. One other boat got two thousand out of it before the others got there... it was getting late in the day, they didn't get much out of it. I could have got another two or three thousand but I knocked off and just idled around trying to process them. And I should have put them down the scollop room in the boat and just kept on working but I thought they'd be there again the next morning as they had done two other times in the same area over the last six years. But when I got there in the morning there wasn't a prawn to be found. So I lost out again. But it is three times I've caught that batch of prawns in that place, and the three times I've made a mess of it and haven't caught what I could have. But it won't happen a fourth if I ever get it again. That patch of prawn was about 12 foot high, there was a lot of fishing up there though; probably 30 to 40% fish - that's trash fish, a bit of shark and that sort of stuff. But 12 foot high and probably 80 yards across, and it was fairly round, the marks, so anything crossing it was about the same distance across. Well I got four and a half, the other boat I called in got two, I don't know what the others got but probably ten thousand pound [lb] came out of it and we didn't... When I stopped catching them I had the sorting tray full and the deck full right to the gunwhales - right around the back of the boat and up the sides - and I was towing two cod ends full. I just idled around - I should have just opened the scollop room and shovelled them in, you know. And when I knocked off the mark was still nearly as big as when we started.

But nobody even realised that when I first found them I put a bubble on them, and as I was going around touring and having a look at it I ran over another mark. And the mark that we were shooting was the second mark, and when I was finished I went back to my bubble and the original mark was still sitting there untouched. It was about as big as the house and six foot high, but it looked like it was clean prawn. You can tell by the colour on the colour sounder what proportion of fish is in it. It depends how you are gaining your sounder, of course, but the way I set mine prawn shows up yellow or orange, depending on how thick it is - and if there are fish in it you get green flecks through it and the more fish the more green. And that big marker we got had a fair bit

of green in it and it was 30 to 40% fish. The little marker was just pure yellow gold, you know. Gold and orange! And I reckon it was pretty clean, but I couldn't do anything with them so.... (well, I thought I couldn't), so I gave it a miss. And that was that! And nobody even had a shot at that mark. But there was no surface indication of that prawn at all.

**JD** And you'd picked them up on the echo sounder?

**HAYWARD** On the echo sounder, yes! But see, I'd already caught them twice in that same area, years previous. Not as many as that, but I didn't get the lion's share of it the times before. That particular lot, the day before they caught something like thirty thousand pounds [lbs] of prawn about 3 miles west of where I found them; and when I got there the boats were all looking there. And I found a little bit of a mark but it was high in the water and the gear I was pulling had big side panels, so you had to get very high, and I had a big bubble on. I had four quick shots at it and I got five hundred pounds out of it and that was it, I couldn't get another prawn out of it. And I thought, well that's it; and I thought well I'll just go for a wander and have a look where I used to catch them, and I just wandered down and there they were - sitting there all nice and quiet.

**JD** Doesn't happen very often though, does it? Not like that?

**HAYWARD** No. I've only ever probably in my entire banana prawn career got a go at five or six lots on my own, and that would be the biggest. Mostly you only get just little bits and you might get a hundred, or two or three hundred pounds out of it. It's still a good boost you know, but I mean there's no point of it. But that lot was a big lot.

The one other time I got them I got two and a half thousand out of it but there were three of us there. I got two and a half thousand. One other bloke got eight thousand, and the other bloke got ten thousand. See I just didn't have the gear to catch them, I had bad nets and I didn't have the gear. And we had it to ourselves and we were just sliding off, chopping them off in bits you know. I just didn't have the gear that trip. Same boat, too!

**JD** The boats that you skipper, are they company owned boats?

**HAYWARD** They are all privately owned boats.

**JD** Privately owned, yes!

**HAYWARD** Mostly all from here. There was one year before then that I skippered from Bundaberg, but I brought it here and then I had it for about four months I think, and then he sacked me too because I wouldn't trawl - well not the way he wanted. He wanted me to catch them here.... [unclear due to music from a Mr Whippy ice cream van] and instead of rail them or put them on a truck he wanted me to steam the boat back to Bundaberg every trip, which is a full day's steam both ways, and when you get into a town I wouldn't know where to unload. I just wouldn't be in that. So he said, "Well, I'll get somebody from Bundaberg to run the boat." So I said, "Fine!" And the bloke he actually put on was the bloke he sacked to give me the job.

**JD** You mentioned earlier that you were also oystering for a while with your father and uncle. Could you tell us a little about that?

**HAYWARD** Yes. They had a lease - my father's sister's husband, he owned the lease originally. That was closest to where we were living on the island and they first just picked it for him and then they leased for themselves - bought the lease off him. I picked oysters probably from when I was seven. We later got the other leases closer to the Yellow Patch and picked them, most any weathers. We had a 16 foot boat which used to travel from where we were to the islands to pick every day, and then once a week take the oysters to town.

**JD** Were they cultivated oysters in trays?

**HAYWARD** No no, wild. Just wild growing sea oysters - milky sea oysters, they are popularly called milkies.

**JD** Are they the same as the Sydney rock oyster or different?

**HAYWARD** No, they are different - but not much. The oyster when you look at it looks quite the same. You know you can see a difference but not very much.

**JD** Is there a problem with worm at all?

**HAYWARD** No, no problem with worm. You get an odd oyster that has a crab in it, which is called an oyster crab, that lives on the animal and I guess would eventually kill it because it just lives on all the nourishment of the animal. But that particular oyster, when you pick it, if it is in good condition you keep it - if it's not you just throw it away. We never pick oysters in the shell and sell them in the shell; we were opening the oyster and actually taking the animal out and washing and bottling the animals and selling them that way, in bottles or in bulk - a gallon at a time or whatever.

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

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** Lance, you also were involved in crabbing I believe?

**HAYWARD** Yes. Same thing - started when I was a kid with my parents. I learnt how to crab in that same estuary, that's Yellow Patch. That has primarily been my crabbing area until the last four or five years. Fairly easy going. Work intensive - plenty of work, you know, not that hard to catch.

**JD** What sort of crabs do you catch?

**HAYWARD** Mud crabs, I've never ever chased sand crabs, only trawled them. Or spanner crabs. Just mud crabs I'm talking about. The biggest problem is your pots. It always seems that whatever pot you've got it's not the best. I've altered my style of pot a fair few times. It seems to work fairly well now, the problem being if you can't fish your pots very regular then the crabs get out again, and it seems you've got to make a bigger pot to keep them in or keep them happy to be in. And the other problem is the other professionals not liking you in the area and disposing of your pots quietly - which is straight out pinching them and taking them home themselves and using them when they feel like it. I crabbed amongst them when I was here last year.

Actually last year, as in last January/February fifteen months ago, the crabbing was very good. We were getting between 30, and our best day was 100 kilos of crab out of 50 pots. But in the space of when I came into the area where the other crabbers were working and were always fighting, in the space of four days I lost twenty-six pots. I couldn't sustain those losses and continue because I couldn't make the pots as fast as I was losing them. They are fairly labour intensive to make if you want to make them properly. A lot of people make them rough because if they are going to lose them, they expect to lose them. But I would prefer to make a good pot and wind all the wire ends in because you find if you are crabbing a lot a rough pot with a lot of sharp edges gives you scratches, and because of the mud and the mangroves and the rotten bait you soon go rotten, you see, and have a lot of sores that get sore. You know, it's just no good. So I make good pots so that you don't get scratched and you don't end up with any cuts and scratches on you. I think it's a lot better to do that. So if I work a full day making pots I can only make five complete pots, that's how many I can make a day.

**JD** With a steel frame, are they?

**HAYWARD** That's no steel frame - that's just weldmesh and a wire netting end shaped the right way. The only frame I put in, I put a box in the bottom (which I never used to) for a bait box with a lid on it, opening from underneath the pot, and I put a solid bar from the top of the box to the top of the pot and lift it from the centre of the top. So when you lift it you are actually lifting the bottom where the weight of crab is and stop the pot from concertinaing and naturally wearing out quicker, you know.

**JD** What depth of water do you put your pots in?

**HAYWARD** That depends on the time of year, or the temperature more than the time of year. Even the tides! On the little tiny tides a lot of people crab out away from the mangroves because the crabs fall back from the mangroves to where they can be in the water. That's a fairly good rule. But I still like to crab right in the bush where you only get your pots in 2 feet of water on high tides, and at small tides (because the tide is so slow) you've still got 3 or 4 hours of water. And the same process happens in there as out wider, the crabs fall back from higher up in the mangroves to that area, and they seem to me (not that I'm an expert at crabbing as some people may be), but it seems to me that they will feed more readily in the mangroves than out in the open - probably because they feel more at home in the roots and more under cover. You know, more protection!

The crabbing I do has changed from Yellow Patch. Yellow Patch you don't crab like that, you just crab in the open along the mangrove walls and the creek bed and that sort of thing. But in the narrows here every little gain that you can find to push into the mangroves you put your pot up in the bush. You seem to catch more crabs and you seem to lose less pots because the amateurs can't find them. Mostly! They still do, but not as many you know. The only problem with that though is that you can't go in and put fifty pots in like that, because you only remember where you put twenty-five of them. You have to start in an area, and what I do I start and I work and I might go in 1,000 yards along a bank in the gullies and put them all in. And the next day you work them, and you sort of get to know that. And then you extend a little bit further, and before long you've got your whole fifty in the bush and you know where every one is. But it's very hard to go into a new area and put fifty pots out of sight and remember where they are. Very hard! Some people used to write them down and used

to trail out and put them in a notebook, but you still lose them. So you've just got to do it a bit at a time until you memorise every bit of every tree, you know.

**JD** Is there a size limit on crabs?

**HAYWARD** Yes there is, it used to be 6 inches (I think that's 15 centimetres now, a little bit under 6 inches), and of course female crabs are illegal at any size. The crabs in this area don't seem to be a big problem. You get some days when you get a lot of small crabs but they are all legal. Other days you get all big crabs, but the reason for that nobody knows. Well females, they are everywhere because you are supposed to let them go. Well, most blokes just let them go so they are thick. In some areas they are a problem because you put a pot down and you get six or seven ginnies in it. It seems to me when we get that many crabs in an outside crab running around is not getting in. The problem being with so many getting tipped out, as soon as you put your pot down they [females] all jump in for another fresh feed.

Another thing about crabs, I don't know if they still know where they go to spawn or if they spawn on the coast or if they don't. They used to say they go over the Continental Shelf and spawn out in the ocean in the mud and the little crabs swim back to the coast. It's free swimming and they don't become crabs until they get into the mangroves. I fairly well believe that theory as long as I've been around that water, one month ago for the first time in my life I saw a female mud crab carrying eggs. And contrary to what everybody says, which I've always believed myself, it's only the small female that mates because of the shell change process, because they can only mate when they change their shell. And they have between fifteen and seventeen, or fifteen and nineteen (I don't quite remember, but that's the span) of shell changes in their entire life; having five to seven in the first year and then less and less as they grow older, naturally because they are growing faster when they are young. And that's the reason that the young ones, the smaller females, mate - it's because there is a lot bigger chance of them changing their shell. And what the male does, he carries them around until she changes her shell and then mates. And that has been the theory for years. But the female that I picked up at The Swains [Reefs] (she was at The Swains incidentally - and that's a long way out) swimming on the surface, flat out, egg case - well eggs, like berries, 4 inches long, 3 inches wide and 2 inches thick. Just pure berries! And she was.... I didn't measure her, I photographed her but it was dark and it didn't come out unfortunately. She would have been at least 6 and a half inches across, she was a big female, like the size they reckon don't breed. And to my way of thinking, if she's carrying berries they would have to be fertile otherwise she wouldn't be carrying the berries, she just wouldn't have them at all. That's my way of thinking, anyway.

**JD** What's your market for crabs? Is it a local market or do you....?

**HAYWARD** Well I've crabbed a lot of years over the last twenty. When I lived at Yellow Patch actually with my wife when I got married. Dad died. Dad died with me when I was taking him to town - I thought he took a heart attack, they tell me he died of double pneumonia. He died with me in his boat I was taking him in. After that I moved over to the Yellow with my wife and crabbed. I used to have a problem selling them here because of the amount. I wouldn't bring them in every day, I would send them in whenever I could, and it might be up to ten days before I could get an aeroplane to land because I used to fly them in; or get a boat run, or get it calm enough to bring them in myself because I only had a 16 footer aluminium and it's 30 miles or 45. It's a long way you know. So I used to fly them to the airport and then straight on to another plane (or the train) to Sydney. I was getting a lot better money in Sydney for them. But in the last few years I've just sold them locally here

because.... well mostly because the money used to be good down that way but it's got to the stage where you don't know if you are going to get paid or not. So you are better off taking a smaller price here and put your crabs on the floor and get your cheque and you are in business. You know! I've never been caught for a load of crabs but I've been caught for fish [by] sending them away. You just get no money back, and if you start kicking up they send you back a bill for dumping and cartage or something like that - you know it's a real problem and you can't do a thing about it.

A classic example of that, last year, Kev's Seafoods here who I sell a fair bit of product to, bought an esky full of king prawns and drove them down themselves to Sydney, and unloaded them and tried to sell them on the floor there. And the buyers there, they were mostly Greek, knew that he'd driven all that way and knew that he didn't want to take the prawns back, so offered him a terrible price. He ended up accepting it, which was about \$1.50 a kilo less than he'd paid for them, and out of 880 odd kilos, all in trays in a stack, they condemned two trays - that's all; and those two were later on. Now how can you justify that! You can't! You just can't beat them, so it doesn't matter what you do. You can stand there and watch them do what they like to your own fish and you can't do a thing about it. It's just the way it is. So I just sell here - crabs anyway; and just take the money I get. I think the price right now is \$7.50 a kilo, although I'm not crabbing. That's not a good price but it's fair.

I've just been reef fishing; but actually the reef fish I've been getting a chap up because I get \$1 a kilo better; and he comes up, weighs them and pays you the money on the spot too. That's the way it goes with the fishing industry.

In the last two years there have been so many fish buyers just go into liquidation, go out of business, that if you start selling big loads and let them not pay you, you are going to lose. I know plenty of people that have. I've been lucky, I've lost little bits - \$400 or \$500, but I've never lost a big lot. I've been lucky like that. I'm a bit careful too. So that's why I don't send any more crabs away.

**JD** Lance, the other fishery that you've been prominent in is the barramundi.

**HAYWARD** Mmmm. Around this area it's getting.... well, you couldn't live on it any more. You could when I was young. I did for a couple of years but I didn't need much to live either. I just had a good time and just scored enough barra to survive, it was easy you know. But you can't catch enough these days, or I couldn't. There are still a few fish here in the open sea and that. That's one fishery where (in this area alone, anyway) the amateurs have a big impact, because they are allowed to keep four barramundi - any amateur. Right! A professional fisherman (not that I'm bitching about it) but if he doesn't have the barra entitlement he cannot legally have one barra, he will be booked for it unless he has a barra entitlement. I don't know how many barra entitlements there are here. I hold one; I could name five others that I know of, there are probably twenty I suppose, the rest of the fishermen don't have them.

But amateurs all can have four fish, and because it is such a good game fish they are largely targeted by amateurs for sport. And of course they don't throw them away, they take them home and eat them or whatever, you know. So the number of fish that the amateurs catch - although they don't catch many per hour, very little in fact - they spend so many hours, and so many out there just looking for a barra, that by the end of the year the barra catch by amateurs I guess would have to be three times the professional catch in number, because they are just at it all the time. You know what amateurs are like - if they are there for the sport and they've got a day and a night to do it, they'll have a day and a night there luring. If they get three or four that's good. If they get none they are still there, and they'll be there next week. That happens

Australia over I suppose, that type of thing. You'll never stop that. Yes there's a problem with the barramundi here - the stock of barramundi here, because there are not very many of them.

**JD** The professional barramundi fishermen, do they use nets?

**HAYWARD** Yes, we all use nets. We are limited to three nets per licence as a licenced fisherman. The length - I don't know whether there is a length on it now but I think it is 100 metres [per net] and the mesh size - it used to be 6 inch and up, and they were talking about making it up to 7 inch. I don't know if that has become law or not, I don't think so. But they also passed a law that you couldn't use 10 inch mesh or bigger, only 9 and three quarters or smaller, which is a bit of a bugger because I have brand new 10 inches. They actually said, "Right, you can wear them out - we'll give you 12 months to wear out your ten inch nets." So I can barra [fish] them now or use them for shark or something out in the ocean, but not to set them wherever there was a chance of catching a barramundi. As far as I know the reason being that big fish.... see, barramundi all change sex. They are all born males and all die females, and there is a lot of controversy about what age they change sex but they seem to think between about 4 and 8 pounds [lbs], 2 and 4 kilos say. It's rare, in fact I've never seen it and I don't know whether anybody has seen it, to see a barra with roe in it less than about 17 pounds (which is say 8 kilos), and the big fish - the 50, 60, 70 pound fish are the ones that do all the laying and lay the longest because of their size. And they endeavour to make it illegal.... not illegal to catch them, but illegal to use the net that is most likely to catch them - 10 inch mesh. We used to use 10 inch and 12 inch.

In a 12 inch you won't catch a fish under 40 pounds but you might only get one, or two, or three for the week. A 40 pound fish is worth \$150.... \$120 or something, you know. So if you get three for the week you've got \$300 to \$400 out of it, and it's really easy because three fish, it takes no time to clean; three fish, and the time to handle it. That's why they make it that you've got less chance of catching those fish that are going to do the spawning, or the major amount of spawning, because of their size. I didn't know that a small roe produced less eggs than a big roe, I thought that the fish layed so many eggs, but that's not the case. The bigger female carrying the bigger roe spawns a lot more fish. A fisheries fellow told me once (he was only guessing I think) but he said something in the order of 1.8 million eggs out of a 60 pound female - it's a lot of eggs!

**JD** Too right! You wouldn't have crocodiles this far south would you?

**HAYWARD** Oh, very rare. There is an odd one. I haven't seen one in the wild, I've seen their marks and heard them but I've never seen one. I'd rather not!

I barra fished actually in Repulse Bay (just north of Mackay) for about 2 months and there were a lot of fish there, a lot of barra there too; we were doing quite well. But my nerves couldn't handle it, I just stepped out on the bank one night to pick a barra up and a crocodile roared, oh 100 or so yards away - so I spared the barra, it could stay there.

**JD** I don't blame you.

**HAYWARD** I have no faith in them at all. There's a lot in that area around Mackay and south of Mackay - even Saint Lawrence and up in Shoalwater there are crocs, but there are not many; and the ones that are have been shot out, and chased, and got

rid of. There are probably still a couple around the mouth of the Fitzroy - from time to time they get one there, but not down here.

**JD** They travel quite considerable distances.

**HAYWARD** It's surprising how far they will travel. Again, I've never seen them but I know a lot of people say that once you get north of Cairns and get up that way you can see them sunning themselves on the little sand cays on the reef, six or eight miles off the coast. So they swim out and swim around, you know. Bugger that! Sharks I can handle, but the crocodiles I just can't because they can get out on the land too.

**JD** What about other problems that you confront in fishing? Is there a depletion of stock would you say? For reef fish generally?

**HAYWARD** For reef fish! The general feeling of all fishermen is that there is a depletion of stock. I would entirely agree with that. I think that... well, from when I first started fishing every time I fish a new area that has never been fished there is an abundance of fish. Now that's quite right, there is a lot more fish and you catch them, and you catch a large majority of them... well, I don't know about a large majority, but you catch a percentage of them, and you seem to get it down to a certain level, and then as long as you don't just hammer it, and hammer it, and hammer it, it will stay at that level.

The Swains is a classic example. Everybody keeps saying that it is getting worse and there's less fish, and there's less fish, but what is really happening is... Twenty years ago when I first started fishing out there there were only about four boats working there, and we used to kill it - catch as many as we wanted. Now I can still catch weight wise (although I've got a bigger crew) close on the same amount of fish per day but instead of three, or four, or five boats there is more in the order of between twenty-five and forty boats - all making a living out of the same area. If you reduced it back to the number of boats and the number of men that were fishing when I started I'm sure you would find there would be just as many fish.

And going by the breeding times - like life span - to get to a certain size, but they certainly seem to grow fast enough to cover even the number of fishermen that are fishing them now. Every year in the last three years, at this time of the year, there are plenty of fish but there are that many boats catching them that by October/November (when they should be biting well) you can't catch much at all because what's not been caught has gone hook shy. The boats all knock off at Christmas because of the cyclone season, except for a few, we give it six weeks to two months, and start fishing early - the fish are all there biting their heads off again with all the new stuff [young fish] in there.

Even the trout alone, when I was first fishing we never used to catch a lot of small trout, well now you do. And that's why, because all the big ones are caught and the little ones take their place and we are catching most of the little ones before they get big. But next year there will be another lot of little ones. And so now there is a big market for platey trout - what they call plate size - which is under a kilo, a kilo or less. And there's just some places you go where there are literally hundreds of them. A lot of them were even undersized - we mark them on the bench and if we don't think [they are the correct size] we just put him back over the side, you know.



This trip I came home a week ago from the Swains and I had 992 kilos of platey trout in 14 days. Without it we had 420 kilos of trout fillets off bigger trout. So there is about 1,900 kilos of trout we got for the 14 days alone.

**JD** It doesn't seem to be very much depletion there then!

**HAYWARD** Personally I don't think so, I think it is just the number of boats that the fish have to be shared between.

**JD** What about pollution? Is that a problem?

**HAYWARD** Not a problem at the reef as in the Swains. It's not a problem at the local reef here - YET! It will be. The marine park has done a study here, last year. Not so much a study, a few tests, and they found on the reef (nowhere near strong enough to cause any trouble yet) - but they found insecticides from banana farms here on the side of Mount Larkin, depositing on the reef - which is 28 to 30 miles out from the mainland. And they said it is nowhere near where it is going to affect anything, but give it another thirty years and see how it's going. It might have.

But in the estuary and the harbour here, pollution is a big problem and it is getting worse. This is becoming an industrial town now and I would foresee that in another ten years there won't be an estuary industry here. If you want to catch estuary fish you will have to go 30 miles away to another estuary. You won't catch much here. They won't be able to survive in this harbour because what is here wouldn't be legally fit for human consumption in any way.

In actual fact we had a biologist up here two years ago and got mud crab samples and he took them back and tested them. He was doing it for our branch, we were fighting the Harbour Board over the pollution and the reclaiming and all that. They wanted to reclaim 2,008 hectares of mudflats and grass... sea grass. But anyway he took the mud crabs back and did all the tests on them and he rang up and wrote us back and said he, personally, would not eat the crab because it was poison. Not enough to affect you, but if you ate crab twice a week for twelve months you would end up crook. So, that just shows you what is in here already. And it's not getting any better. Other places could probably be a lot better, but this is becoming an industrial area. That's what's going to happen. You know, you can see it sort of coming.

Still it's the same thing as well. There's more blokes catching the same amount of fish here now as there was twenty years ago, but when I came here (about fourteen years ago) there were five times the banana prawns. Every season you go down to Tarrum Flats here and you catch between 1,000 and 3,000 pounds a day in the middle of the season, just scratching. And there's not a day this year that they've caught 1,000 pounds. And it's not because of the number of boats and that, because in those times it was a big pulse fishing thing and when the banana prawns are on - if they are on here - there would be 40 to 60 boats all catching them. There's not enough any more, they just.... if you see 10 boats here now that's a big lot. That's the reason that I don't banana prawn here any more. If I banana prawn I go up to the Yeppoon coast, up there where it's clean. And the prawn is just the same all the year. Here it's just depleted every year, you know.

**JD** Have the prices for prawns stayed up or have they declined?

**HAYWARD** That's the bigger problem of any. Four years ago, say five years ago, the lowest price that we would have got for cooked banana prawns for the year would be probably \$4, \$4.50 a kilo. The price outside our own Co-op here now is something in

the order of \$3 a kilo this year, and there have been no bloody prawns caught - probably a third or two-fifths of what is normally caught, you know. I't been a bad year. But it seems each year it is getting worse. There is less product, or the sale out of product, and all the buyers panic and buy less of it or pay you less money. But that's really a problem with the economy of the country, not the fishing industry.

**JD** Do you think.... is there competition from aquaculture?

**HAYWARD** That is also having an affect. I believe that that would be equal. You see the two things that I see that is causing the prawn price to drop - there's three, but one of them is only tiger prawn that's exported to Japan. With the Japanese Emperor dying and all that, we're right out of that market. It will come good again but it is only just starting now. But here there are two things.

One, the country seems to be in such a state that nobody is game enough to invest a lot of money in a big handful of prawns; and two - aquaculture can put the same quality prawn on the market at a really reasonable price. I don't know whether you've ever eaten aquaculture prawns but I have had a try of them in Innisfail last year, and they taste like prawns but very, very bland - they've got no real flavour to them. They feed them on chook pellets. Well, I guess it is the feed that makes the flavour because even though they taste like prawns but only just. Nothing near the quality of the wild prawn, you know. But because they are of an even size - that stuff that I was looking at and had a feed of, every prawn was within an eighth of an inch of each other. And they are a reasonable price, and you can ring up today and say, "Look, I want 500 kilos of prawns" and they can give them to you live tomorrow morning. That's where they've got it made, and so people buy even though they are not as good a quality. And that's having an affect too, and really quickly too. Two years ago it was fairly hard to buy aquaculture prawns but now you can just about buy them anywhere.

**JD** They are even importing them from overseas I believe!

**HAYWARD** Yes. From Taiwan or somewhere. The only market that they can't get near yet - I guess they will, but they can't get near yet - is the U.10 market to Japan; because they can't grow a prawn that big. He grows really fast to a certain size and over that it costs too much to feed him to grow. So that's what they are doing; they grow him to that size which is the average cooked prawn, and that's what is on the market.

**JD** Lance, what other problems do you see?

**HAYWARD** Well the price is a problem - always a problem. Even though I fish there is no way of doing anything about it, you've just got to cop it - it's the only thing you can do as an individual. I'm actually a director of the Co-op here and in the Co-op we originally had a deal that we all supplied the Co-op while we were in this port, you know. But it has got to the stage where you really can't because you get \$1 a kilo more elsewhere. So even me, I sell my stuff elsewhere when the price is right. We get that \$1 a kilo because as you can appreciate, if you get say \$2 a kilo for your product, right! Your expenses have got to come out of that. If you get \$3, that other dollar is all clean - there is nothing comes out.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

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**TAPE 2 SIDE A**

**JD** Lance, in all fisheries weather seems to play a large part; is it a problem here?

**HAYWARD** Yes, it's a problem in all fishing from day one, and it will be forever on this coast anyway, because our rules on this coast specify that we don't use bigger than 20 metre boats - which are weather susceptible to some extent. Not like gulf boats, the big gulf trawlers. That style of boat they can work any weather but... well, a 66 footer (20 metres) can work a lot of weather too, but there are still times when you can't. I've never driven a boat that big. The biggest I've driven is 57 foot, but even that boat you couldn't work it sensibly, safely, in over 25 knots of weather. Even at 25 knots (that's the boat I last scoloped on) you'd be taking a risk working in that sort of weather because if you do hook up on the coral or whatever, or hook onto a rock in the middle of nowhere, in that sort of weather you can have a problem and then come to grief. Not many people do but it's a possibility, and I don't think it's very smart myself so I'd rather be away from it. So weather is a problem always.

It doesn't affect reef fishing as much as it does trawling because once you get to the Swains there is a fair area that is protected; doubly fished as well, mainly because it is fished more regularly, but you can still catch fish. It has really got to blow 30 knots plus to stop you from fishing, and even then you can work on the boat at low tide when the reef bares (or almost bares) around you, you can still go out on the dinghy as well and work around the inside of the lagoon. You only catch sweet lip and stuff, but I mean it's better than not working at all. You still make between \$100 and \$500 gross for the day, just for working those 3 hours when the tide is out.

The biggest problem is coming and going. That's why there is no real, proper fresh fish industry in any quantity because you can't really travel from the Swains to the coast and back once a week to enable us to bring fresh fish in. It's got to be once a week. And to keep up without doing some damage or maybe, at the worst, sink a boat... loss of life, the lot, because it is just too bad. The weather just gets too bad, especially in that strip across the Capricorn Channel. The tide... I think it is a southerly set there, but the tide (on the ebb, any rate) runs south into the wind; and it is one of the roughest strips of water that I know. And it is about 60 miles across, so it is a long way if you have a problem in the middle and you are on your own. That's all there is to it.

I, in fact, punched a strong wind warning home six weeks ago from a bit north [Pops Reef]. Because I was supposed to go on the slip, for no other reason, but I had the slip booked for two nights. I got here and they didn't even have my name in the book - they'd lost it. So I didn't get out of water after all.

We copped a terrible flogging. We carry our dinghies on the roof and one wave actually moved the dinghies on the roof, and we had to stop and run with the sea in the night and strap them down. It was raining and the squalls were probably up to 50 knots of wind and it was quite a worry to me. Normally I sleep most of the way home, the crew will take turns at driving, but on that particular instance I sat up. If I wasn't driving I just watched because I was expecting something to happen at any time - it was just that bad. We copped it real hard. In the rain squalls the rain was coming under the awning of the boat. It's an ex cray boat, so you can imagine the length of the deck, it's a 50 footer. So I've got about a 30 to 35 foot deck, and we've got a complete awning. And the rain was coming under the awning and blowing straight out the back of the awning and still going - horizontal! That's how hard it was blowing. And we copped some of the waves, probably every third or fourth wave would come over the boat. So

we just slowed down as slow as we could and just took cover. That was all you could do.

At night time you can't go back to the reef because without sonar you are taking your life in your hands going near it at night time. Unless you are there and know where you are and you know what reef you are on, and you know it well, that's fine. But once you are away 30, 40, or 50 miles - if you try to go back there and the radar wasn't working either, you know you are taking life in your own hands. There is only one thing to do - just keep on going. That's what we did and we got here safe and sound. A bit of damage; broke a few things - a bit of timber work. A fibreglass boat with timber work on it that smashed. One wave, you wouldn't believe this, washed the green navigation light clean off the wall. That was a goodie!

But for fishing purposes it doesn't worry you until it gets really strong out there. On the locals it is different because there are not many anchorages. My sort of fishing is out on the shoal ground, the flats and that, and so it is silly to say at 20 knots you can't work. You just sit down on the lee of the reef and catch hussahs or something, if you can find some. They are rubbish, but again it is \$2 to \$3.20 a kilo. At the end of the day you've got \$200 worth or \$300 worth.

A lot of people say that you are an idiot to catch it, but I've just done four days at the locals now, came home yesterday. (Sorry, I had to unload yesterday). And for the four days we had a tonne of fish - a lot of it was rubbish, but the rubbish still made \$1,000 for the four days. Now you can't knock that.

**JD** Some of the vessels fish through the cyclone season?

**HAYWARD** Yes. I did this year for the first time ever. I've always stayed away from it and stayed in the estuaries for the cyclone season because I've seen the damage that they can do. I've been in a couple - not out there, but one at the Percy's I was telling you about earlier. And I've been in two at Yellow Patch, on the beach, and I've seen what they can do. And I've kept away from them. But this year, skippering for an owner who has to make money and I wasn't doing right well myself, so I was more or less forced financially to work it through. We were lucky we didn't get caught in one because there were five or something this year came down the coast; not bad ones, but bad enough! I was lucky to be away in here for a lot of them. But I think really that you are silly to do it - and so am I, I shouldn't, because if you keep doing it you know you are going to come to grief or lose everything - lose all! Lose the dinghies, sink the boat, because you can't kid yourself - they've got a terrible force. Terrible, terrible! If you got caught in a real bad one I, personally, wouldn't expect to live - you just can't. The water, with that much wind, the surface of the ocean becomes foam and the waves keep blowing off, and for about 6 feet above the surface it is very hard to breathe because the water in the air gets up to 100, 120 knots. I've actually seen that, and I just don't think you'd get out of it. You'd drown. Boy, it's hard! Because there's that much water in the air you can just only breathe water. It's no good for you.

**JD** The rivers on this coast tend to have bars, I presume?

**HAYWARD** No. All of the bars are south of here. From here north - oh well, they may have little ones but nothing like the southern ones where you've got to jump the ocean. Jump the ocean sea into them. They are all easily accessible in any weather. Which is another reason why I've never fished south of Bundaberg, because I don't like bars or breakers.

At Yellow Patch where I was brought up there was a little one, just a little one at the entrance there, and it was only ever rough normally when the wind was blowing from the north because it is used to blow straight in on it. But even as a kid I got sunk there two or three times in small boats, trying to jump it and breakers, and I just don't like it so I keep away from ports that have got them.

**JD** Do you have any difficulties in getting and retaining crew - suitable crew?

**HAYWARD** I don't have any difficulty getting crew, the difficulty is in getting crew that know what they are doing, or that can learn quickly and treat it as a job and not a holiday. A large majority of the younger people that you can hire today all think let's go fishing - it's a holiday. And that's what they want. That's what they do.

I've got a fairly big crew on this boat - I've had six on the last two trips besides myself, that's extra. I just had a couple of blokes given to me to take for a trip while their boat was out of action being refitted. I've got a few blokes on this boat that do a week's work (and bear in mind that on this boat I pay the men contract - which means that for what they catch I pay them \$1 a kilo live weight for all of the low grade fish, and \$2 a kilo for the high grade, which is trout, pearl perch, that sort of stuff.) The one bloke in question I'm talking about - the worst one I've had this year - he did 7 days and at that amount per kilo, came up to \$68. You can imagine the amount of fish he caught.

**JD** Was he not trying or did he have no skill?

**HAYWARD** He reckoned he'd fished before and he was good at it, but I think he was just talking through his bloody ears, that's all. Just didn't know, and he was the type of bloke you couldn't teach. He almost got a nasty cut. He was picking a tangle out (he was pretty good at getting them too) and got the line around his wrist when a shark took it, and it burnt him around the wrist completely. I grabbed the line and broke the shark off, and there was pure blood right around, just like a bracelet and could have cut if badly if I hadn't grabbed it. He was using an 80 pound line, that's big enough to cut you bad, you know. Any rate, he's only an example, you get quite a lot like that.

Then you get the other side of it where you get good crew. One of the problems that I strike with crew (I don't know if other people do, I guess they do) is that when they get good, a lot of them think that they are indispensable - and when that happens they are immediately no good, because there can only be one person running the boat. And if it gets other than that you will find that the whole show goes downhill. You just can't have that either. It's different if you own the boat yourself, but if you are running it for an owner you've got to make him money as well as yourself and the crew, and if they aren't going to work as hard, or start telling me when they are going to go to sea or what they are going to do, straight away the boat's catch has got to be watched for decline - and so it goes right down the line, from the owner down. You all make less money. Straight away the owner is not going to be happy, that puts my job on the line, which puts their job on the line - but they don't realise that.

I always say to them if they think I'm being very hard or this and that, "Wait one day until you are driving a boat and see how your attitude changes." They always are - that is the case. You've got to think of it from all angles, you are not just there to catch fish - you've also got to look after it. You've got to present a product that is going to be right, is going to be nice, look nice. You've got to watch how long the fish are in the sun; how long they are out in the dinghies - keep a cloth on them. You know when you process, you've got to process neat. If someone has been dragging [hacking] on the knife you've got to stop them and try and make them do it properly,

or put them off the knife. When they scrub them out you've got to make sure they scrub all the blood out and don't get slack and just start chucking them through quick.

The crew I've got now are fairly good but most crews you have got to chat them at least once a day for scrubbing the fish, and EVERY DAY. Because as soon as you are not looking they will be putting them.... you know, because they just don't feel like doing them. That's just no good, because it all comes back; it starts at the top and works back way down the line to them in the end, but they don't see that.

There's some good fishermen around - nobody's perfect, I suppose. But with the fellows it's hard too to get a crew that we all get on. That's another problem. I've not had much problem in that area because I pick my men fairly well. Not always, but mostly. I would go without rather than take somebody that might cause trouble. There are a few blokes that have worked for me for years that I won't take any more because I know they wouldn't fit in with the crew, they'd cause trouble, so you just don't take them. That stops the problem before it starts.

**JD** Do many of the boats have women crew?

**HAYWARD** Not out of this port, the further north you go you find a lot more women. In fact when you get up to Cairns almost every boat has got women on it, some have two or three. But it just hasn't been down here yet. Even in the ports with most of the reef boats, even cooks and that, line fishing crews - but not here, not here. The only boats that have got women here are the visiting boats - the out of town boats that are working here for a time, you know. I've tried women over the years, mostly fairly good workers but in a lot of cases you end up with trouble amongst the crew - it just seems that way you know. It is the cause of more trouble than it's worth in the end. It's all right with a smallish crew, say three or four people - but when you start getting six or seven on board, and one woman, they are always either fighting among themselves over her or she doesn't like somebody and she's put out over it, and on and on it goes.

About six years ago I had one girl on board; I didn't start out with her, she came on another boat and they sacked her at Yellow Patch, we were camped there for the weather to abate to go out to The Swains. So I put her on because one of my crew said, "Well you put her on because I'm not going to do the cooking" because we had extra people on board. So I put her on, and then he fell out with her and I ended up coming home because there was that much drama. He was putting a turn on, and she was trying to do her best. She used to get up in the morning just on daylight and cook us all breakfast - he'd get up and have a look at his and say, "I'm not eating that!" and go and cook his own, just for the hell of it. We all ate it, but he'd just go and cook the same just to be smart, and it was getting to her. I just brought them all home - it just doesn't work, you know. But otherwise I've had it real good.

**JD** Turning to management, how do you get on with the [Fisheries] Department? Do they listen to the fishermen's point of view do you think?

**HAYWARD** Oh, that's a hard question. A lot of the things that we say I don't think ever get there. That's the QCFO.

**JD** That's the fishermen's organization?

**HAYWARD** The fishermen's organization. We have a system where we have twenty-six branches on the coast, we all hold our meetings - obviously sometimes we are slack and don't hold them, or everybody is at sea, or different reasons you know. It then goes from there to a State Council, which is one member of the twenty-six

branches, and then they have the opportunity that we voted on to say "Yes, right, that goes there" and those twenty-six have to decide on it - and it has got to be a majority win situation before it goes to Government - QFMA. Right! A lot of the time what we would discuss at our branches we would say "Right, we'll have a go at that" it is wiped at the twenty-six man council because only ten of them like it. Those sort of decisions.

And one other problem we have in the QCFO is that something that might affect a branch, say for instance this branch, is voted on (naturally) by every branch up the coast. Now some branches are conscientious enough to say well, if it doesn't affect us we would rather not vote on it, or let the people who know what they are talking about vote on it. But there are other branches that say, "Right! Yes or no." and most times for some reason it seems the wrong way - even though it doesn't involve them and they don't know what the situation is, it goes against us and then that's a vote the wrong way. A few times that type of thing has happened and we've actually ended up worse off.

You know, the QFMA seem to be reasonable although they are putting a lot of restraints on - enclosures and that are coming and coming all the time. I don't know when that will stop. I hope it doesn't keep going too long because it will become unviable for everybody but the big fishermen - in which I mean the big trawlers, and the 60 footers and that, and the companies on this coast. The little bloke, like the estuary fisherman or the beam trawlers, there's a bit stink about them too. But everybody to their own, I hold a beam trawler entitlement - I've never used it but I hold one. I'd rather be out of it because they won't be able to afford to stay out of the enclosures and survive if you get restricted much more.

Like I said earlier on, if I had to survive on barramundi I would be out of the industry. If I had to survive on mud crabs I probably would be okay if I could stop them from pinching my pots. If I had to survive on estuary - you know, net fish as in whiting, bream and mullet in this area, I could probably do it but I would only need a three month bad spell and I would be out of it. For me to survive I would have to have a go at all of those things, and the reef fish. And because I have a licence I am able to go and run a trawler if I want. That's my entitlement as it stands. I don't think you could have that taken away from you if you are a skipper. So that is where I survive, and survive well out of it. If they restricted it to you being locked into one industry, or one area (I don't believe in zoning either, personally) you are going to probably go well, but if you have a bad time you are going to go under because you won't be able to turn to something else, like we always traditionally have, and survive. That's just fishing as far as I see it.

In my life I've gone from one to the other many times. Not always because I have to, but sometimes because I've wanted to, or I've felt like a change; but sometimes because I've had to, because I just would have not survived. Out, you know. Not only that, I've been a fisherman born and bred and I most probably will die like that. I think there is a future in the industry still. A lot of people say there is not, but as hard as it might be, the QFMA in that respect are doing a fairly good job as I think they are trying to limit the effort on the coast and make it viable for everybody who is eventually in it, which is a good plan you know.... a good idea.

I'll be in it; my sons may or may not - that's up to them, you know. But the people who don't think it's going to be any good, well they can hop out - then there's room and more fish for the rest of us. I think if you are fair dinkum enough you will be there in the end. It's just like.... you'll end up like I assume the Western Australian Cray industry. That's been up and down all over the place but it's a fairly stable and big money industry now, eh? That's really well governed. And I think that will happen here

eventually. For anybody who's fair dinkum, there won't be many.... well, there will be hard times and things that you don't agree with, but in the end you will benefit provided they don't restrict it too much. That's my personal view of it anyway.

**JD** Best of luck with it anyway, Lance, and thanks very much for this interview.

**HAYWARD** Thank you very much.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Lance Hayward of Gladstone, Queensland.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer







## Verbatim transcript of an interview with LES IVES

### INTRODUCTION

Les Ives entered fishing after lengthy Wartime service in the Australian Army. Now aged 69 years, he has retired from full time fishing and has handed over to his son. Les however is still very much involved in the industry. He is a past State Councillor of the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation and has been the recipient of the Fisherman of the Year award.

In this interview he contributes much, both from his own experience in the industry, which was mainly in prawn trawling on the east coast in both New South Wales and Queensland and in the Gulf of Carpentaria, and also from his extensive experience in the councils of the industry. He provides views on the control measures being instituted, the currently depressed prices and rising costs, the threat of aquacultured prawns from overseas and damage to the eco system upon which the industry is dependent. He also talks about licences and crews and their opportunities as well as the input of various groups in the decision making process.

The interview which is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry, was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Ives' home in Woree, Queensland on the 7th 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* Les, would you start off by recording your full name please.

*IVES* Leslie James Ives of 6 Maria Street, Woree.

*JD* And your date of birth.

*IVES* 9th of the Sixth '21.

*JD* And where were you born?

*IVES* Henty, New South Wales.

*JD* And were you brought up in New South Wales, or did you....

*IVES* Yes. I was brought up in Henty, Kingcumber, a small place north of Sydney and was in New South Wales and particularly Sydney until I moved to Queensland first in 1953.

**JD** What were you doing after you left school in New South Wales? You didn't come straight into the fishing industry, or did you?

**IVES** No. I tried various jobs. Didn't go on with a trade but mainly in Sydney I worked for an importing indenter until I went into the Army. I had five and a half years' service; came out of the Army; went back to the importing indenter until I left them and started a business of my own in carrying which was moderately successful until I left carrying and went into fishing. My first boat was purchased on an exchange of a truck and vessel plus cash adjustments which was my first venture into fishing.

**JD** You didn't have a fishing background in the family?

**IVES** Other than amateur. My dad was a very, very keen fishermen. I went with him all the time from the time I could just about walk.

**JD** Les, when you started in fishing what area where you fishing?

**IVES** I was fishing out of Sydney. I was based at a place called the Spit and all I was doing was trapping and long lining.

**JD** For what species?

**IVES** Oh mainly snapper, leather jacket and various other fish but mainly leather jacket and snapper. From long lining and trapping I left Sydney, or sailed from Sydney up to Stockton in Newcastle because I'd heard a lot about prawns. I'd bought a small trawl and otter boards and rigged up a winch on my vessel and so caught a few prawns there and decided that this was the way, a lot better than long lining and trapping. So [I] returned to Sydney, sold that vessel, bought a larger vessel and fitted it out for trawling and trawled once again at Stockton and then moved up the coast to Yamba on the Clarence River. I fished out of there for quite a few years, moving between Yamba and Ballina, returning to Sydney for refits where I still had my home. Then [I] left Clarence River with five other vessels to sail to Bundaberg where they were starting to catch a lot of banana prawns. I worked out of Bundaberg that first year and did reasonably well.

I returned to Sydney and sold that vessel and got a bigger and better one. [I] returned to Bundaberg and fished there in Gladstone for the next few years and then had to return to Sydney, sold the vessel and went ashore for a while because my three kiddies were of an age and my wife wanted a bit of a hand and so I had a spell from fishing for a while. Then [I] purchased a larger trawler and re-entered the fishing and fished the Queensland coast first and then moved into the Gulf of Carpentaria for the banana season, going to the Gulf each year and then predominantly fishing the east coast from Innisfail right up to Cape York which I did right through, changing vessels, upgrading and always improving nets, gear, bigger engines (technology changed) until 1986, I think it was, when I sold my large steel trawler and more or less retired and just bought my son a small 37 foot trawler which I still have an interest in.

**JD** Les, during that career, you spent most of your time in prawn trawling almost exclusively after them in the very early days, did you have any difficulty in getting licences for the various prawn areas that you were fishing?

**IVES** No, no trouble with licences. That's only a recent problem. There was never many in the industry because it was a boom and bust situation. Whenever there's plenty of product around, the prices were practically non-existent and of course fees rose as the product was scarce. So you [were] always sort of JUST making a living and

it wasn't until the later years when technology changed and we found newer grounds and that more and more people entered the industry.

As a matter of fact, while I was with the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation as a State councillor, I was the first one to ask for a moratorium on vessel licences because I could see that there was going to be over fishing. I don't know what year that was but if you check with Mr Noel Haysom, he was then Fisheries.... He was head of the Department, anyhow, of Fisheries in Brisbane. I had to take that submission and present it to him and speak on that submission and of course there was too much delay but eventually that moratorium was placed on vessel licences. There are no more licences to be issued in Queensland, that is trawler licences and, I believe, fishing boat licences as well.

**JD** Is that still the situation?

**IVES** Yes. That's the situation today. They are even talking about buy-back schemes at the moment because they realise there is just too much effort on the resource and catches are down. We were using every method to try and protect the resource. We were being hounded by the amateur fishing lobby and if I can just use the term loosely, every greenie going, that we are destroying the sea etc, but as an industry with our organisation, we've brought in a lot of, I believe, good.... what's the word, controls to make sure that the industry's there for our sons.

Firstly the moratorium on licences. Then we increased the size of mesh of nets. We reduced the size of nets. We put a moratorium on the size and horsepower of motors and last but not least, we have closures such as this last one for just on the four months. This, unfortunately, is partially an economic closure which in my opinion is not working. I think they should do much more research and then look at it from a biological point of view in conjunction with the money side of things because it's a large coastline in Queensland. You have various areas with various types of prawns and even, and I'll take tiger prawns, you have a different, I believe, breed stock in a certain area which is different to the area further north. So to have a closure on the taking of tiger prawns, not working one area and the other two areas are.... well a lot of the product is lost to the fisherman.

In our first unloading this year which I call an economic closure, I don't think has been a success because we brought in a lot of small prawns which we all know is unsaleable. It's no good throwing it overboard because it is dead on the table. The main reason for the closure was so the prawns could grow so we would get the maximum price from the Japanese market which likes larger prawns. So I'm afraid that we're back to the drawing board for the future.

**JD** Would you say that the total catch in, say the tiger prawns, has declined or has it remained stationary or has it improved?

**IVES** The tiger catch, apart from a couple of hiccups which would be because of probably weather conditions, lack of rainfall or whatever, has been increasing yearly but unfortunately that catch had to be spread over more and more vessels. So it's still more or less boom or bust in these days. To give you an indication, they're talking seriously of buy back schemes now and I think, from what I read in the paper and what I hear, that there will be quite a few fishermen going into bankruptcy this year unless they have a lucky one.

**JD** Is the catch in other types of prawn, is that holding up or is it declining, or what?

**IVES** Well they go together. Take banana prawns which are fished for mostly in the daytime. There's only a couple of areas. There's an area down near Townsville which is very productive on some years, again near Dunk Island near Innisfail and a couple of areas in Cairns, but the banana catch on the east coast is very, very small. It's mainly... the banana prawn is caught in the Gulf. The endeavour prawn, which is caught in conjunction with the tiger prawn, seems to follow the same pattern. There's highs and lows. The odd hiccup is the same thing due to weather. I can't speak with authority on why because the weather is tied in with it and I believe the tiger prawn breeds at sea but the egg floats up the river and the fry grow and then come out with the floods. I think salinity is tied in with it together with the flushing out of the rivers gives them the food that they need while they're growing and they grow quite rapidly but I know nothing and I've read very little on the endeavour prawn which is quite a big item in our catch.

You have the king prawn and there's only known brands around Townsville that seem to fire on most years and a little further down towards Bowen and Mackay. I'm afraid there has to be a very, very big increase in research through tagging etc and in my own opinion, it must be done on area basis area by area. You just can't take... not in the Queensland coast, you just can't take the coast, say from Cairns to Cape York, as one area. You must put those into possibly three or four areas and research each one individually because they are different breed stocks. It may be the nature of the reef or the rivers or whatever but a total closure on those areas doesn't seem to be working. Of course one of the problems with closures is policing. It seems to be policed reasonably well but you still hear of, for instance Gulf boats steaming up for their start on the 15th April in the Gulf. They're trying out their gear, they say, but they seem to be trying out for a heck of a long while and they found prawns on the east coast and of the few boats that seem to be unloading very early, fishing in areas that were closed. So we've got a long way to go with closures, in my opinion.

**JD** The need for research would be recognised, I fancy, but it comes to a question of who funds the research and who controls the research. Who decides what is researched?

**IVES** Well we have an organisation, CSIRO, that does a lot. The Queensland Fisheries does a lot of research but in this day and age the Government tells us that the user pays and we're paying because our licence fees are going up at an alarming rate every year but we don't seem to have enough input into how that money is to be spent. We had no input into staffing of any of the departments and it's just a case whether that department has to put in its budget and if they wish to put on another ten staff for whatever reason, well the user just pays. He knows nothing about it; can have no say in it whatsoever. So I'm afraid that there's got to be a lot of liaison between our organisation and the different departments if we want to succeed with its research and even out the effort on the resource.

**JD** Is one of the difficulties the consideration that because you're really dealing with two separate Government Departments (aren't you, there's the Commonwealth and the State) [there is] a problem from the point of view of the commercial fishermen's organisation?

**IVES** Well it has been a problem in the past. It's been addressed and I think that has almost been overcome in the States with this offshore settlement which gives the State rights to the 200 kilometres (I think it is) limit. There is only Commonwealth input with State in grey areas such as borders. For example, traditionally fishermen in Tweed Heads have fished in Queensland waters and vicky verka. So there had to be separate agreements there and the Commonwealth has to have input there along with

the State, with both States. At the moment, as far as Commonwealth is concerned, they are in control of exports to [the] Department of Primary Industries and there again it's a case of user pays and we have very little input. For instance, my Department of Primary Industry's licence fee as an export establishment or the vessel allowed to pack for export (it's the same thing) rose from \$350 to in excess of \$800. I'm not too sure of the figure but it's quite a big jump. I think that area must be addressed because when you have licence fees together with all your other costs such as fuel rising and catches are declining per vessel and prices are less than they were three years ago, we've got a volatile situation. I've stated that a lot of vessels will go bankrupt this year.

**JD** Les, why are prices declining?

**IVES** Well I think the marketing must be addressed. I agree with an article in our magazine this month where there is another substantial call for fishermen to be able to sell direct; by direct - direct to the public. Now in some instances that is impossible because big vessels would return to port with in excess of a thousand cartons of product on but predominantly up and down the coast the normal size vessel with small catches has the problem of accepting what the local buyer is offering and then probably having a drink with somebody and a natter. That person finds out he's a trawler operator and thinks he must be a millionaire because that chap had to pay \$15 for a kilo of prawns and the fishermen knows he gets \$3.00 for it. Now in some cases there is a middle man but the price received by the fishermen is not being passed on to the general public.

So that leads to another problem. Most people like prawns but they take them off the menu because they can't afford them. If the price received by the fisherman was a little bit larger, he would be able to stay in business and if it was passed on to the public, the consumer, you would have more people eating the product, our local market would improve and we would not be dependent so much on the export market.

**JD** Did I understand you to say that the fisherman gets \$3.00 per kilo for his product?

**IVES** I was just giving that as an example but my last unloading in the export class which they very rarely sell on the local market unless they're sure it's the tiger prawn, I received \$17 a kilo under ten tigers, that is under ten count to the pound, \$12.20 for ten/twenty tigers, \$9.00 for 21/30 tigers, \$5.80 for 21/30 endeavours and \$5.00 for soft and broken which can be a mixture of tiger and endeavour and you might have a few kingies in it, and \$6.00 a kilo for shovel nose crayfish, or bugs as they're commonly known. I have walked around town and I haven't seen whole bugs sold retail for less than \$15 sometimes. So if you want an example, the bugs would be one: \$6.00 to the fishermen, \$15 for the customer.

**JD** Is the trend up or down or stable for the fisherman, the price to the....

**IVES** Well at the moment the trend is that the prices are going down. They would be holding steady or going down. There's no.... I can't see any rise in prices and can't see any in the foreseeable future.

**JD** Is the competition from overseas product a problem?

**IVES** It's always a problem but I think the main competition for the industry today is aquaculture prawns. I believe South America is coming onto the market with more tonnage each year, Taiwan, parts of China, Indonesia. These are all supplying the Japanese market which was our best market and of course our wholesalers or buyers

(I just use the term loosely, buyers) have just looked at the Japanese market without establishing markets elsewhere overseas. I believe they are going ahead with those markets and are being moderately successful but I would say it'll be another two years before the markets are really established and our prices will improve. The biggest problem to our industry at the moment is aquaculture.

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

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** Les, could we have a look at some of the other matters of concern in the industry? What about the ecology, for example?

**IVES** Well there is great concern there. In our organisation we have an officer that's looking into that and monitoring it all the time. As you might know, there's [a] huge development going on in Queensland and the popular development these days is marinas which are attached to huge hotels with a golf course out the stern. If you wish an example, Port Douglas and the Mirage development where they built a marina which got rid of a lot of mangroves. They built a huge golf course which got rid of huge acres of mangroves and in addition changed a lot of the waterways on the local creeks which is [of] concern to fishermen because that is where the fish and prawns breed. Of course, in conjunction with that, probably ahead of development which is the destroying of breeding habitats and cutting down of mangroves in general, changing waterways, is pollution.

There's quite a lot of exotic, I'll use that word "weedicides" and pesticides used by banana growers, cane growers and used on the golf courses. A lot is supposed to be biodegradable but I think that has to be proven and of course these pesticides and insecticides find their way into these creeks and rivers and streams and they kill the foliage where the fry stay to try and dodge their predators or they kill their tucker or they kill them themselves. It's having a devastating affect on the prawning and the fishing industry.

So to sum up I would say that the problems on the ecology are: Number one is pollution. Second, the spoiling of breeding areas and mangrove areas with development and of course with development you must have all the infrastructure which is sewerage or septic systems and have a lot of problem with these. So that ties in with pollution. The blocking of rivers and streams with dams and barrages has a devastating affect. Next in line would be "shamateurs" which is an amateur trying to make extra money by using nets and various means and he doesn't care how he uses them so that he gets his fish. For example, you get an amateur, or as we call him, a shamateur, who somehow gets net. He'll place that across a stream somewhere and half the time he doesn't return to the net and it stays there and it's killing fish for some time to come. Whereas the poor old professional, he's policed and he's only allowed to use certain meshes; must be in attendance; can only use the number of nets, but of course as soon as the shamateurs operate in the area, the professional cops the blame. They think it's the professional. So that are the problems as far as the ecology is concerned at the moment.

**JD** Do you feel the Fisheries Branch has the resources to adequately police the industry?

**IVES** Well that's the \$64 question. I feel that on the licence fees etc that we are paying, that we should have more input on how those moneys are spent but they are allocated and I'm afraid that policing is well down the order. Number one, I must agree it is expensive and we have a huge coastline but although they have success, I feel they're just getting the tip of the iceberg. We have always stated that we would be inclined to give more money to certain areas in the industry such as pollution. We feel that of every dollar, be it administration or whatever, what's left in the end for the actual policing is negligible. So therefore policing is very, very limited at the moment.

**JD** Les, from the fishermen's point of view, would you say the management techniques that are being employed are proving effective?

**IVES** No. The management at the moment.... For example, there is a limit on the net sizes now. They could make nets in various ways so we brought in a rule and I think the rule is that it is 88 metres combined head and foot rope length which is the maximum any trawler can use on the east coast. Now I could name ten vessels without thinking that had nets in excess of that. So that is a regulation brought in to save the resource etc but it's not being policed.

Two: They are putting on closures which might be in this last one which went from December to April for economic reasons and is not working because the large prawn which was to be harvested for export to Japan is just not there. So there has to be a lot more research done, for instance tagging, to find out just what the life span and movements of the various stocks of prawns on the east coast are. For instance, prawn research, we may be losing millions of dollars with our catches being down. We should have been catching these prawns in February and although they were only of a count of 21/30, when we wait until mid-April to start fishing, the large prawns weren't there and they just had been taken up.... Well prawn stocks deteriorate in two ways and that is through natural disease and through predators and thirdly they only have a certain life span.

So there has to be a lot of research into those stocks so that we know when we should catch them to get our maximum return and one is that we get the highest price for ten tigers on the Japanese market but by catching the smaller prawns and having a more vigorous market, locally, fishermen could get a greater return.

**JD** Les, could I ask you, do you see the future laying with the owner/operator or companies?

**IVES** Owner/operator all along because he has got to work his vessel and only works it to fit in with his own life-style that he requires. He may take a month off even in the height of the prawn season because he, his wife and his family might wish to go on holidays to coincide with other members of the family or for whatever reason, and predominantly they work.... Well it's not, I'd say approximately a twelve hour fishing day, but then they have repairs to do, machinery and nets and everything so they work a fifteen hour day. They generally look after their deckhands, or assistant fishermen we call them. Whereas with a company operation, that goes right back to the board room and the only thing that is on that agenda there is profit, how they can obtain the maximum profit which is not assisting the resource and it's assisting nobody because we have a problem in the Gulf.

These huge companies with their fleets of boats of 27 large trawlers that are worth between a million and two million, they put on crews, they use mother vessels to go out to them and that vessel is out at sea for six months at a time. The only time it comes back is if they have a major breakdown. Some companies do change their crews but not very often because that's an expensive exercise. So you get a very, very big turn around in crew and unfortunately, probably to combat their life-style, there's a drug scene that's very, very big in the Gulf fishery at the moment. So the owner/operator, I think, is the only way to go and this has a reasonable affect on the resource and you generally get through your crew your future fishermen coming up through the industry.

**JD** Do you feel that people of a suitable type are coming in as crew members and hence will be the future owner/operators?

**IVES** Yes. There's a pretty fair percentage of those but I have noticed in the last few years that those that think there is a future in the industry are doing their level best to get on with owner/operators. Our organisation has helped in this because we have brought out service booklets. It's natural that a crewman might'n be able to get on with a certain owner/skipper but he's put in six months on that boat. There may be another crewman on that boat so he moves to another vessel. Well that record of service book has only got to be signed by the skipper and he goes over onto the other vessel and might do three months on that. That's entered in his service record so that he's advancing through the industry but at the end of two years, if he wishes, he can sit for his first ticket. Then of course later on when he does extra service he can sit for his other tickets. That way he becomes a skipper in his own right and eventually may become an owner/skipper which was the natural progression but with the price of vessels these days, unless he's got a rich uncle or aunty or father, doesn't happen very often. There are big types in the industry and of course we have the other element and we have a problem at the moment. It's been there all along. The payment is that the crewman signs on for a percentage of the catch, plus he gets his bunk and his tucker and probably his tobacco or cigarettes or whatever is necessary. In effect, it is good for a young itinerant, of which the greater number are of the crew, that he hasn't got to pay his hotel bills or backpackers bills or whatever. He's got his tucker there and everything and he's got a bunk. So that they've only got to catch one prawn and he's made some money.

Like all industries there are some unscrupulous skippers who don't do the right thing by the crew. Thankfully they are in the minority. Any that I strike, I send them straight to the Police and I have some good results but in effect the crewman is a subcontractor. He's selling his services for a percentage of the catch. So you come to the Taxation Department. The Taxation Department have come on strong just recently that we must take tax out of that crewman's wages or else we have to pay fines, etc etc. Now the law states that you must cover your worker with workers compensation as soon as you're paying wages. We cannot obtain coverage under workers compensation. So in effect we are breaking the law. So I've asked our organisation to address this as a top priority right now. To date I've heard nothing but it's an ongoing thing that I hope to hear something about daily.

**JD** The crew members wouldn't be members of the Commercial Fishermen's Organisation, would they?

**IVES** Well each crewman has to have an assistant fisherman's licence and we have tried to get them to join our organisation under a separate heading (I just forgot what it was now) but they didn't see fit to do so. They're quite happy other than those few isolated cases that I mentioned and it's a matter of progression. They only have to do



their years as [a] crew member and they become a licensed fisherman. Then if they like to sit for their ticket, they then can become skippers and naturally [go] on further [and] they can buy their own vessel. There's two facts that I wish to make clear here that to take fish under Queensland laws, you must hold a Master Fishermen's Licence; that's first. You must take it with a licensed fishing vessel and every fishing vessel of any size must have a certificated Person in Charge, in other words have his Master's Ticket. So our assistant fishermen or crewman move up through in the natural progression and become skipper/owners.

**JD** In addition to the service requirement is there also a training requirement that they have to sit for a ticket? Is there training available for that purpose?

**IVES** Yes through TAFE colleges and here in Queensland we've set up a college that deals with nothing else in Bundaberg. I forget the input or throughput per year there but it's quite considerable and those that can't afford the time or effort to go to Bundaberg, they sit at various times through our local TAFE colleges where they have the various schools putting through to Grade 4 or Grade 5 certificates. In addition they are taught how to handle their catch, how to package it etc.

**JD** Les, as a very involved fisherman, would you say that the people who make the rules that govern the industry understand the fishermen's problems or are able to take notice of those problems?

**IVES** My answer would be no. We have too many changes of ministers at the top who have had various port folios in their careers. These ministers are advised by heads of department who in turn are advised by the various underlings. I could use the terminology, these people are referees and although we give our opinions and through a democratic process through our organisations decide what is good for our industry, this goes through the various departments but mainly the Queensland Fisheries....

**JD** The Department of Primary Industry, is it?

**IVES** No. The QFMA.

**JD** Yeah, Marketing Authority?

**IVES** Queensland Fish Management Authority.

**JD** Management Authority, yes.

**IVES** Although lately we have gained extra seats on the decision making body there, for instance the Amateur Fishing Council has a seat, they are approximately 100,000 to our 2,500 and various tourism lobbies etc I feel we are not getting what we require in the industry. If I could use a terminology, we are being out lobbied or the powers that be are erring on the side of the amateur and the tourism lobby.

**JD** Les, you've given a lot to the fishing industry. Has your contribution ever been acknowledged?

**IVES** Yes. My years of service to the industry.... In the year 1982 I was voted Fisherman of the Year which was quite an honour, I felt. It's good to know that you had contributed something to the industry.

**JD** You've been out of it now for a year or two, what are you doing with yourself?

**IVES** Oh I still have an interest. I've got an interest in the trawler with my son and still do some repairs on the vessel, help unload, listen to all the woes, keep my eye on the market, go along to industry meetings and where ever possible, I would hope to be able to contribute something still to the industry. We have quite a few problems with the industry and if I could just give an example for a while where the due process is not working.... We find that tourism is really lobbying strong. They're getting areas closed where we made our living. I can give you examples of that here at Cairns and it's happening all up and down the coast. I feel that those fishermen (professional fishermen) that have worked these areas year in and year out for quite a time should be compensated in some way. I know that it is a resource that is open to everybody. It's a public resource. At the same time the fishing industry helps tremendously to the local economy in any area and it's felt right through when fishermen are deprived of these fishing grounds, where ever they might be.

Well one of my areas is, and I have made a submission before, that it is high time that we have licensing of amateur fishermen but that that be set up in such a way that both research into the industry or into fishing in general which is helpful to both professional and amateurs, breeding and stocking of rivers helpful to both, research and policing of destroying of breeding habitats and the general destroying of mangroves with development up and down the coast, and research into chemical being used by local industries to find better chemicals that are more compatible. They would be the general run and of course some firm guidelines laid down that whatever the fees is, for example \$25 for a fishing licence, that this \$25 is not eaten up by administrative costs which is a problem that has faced the industry. If I can give an example, the user pays, which we have little control over. So if that is set up there must be strict controls that those dollars they paid for those licences are used in the correct manner.

**JD** Thank you for that Les and thank you for this interview and [I] wish you well for the future.

**IVES** Thank you.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Les Ives of Woree, Queensland.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with GEOFF KAY

### INTRODUCTION

Geoff Kay entered the fishing industry after war service in the Royal Australian Navy. He has had a varied career both in and out of fishing, but has always retained his links with the industry.

He has wide experience in many aspects of fishing through hand-lining to prawn trawling. He has also been very much involved in fish marketing and retailing, in the establishment and conduct of fishermen's co-operatives and in other fishermen's organisations. He has also been much involved in the Queensland Fish Management Authority.

Currently he is Chairman of the Environmental Committee of Queensland Fish Management Authority. In the environmental field he is an authority on pollution and wetlands and publishes widely in that area. His outstanding contribution to the protection of the environment has been acknowledged by the award of the Queensland Environmental Award for 1989.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry and was recorded in Mr Kay's home in Oxenford, Queensland by Jack Darcey on 21st of April, 1990. There are three sides on two tapes and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

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

**KAY** Yes, Geoffery Howlett Kay, born 4th of March, 1926, at Woolooma, northern New South Wales.

**JD** Were you brought up in this sort of south of Queensland, northern New South Wales area?

**KAY** Yes. In those days, northern New South Wales, most of their trade was run through Brisbane and they were virtually more a part of south east Queensland than perhaps New South Wales.

**JD** So you were educated here. Did your people have a connection with fishing at all?

**KAY** No. No, my father was a Shire Clerk in Woolooma, and I was educated in the Woolooma High School at Woolooma.

**JD** So how did you come to come into fishing?

**KAY** Well, when I finished school I was of an age when I didn't have an option but to join up, and I joined the Royal Australian Navy.

**JD** This would be war time would it?

**KAY** Yes, and in 1944. I started training in March 1944, and with a Queensland number - B5104. Most of the northern rivers people had Queensland numbers. So I commenced training and I went to sea the latter part of 1944.

**JD** And it was only after the War that you came into fishing?

**KAY** After the War. I was discharged in 1946. I spent four or five months in hospital after the War, and from there I started at the Sydney University doing engineering which I opted out of, and I went back to sea with the Department of Trade. Bass Strait was the lighthouse, Navigational Department. Back on the ship I'd served on during the War which was the **Cape Leeuwin**, and operated on the Queensland coast.

**JD** And from that, then you went into fishing?

**KAY** Then I went fishing, and I started fishing on the beach with Bill Keft, probably about 1948. There were probably 30 boats fished off the beach at Greenmount, which were eighteen footers, two-thirds decked, with the engine in the enclosed front compartment, and self-piloting cockpits, crewed by two and probably 30 to 40 boats were operating at that time - schnapper fishing and mackerel fishing.

**JD** They had a special way of launching these boats, did they?

**KAY** Yes. Probably the fellow who was the foundation specialist in this was Claude Edds. I think Claude is still alive and Claude would probably be in his 80's now, but Claude mastered the knack of building the wooden cradles and wooden rails and these boats had fixed propellor shafts and the rails were carried.... crews helped each other launch their boats through the surf. The boats were launched into the surf on the cradles. The cradles were then drawn out from underneath them and one crew member would hold the boat in the surf and the skipper would start the engine. He would circle the boat in the surf while the crew then returned to help other launches, and eventually the boats would circle right into the beach and pick up their crew and work out through the surf - very seaworthy boats. They had to be able to shoot a wave like a surf boat and they had to be able to work through seas completely right over the boat. This they could do because their engine was enclosed in that front compartment.

**JD** These were eighteen footers. About what beam would they be?

**KAY** Oh they weren't very wide. They'd probably be six to seven foot beam. They didn't draw a lot of water. They were mainly clinker - clinker built. Later on some of them were sharpey built. They were still quite good seaboats and later on the sharpeys were planked up with ply-woods.

**JD** And how far off the beach would you fish?

**KAY** Oh, we'd fish out to eighteen miles, eighteen to twenty miles, on those reefs. The boats started off, they had Laxlon two stroke twin motors. Eventually the ten/twelve

Simplexes, twin Simplexes, they were a pretty heavy motor. Later on the Rugby car engines were suitable for conversion (four cylinder Rugbys) they had more power and they got those boats on to something like a semi-plane, and that saved time getting to the grounds and also getting home, and they were very efficient little boats.

**JD** Was it a netting operation?

**KAY** No, hand fishing, hand-lining for mackerel and schnapper, and there was a lot of art in being a good mackerel fisherman. They would fish and there was a lot of expertise came from that type of fishing, just how to catch mackerel.

We had a few sharks in those days. They took a lot of the fish especially the schnapper, and the boats themselves were attacked by the sharks and fishing.... one day a shark did attack us. We were pretty scared, right round attacked the boat and locked itself on the stern. The sharks in those days were very vicious and they would [unclear].

Fishing mackerel, we had a lot of trouble and had big losses from hammerhead sharks that used to.... We used up to 30 or 40 boats that were hand-lining and the hammerheads would take a few percentage of that fish.

In those days there was very little in the way of regulation. The government fishing activities - commercial fishing activities in Queensland. The main regulation was that we couldn't sell direct to the public and when we did come in to the beach in the morning, we used to have a lot of tourists who wanted to buy some fish. These couldn't be sold to the general public but it was circumvented that we would keep the boats some twenty feet off the beach where we'd cut mackerel and people would have to wade out and buy it. The fact that we were off the dry land prevented the Fishing Inspector from charging us. So he would stand on the beach and watch this activity and that's how the retail had to be operated in those days.

In those days the regulation was almost local. Some of the old foundation fishing fraternity called the Boyd brothers, who had a shed and they were [unclear] net fishermen and also beach seine fishermen. It was quite a big team of Boyds, probably five to seven and they were very big men. They virtually called the shots in the industry, and the place where the decisions were made what you could do and what you couldn't do was the old Queensland Hotel at Greenmount, and anybody who stepped out of line, got the message to attend there where the Boyd brothers would sort it out. If you were a beach line fisherman you didn't become a part time net fisherman and similarly if you worked out of the river on what we call a "bar boat" (a 40 foot boat) you didn't chop and change between there and the beach fishing. So similarly new entries into the industry (in my particular case) after you'd served a certain period as crew on a boat, they frowned on you becoming an owner of a boat until they were satisfied that you'd served sufficient time and that you were accepted as a master fisherman.

**JD** So really was the industry regulating itself?

**KAY** It was regulated and those who did step out of line got a pretty clip in the ear. If somebody appeared on the beach with a beach boat to commence fishing, who hadn't served their time they were black banned. The rest of the crews wouldn't help them launch boats or retail boats, and similarly on the beach seining, if somebody appeared who didn't fit the criteria to become a beach seiner, you found that Boyd brothers would hold the shots right along the beach, and they couldn't get the [unclear]

**JD** Geoff, are....

**KAY** There was a very good atmosphere in so far as we would lose quite a few boats on the bar or boats going ashore, and the word would be passed, and no matter what you were doing all fishermen turned up at no cost, to help the situation. We were digging out boats and most of our boats would come ashore on the land bar on the beach, and everyone was expected to turn up and help out. Similarly if somebody built a new boat, everybody was expected to turn up and help launch it. In those days boats were built in Grandad Bay by Norm Wilkins, also Clem Head, so that first 30 foot boat Clem built, when the weather was bad, we all turned up and worked as volunteers on this 30 foot boat of Clem's. It was launched, it was put on rails and taken all through the main street of Tweed Heads on cane rails and bogies, and launched at Heads Bay. So that it was expected that you'd turn up to that and if you didn't, well you know, you had a black mark against you.

**JD** Was there a formal fishermen's organisation in those days?

**KAY** No, no, there was no organisation at all. Just nobody challenged Boyd brothers' authority because there were six or seven and they were big blokes and they seemed to be fair and accepted by the people, and that was virtually the way that it worked.

**JD** Looking back over your career, could you sort of detail some of the highlights, some of the significant points in your career?

**KAY** In what way?

**JD** You started off with this beach fishing in these eighteen footers. What happened then?

**KAY** Well, Tweed Heads was a pretty strong fishing area in those days, probably the strongest fishing area on the Queensland coast. At that stage we did know Evans Head had commenced prawn trawling. It was probably the first deep sea prawn trawling port on the east coast. Though we had on the north coast of Queensland there were no [unclear] being used. So we had a fleet in Evans Head because they seemed to be making pretty good money and from the beach fishing I came to Brisbane and I had a 35 foot boat built to start prawning from Evans Head. Now once again, Evans Padden, was what we called the "mayor" of Evans Head. He won the world singles scull championship. He also prawned from Evans Head and they formed a co-operative down there, and Evans virtually decided who was going to fish at Evans Head and who wasn't going to fish at Evans Head.

Now, I was fortunate in being accepted and allowed to go and fish at Evans Head because each time that he had a challenge against his world sculling championships, my brother-in-law was an engineer down there and he would measure out the mile. So through that influence I got the nod from Evans that I would be acceptable to fish in there. By the time I'd built my boat (which was a 35 footer) and was ready to move to Evans Head, the Evans River of sandy cross and those boats that were out stopped out, and those that were in stopped in. That [unclear] decided to cross for something like thirteen months. So from that position I moved north to Moreton Bay and worked from there. I had worked small boats from there. We darn near caught up. We knew nothing about head boards or trawl gear or nets or how to make them or anything at all, so that we ordered our first boards and nets from makers in Newcastle, and eventually they arrived at the Queensland Fish Board, and the Fish Board financed

them and just by trial and error we started to tow this gear. We had no winch and nobody had an idea of what a winch was or how you got one.

So we worked our gear by hand and we started working Moreton Bay for prawns. We hooked a lot of reef and we decided it wasn't a very good fishery so we moved up to Maloona Bay and from there we moved to Brunswick Heads (not Brunswick Heads... Bundaberg) and very early met up with Reg Massie, who came up from northern New South Wales with a boat and I suppose, probably the first two trawlers that worked from Bundaberg, the late Reg Massie.

From there on I was still doing hard grind. I sold out to my two partners and I then went back into local government for quite a few years, and I finished up as Deputy Shire Clerk at Garrawaldum in western New South Wales. I was moved from there to Queensland and I [unclear]. I worked in the local government there and subsequently I did work for fishermen, part time, to assist them and eventually formed a Sandgate Fishermen's Co-operative and I left and worked full time in that co-operative. That was built with a working capital of \$3000, Sandgate Co-operative, and we bought a barge for \$2000 and that left \$1000 in capital. I worked into that for quite a few years and it turned out very successfully. It was very successful and from there.... During that period with the co-operative I was involved in virtually the whole Queensland fishery.

Just prior to that Frank Wicks built probably the first deep sea bottom trawler for deep water prawning, a boat called the **Atlanta**. His brother, Les, built a boat called **Telstar**, which was subsequently lost. His other brother, Alf, built a boat called the **Silver Dollar** and another brother, Bob Wicks, he built a boat called the **Domino**. But those Wicks's to some extent pioneered into that. Reg Matthew, of course, had sons coming on. He was a Moreton Bay fisherman. Eventually they graduated when his sons grew up. He was lost in Moreton Bay. They built quite a number of boats and virtually were pioneers into the Gulf fishery. They also were ex-northern New South Wales fishermen, and the Wicks's were ex-northern New South Wales fishermen, and the Roses who came from the big river, Maclean. Bob Rose, he started to fish Moreton Bay and, of course, his sons grew up, three of them, and they became Moreton Bay fishermen, and a lot of their work on the coast they pioneered Nanga fisheries up in the Cairns fishery, Charlotte Bay area.

**JD** Could we have a look at the co-op situation in Queensland that you were so intimately involved with, Geoff? Were there many co-ops in Queensland?

**KAY** No. With the co-op situation, what Queensland began to suffer from, we had a very good (from the Wicks' work in the deep water) king prawn fishery. It fished very well and, of course, once they were established many boats were built to enter that fishery. That unfortunately then drew many boats from New South Wales and New South Wales' boats were [unclear] due to the fact that the fishing grounds (because the 100 fathom line is close to the coast) they had a very short run before they were fishing off their own ports. Now they would come to Queensland for the prime of the prawn season and pick the eyes of it and then go home but, of course, working from Scarborough, our boats had something like a five hour run before they could start fishing, and if the weather turned on them, they had a lot of lost time, a lot of lost cost.

So there was a lot of agitation to prevent these New South Wales boats coming into the water, and the fishermen decided that to stop this they would build three co-operatives, one at Sandgate, one at Scarborough and one at Muloolah Bar, and virtually try to control, or manage the fishery by use of the fact that they wouldn't unload New South Wales' boats and they wouldn't fuel New South Wales' boats, which

sort of put some impairment into those boats fishing in Queensland waters. That was the original concept and even though in the early days of the co-op our prawn we took to Evans Head for processing, and quite a lot of Evans Head fishermen eventually did enter the fishery, the rule of thumb was if a fisherman came from the northern New South Wales and sort of bought a house and started fishing permanently in Queensland, that he was accepted. But if he just came on visits and went back home, well that is where the problem was coming in and there was a pretty heavy over pressure from that fishery in those days where the catch rate fell back pretty alarming, and there was one period of some two years back in those days, where it was virtually an unviable fishery from over fishing. But subsequently that was corrected and then the fishery opened up further into the north. That drew a lot of pressure of the fishery.

**JD** Did any of those co-ops survive?

**KAY** Yes, Sandgate still survives today. The co-operative at Redcliffe was never built because the fishermen couldn't quite agree and also, the Fish Board was pretty active in Scarborough. They had pretty good facilities even though they were losing money. The Fish Board at Sandgate fell by the wayside. Muloolah Bar survived, not very viably but it survived up till about right now, and I believe it's just been sold to Pills Brothers in Sydney. The reason for that was that right when the co-operative was built at Muloolah Bar, the Fish Board, they spent a million dollars and built a new Fish Board. Also Marquell spent a million dollars and the built a new facility, so that you had three facilities there which was really over capitalisation. But the co-operative had a problem maintaining viability and now it has been sold to Pills Brothers. At the same time Muloolah Bar and Sandgate, those two co-operatives probably were one of the most important stages of the development of the fishery because for the first time, the fishermen got to know the complexities of retail selling which they knew nothing about before that, but they came to appreciate the problems of shop people selling sea-foods, the losses and just what the market had to be.

Similarly Muloolah Bar was instrumental in breaking up what fishermen in those days were quite sure was a carrier collusion between Marquells and the Queensland Fish Board. Collusion between buyers was.... there was quite an issue in those days where there were very few major buyers in the Queensland fishery. It was quite easy for them to get their heads together and decide on a price. When Sandgate and Muloolah Bar Co-operatives came into being, they started to explore different markets and especially in Sydney and Melbourne, and that had a big effect on the price, and eventually they, to some extent, did dominate the price structure, whereas the Fish Board and Marquells had to keep meeting the co-operative prices to try to stay viable.

So that that was very important. Similarly the two co-operatives eventually were instrumental in breaking up the Queensland Fish Board Management Act. Up till that period the Fish Board was the only receiver for sea-food [unclear] in Queensland, that is for retail sales in Queensland. So the co-operatives eventually proved a point. The marketing side was over regulated by way of that Act and when the co-operatives then started to attract private buyers and organisations started to compete with them also, fishermen started to get a good price for their product, and it virtually to some extent became a regulated marketing situation. The Fish Board attempted to remain viable in that competition, and couldn't, and it subsequently was sold off.

**JD** And that's the situation today, that it's an open marketing?

**KAY** Yes.



**JD** So that the fish are not actually auctioned nowadays, or are they?

**KAY** Well, not now. They're usually by treaty at the boat. But further into the north, we now have many vessels in Queensland. The main ones of the northern vessels have DPI certificates. Those boats pack and snap freeze on board and they export direct. They virtually by-pass the middle man. But in Queensland, in the southern area, we have what we call the "quick prawn market", where most of this consumption is cooked at sea and it goes straight into consumption. The biggest market, of course, is Sydney. In the north you're looking more at an export prawn. That's snap frozen at sea and it's virtually exported direct.

But when the Sandgate Co-operative commenced receiving product, of course, it couldn't retail sell. The [unclear] of the fishermen was to get product out to people. They felt the marketing situation at the time wasn't handling sufficient product. The outlets were Fish Board and from there to retail shops, and we were suffering from catching all the product that was subsequently dumped over the side due to this lack of proper marketing organisation. So the co-operative decided to go into retail selling and to do that it meant our product... we had to buy product from New South Wales. The co-operative overcame that by taking it's product to New South Wales bulk, and selling it, buying back product and commencing the retail market in Sandgate Fishermen's Co-operative. The directors of the co-op at the time estimated that probably the sales would be in the vicinity of \$20000 a year, and we found that there was such a demand for fresh product from people, that the first week we ended trading at something like \$7000.

The co-operative today would turn over a few million dollars in retail sales. This probably had the biggest effect on marketing throughout Queensland.

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

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**KAY** During my [unclear] government career I had studied commercial law and business management, and I became aware that the co-operative at Sandgate were [unclear] its facilities and its successful market attracted more and more boats into the Moreton Bay fishery. Similarly Muloolah Bar which fished something like ten to twelve boats moved to something like 110 boats, so it became quite apparent that with the improved marketing and the improved facilities, it had the danger of blowing out the fishery and over fishing the area. At Sandgate, fishermen, because of the marketing (much improved marketing situation and facilities) began to catch a lot of prawn which was what we called an "immature" prawn. Unfortunately it did have a sale price, at a price. It was prawn that shouldn't have been caught. The directors at the time (and I also was an advocate for the organisation of fishermen right up the east coast) called the Queensland Fisheries Consortium. We had regular meetings and started to address this problem because with the opening up of the much improved marketing, especially in retail marketing, all ports began to have an increased number of boats, which [unclear] going back in those days, there were probably ten boats fished Cairns, where today you've got something like 300.

So it became apparent that we had to address this problem and there were a number of fishermen's organisations in Queensland, and probably four or five who became concerned. They did talk to each other. The Government continued to say to us, "Look,

we'll talk to you only as one body. We won't talk to four separate organisations." So then decided to get together and form one organisation. During the same period the fishing pressure in Moreton Bay showed indications that it was going to wipe out the fishery. It was a fishery that was fishing upto 200 trawlers a season.

**JD** Did that apply to other species beside prawn, Geoff?

**KAY** No. So we had quite a group of fishermen from the Bay prawning ports who were quite sensible blokes. They could see this problem, and we asked the Government for some pretty severe regulations. We closed off large areas permanently. We cut the headline length of trawl gear back to eight fathoms. We brought in a limit of fourteen metres in a boat. We regulated boards, board size.

Now this had quite a big effect. Many of our foundation fishermen such as the Masseys, the Roses and the Wicks, they had graduated into bigger and more powerful boats, and with the decline in catch rate, it became apparent to them that they would leave the fishery and settle north. Subsequently they have joined our northern fishery. They were certainly pioneers at the Moreton Bay fishery and they could see that that was becoming far too competitive. Nevertheless the regulations we asked for we subsequently got, and I think the Government sort of had a bit of a smile on its face, you know, "These bloody fishermen think they know what they're talking about but they probably don't. But if that's what they want to do, we'll do it."

Unfortunately then, the Government refused to police these regulations and we went through quite a few what we could call.... it was illegal fishing. We then.... when Government [unclear] we then got a whole fleet together and virtually illegally fished in front of the Government and the Fish Inspector, with television coverage and everybody.... people saw this and we told people why we were doing this, that we wanted these permanent [unclear] so then the Government then commenced to warm up the boating control, and we got policing for the first time. That evidently.... it was costing every fisherman a thousand dollars a week, the restriction of the effort and the closing of those areas, and that had some pretty big repercussions and it took quite a few years for the fishermen to accept it. But the fishery has probably fished very viably now for some fifteen years since those regulations came in. They are probably the most rigid regulations of any pocket fishery in the world.

Moreton Bay is the most viable pocket fishery in the world, even outside of what we catch. Our fishermen, and the crayfish industry in Moreton Bay, they're taking something like 900 thousand crayboaters a year. Amateur fishermen are taking another 30 per cent on top of that, and we know that amateur fishermen in Moreton Bay catch something like 3200 tons fish a year. You get the occasional juvenile areas and the restriction of activities to five days a week, and reducing the boat size. Boats can't work bad weather in the Bay. That has been a proven management tool. It's a tool that we talked to every other region of Queensland on, over manage their fishery.

To date, the northern regions of Queensland have avoided accepting what we're trying to do. We have a proven management that's rigid, but a good future, [unclear] harbour fishing. Unfortunately it's costly to the fishermen up to a point, but only in the short term. We have big problems northern fishermen accepting that form of management.

**JD** The northern fisheries are rather different from the southern fisheries in that the they're mostly company boats, are they not, [unclear]?

**KAY** Oh not altogether. The basics of the expertise are still individuals. Unfortunately the Government of the day when we first formed up QCFO, they laid down the criteria that it was to be open to owner/operators, absentee owners and investors. Now we've had to wear that and from that period when the QCFO was formed some fifteen years ago....

**JD** Could I just break in and ask you what those letters stand for?

**KAY** Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation.

**JD** Right, thank you.

**KAY** We had been lobbying the Government.... it was quite some time (and formed this organisation) and pretty unsuccessfully, but eventually with persistence from the late June Houghton who was the Member for Redcliff and Speaker in the House, and Russ Hinze, who was Member of Parliament at the time and Des Fawley who was the Member for Walooma. They eventually spoke for us and the Government agreed that we could commence what they called the "provisional" Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation. In other words we would be unpaid volunteers, set ourselves up as a committee and we worked through the Council of Agriculture. They made the late Jack Jones who was the Secretary of the Council of Agriculture, he was the Chairman - a Government appointed Chairman, and his staff.

So we worked for that organisation without money for something like two years. That provisional State Council was quite successful. It had probably the foundation leaders of the fishing industry involved, because I could see that each and every one of them had realised that the success of the retail market and marketing) was rapidly gone with the fishery. This is going back fifteen years ago, and they could see the writing on the wall for their future and the fishery.

After some two years, that provisional State Council was reconstructed and Jack Jones was an excellent Government appointed Chairman. Eventually the Government conceded that if we could sit round the table for two years and survive, we might have.... they would allow us to form up the statutory organisation, which subsequently was formed. That sprang from where we started off in those days at \$60 a year and the contribution now is compulsory from every master fisherman in Queensland. At present time the budget is up to one and a quarter million, and we have a regional office in Townsville and another regional office in Cairns, and it has become well recognised as a very successful fishery management too. There are some 26 branches in the organisation which is split up into four regions, but nevertheless there is a lot of conflict, and the conflict is coming from the fact that naturally fishermen want to get bigger and bigger. You've got a twenty metre limit on any boat working here on the Queensland coast.

Eventually.... well, reasonably one of the biggest advances made after Kishi Bay was still on.... say, it will be eight years ago. We eventually got agreement narrowly, to declare the retail fishery as a limited entry fishery from the New South Wales border, the full length of the coast. The Government eventually took our recommendation and closed the [unclear] to limited entry fishery, and boats now.... a master fisherman will operate but they are entitled. We then.... from the time we declared this limited entry, we found also that many areas in the north that were purely regarded as limited potential as more and more boats appeared in those areas, and people had spent more money on boats, they started looking further and further and fishery.... they discovered fisheries that hadn't been fished before and we've just been through a

period of probably some five years where the industry has become a very, very viable fishery with an infra-structure of something like 700 million dollars a year.

I believe that that great (and the fact that it is sustainable) has been due to this management that we had put on the fishery, and control of operations in the fishery and controlled any further apparatus coming in to the fishery. If we had continued without limited entry the way we were going, where we were accepting something like 150 to 200 new trawlers a year. By - well, well before this - we would have run the whole fishery out. So that was probably one of the biggest success stories of QCFO.

**JD** Can I just come back to this question of management. The fishermen's organisation, as I understand you, has now representation on a council that has statutory authority. They've managed the industry. Also represented, of course, would be Government I presume. Are the fishermen's representative elected or appointed?

**KAY** Well, with the Queensland Fish Management Authority, it came into being by QCFO lobbying the Government. A recent effect that prior to the Queensland Fish Management Authority, we were working through a number of government agencies. This was very confusing. We worked through Primary Industries and Harbours and Marine and Brisbane Port Authority, National Parks and Wildlife. It was very confusing to get legislation carried out and to decide which just which Minister was responsible for the venture.

Eventually the Government saw the need for the Queensland Fish Management Authority. This was financed wholly by fishermen through master fishermen's levies and apparatus levies, and it's really the clearing house as far as legislation, and it accepts .... it handles recommendations from the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation, and in this form any decisions or changes to legislation or management tools, they originate from any one of the 26 branches in Queensland. We appoint a State Councillor.

He comes to the State Council and puts up his branch submission and it may be approved by the organisation (that is QCFO). From there it goes to another organisation which is actually an advisory body to the Queensland Fish Management Authority. That's called FISAC, Fishing Industry's Specialist Advisory Committee. Now, on that there are a number of government appointees, staff from the Queensland Management Authority, Primary Industries, Premier's Department, etc. They go through the agenda that's going to Queensland Fish Management Authority, and virtually give opinions on them. From there on it goes to the Fish Management Authority at which we have four members. They're appointed by the Government for a period of three years and they're appointed from a panel of names. In other words we don't decide Joe Blow's going to sit, we just put up a panel of names, and they come from the four regions, representatives of the four regions.

They wear a different hat at that stage because most of them are State Councillors, and where there's perhaps a call from fishermen that they should remain loyal to the recommendations of the organisation, they have to take that hat off and put a new hat on where they look at the proposed legislation in a much more serious vein to see whether it's legally possible or perhaps disadvantages some other section of society.

Similarly the Amateur Fishing Council have a seat on that, the processors have a seat and a number of government appointees, so that it's [unclear] a section. They also make decisions on perhaps illegal actions of commercial fishermen who buy or process, and they have the power to inflict the heavy penalties. Similarly if they [unclear] and the fisherman still doesn't agree with it, within the [unclear] groundwork

that was done there is an appeals tribunal. He can go to that and that's chaired by a former judge and it's staffed by government appointees, one of whom must be a retired master fisherman, but there's no further financial interest in the industry. They look at the decision of [unclear] and they take into account other factors (social factors) and whatever case that fisherman wants to put up. He can be represented by a solicitor, and they virtually make the decision and they can over-rule the Queensland Fish Management Authority on those sort of issues.

The Queensland Fish Management Authority having decided that they agree with QCFO on the change of regulations on management rule such as net size or the closed area, the Chairman of the Authority eventually makes a recommendation and the Minister has the final say, yes or no. This is not without problems because the grapevine leaks on the fact that if you were able to prove certain restrictions which may be for the benefit over all of the industry in the long term, but has some disadvantage of the hip pocket of certain fishermen in the short term, unfortunately it suffers from those fishermen lobbying. Some ministers who have held that portfolio have virtually closed their doors to lobbying and listened to the recommendations from the Chairman of the QCFO. Others have attempted to be more democratic and left their doors open to input from all types of individual fishermen, but that has caught a fair bit of conflict where a minister has virtually tried to act as God without the knowledge that management criteria was probably trying to do something like a year in the pipeline. It's probably gone through twenty meetings. It's survived through QCFO. It can lobby outside the ministers who listened to perhaps the last voice and said, "Oh I think all these fishermen [unclear]."

But that's a problem and that really comes back to whether the ministry is going to accept a vast structure, and our structure costs one and a quarter million a year. QCFO structure costs two and a half million a year. You know, is there a God that thinks he knows better than that structure? But that's a [unclear]. But nevertheless it works very well and naturally fishermen being individuals, they compulsorily pay their levy and quite a large proportion of them don't like it and, of course, the fact that QCFO are bureaucrats, they naturally don't like bureaucrats. But it works pretty successfully and we found the original appointees to QCFO, they came from the [unclear] industry and we were very disappointed by the staffing of that organisation and we used to call them "pickworkers" and we're stuck with them - knowing how to run a fishing industry without any prior knowledge of it. But it's well regarded by fishermen that it was supplying. The bureaucrats certainly do have expertise and it's remarkable that within twelve months how much they should pick up our industry when it's come down to things.

My type of boat, I regarded them as just. The other fishermen perhaps weren't regarded as [unclear]. There has to be a professional framework somewhere in an industry to frame legislation, but successfully viable where it's legally possible that it doesn't disadvantage other sectors of society etc. [unclear]

**JD** Geoff, although you've retired you're still a master fisherman in Queensland, and you're also Chairman of the Environmental Committee of the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation, I understand. What are the problems environmentally as you see them?

**KAY** Well, up till five years ago, I was a member of the Management Committee of QCFO and occasionally we did present development proposals from the Department of Primary Industry and we would virtually.... There was a lot of development taking place in wetlands and we had no knowledge of environmental matters and fishermen up to that stage, didn't have much concern. However, I began to pressure

Management Committee for.... that we should start taking a more serious view of pollution and wetland destruction. As well as that the Management Committee, I think, facetiously said, "Well, you've got a lot to say about this. Do something about it."

So I took on this role and representations were made to the Queensland Management Authority. They recommended that I sit on a specialist committee with the Department of Primary Industries and also representatives from the Amateur Fishing Council, to view development proposals that were submitted to the Department of Primary Industries (Wetland Section) for comment, before a report was made by the Department which went back to the Minister for eventual approval.

What it amounted to as far as I was concerned (fortunately I had the time) I commenced reading and I was reading something like six books a week. I did a complete study of Chesapeake Bay in America and the American pollution problems, and also the American Federal legislation and the history of how it came into being. It wasn't satisfactory for environmental legislation in each State because one polluted the other so it had to be Federal. This took a long time. Also I studied the rate of wetland destruction which was pretty horrific. Then I started to relate that back to Queensland particularly. I went to New South Wales and studied their set legislation. I went to Western Australia and studied their environmental legislation.

Coming back to Queensland I started to feature this by articles to a magazine and the various newspapers, and eventually came to the conclusion that at the present rate of wetland destruction.... we identified that on the drawing board at that stage, there was something like 250 proposals which involved destruction of mangrove and wetlands on the Queensland coast. So they highlighted this, the newspapers did, and told the people of Queensland what was going on, and we had a pretty big response to it. We then made representations to Australians to keep annoying [unclear] at Townsville, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and also James Cook University, and eventually I was requested to present a paper to a seminar at Griffiths University on coastal management, which I did and which was well received.

We continued with this quite successfully and it did have some bearing on the past National Party Government in so far as we felt that they were more inclined to favour developments. They talked very strongly about the past [unclear] legislation which allowed the Government the country code which was a very important juvenile fish and fauna, and eventually we convinced Mike Ahern in the last days of his Premiership, the need for coast management plans. We met the Premier and his senior Cabinet Ministers. We put our case and Mike Ahern did agree that Queensland now would aim towards a coastal management plan and begin to arrest the mangrove and wetland destruction [unclear] and also come to terms with pollution from pesticides, agricultural chemicals, and also toxic wastes flowing from those industries on the coast, and also the fishing sewerage, reticulation - or at least the sewerage treatment works that were operating on the coast.

That's in the pipeline now. The new Government in their election strategy have promised that they would further the aims of this coastal management plan which basically the outlines of it have been worked out. We've virtually got a nucleus during the late government association in Queensland that it would.... something on the framework we worked out would be acceptable, and if you leave them off present problems as far as the developments are concerned, and also perhaps cut off the [unclear] inlets associated with Council's approved developments. As the result of that, last year, I received the Environmental Award for Queensland. I think that also, you could say that the committee that I headed were [unclear] other fishermen from up the coast who promoted wetland destruction, not so much for the benefit of

commercial fishing, but more for the aspirations of future generations, and that was pretty well received, and I think it had a pretty good bearing on those elections.

**JD** Congratulations, Geoff. That was the Queensland Environmental Award for individuals for last year, I understand.

This interview continues on side a of tape two.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

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## TAPE 2 SIDE A

**JD** Geoff, are there any other environmental problems that your committee is involved with?

**KAY** Yes. Seventeen years ago, Queensland cattle had a problem with hexachlorine residues in beef cattle, which resulted in the whole of the Queensland eastern seaboard being in quarantine for excessive levels of hexachlorine. We viewed this very seriously because everything on the land eventually washes in to the sea. We had worries also, we knew that the killing [unclear] these organo chlorines were something like one part to a billion which is something like a teaspoonful in an olympic swimming pool, is sufficient to kill a juvenile sprat. So we worried (we had big worries) as to how much juvenile product we were losing from the effect of the organo chlorines. Organo chlorines are not banned in Queensland but if they had something like a 34 year half life, we will know just whether our export prawn would be detected with unacceptable levels by certain overseas countries.

The Department of Primary Industries offered to do a testing programme for us. At the time we were inclined to distrust that because if the levels were found to be perhaps excessive it would badly affect our export trade, so we decided to do a confidential programme of our own which has been completed. We commissioned Griffiths University to carry this out. It was quite an expensive programme and we tested product on the whole of the Queensland east coast. Those results are out but they're confidential. Fortunately we found that our levels are safe. There were a few hot spots on the coast which we're now having looked at again. They're looking for sources of these chemicals.

We talked to the Government on this and we talked to the Australian Institute of Marine Science and we had a pretty.... probably the best network of professional advice that is available in Australia through the Australian Institute of Marine Science, Griffiths University, James Cook University and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Authority. We had meetings with scientific people from the organisations advising us how to come to terms with this. We're probably the first organisation in Australia who have just employed a full time environmental scientist. His job will be to commence monitoring certain areas of the coast and looking at areas that we refer to him from our committee, where we suspect there is excessive pollution, or anything that might be affecting the wetlands and our fisheries.

**JD** Some of the other problems.... I don't suppose they're really environmental but what about the pressure of recreational fishing on the raw resources?

**KAY** We don't have a big problem. We did have a conflict in past days with the recreational fishermen. Perhaps a lot of that conflict came from recreational fishermen

themselves who, like the majority of society, felt that commercial fishermen were ripping the backside out of the fishing industry, avariciously, just for profit and gain at any cost. When the Amateur Fishing Council became aware that we actually do have a very rigid management programme and we certainly put more hardship on our own members than any other primary organisation in Queensland. We now find that we sit down.... we've come to terms with the recreational fishermen. This also is assisted when they did take an active interest in the environment. Whatever we did to the environment was to their advantage as well as our own, so that they thought that perhaps we weren't such a bad lot and that we were responsible. We were prepared to inflict penalties on our own members where there was conflict with the environment. So we now don't have a big problem with recreational fishermen.

The problem that remains is what we call "pro-ams" that are fishermen who aren't market fishermen, but are operating virtually illegally (although they cannot under Section 35 of the Act) in buying and selling fish. Now we are talking to the Government very strongly to cut this out because it brings in a lot of problems such as the handling of product, presentation of product. Similarly we have in Queensland a secateur problem, secateur poisoning. Commercial fishermen know the areas where fish infected by secateur are. You don't catch product in those areas. The only problems we've had with secateur poisoning from Queensland fish have been fish that have been illegally caught and sold by [unclear] fishermen. The Recreational Fishing Council also recognised this and they are now on side with us to contain the activities of these [unclear] fishermen.

**JD** Some of the other problems that fishermen confront (and fishing has always been a hazardous and hard work industry) one of them is the weather, of course, and the other and more prevalent perhaps in recent years, is shipping. Now vessels (fishing vessels) are run down by larger vessels.

**KAY** Yes, well, commenting on the weather side first, what I think society doesn't realise, especially boating types - yachties - is that the fishermen today are very much up front with the best of the electronic equipment available. These fishermen go to sea, they usually go to sea with a fair knowledge of weather conditions because they have a radio, they are talking to fishermen further down the coast. Perhaps they know better even than the weather bureau of what to expect in any given period and while they are at sea, they've had their problems about dams and hazards, but they are in constant radio contact with adjoining fishing vessels and they get that assistance. That happens all night. We probably had.... our losses of fishermen from a million hours would be very, very low, and we did have an officer from the Canberra Rescue Organisation who did address us once, and told us of the dreadful losses of people in small boats (which included us) per year on the coast, and how much it was costing the Commonwealth Government, until we were able to turn round and say, "Look, we haven't lost anybody this year in so many million working hours," but where the yachtsmen and specially the [unclear] vacationer and recreational boat doesn't hurt either. If he goes to sea on his own, he is certainly a risk and hazard because he hasn't got that ready call for assistance from adjoining boats.

If there's shipping; we've had big conflict with shipping in the past and [unclear] the north in the inner Barrier Reef. After a number of meetings with the Department of Trade we've come to terms with that. Those ships, most of them are controlled by Queensland pilots who know the fishing industry. They do talk to trawlers and advise their position and where they can expect to be at a certain time. This gives the trawlers an opportunity to keep the way clear for them and they respect that. But down the southern areas where you've got shipping coming across from say America and New Zealand, where you do have ships that make landfalls on this coast, and they



arrive announced by radio. They seem to have poor regard for trawlers and trawlers have a very big disadvantage in this way, because they're often fishing in 100 fathoms of water. They're travelling very slowly at perhaps two and a half knots, and to recover their gear from that depth of water is often twenty to twenty-five minutes, so that they're virtually pinned on that spot, and the result of the recent incident up Cape Norton where we believe a trawler has been run down, we will be making very strong representations for shipping to be alerted coming in to these waters to the effect that it is a very heavy trawler area and that these trawlers are at a big disadvantage.

**JD** To come back to your own career now, you also built vessels. Would you like to tell us a bit about that?

**KAY** Yes. Well, going back when I started, everybody built their own boats. Usually they started off by working for other fishermen building boats and picked up the skills that were passed on. I've built quite a number of boats and the last one that I built was a very heavy boat, a 45 footer, which was some 55 ton, and perhaps a lot of that expertise is being lost because in those days you had to practically do everything. Build the boat, fit the engine, fit the propellor and shaft, the fuel tanks and the whole box of dice and get it into the water. These days that's looked at pretty simply with cranes, but in those days there weren't cranes around that could lift 25 to 30 tons. So it had to be done manually but fortunately, the people of those days, when something like that was on, everybody turned up and sort of gave a community hand. Perhaps that's not going to happen any more.

**JD** The world's changed rather somewhat, hasn't it? Geoff, how do you see the future of the fishing industry? Are you confident about it?

**KAY** The Queensland fishing industry by way of limited entry, did contain the amount of apparatus and unfortunately, we have to look and make some provisions here in proved techniques. We look very carefully and keep trying to say, "We mustn't build a trawler and then restrict its efficiency." Theoretically it's stupid to build a very efficient trawler then bring in regulations to restrict its efficiency. We have started to do that. We have now cut down headline length for the whole of the east coast inside 50 fathoms to 88 metres of net - at least 88 metres all up, which is about 21 fathoms. Now we have a lot of trawlers on this coast at the present that have been pulling 45 fathoms of net, so we've virtually, to some extent, cut back the efficiencies to 21 fathoms. This has to happen because we recognise that the fishery can certainly only sustain a certain amount of effort, and we get these figures at the present time in Queensland. We have a logbook programme where every kilo of product caught in Queensland must be logged in the logbook, and logbooks must be returnable. They go on to a computer so that the amount of product in any given area is known and also those figures will show whether the gross catch rate declines, or whether it remains static, or whether it increases.

Now what has been misleading to us for quite a few [unclear] was when we got more efficient marketing the price of product went up, and we are waking up to this because the industry grew by way of monetary terms, the gross catch, but you then eventually realise that the actual weight has diminished considerably. At the present time we have fishermen who... fortunately for them, they have perhaps five very good years and they've made their money. They get into tax situations where they decide to sell their existing boat, they take the licence off it and build a bigger and more efficient boat. That is taking off like a bush fire. We've restricted that by we have a ban on updating vessels at the present time.

In this basis originally on the limited entry plan, we sort of looked at the fact that two boats would come out of the fishery to build one boat, an up-date. This hasn't worked because the boats, the twin motor boats that are coming in, are very efficient boats that can work 35 knots of wind for very long periods, and they've avoided... been able to avoid what we always felt was a safety factor where we did get weather, the fishery was rested, and we've lost that with these big boats. At the present time the owners of these boats have outlaid a lot of money. Each of them is starting to be felt around government level and certainly in our own organisation level, where they don't want to be restricted, and we have quite a number of fishermen with smaller apparatus who are very keen to up-date, especially the fact that money has been fairly easy to get, and it's been quite a simple mathematical formula where you know exactly what you catch rather than being on a mere fishing vessel. In other words one vessel perhaps could catch the product of two or three vessels.

Now where this is important as far as the northern fishery is concerned, it meant that if you were fishing Torres Strait or Princess Charlotte Bay, or the outer grounds, and you were fishing a 50 foot boat, if [unclear] and you had your cargo infected you possibly had that dreadful stain all the way back to Cairns to unload and refuel. Whereas if you had a more efficient bigger unit, you could stop there six weeks. So that you're doing three return trips in a small boat to unload and refuel and only one on a big boat. That's where the sort of mathematics works out.

So naturally those fisheries they all very keen to get in to a bigger boat, but at the same time, those that already had the bigger boats can [unclear] the big boats. So you're arguing in a circle to some extent and so far we haven't got the influence of overseas' money or Japanese money coming in to the industry, but we talked to the Government very strongly and we talked amongst ourselves very strongly, that the ideal situation is a controlled limited entry fishery and that by way of the logbook programme and the recommendation from the scientific personnel that worked for the Primary Industries Department (Fisheries) that we can come up with a noted effort which the fishery will sustain, something like the Moreton Bay Management Programme where you can say, "Right now, this fishery will sustain X numbers of trawlers, X number of crabbers and X number of line fishermen and X number of net fishermen.

Unfortunately man being what he is, he never seems to be satisfied to reach that situation. He's always got that impetus to be bigger and we've looked at the failure of most of the world's large fisheries that have failed, and they failed for two reasons, and one is over fishing, over efficiency, and number two, the prawn finished. Now, with over fishing that's something that can be rectified by reason of the fact that like Moreton Bay, you put in a criteria and you stick to the efficiency of the vessel. It's still a viable unit but it's a method of earning a living, not a method of becoming a millionaire.

With pollution, we look at that as perhaps our biggest danger because the pollution that we think we have got in our off-shore waters in this certain area (it applies in New South Wales also) most of those pollutions have got something like a 35 year half life, but if you do chop it out now, it will still have an effect and similarly our biggest agitation is against [unclear] authorities who are very negligent as far as what they throw on garbage dumps. You get pollution from toxic industries in the towns and also we seriously challenge the efficiency of many of the sewerage treatment works. Yet your [unclear] to blame which gives us a very good oxygen level in the water which wipes out our deep water. So that over fishing; periodically we are managing that by the way of this log book programme to study each fishery on the coast, that is every

one of them comparatively, to see whether that fishery is declining or remaining stable. If they decline it's a matter of second [unclear] to reduce the effort.

But with pollution; we've come to terms with pollution and know that if we had to... the Government had to put in rigid legislation (which it has done now with organo chlorines) we know that we still have our problems with that. They've done that with [unclear] authorities.

**JD** Geoff, thank you very much for this interview. The issues you've raised clearly are of fundamental importance to the industry, and again congratulations on the contribution you're making.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Geoff Kay of Oxenford, Queensland.

END OF RECORDING ON TAPE 2 SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with **BILL KEHOE**

### INTRODUCTION

Bill Kehoe started his working life as a bank officer and later worked in the sugar industry. He became a full time commercial fisherman in 1976. His area of operation in the industry has always been in the barramundi fishery in the Gulf of Carpentaria region.

In addition to his own fishing enterprise Bill Kehoe is very heavily involved in many organisations and committees associated with the industry. He has been the secretary of the Karumba branch of the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation for almost a decade and is a deputy state councillor. He has been a shire councillor in Karumba and is a member of the Consultative Committee to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. In this interview he outlines the history of the Gulf of Carpentaria barramundi fishery and in doing so discusses many topics such as fish substitution problems, overseas imports, management techniques and relationships with Aboriginal communities.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry and was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Kehoe's home in Karumba, Queensland on the 11th 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** Bill, would you record your full name please.

**KEHOE** William Lewis Kehoe.

**JD** And your date of birth.

**KEHOE** Born 25 seven 1935, a little place called Killarney just inside the Queensland border.

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

**KEHOE** My dad was a school teacher and in the early days he was teaching around about the Warwick area.

**JD** Yes and did you move around the country?

**KEHOE** As a result I would find it hard to give one place in Queensland that I could call home because like most school teachers, he was transferred a hell of a lot but

probably where I got my first taste of Queensland was, he was transferred to a little place called Mirani outside of Mackay [in] approximately 1948. Only as a young fellow I then went to boarding school outside of Rocky at a place called Yapoon and, as I said, I got the first taste of North Queensland and except for a few odd intervals, one when I went to Brisbane to find myself a wife, I've been up here ever since.

**JD** So you didn't have a fishing history in the family?

**KEHOE** No, Jack. There's nobody in our family, although on my mother's side, her maiden name was Roach and the Roach insignia or the crest of arms is surrounded by fish, I don't know whether that's appropriate or not, but no. On my mother's side there were a lot of relations that were very keen amateur fishermen but nobody had even been in any way professional at all.

**JD** Did you come into fishing straight from school or did you [unclear]?

**KEHOE** No. I left school. I got a reasonable sort of an education thanks to my dad. I started work with a Bank in Queensland, the Old English Scottish & Australian. Got sick and tired of country transfers after about four years and then drifted up to the sugar cane. I got jobs in sugar mills. I started work at the Houghton Sugar Company in Giru in 1957. That's just south of Townsville. Then I went through there and that's probably where I got my first taste of net fishing because the Houghton River and Morris's Creek at Giru were full of barramundi. In those early days every man and his dog had 50 yards of net in the garage. In those days, just as a point of interest, amateurs were allowed to own 50 yards of fishing net and that was applicable right through till the late '60s when the Queensland Government in their wisdom took it off them, but that's where I got my first taste for it. I used to work all day at the sugar mill and then spend all night down the river trying to catch a few bob. The local butcher used to buy the barramundi off us in those days at two shillings a pound (or twenty cents, as it's going now).

**JD** Was it legal for an amateur to sell fish?

**KEHOE** Oh yes. As I say, there was an amateur permit which allowed amateurs to use 50 yards of net and market their fish. In Giru it was alright because in those bad old days you had to sell to the Queensland Fish Board unless you were some twenty odd mile away from the Fish Board Office, which Giru was, and then you could sell to anybody.

**JD** Bill, how and where and when then did you come into professional fishing?

**KEHOE** I first took out my master fisherman's licence in 1969, Jack. I was still working at the mill. By this time I'd got myself a pretty fair job in the office. I was the assistant of the chief accountant in the office but in round about 1972, CSR or the Colonial Sugar Refinery as it was known, acquired the public company of the Houghton Sugar Company, as it was. They applied for majority shares. So over night from working from a public company which everybody around the district had shares in, I became an employee of a rather large organisation. In my wisdom I realised that it would probably only be a matter of time when all the existing staff, including myself at that small sugar mill, would be replaced with brighter fellows from down south, as we used to call it. So never being one to be caught short, I believed that because I had approximately eleven or twelve years up by the way of superannuation and long service leave, and I had this tremendous urge to go and catch fish for a living, I decided that the time was right.

So we made the move in 1976. I finished up at the mill and we started to live in Townsville. The fishing by this time was pretty skinny along the Townsville/Giru area. Townsville by this time had a population of just over 100,000 and there wasn't a great deal of fish to be had. Quite frankly there were more meal times than meals in those days at the Kehoe household. So a couple of the Townsville boys who I knew came back and put a fair amount of barramundi into the Fish Board auction one Monday morning. Of course my eyes just popped out of my head when I saw it and I couldn't wait to find out where they caught these fish. So they told me that they caught them up at a place called Karumba, up in the Gulf of Carpentaria, which to me could have been thousands of miles away. So I went home and looked it up in the map and found out where Karumba was and said to my wife, "Well I think I've got to make a trip." So I had a 1969 long wheel base landrover and a small dinghy and a few nets. I went there with the local Milanda Milk Board who happened to sell ice and I loaded up 28 moulds of ice, put them all in big sack bags. A mould of ice, I suppose, in those days was a fair size but more importantly it must have weighed around about 30 pounds or, say thirteen to fourteen kilos and I had 28 of these plus myself, all the gear and off I set. It was around about June. The weather was quite cool and off I set, for Burketown of all places.

It was just about 800 miles and after the second day I got up there and I proceeded to put the nets out and in the space of four or five days I couldn't fit another barramundi in the ice box so I turned around and drove the 800 miles back to Townsville and unloaded them all at the Fish Board. Of course the word spread like wild fire and in the space of three days I think there were fourteen fishermen knocked on my front door to find out where I'd been. So I tried to give them all the false information that I could possibly think of but the next trip was only a week after because I found that as soon as I sold all the fish in Townsville, the bills were rather pressing, so I had to go back and get another lot. So another 28 moulds of ice, and I went back to Burketown. I was only up there four days and I think every one of the fourteen must have followed my tracks from Townsville because in the space of only a few days we had nearly half Townsville fishermen up there. That's probably how the track started, by Townsville fishermen and the east coast fishermen up to the Gulf.

It was 1977 which was recognised now in 1990 as being the best fishing year ever in the Gulf of Carpentaria. It was a strange set of circumstances that seemed to move fish, and in particular, barramundi. We'd had a reasonably good wet season in 1977 and it was followed by an extremely cold winter. I can vividly remember sitting in my dinghy over in the Nicholson River over in Burketown in July. After taking several fish out of the net I had to put my hands underneath my arm pits to try to warm them up. The fellow that I was with at the time who was up there fishing with me, we had a raging fire going all night and something like four blankets each and we were still cold. I think, from memory, it was around about two degrees in Burketown. The fish were literally floating on top of the water, so extreme was the cold. They just had to move or perish and that's the reason why [in] '77. That was prevalent right throughout the Gulf country that fishermen will all agree that '77 was probably the best year.

Anyway in 1978, following the 1977 boom year, the word had spread around and it was estimated by individual fishermen and Government people on good advice that there were approximately 750 fishing units; that's people with four wheel drives, aluminium dinghys on top, both licensed and unlicensed, travelling throughout the Gulf in 1978. Fishermen such as myself realised that given that type of pressure up here in the Gulf, it wouldn't be too long before the Gulf barramundi fishery became the same as the east coast fishery, in other words, just no fish around, over fished. What was needed was some sort of a management plan whereby we could conserve the species, that is the barramundi, make it a viable industry for those people that want to stay up here and at the same time, create and establish and I suppose keep a very popular

recreational fishery. We saw it as being twofold. So early overtures were made to the Government in 1979 and it was a long hard road because they weren't easy to convince at the time. The Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation was probably just in its early stages of being a dominant force and it was very difficult to try to advise other fishermen that an area should be closed off to them, because that's really what we were talking about. We wanted the Gulf of Carpentaria to be set aside as a commercial fishing area for a certain number of fishermen. We felt that we had to control the effort on the fishery.

So in 1981 the Queensland Government, through their Queensland Fisheries Department, as it was known in those days, in their wisdom and with the blessing of the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation, the Government called applications from gill net fishermen who wished to establish their right to partake in the Gulf of Carpentaria gill net fishery. Originally there were some 570 applicants for those licences. The Government really never set a figure, or the managers in the Queensland fisheries never really set a figure, but they didn't think that they should start the fishery off with any more than approximately 250-300 individual fishermen. So by way of criteria, which at the time, while I was three years in the fishery and having caught so much fish, I think at that time it was around about \$6,000 worth, the number that were allowed into the fishery into that limited entry fishery (as it became known) in 1981, was 276 but the industry and the Government imposed very strict restrictions, criteria, call it what you like, on those 276 people. Number one was that they had to work in that fishery for 26 weeks of the year. Number two, they had to catch and market \$10,000 worth of product from that fishery annually.

Now the idea behind each of those two things was, the east coast had been plagued with over fishing and increased effort on inshore fisheries by people who were cane cutters in the early days, people who held down jobs in sugar mills, every Tom, Dick and Harry, (and I suppose I was one of those in the early days myself) everybody who had another income but used fishing as a hobby, but a hobby which paid money. We wanted to make sure that those fishermen that used the resource up here in the Gulf or bona fide fishermen, that was the reason why those criteria were put in. Now every year at the end of the year the performances were examined and those fishermen that could not prove 26 weeks involvement in the industry and could not prove that they had caught X numbers of dollars in the year, they were put out. By 1987 that number had been reduced to 112. So in other words, we knocked off 150 odd in the space of six years. Those fishermen that were left, those 112, had been in the fishery, most of them, probably since about 1977, 1978. At that time there was no reimbursement if they wished to sell. In other words, the Gulf of Carpentaria barramundi fishermen, Bill Kehoe or Jack Doe, anybody at all, that wanted to sell out just couldn't. If he walked away he just left everything here. There was nothing left for him.

So the Fishermen's Organisation, of which I was the secretary, in 1987 negotiated with the Government and we believed that the fishery was in a very stable condition. In 1987 the Queensland Government, through the Fish Management Authority which they then established to supersede Queensland Fisheries, agreed to transferability. That was the first time the fishermen in the Gulf had the right to sell their licences and move on, retire, do what they like. In that space of those three years, something like nineteen or twenty of those endorsements have been sold but mainly the fishermen that are here in 1990 are mainly the old brigade that were here in the '70s.

In 1981 the Queensland Government also requested, demanded, that fishermen fill in an annual production return. It was seen that to manage the fishery successfully, we had to establish what was coming out of the fishery each year and the best way to do that was monitor fishermen's catches. Right from the early days of the management

plan it was seen that the way to control the effort in the fishery was by way of apparatus, that is, fishing nets. It was established that each fisherman would be allowed a maximum of 360 metres in rivers, a maximum of six nets with no one net any longer than 120 metres and a total of 600 metres of net on the foreshores which could be split up into six nets the same as the rivers. Because of the danger and how rough the Gulf gets there was never any attendance rule for foreshore fishing placed on fishermen in the Gulf fishery. It was seen by the powers that be because of the remoteness of the area and because of the rough conditions available up here or pertaining up here, it would be suicide to expect fishermen to sit out in a fourteen foot dinghy when it was blowing 40 mile an hour. They decided, I think it was in 1980 or '81 in their wisdom that there would be no attendance rules. There was always an attendance rule on river set nets until approximately 1987 when a five mile attendance rule was established which made it a lot easier for fishermen up here in the Gulf. It's a rule that could probably never work over in the east coast, mainly because of the population and the day would probably come up here in the Gulf, as more population emerges and more traffic gets into the river system, whereby the rule won't be able to stay but just at present, it's a privilege that we earned and we're very happy to have that privilege. It makes life a lot easier.

As I said, the maximum amount of net that could be used was seen as a very important tool in the management of the Gulf. In 1973 the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation, Karumba branch, called for a closure on barramundi fishing for three months of the year. In those days they thought that maybe December, January and February were the right months but it's with pride that Karumba fishermen registered that first request to Government in 1973. In fact, it was 1981 when the first seasonal closure was placed on barramundi in Queensland. That went for six weeks initially because the Government had probably let things drag a little bit and it was a bit of a rush thing. Anyway, six weeks from our point of view was better than nothing and the following year it was a three months closure and that's been in force all over Queensland ever since.

In the Gulf we're particularly happy with it; (a) we believe it is a very important part of the management because it allows the fish to spawn without being pestered with fishermen or with nets. I think we've got to accept the fact that barramundi spawn around the mouths of rivers and creeks mainly in November and December around about the full moon. Alright, we can say that that female fish that you could have caught in December, you would have caught in August and September and it wouldn't matter anyway but the thing is they are far more susceptible to being caught because they're being congregated in one area. [For] fishermen the first year or so, it was a hell of a shock to have to go to the bank manager and say, "Well look, we won't have an income for three months" but I don't think there would be anyone now, up here, that wouldn't be completely happy with the three months' closure. It's a bad time of the year. The jellyfish are bad, the wind blows, the tide's are big, the logs are in the river, the cyclone season's on and there's so many reasons as to why we're far better off just taking it easy in Karumba or going down south and seeing our families. We need the three months to maintain the boats, have a look at the gear, have a look at the outboard motors and things like that. So in 1989 the Queensland Government updated the information on the compulsory log books that we'd been putting in since 1981 and they're of the opinion that the fishery is in a very stable condition. So that's the most important part. We feel that with a lot of co-operation we've accomplished something. We've all had a good living out of the fishery over the years, or mainly had good years and we've had bad years usually associated with good rainfall. The bad years have never been that bad that everybody hasn't been able to make ends meet. I think that's the most important thing.



We've got a recreational fishery up here in the Gulf which mainly centred on the ports of Karumba and Burketown. We're lucky in the Gulf, I suppose, that there's not much access around the Gulf of Carpentaria. There's 27 major rivers in the Gulf and probably 22 of those can only be accessed by boat. That's a major thing as regards the commercial fishery. In Karumba here now there is a very large recreational fishery that concentrates out the front, as we call it, out around the first and second buoy from about February through to till the end of May on what's probably the best grunter or javelin fish run that's seen anywhere in Queensland. We professionals, even though there's no requirement, we've got a bit of a gentleman's agreement amongst ourselves. We don't put nets in and around the mouth of the river or out around the front where the amateurs fish. So far we've been very fortunate that our relationships are very, very good because this is very important that fishermen, whether they be recreational or professional, realise that they've both got to share the resource and we've got to be on the best of terms with the opposition, as someone liked to call them.

So [on] the marketing side of things, barramundi is probably under a little bit of threat in 1990 because of the importation of barramundi fillets from Taiwan, certainly Singapore and Thailand. At this stage they're inferior to the Queensland or the wild fillets, as we call them here in Queensland because the majority of them haven't been processed as well as we do up here. They don't seem to have perfected the technique of bleeding fish and cutting them and freezing them as quickly as we would up here in the Gulf but the presentation of the product is probably on a higher scale than what they're doing up here in the Gulf. That's one area where Gulf fishermen have to improve their performances, in the packaging of fish fillets because the imported fish, (a) it's not as good in quality, but it's cheaper and people can open a carton and take out each individual fillet which fishermen up here in the Gulf have traditionally packed in a ten kilo frozen block. Those bad old days are hopefully going very quickly and we're trying to educate them now that they must put plenty of interleaving in their ten kilo blocks so that fillets can be taken out, either individually or at least a couple at a time.

**JD** All the product is sold in fillet form, is it?

**KEHOE** I'd say that 95% of it is sold in fillet form. Because of the nature of the fishery up here, most of the people that go out are going out in 30 foot through to 60 foot boats with predominantly the bigger percentage of them around about that 30 to 40 foot mark. They would have capacity on board with their freezers, probably to carry anything from 100 ten kilo blocks or one tonne of product up to the larger boats [which] could carry seven or eight tonne. When you travel, say 60 to 80 mile away from Karumba, it is seen as being important that you take every advantage of your freezer space, as fishermen would call it. So therefore because we mainly supply wholesalers who in turn supply restaurants, hotels, we traditionally have marketed in ten kilo frozen blocks; (a) because of that difficulty with freezer space, if we ever deal in whole fish and (b) because that's what the market up until now has looked for.

As I said before, we obtained transferability of licences in 1987. The first licence that was sold was sold for \$12,000 in 1988 and here we are in 1990 and the market value is now in the mid \$40,000. There hasn't been a hell of a lot of them sold but it's an indication that fishermen throughout the State realise that it's a good fishery up here and there is a chance to earn good money. I believe myself (it's my own personal opinion) that the value of a licence here in the Gulf in the mid-1990s will certainly be no less than \$100,000. That's as in a piece of paper which is attached to a vessel. One of the reasons why that value is on the licences up here is because I think it is generally recognised that the fishery is in a very stable condition. Fishermen can really

earn as much money as they want to up here, depending on the amount of time that they're prepared to spend out. We have our seasonal difficulties, the same as any other fishery but by and by in that nine months a person up here, if he wishes to work, can catch plenty of fish.

Barramundi represents about 45% of our total catch up here in the Gulf. That total catch of fillets would be approximately 300 tonnes annually. The other 55% is made up of 45% of king salmon which is becoming more and more popular with fishermen because it's seen to be easier and also taking pressure of the barra. The other few percent is made up then of what we call mixed fillets or mixed fish, you're ordinary diamond scale mullet, jewel fish (spells name) which is unique up here to the Gulf. It's a member of the silver jew family, I understand; pomphrey which is a black pomphrey and it's pretty popular over in South East Asia, although they look for the silver pomphrey. All in all fishermen take everything. In the bad old days they used to concentrate on barramundi but we've gone to a lot of trouble in the last few years to try to promote other species of fish other than barramundi.

Present values make it attractive for fishermen to take everything. With the emerging, say ethnic population in Queensland there is more and more demand for everything and indeed these days very little is thrown away like it used to be years ago. Present day prices to the fishermen here in Karumba would be approximately \$9.50 a kilo for barramundi fillets, \$5.00 to \$5.50 a kilo for king salmon fillets and approximately \$3.50 to \$4.00 a kilo for mixed fillets.

As I mentioned earlier, each fishermen or each endorsement holder up here has the right to run 600 metres of net on the foreshores and 360 in the river, as long as he's no further with his foreshore operation away from his river nets than five miles attendance rule in the river allowed. We had an early problem in the fishery where it was known that some fishermen who had just by way of greed or financial responsibility, that the bank manager was on their back, were seen to be using more net than they were allowed to. It had a twofold effect. It was unfair on other fishermen but more importantly we, the managers of the fishery, had decided that X numbers of licences, in other words 112 was the maximum amount of effort that should be placed on the fishery. So it was by way of good common sense that people should not be allowed to enlarge on that 112 by using extra net. So fishermen decided, at a meeting here in Karumba, that a penalty should be placed on those fishermen who were convicted of an offence of using more net than they were allowed to. That penalty was a loss of endorsement or loss of licence for three months of the year. It was the first time that fishermen, to my knowledge, have ever called for a penalty such as that anywhere in Australia. It was probably one of the reasons why the Gulf gill net fishery has so much credibility with (a) the Queensland public but more importantly with our masters, the Queensland Government because it's seen that we're responsible and we're not frightened to bite the bullet and place restrictions on ourselves. Today I would be surprised if any fishermen were using any more net than they were entitled to because of that fear, not of the court case and the, say a thousand or two thousand dollar fine that might be imposed on them but the loss of licence for a three month period which in effect to the larger fishermen could be a fine really of 30 to 40 thousand dollars. It's really not worth it.

The other problem that we had in the mid-'80s with the fishery was substitution of species. It nearly brought the industry to its knees around about 1984, '85. Barramundi was seen as probably the premier fish in Australia in those mid-'80s and demanded a top level price. Unscrupulous retailers and others in the trade saw an opportunity to substitute species of fish which could be bought cheaper for the top of the range barramundi. The Australian Broadcasting Commission at the time had a top

rating show called Nationwide which went to air at approximately 7.30 every night and was watched by nearly everybody in Australia. It was a very, very popular show. Low and behold on this Tuesday night, I think it was, the show from Sydney which went Australia wide, broke the story of substitution of other species for barramundi.

**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

**KEHOE** The role of the Nationwide team was to go into fish shops in Sydney and buy some barramundi fillets, take them away, get them examined and get them identified by the experts. The figures that they came up with suggested that 70% of all the fish that they had bought that day from something like 30 odd outlets in Sydney, 70% of all the fish that they had bought was not barramundi. So this caused a hell of a furore. I happened to be in Brisbane at the time on QCFO business and I clearly remember the afternoon that I was seated in the QCFO office with our State President, Dale Bryan who calmly announced to me that he had a phone call from [the] Nationwide people and they were coming to do an interview on the barramundi substitution and because I was there, the right bloke at the right time, would I be interested in saying a few words. So I thought, well certainly I'd be only too happy to try to put my two bob's worth in. So before I knew what had happened the Nationwide team had arrived and they did probably around about a ten minute segment with Dale Bryan and myself. I suppose I was [the] answer to their prayers because here I was, a Gulf of Carpentaria barramundi fisherman who was able to give them all the information on what was happening. I assured the public that as far as fishermen were concerned, we were not substituting at the point of capture, that if substitution was occurring, and I believed that it was, it was certainly occurring at the other end of the market and we as fishermen were very concerned about that. We also believed that it was occurring mainly in New South Wales and Victoria, that Queenslanders, because they had been used to barramundi over the years, were not all that silly that they couldn't tell barramundi in the fish shop windows and that we were quite certain that the substitution that was evident in New South Wales was not on the same level in Queensland, however it was a problem.

So I went home and got home to my mum and dad's place out at Salisbury, at probably about 5.30 in the afternoon and mum and dad were just sitting at the table. Dad said to me, "Well how'd your day go?" I said, "Oh not too bad." He said, "What did you do?" I said, "Oh well I'm on Nationwide tonight. I did a bit for Nationwide." He just laughed and said, "Oh yeah, fair enough." So I never elaborated any more on it. So at half past seven we finished tea and the washing up was done and I said, "Well come on, we'll go in the lounge and watch the news." They both looked at me and they switched the Nationwide programme on and sure enough, in another ten minutes, there it was, the segment. It went over pretty well and I suppose, being a bit of an amateur at it, I was quite pleased with myself. A few people rang up and said, "Oh gee Bill, you were good on TV tonight." I said, "I'm happy. I've got a bit of a future in this regard!" I was quite pleased with myself. That was until I got home to Karumba.

When I got home here to Karumba they wanted to hang me from the nearest tree because it was seen that the publicity given to the substitution of the barramundi would have an adverse effect on the fishery and they were right. The price for fillets went from \$6.60 down to \$4.00 in the space of several weeks and even at \$4.00 nobody wanted to buy it. We were in a hell of a mess and believe me, it took us two to

three years to get our place back in the market and build up confidence in the market place again. We know that the substitution is still occurring but certainly not on the scale that it was in those days, but we've got substitution now in another form with the imported fish, and I give an example of Nile perch which is a native fish to South Africa. It's now imported into Australia and marketed as Kenyon barramundi. In May 1990 (present time) there is a case before one of the Courts, I think it's one of the Federal Courts, whereby the fishermen's organisations are trying to upset, disallow, call it what you like, the right to people to market that as Kenyon barramundi. We maintain that barramundi [is an] Aboriginal word meaning big scale. That's where the fish name first eventuated. There's two species of barramundi in Queensland, the one that we've got up here which is really a giant perch and the saratoga which is a fresh water fish but we would argue that given that that barramundi is a Queensland Aboriginal name, we don't see that it's right that people can grow it, catch it wild anywhere else in South East Asia, for that matter, and bring it into Australia and call it barramundi.

It's a problem and it's a problem that won't go away. I don't know what we're going to do about it except hope that... we're embarking on advertising at present to say that there's no fish like Queensland caught barramundi, that's Queensland wild caught barramundi. Traditionally Queenslanders, anyway, they've been the type of people that like to eat a piece of fish as in a piece of steak; something that they can put on a plate, nice thick fillet, cut it up like they would a piece of steak, not have any worries with bones with the kids. We believe that there's a market there for us but we are concerned about the imports.

The enforcement up here in the Gulf leaves a lot to be desired. We are watched over by officers of the Queensland boating patrol. Historically they belong to Queensland Harbour & Marine. With the advent of the new Labor Government last year, the boating section of Harbour & Marine, the Fisheries officers, were transferred over to the Department of Primary Industries. There's only two of them here in Karumba. They've got a nine metre patrol vessel which they've only had for a short period of time, an eighteen foot aluminium with a 50 on the back of it. Their territory ranges from the Mitchell River over to the Northern Territory border and south to Longreach. They're away on patrol for half the period of the year and it's a very, very big job. We, as fishermen or we as the Fisheries managers up here in the Gulf, believe that we should have more officers so that enforcement is more seen to be happening. Fishermen these days could run the risk of getting caught not only with excess net but all the tricks the fishermen have traditionally got up to by blocking off creeks which isn't allowed and all sorts of nonsense that if they were aware that there was more likelihood that they'd be apprehended, they wouldn't do it. It only takes a couple of the bad eggs to spoil it for everybody.

We have a big industry meeting here at the end of the year of the 110 or 111 that fish here in the Gulf. We can usually put 70 to 80 people in the hall at the end of the year for our annual general meeting [at] which we elect the usual chairman, secretary and delegate to the State Council [of] the QCFO. The present executive of that QCFO here is Garry Ward. He's the chairman, [a] long time fisherman; Ward family Townsville and Princess Charlotte Bay. His father's name's Dinky or Dave. His uncle's name is Reg. Reg was one of the early fishermen [who] came over here and fished the Gulf way back in the late '50s. The State Council delegate's name is a fellow called Warwick Crossland and he's probably decided that fishing is better if his sons do it and he's living over at Mareeba but he still looks after our interests in Brisbane when he goes down to the State Council meetings a couple of times a year. Yours truly, Bill Kehoe, is the secretary.

We communicate with fishermen up here by way of a newsletter. The chairman and myself get our heads together probably around about three times a year and we knock up a three or four page newsletter involving all the things that have been happening in the fishery, the meetings that I've gone to or the meetings that Wardy's gone to, things that we've done, so that fishermen, even though they're out in remote areas, don't feel as though they're not part of an organisation. They're well informed and they're less cranky when they come to the annual general meeting at the end of the year and it's more likely that they're going to re-elect us. So that's the reason for all that.

We tie the annual general meeting with what has become a very sociable event called the Barramundi Ball. It's a very strict informal affair. Gary Ward, the chairman, approximately five years ago decided that it would be appropriate if we ran some sort of a social event at the end of the year which tried to show the towns people of Karumba and Normanton, for that matter, that fishermen weren't such a bad bunch and that we appreciated really the fact that towns people looked after us. We could get jobs done. The engineering works, the fibreglass works, the local garage, it was a get to know you, thanks very much, come and have a good time, end of the year show. It's grown very much in popularity and last year we had approximately 400 paying people at the door. Considering Karumba's population is only about 300 counting all the children and the dogs, it's an indication of how popular it's become. It's a very informal affair. It's held at the civic centre but all the fellows come in their long trousers and their sports shirt. All the girls get done up in their best dresses. I don't know how Gary Ward and his committee do it, although I'm on the committee [and] I suppose I do know how he does it [with] a lot of donations. The deal that's put on is \$20 per person, kids under fifteen free of charge, all you can eat and all you can drink. Last year we took \$8,000 at the door and there were a few free ones like the local police sergeant and the fishing inspectors got in for nothing but it's a very, very popular event. There's never any brawls, never any drama. Everybody's on their best behaviour and there's prawns and there's barramundi and there's squid and there's as much beer as anybody can drink without making a booze up of it. So that's a very popular end of the year occasion.

Then after the barra ball we usually run a master fishermen's course here, or training course. We have our own Fishing Industry Training Council in Brisbane and they have full time people who instruct us in the art of people getting their master fisherman's licence. It's about a fourteen day course and they come up here every year with their big truck from Brisbane which is air conditioned, a panel van type of thing. They can seat twenty people in it and they put it here in the complex where we live at the Department of Fisheries. The people that want to sit for their master fishermen's course, they come along, they do the course for fourteen days and then the instructors give them an examination. Then those people are master fishermen. It's not a difficult course but at the same time, it's seen that you must do your couple of weeks. The criteria for getting a master fisherman's licence in Queensland now is that a person must have two years as a trainee master fisherman and during that time, or after the two years, sit for the examination which I've just spoken about, pass it and then obtain a certificate of competency to handle a vessel up to nine metres and away he goes.

That still doesn't allow him to go fishing because if I could relate to it this way, the fishing industry in Queensland is controlled on effort now. It's the same as State taxis. It doesn't matter if there's 3,000 taxi drivers in Cairns or Townsville, as long as there's only 200 taxis. It's the same with the fishing industry. There's thousands of master fishermen but there are only so many licensed fishing vessels. That's the way we control the effort and that's the best way that we've known. So if a young fellow goes through, or anybody for that matter, gets his master fishermen's licence, he then has

to go and fish for somebody that has a boat and an endorsement or else he's got to go and see mum or dad or aunty Mary and try to get a few bob together to buy somebody out that might want to retire or might want to move back down south and that's the way that he can get entry into the fishery up here.

During the '80s we did have difficulty with certain Aboriginal communities in the Gulf of Carpentaria. It was always seen that fishermen shouldn't fish near Aboriginal communities and I mean Edward River, Kowanyama, not so much Doomadgee because they're inland, but there was always bad feeling. The Aboriginal communities used to write to the Queensland Government and get some parliamentarian to raise it in parliament about these no hopers of fishermen that left fish carcasses or trash fish on their beaches and polluted their beaches and they couldn't catch any fish in their local river because fishermen were netting it and it was seen that there were a lot of problems. Mainly through the Queensland Fish Management Authority and a couple of our local fishermen, namely Gary Ward, our chairman who had always had good relationships with Aboriginal communities in the Gulf and on a personal level, it was decided that we should meet and get together and air our grievances and try to get some sort of a relationship. So early moves were made and a relationship was established with the Kowanyama Community Council. The early days were not easy. It was usual that people that have a row and go home and not communicate for another six months and then I, as secretary, would write a letter to them and because in those days there was no STD telephones, they would get back to me by radio phone or whatever. Gradually we got closer and closer together and I suppose one of the people up there that we've got to thank for that is one of their advisors, Viv Sinnamon. Viv is not an Aboriginal but is a European and is very responsible towards the Aboriginal community. He and I and Gary Ward communicated together very well.

One of the problems that Kowanyama saw was the need for closures in the south Mitchell River adjacent to the Kowanyama Community Council. So Gary Ward, the chairman, probably at 2.00 o'clock in the morning when he was sitting at his dinghy, got a flash of inspiration from above and put a proposition to the Kowanyama Community Council that because he (we) the organisation or the Karumba QCFO believed that if we closed approximately sixteen miles of river, we would have to put the effort that was already on that area somewhere else in the fishery and it would disadvantage those people that were already there. So the formula came up and the proposition was put to Kowanyama, "If you purchase two barramundi entitlements and tear them up, we will agree to the closure." So Kowanyama went away, the Queensland Government threw their hands up in horror and then came back a couple of weeks later and said, "You know fellows, that isn't too bad an idea, but they won't be in it, will they?" So anyway Kowanyama replied that, yes, they would be interested in negotiating and what was the current market value of a barramundi licence?

So another cap that I used to wear at the time, and still do for that matter, I also used to sell the licences for the fishermen. So I was able to establish the value at the time of \$32,000 which one fisherman wanted to sell for and another had his up for sale for \$30,000. So I put it to Kowanyama and in the space of a month they had purchased the two barramundi licences, torn the barramundi part of them up which still left the crab and the line section of the endorsement, and we agreed to the closure. They went away terribly happy and we thought that we'd got a good deal. We'd taken some effort off the fishery. Of course a couple of the fishermen that fished up around there weren't too happy but every since that day we have had tremendous relationships with Kowanyama and we are seen as being their friends. We do not believe that fishermen in the Gulf should have the sole right. We as an organisation believe that the Aboriginal communities were here before us and that they should have the right to fish for their own community's benefit. We do not believe that they should ever have the right to catch fish commercially unless they want to enter into the commercial field

and buy a licence and market them in that way but we do not believe that they should ever be able to or be allowed to catch fish and market it. So far that hasn't happened, but that's something that we believe that we should always keep our eye on. Indications are that the Aboriginal communities really only want to manage their own community, enable their own people to go down to the areas and catch fish, allow tourism in and be managed in that regard.

We've had other discussions with Doomdjee and also Edward River. With Edward River, it was a different sort of a problem. They were complaining about fishermen polluting the beaches up there by filleting fish and throwing the fish frames over the side of the boat and they'd float in along the beach. So we've had a gentleman's agreement up there now and more recently a stipulated closure whereby fishermen aren't allowed to fish adjacent to the Edward River Mission. So that's a good thing. We've got a fair bit of credibility with Aboriginal communities.

The organisation up here in the Gulf has probably survived and done so well because a couple of us realised at an early stage that fishermen were really at the mercy of every politician or every tourist body or every shire council in Queensland. If we wanted to survive, we had to become a little bit political ourselves. For that reason, in 1985 I decided to run for the Carpentaria Shire Council, as one of the people representing Karumba (there were two elected members).... In 1985 I decided to throw my hat into the ring because prior to this we'd had several people calling for closures up there in the Gulf of all rivers and creeks for all the wrong reasons. I decided that unless we were going to get done like dinners and have closures put on without having much say in the matter, that we had to get into the political arena. I was able, or others were able to say, "Hey, now listen, that's a load of rubbish. That's not right, (we're this and we're that)"; [to] take the figures from the management plan and show Government and others that we weren't a ratbag industry, that we were responsible people and that there was no need for closures.

So I fortunately was elected to the Shire and because most of our difficulties in closure calls had come from a body called GLADA, Gulf Local Authority Development Association, I asked the chairman and the council if I could be considered to be the Carpentaria Shire's representative on GLADA and they agreed to that. So here I was the next month, attending a GLADA meeting at which the four Gulf shires, Burke (or Burketown), Carpentaria [which] centred around this area, Croyden and Georgetown, were represented as well as a representative from the Queensland Premier's Department and Queensland Community Services and the then office of Northern Development which was the Queensland Development Office. So I was in a position immediately then and I was for the next three years, to preach the philosophy of the fishery up here and really gain back the lost ground that we had put ourselves into with false claims by some people in that forum. Along the way I became very interested in the operations of GLADA and sure the great deal of good that it could do for the whole of the Gulf and not only the fishing industry. It's a relationship that I've been able to continue.

In 1988 they must have got sick and tired of me because I got speared out of the council but one of the members of the GLADA group, apart from the shire councillors, was a body of people called the GSTO, Gulf Savannah Tourist Operators, a body of approximately 50 people made up of tourist operators and service operators, garages cafes, people that had banded themselves together in the Gulf of Carpentaria, approximately \$200 odd a year membership fees and for \$5,000 they had bought themselves a seat on the board of management of GLADA or the Gulf Local Authority Development Association because it was seen that this would be a terrific advantage to them with the promotion of tourism. Because the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's

Karumba Branch had been one of the inaugural members of the Gulf Savannah Tourist Operators, it had only been two meetings that I had been away from GLADA on my demise from the shire council when I got an approach from the Gulf Savannah Tourist Operators to ask me if I would be willing to go back to GLADA as their representative. So I've had a very happy association. The industry has benefited tremendously with my association both in the council and in GLADA over the years, being able to be in a position where I had contact with [the] Premier's Department and with various ministers of the Queensland Government who attend GLADA from time to time. Recently [the] Minister for Primary Industry, Ed Casey, was in Cairns. [It was] a wonderful opportunity to sit down and have lunch and tell them how we're going up here and just let them know that everything's alright. So then again it was a tremendous advantage.

Very briefly about myself, I've enjoyed the fishing. I fish locally here out of a dinghy in Karumba. I go about eight miles down past the other side of Broncho's Creek or up the river. I used to fish up the river all the time until two years ago when I started to lose the odd outboard motor to somebody that needed one worse than I did. The nets were being fished of a night time. It was just a population thing. More and more people were coming up here and more and more were going up the river in boats. Whereas in 1983 or '84 you would very seldom see dinghys up any further than where the pipeline comes across the river, up near the six mile, in recent years you'd be up there fishing your nets and probably a dozen dinghys would go past in the space of three or four hours. So I saw the need to try and get away a little bit and that's the reason why I'm fishing down the coast. It's probably not as productive as it used to be here in the earlier days but I still manage to raise a reasonably good living.

I'm very keen on the organisation side of things. As mentioned before, I've been the secretary of the local branch here since 1981. I've only been opposed once in that position and I was able to hold on to it rather comfortably. I've always had a very good relationship with the staff of the Fish Management Authority and before them the Queensland Fisheries, and indeed fisheries management of the DPI. My wife, Lee, and I are seen as probably people in Karumba who can be phoned up or contacted who will be able to give Government an unbiased opinion on situations in the fishery on on the town. I suppose that's to their advantage as well as ours. As I said, over the years I've had a fair bit to do with the state organisation. I've been the deputy state councillor up here since 1981 as well as the secretary. Over the years when Warwick Crossland, who was the state councillor, was unable to go to Brisbane because he was fishing, I used to go down there as the deputy and in that role. In 1985 the state president of the QCFO, Dale Bryan realised that the organisation needed to have a look at itself and indeed I was chosen to chair a group of twelve people who looked into the restructure of the organisation. We sat for around about six months and many of those points that we took back to the organisation were ratified and it's probably one of the reasons why the organisation is as strong as it is today.

Presently I'm representing the industry on the consultative committee of the Great Barrier Marine Park Authority. That's a three year term. It's a Commonwealth Government position which goes to being by way of a Cabinet decision by Queensland Government. You might well ask, "Well what the hell is a bloke, a barramundi fisherman in Karumba doing on a consultative committee to a great barrier marine park?" Probably a couple of reasons. One was that I could be bold enough to suggest that I might be seen as being safe. I wasn't a radical. I wasn't a ratbag. I'd been around a while. More importantly, I wasn't an east coast fisherman that had a vested interest in the Great Barrier Reef [in] the way of a line fishery. I was seen that I was a neutral type of person. You must understand representation on a lot of these committees. A lot of people lose sight of the fact that when you're on a committee, you must act on behalf of the committee. You've got to leave your own personal ideas



and even sometimes the organisation ideas behind if they fall short of what I see as being for the good of the whole community. I think that's very, very important. Anyway, that's for a three year term. I enjoy that immensely. We meet three times a year and there's about sixteen people on that committee.

I'm presently on the review panel for the Torres Strait Protected Zone otter trawl prawn fishery. There was a great deal of controversy a couple of years ago when the Australian Fishery Service, because it is a Commonwealth fishery, brought in a set of criteria which made it very difficult for most otter trawl fishermen to qualify to fish that protected zone. Because there was so much upheaval and ramifications over that criteria, the Feds established a three man board of review to look into all those people who felt that they had been discriminated against and indeed should have been allowed to fish up there. I represent the industry. Mark Elmer, who's an executive officer of the Queensland Fish Management Authority, represents the Queensland Government and Athol Johns from the Australian Fishery Service is the chairman representing the Commonwealth Government. We just about ran out of all the things that we've got to do and I understand that's being wound up in the next couple of months.

I represented the industry on the working group for the National Fisheries Forum in Brisbane in 1988. The theme of that forum was "Fishing for Future". It was seen as probably one of the best (and I'm not being parochial there) fisheries forums Australia had seen. It was very well done. More importantly, one of the most important things attached to that forum was the youth segment which I was privileged enough to chair. We had young speakers from some of the high schools in Brisbane. We ran a competition for six months prior to the forum whereby the Fisheries people went throughout the high schools of Queensland and a competition was held. We finished up with four young people approximately fifteen or sixteen years of age who spoke on fishing for the future in Queensland, as it was affecting all the pollution things, commercial fishing, recreational fishing. It was an outstanding segment and I was very proud to be part of that and indeed the Queensland Government picked up the idea and ran with it and now have established the means whereby an instructor goes throughout the primary and secondary schools in Queensland and speaks to the children on fishing.

**JD** Bill, thank you very much for all of that. You've told your story wonderfully well. Thank you.

**KEHOE** Good. Thank you Jack.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Bill Kehoe of Karumba, Queensland.

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with SNOWY MALTMAN

### INTRODUCTION

Snowy Maltman is widely known among the fishermen of Queensland. He is now almost 80 years of age but still has close links with the industry. He spent much time fishing around the Swains and on the southern end of the outer Barrier Reef, much of which he charted and named.

He is an enthusiast and in this interview shares much of his lifetime of experience in fishing with us. He operated charter boats for some years and has many stories to tell of that part of his career. He was also a professional fisherman and operated successfully a line fishing enterprise using doreys on the outer Reef.

The fishing enthusiast will find much of interest in Snowy's discussion which is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry [and was recorded on 17th of April, 1990]. There are five sides on three tapes and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

*JD* Would you please record your full name?

*MALTMAN* Gordon Archibald Maltman. The Archibald comes from my ancestors from Scotland and the Maltman comes back.... the Malt is my granddaddy (or great grandpappy) made the malt that's used in the Scotch whiskey.

*JD* And you're commonly known as "Snowy".

*MALTMAN* Commonly known as Snowy. I've a very big nose and very fair hair and that is really my trademark and recognised by a lot of people everywhere.

*JD* And Snowy, when were you born?

*MALTMAN* 1911, 14th of May at Ipswich, Queensland.

*JD* And were you brought up exclusively in Queensland or did you ever leave the State?

*MALTMAN* Queensland. Early days, knee high to nothing I was at Ipswich. My family then moved to Clifton where they had a hotel. They were there until Armistice night, 1918, and the hotel was burnt down. I still have very, very good recollections of the

smoke and flames and what have you, and next morning, scratching through the ashes looking for my [unclear].

**JD** That happened on Armistice night?

**MALTMAN** Armistice night.

**JD** Too big a celebration, was it?

**MALTMAN** [Laughs] Too much celebrating [laughs]. No, I presumed some of the people that were celebrating helped to do the fire. The interesting point there, our earliest recollections of Clifton as a... we owned nothing, walking along side the train. The soldiers going to War were there and I'm trying to beg a Rising Sun from some of the soldiers and finally received one and, of course, it was something I treasured for many years.

**JD** When did you come then to live in these parts?

**MALTMAN** Then my parents bought a hotel at Southport. Dad, in conjunction with a local, Charlie Shilling, had bought the Railway Hotel which is now the Hotel Del Plaza. Interesting there, of early days' people, standing in front of the hotel with a wooden figurehead from a vessel called the **Cambus Wallis**. The figurehead it would be all of six foot high. It stood in front of the hotel and leant there as a sign of the early days situations. It ended up riddled with white ants, which was..., of course, it was realised too late there as a [unclear] which should, of course, have been preserved.

But I think what gave me my first taste of fishing, knee high to nothing, the Queensland Amateur Fishing Association had their club in Brisbane, and used to come down and stay at the hotel and there, of course, I was keen to take them round the area and they said, "Oh here's the little fellow, give him a bit of egg, give him a bit of bacon." Fixed me up all right. I thought there was [unclear] old George Shaw (George Shaw and Sons) these were the tackle people in Albert Street in Brisbane. Other old men, old Billy Brett, Billy Lee. Billy Lee, of course, was one of the early manufacturers of first casting reels in Australia. But there they taught me so much about fishing and it was interesting in those days, the wonderful way they used a white pillow slip to put the fish in. Of course, in those days it was a recognised fact here, when you went fishing you used a "Bundaberg creel" which was a sugar bag. In those days they held about 70 pounds of sugar. That was normally what you had there and there is nothing smells worse in this world than old fish left in the bottom of a sugar bag.

Of course, I think fishing in those days to a degree was governed by the quality of the fishing gear that was available. It was the early days of the Acme reel, the Billy Lee reel. The egg beater reel, of course, wasn't even thought of then. Some monstrosities manufactured in the Ipswich Railway workshops. The fishing rods, odd ones are still available. Of course, there was the English Green Heart, the English split cane rod which, of course, was primarily built for trout fishing and as such, even now, they were a beautiful line and a pleasure to fish with.

It's interesting my last remark about a Bundaberg creel. Bundaberg, of course, being one of the main sugar-growing areas on this coast and also famous for the Bundaberg Rum. The Bundaberg rum was, of course, a set of boxing gloves in every bottle of rum. It was really fighting rum, but there we digressed somewhat to get into rum. On to the fishing and I was talking about the AFA and them teaching me about all the, I suppose, the finer points of the rudiments of fishing, and governed in those days by the type of fishing line that was available. There were some of the original lines.... well

I don't suppose there are too many that can remember them. They were made of silk and there was the Cherry Blossom, the early days of Cherry Blossom lines and then there were Australian lines, made out of a very, very fine fibre, and the treatment they put on there after a few times casting and running it over the runners, the fibre was exposed and then it was a dead loss as a fishing line.

But there, of course, there we'd have had the fishing gear of those days that is now available, even then we caught more fish than we could possibly use. I hate to think how many fish we would have caught in those days, but that, of course, is evolution.

**JD** Snowy, how did you come to become a professional fisherman?

**MALTMAN** Oh, evolution, necessity. Well when they sold the hotel there after a period of time, my dad, they sold out of the hotel and a square peg in a round hole the first [unclear] there, Dad went out and he bought a boat and he went schnapper fishing. Well, when you look back at me and you think to yourself how anybody could be so utterly stupid, to go schnapper fishing and if I might make a point there, modern times everybody does a feasibility study before they go into this or go into that, as Dad found out. Yes, he could catch schnapper. He couldn't sell them there. Of course, mainly in those days, railway spikes which is a sinker, cordline was a line. There were ten or a dozen books on the way of fishing and even in my young days, I'd tie up a net with Dad. There'd be half a dozen lines over the side. By the time you got to them there, the weight of fish, they would have floated up to the surface, eight or ten schnapper on it and a cod of about 20 or 30 pound on the other hook. You'd put them in the market here and there. You could be lucky, you could have got threepence, possibly fourpence. Lots of time they'd put it into cold store and the cold storage, of course, adds up the effort, the value of the fish and it was a dead loss.

**JD** Where was your father fishing?

**MALTMAN** Out of Brisbane, outside of Moreton Island there, of course, there were no two ways about it, the fish were there. But from there, Dad sold that out and then he made another real bright move, and he went growing bananas.

In the meantime I added my knowledge that I had learnt, and furthered my knowledge with catching fish with a rod and line, and I think from necessity and to a degree, demand, I found that here and there as I was fishing from the old Southport pier, or somewhere or other there, and I'd be catching a few fish, and somebody would come and say, "Hey, sonny, would you sell me a couple of those fish?" So naturally, I was more than happy to do so. But as time went by, the early days of the Depression, times were really hard. I remember you couldn't give the bananas away let alone sell to the farm. Then I found, of course, that by catching a few fish, and I ended up by putting them on the pier and I'd say to anybody, "Take the fish, four for two bob." And, of course, those days, the early days of the broad water of Southport there, the natural catching of oysters where it was just a way of life.

**JD** They were natural rock oysters?

**MALTMAN** No, not too much rock oysters. They were caught on a very, very small whelk. They preferred them to the rock oysters of Queensland. Oh, whelks are supposed to be no more than half, three quarters of an inch in length and it's interesting there as you learn, of course, you go round and you'll see in the pool, thousands of these little whelks in the pool and as you pick up a handful of them and you examine them under a microscope, you will see the first small catch of oysters on these little whelks which, of course, an experienced oyster man what have you, he

knows that he can either transfer those whelks or watch that area where those little oysters are.

Incidentally the oysters of Moreton Bay.... of course, the early days there, we had the Moreton Bay Oyster Company which was stationed at Courgee, operated in those days by the Leving family, or I forget the name of a few of the boys. But I make that a point here, I don't know so much about modern ones where you get Port Stephens' oysters there, but the early days there of the oysters around Moreton Bay and around that area there, we reckoned they.... a dozen was good for a honeymoon. They were beautiful oysters.

There you've got me. I'm talking oysters. Here and there on my travels and on boats and you've got a few people on board, you make an oyster omelette. You take one dozen eggs, beat them up there and you add twelve dozen oysters and you cook it in a bacon dish. Put them in the oven for a few minutes there and then, of course, when you're nice and coarse, each slice.... it's really delightful to see the size and see the oysters in your oyster omelette.

There well, I'm talking about oysters, oysters, oysters there. It's just one of those things in the early days of Southport.

**JD** You sort of started in a very small way then in professional fishing?

**MALTMAN** Yes, I say there through circumstances I was catching these fish there, and in the early days there, of course, are so many people I remember, old Jack Tuesley and the Tuesley family there, and there are others. [unclear] of he really got upset and "Oh," he says, "You can't sell fish here, you haven't got a licence." "Well, " I said, "Mr Tuesley, I'll have to get a licence." "That's right," he said, "I'm the Harbours and Marine representative here. It'll cost you ten bob." I gave him the ten bob and so I say I was very, very young when I got my first licence but there, of course, if I might refer back to lots of us, Jack, but to the Tuesley boys, I spent an awful lot of time with the boys. They were good fishermen (good net fishermen) and from the boys, Lochie and Mick and Pat could - even old Jack - in my time there and the old story of putting rag around your oars and creeping around. Interesting on a quiet night even now, if I'm out with somebody, I will say, "That's a fantail mullet or that's sounds like a good patch there. That's a bream or there's a jewfish." All the distinctive noises whereby you can identify the different fish of a night time on a quiet night.

But there I'm getting ahead of myself or getting back to myself there. A part of my earning a few dollars (or a few shillings I should say) at the fishing. The oysters, I had a few customers. I would get two bob for an old time pickle bottle of oysters.

**JD** That's 20 cents.

**MALTMAN** The old pickle bottle would hold between five dozen and six dozen oysters and I [unclear] there and I had a few regular customers in my courting days there was many a time my bottles of oysters took my girlfriend to the pictures.

**JD** Snowy, could I ask you what species of fish were you fishing for and what method did you use to catch them?

**MALTMAN** As I mentioned there that I spent so much time with the Tuesley boys. In those days I suppose it was more necessity to be there. Of latter years, of course, they used mesh nets and peg nets or drain-off nets, bags and what have you, but in those days it was all hauling of nets, and different size mesh, of course, from

anywhere to a small mesh for your garfish, you moved up to oh two, two and a half inch primarily of a light twine net for whiting fishing and then, of course, you've got to have your heavy nets for your mullet, hauling in the broad water. Then you also built special nets for your ocean fishing, or to say ocean fishing, beach fishing. That, of course, we're coming into that now at the end of April. Here, the first westerlies are around on the 25th of April. It also signals the start of the sea mullet run along our coast although, of course, the earlier part of April they're already catching those mullet from the New South Wales coast. Then, of course, they catch these mullet and from these they take the roe which is very, very popular. But a beach net.... in those days, of course, the nets were tarred and then tarred again, to make them very, very heavy so they wouldn't tear and the tailor couldn't bite them, and they were very, very heavy gear.

But the beach fishing, of course, would be calm with the westerley winds. The seas would become reasonably calm and so you'd operate from the beaches and there's a time when the net boats were put on trailers and then the [unclear] so that vehicles could run along the beach, and instead of rowing along on the outside of the beach in the surf looking for fish, then it evolved so you could drive along there and, of course, a bit later on as they evolved the four-wheel drives, now it's just a way of life. Net boats being dragged along the beach to do the hauling there.

But primarily there, the basic fishing from the beaches or the estuaries is the tailer, flathead, bream, whiting, garfish which, of course, are seasonal and that virtually describes our fishing here.

**JD** What was your market?

**MALTMAN** Oh, the earlier days, lousy. [Laughs] From Southport in the early days, your fish were put in what do they call it? Apple cases, apple dumps, or benzina - that was the old petrol cases - taken up to Southport station, put on the train and sent to the markets in Brisbane. There interesting there, you always.... every case had to be overfull and you always put an extra case in because as the train was going to Brisbane, it was also pulling up at every station between Southport and Brisbane where the cockies or the farmers came down and got off their cream cans and, of course, as they're pulling the cream cans off, they'd say, "Well...." I don't blame them. The temptation there was a feed of fish and by the time they arrived in Brisbane, and the different fellows on the floor got his feed of fish, ooh you'd be lucky to get three baskets or box out of a box. Then, of course, that's human nature and a way of life. That, of course, was the early days of net fishing.

But there I fished through until.... oh Depression years. I've seen us with a great heap of sea mullet spread out under the trees there on the beach at Southport, and people coming by there, you see, "Oh take your pick. Four for two bob." Well, of course, in those days, three pound, four pound mullet were just a way of life. And they would walk over and stop over the heap of them there to pick out the four biggest, and if you weren't looking they'd probably take five.

It was interesting. We were talking about beach fishing. When you hauled those nets ashore on the beach, you know, of course, there were a few people gathered around and here and there, one just grabbing a fish here, there. Interesting on one occasion there was a lady there and she looked down and she grabbed a big mullet and she flipped it up and put it up underneath her skirt. And she tried to be there, you know, kidding she had no husband there, and you haven't seen anything so funny to see a

lady trying to hold a big mullet under her skirt and the mullet kicking. But that is, of course, the early days of mullet fishing on the beach.

**JD** Snowy, when you sent the fish through to Brisbane markets, they presumably were auctioned?

**MALTMAN** Yes, fish were auctioned and it came back then, of course, to supply and demand and especially with your sea mullet, even in those days, a roe fish brought much better price than a melt fish. Even a top fish (talking in those prices) if you got threepence, fourpence a pound for your fish, you did very well. But there if there was a good quantity around oh, there'd be no trouble for the inspector to condemn them. With his ideas lots of times there, I've had a fish there been condemned there, and you'd get up there and you see the filleters filleting your mullet.

**JD** Even though they'd been condemned?

**MALTMAN** Even though they'd been condemned, yes. At later stages, of course, there to prevent that, that's where the Fishermen's League come in then and it was the inspectors then had to pour kerosene over them, over the condemned fish to stop them from being used. They claim it was for health reasons, what have you, but it was really to stop them from sort of being pushed out here and there.

But oh no, it was a hard way of life, the Depression years, nobody had any money and, of course, it was a way of life. You knew somebody was having a hard time, well, you always - as you went past - you sort of dropped a feed of fish off to them. But there again, that was Depression times. Oh we battled along there and then it's I suppose, circumstances turned up there, work was hard and I had the opportunity of working at Somerset Dam, so far inland. I had an old Chrysler utility and it became a way of life. Few of the boys, over we'd go to Caloundra and with our line fishing. There again, getting back to the earlier days, there talking about catching 100 bream or what have you. It was... if you didn't there was something wrong with you, but there I lasted with that there at Somerset Dam through to '39, fishing here and there, and I came down to Brisbane, tried to enlist, and at that time, I worked at Paul Greys in the rigging loft, making all the gear, fitting out ships. When I was down, of course, I was a rigger. I was a very, very efficient wire splicer, could make - even from my knowledge of fishing, of course - I could virtually make anything out of ropes. Rope nets or spliced ropes, spliced all this and, of course, I naturally would be able to take this into the rigging lofts, and from there I was seconded by the US Army small ships there, and I started off then teaching the American soldiers how to splice wire.

But there, of course, there were a few boats available here and there, and there, of course, we had to go out here and there and do certain inspecting of ships in there, and some General or some Colonel wanted to go out there, so while we were inspecting a few ships we would catch a few fish. So I maintained my contact we'll say, or the love of the water, we'd get whenever possible. But, of course, the end of the War years, that really started me off serious. I bought an Army work boat, 40 foot, fitted it out, went schnapper fishing, deep sea fishing.

**JD** Is that a Fairmile?

**MALTMAN** An Army work boat, a 40 foot Army work boat. I had a Fairmile a bit later on in the history. I had an HDML, another 72 footer, but I had this Army work boat and fitted it out and out of Brisbane there, around the cape, out to the island, and I set up the boat drifting and I'd have half a dozen lines ready along the side, baited there, and just one line over the side on the bottom there, and I'd get fish there. So

I'd run along quickly and put the other lines in the water and I'd get back and pull up my first line and I'd go through there and while the weather was good, I'd just keep drifting and keep fishing.

**JD** What sort of fish were you catching?

**MALTMAN** Oh there, the basic fish.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**MALTMAN** The Queensland nanagi is a different to the nanagi further down there. Here it is more what they call a pearl perch. On either side of his head oh there'd be a big gap and a fair sized flat disc that looked like pearl shell. Oh they go up to sixteen/eighteen pound and a very, very delightful fish. This is in there.... Bob Dyer, one of our early game fishermen, when I say, he was really the father of shark fishing here in Queensland. He came up here and he showed the Queensland game fishermen really how to catch sharks. [unclear] What we did find this.... old Bob, I [unclear] very well there. Bob would come out on the ocean and say, "Hey, lick lick nanagi," in other words he wanted a small nanagi, "Let lick...." he liked the nanagi about one pound/two pound, and cooked whole that's good tucker. When I say there I catch on to Bob<sup>1</sup>, old Bob and his boat called the **Tennessee Tea**, and Charlie with his deckhand and they came here to Queensland from the south. Called in to the whaling station and took a great hunk of whale meat, tied over the side, and then he would have so many bottle tops nailed on to a board, and all they've got to do then, is rubbing this hunk of whale meat which, of course, would create a slick, and you could see this great big oily slick travelling away in the distance and in no time at all.... of course, this is virtually where Bob Dyer fisheries sharks in Queensland and got so many records.

After a short while you'd see a fin coming up in this slick. After a while there and sometimes it might be a half hour and sometimes it would be an hour. But it would sit for a while there, he would have a collection of sharks at the back of his boat. He would rub a bit more stuff off there and rubbing a bit more so there was just a bit of a taste of whale meat going down into the water all the time. Well then, of course, Bob would put a lump of whale meat on a hook and hang it over the side there and have the shark.... "Oh no, he's not big enough." He'd take the bait away from the shark. "Oh there's a bigger one," and he let the big one take his bait. That way he could pick the size of the shark he wanted. From thereon, of course, it was on.

But it was interesting there, I suppose it was purely by accident what came from it. While he was burley, burley or something chum or call him up.... one old mate of mine, give him a bit more oodles now. At that time I was professionally fishing, we used to mix a lot of stuff and have it on board there and scraping all the time, we'd just keep dropping a little bit over the side for calling up. But as I say, with Bob and his oodle there, his burley for his sharks there, he also was calling a schnapper and I sort of weighed the situation there, and I ended up one time there and I was anchored in his slick about 100 yards or so behind him. Oh dear the amount of schnapper that was hitting that oil slick. It was [unclear] it was really terrific there, of course. I was already a burley man as a matter of fact, all my fishing, I hark back even to my early days, the Southport fishing club in the early days, I remember of course, they had a rule that you could not burley, you could not throw rubbish over and I used to argue about it there, saying, if you cut a piece of flesh off a mullet or something there and you threw the backbone over the side, you were burleying. If you were using prawns



and you threw the heads over the side, you were burleying. If you throw some bread over the side, or throw the crusts over the side, everybody in the world will see that Bingham's chopping up fish on the ship, when of course, he was burleying.

And to a degree, that is the basis of my success over the years in catching fish. Mainly burley. Always in my younger days I had found that a cracked corn and a bit of wheat soaked and then the second thing is, of course, bran mixed with wet sand, which carries the bran down to the bottom. Some is retained there by the wet sand and the other is carried away by the tide which gives the flavour to your fish which calls them up.

Anyway I get back there to my schnapper fishing with old Bob Dyer and burleying this net rock.

**JD** You are using a line for this?

**MALTMAN** Using a headline, yes, and then, of course, I always had a hunk of whale meat on board and then I just put a little bit of whale meat on the hook there and really like catching schnapper. But everything won there.... what else? It could be of value to people ocean fishing, reef fishing. You can anchor up in ten, fifteen, twenty fathom of water. I used to get a fairly light wire, and about seven pound anchor, and bank on a bit of a reef. But there, I'm mixing a bit of stuff, a bit of rubbish, any old crab stuff there, I found you could put it in a paper bag, tear the corner off to let the air out, tie that on to a line and lower it slowly down to the bottom. When you get down to the bottom, give it a jerk and burst the paper bag, which spread your burley all around the bottom which, of course, when you're out in the ocean or something like that, of course, you start off a line of burley for your fishing, and one of the things back in my Army work boat there.... You want to be in early and you'd probably run for a mackerel to towing garfish around the headland and different places there, up to about seven or eight o'clock and then go schnapper fishing, drifting for half an hour, up to eleven o'clock you'd drift. Eleven o'clock or two o'clock you might as well stop. We always knocked off, had our food and had a bit of a snooze.

The afternoon, just as the sun hits the water reflects on there, go into anchor on your reef and say the method I used there, I've lynched up, stop there, just drop a bit over the side, put in a paper bag and oh, just put a burley over, then come out after a little while and put a line, not so much a heavy line but a line with a round sinker or a small sinker, out on the hook, just drop it over the back and let it go out there. In my days, by that time you had your fish burley.

**JD** Did you catch other types of fish besides schnapper that way?

**MALTMAN** Oh yes, yes. It's interesting there. We would virtually catch all types of fish, especially later on there. At one moment I might.... most of the fish would last all night. You didn't get schnapper after nine o'clock on a dark night, but near the coast that you could get any time of the night, and the nanagi or the pearl perch, you could get him any time of the night, and either the nanagi or the pearl perch would come in and frequently you say, "Oh my godfather, I'm a bit early," but you got your hook out of the bottom and all of a sudden the bottom would start to move. It would be a groper and while he just took a turn and there was part of a ways and just rigged up for your fishing again.

The thing is it's interesting when you say other types of fish. When in the daylight hours around your reefs, of course, you're likely to pick up a coral trout, a hot coral trout [unclear] and parrot fish. Well Queensland has such a variety in the parrot

family, or they call them the wrasse, or blue tusk, or Maori wrasse, or the Tojo parrot which, of course, or whatever you're supposed to.... Tojo wrasse was there. The shape of the teeth or the shape of the head on there is typical Japanese, no disrespect whatsoever, it was just the name that was given to these fish. That, of course, applies to so many fish in the waters.

But one of my favourite baits, of course, is any species of crab. Modern times now, with all our trawlers, especially in our bays around here, all I get what they call a drynan crab or a three spot, undersized sand crab. These are outstanding bait all surrounding the reef. All types there, only [unclear] the burley in the.... You also a team later round the back there, yellowtail, or what they call yellowtails, they're a type of kingfish. They get samson, king, what they call cobakai. Really I don't know whether you get them in any places in the world, but a black king here in Queensland.... oh what a tremendous fish to catch. He doesn't come up. You don't get a bite or so and there again you might get a nibble. Someone will say, "Oh had a bite?" "No." To describe the different ways of a fish approaching a bait. They will have a bit of a nibble, have a touch, have a bit of a run, oh he's out in the [unclear] and that king does not do any of these things. He stands off and he decides he likes it. He blows his whistle and by the time he's picked up your bait he's in top gear. He doesn't bother chancing the gear after he's got it and away he goes. That's really only the way to go to catch these black kings.

But you really get varieties of fish. Anyway we were out looking around and incidentally the name of the old boat was the **Sea-horse**, the old Army work boat. Drifting round there and in those days, of course, it was all ice. You caught your fish there and you, at the earliest convenience, you cleaned your fish. If one might then.... it starts me off on a chain of thought that is, better it is fairly or what have you, but if I might expand my thoughts on this cleaning this fish and this secateur poisoning. I think it's secateur, the word they use. The poison they get [unclear] fish. To me most of that is caused by neglect on the part of the fisherman. There are all these fish which are big [unclear] a lot of them are scavengers. They eat all sorts of things. I know that a mackerel really likes sea toads. They really love them. Then, of course, knowing that sea toads are poisonous. The point I'm trying to make is this, that fish there - and they're thrown in to your bins, they're stacked on top of each other there, and they've got all this food in their belly, and they're laying there and to a degree, they generate a certain amount of heat. The food continues to digest and the food is released there and I am of the firm opinion a lot of this poison that is in the food seeps through into the flesh.

So what occurs with this poisoning and people getting sick, has primarily been caused by fishermen not cleaning their fish soon enough after they're caught. In other words you cannot clean a fish, even the [unclear] other [unclear] here in Queensland, we've got a bream season coming up and they go down there and the [unclear] and they get a rubbish bin, and they catch a great lot and they throw them in the rubbish bin, see? And they throw a few more in the rubbish bin, and a few more in the rubbish bin there, and they're in there the early part of the night, and in the bottom of the bin the next morning. The fish are there and they have the weight of the others on top of them, and all this slime and everything ends up down there.

Some of that must permeate through the flesh. There at the end it's only my theories of the situation there. There I digress there and I've started off when I started fishing including them. There again, of course, you're cleaning your fish there and taking his gut out and you break the skin along the back of the backbone there, and then you scrub out.... in my younger days any fish coming into the markets with any sign of blood in the belly, or the shoulders were broken, it was automatically condemned.

That fish must be as firm as can be, no sign of blood anywhere at all. But oh, and I see some of the fish even now, come in there.... amateurs to a degree I suppose, but still not the care taken of fish like it should be, and I suppose it is like your fruit markets. A buyer will go to the fruit markets there and he will ask for a definite grower's fruit and now, of course, the modern markets now, oh they're there, and the fellow on the floor, he'll say, "Oh this is so-and-so's catch," it will bring a better price than Joe Blow's.

It's interesting there that the.... when I passed a remark about presentation, modern times now, of course, the experienced man knows how to look after his fish, especially with modern times now, a good man working the reef. It was one of the ideas really, well I'll touch a little bit of my story because I'm coming to the situation there now of presentation of your fish.

Now your reef fish, of course, a coral trout of about one kilo (a little under a kilo) well they call it a plate size, I had been used to the idea in my reef days and now you can get freezer bags to put your fish in, or you can get freezer tubular stuff, so then you can buy these big rolls of freezer tubular, some might be six inches, some might be nine inches, which will handle even up to a full size mackerel. So if you put wet fish into a freezer when wet, they freeze together, stick together and they get freezer burn, whereas if you put even your small trout and any good reef man knows his trade, will sort out his small trout, small hussies, small sweet lip, what we call plate size, he will give them special attention, put them in the tubular freezer stuff there, and put a little twitch on each end, packing each fish individually, and that, of course, is the ultimate in presentation to the buyer. It's so much lack of experience, of course, it's new people coming in. They see boats for sale, prawning, fishing gear, and some learn, some go broke. The presentation there, specially round the reef.... I've seen them in the [unclear] year as sweet lips laying around the deck for hours, so they get sunburnt! Yes. And there when you put up that fish, there it is, it's just white and tatty there and, of course, [unclear] the buyer's not fooled and after several trips then they realise, now it doesn't look a hard fish, fish doesn't do that there. He doesn't clean his fish, doesn't....

But, of course, modern times now, even with your whole fish, where we use to use a.... well, we used to call it a cream can brush, a little round brush, that is used by the farmers, a round brush so they can really get into the corners of their cream cans and it served the same purpose there of chasing the blood along the backbones of a fish. But modern times now a boat of any consequence at all, will have a jet of water, and nicked open the throat and will rip his belly up, tear the gut out and agitate the gut out.... and of course, you're pulling the air bag in one pull, and nick the skin and the jet's there, and all the bag you can come out in one piece. It takes the slime off and it really polishes your fish. There again, of course, it's a matter for presentation.

This Army work boat, it's interesting really. I referred to Bob Dyer and shark fishing that I'd viewed, and naturally I was approached by a few of the early game fish fellows there, to take them out, which I did do. From that I ended up buying.... doing a fair amount of charter work - weekend charters. You do not know you're alive until you've run a charter boat, taking people out. You're at their beck and call, you hear them calling, "What's that?" all weekend. You've got to pick up the crowd, or they've come out and they've booked you and "How many going?" "Oh it will be ten." You can't take ten with any [unclear]. There's ten berths. I've got to occupy one and my mate's got to occupy one. Only eight. "Righto." "We leave at eight o'clock Friday night." "Righto". You get away by half past nine. Every boat has got a dozen beer and two bottles of rum and about two bottles of [unclear]. You finally get away from the wharf and they

crawl into the bunks and you look around and you find you've got ten people. "Well it's all right, we've doubled up. We'll double up there."

So out you go and you get somewhere near the fishing ground about midnight or one o'clock in the morning. Put over anchor, you can't get in your bunk. Anyway when you start to doze off, by that time the fellows that have gone to bed early are waking up. They say, "Come on, skipper, come on, skipper." So out of bed and away you go. When you get out and we'll do some schnapper fishing. Everyone wants to go schnapper fishing. So out you go and the weather's nice, and I had a very, very hard and fast rule that once we head out to sea there, there's no drinking whatsoever, and I didn't mean "maybe" there. If I see someone with a drink, I'd say, "Righto, now that's not on for the day," and I'd pick it up and throw it over the side.

Interesting, I remember one occasion, you get down there perfect, ideal, just like a sheet of glass, hardly a swell of any value, it was one of those days there's hardly any wind and it was a bit warm. Everybody sat round and they said, "Hey, skipper, how about a beer?" And you think, "Ah, righto." So next thing out comes the beer and everybody has their glasses there, and they were sitting round and, of course, meantime, some silly bugger's had a line over the side and we're drifting along, he yells out, "Fish!" A schnapper see? I remember on this occasion when there's usually a mad scramble, he's only got his glass in his hand - a fellow named Jim Cox - put his heel in the centre of a glass. Oh! It was a long pointed piece went up through his heel, come out near his ankle bone there. Well, the other fellow couldn't give a bugger. He's screaming, "I can't fish," and I'm getting the glass out of his foot, getting out all the medical equipment and what have you there. Oh what a valuable nuisance. So the moral of this story is you do not go fishing and do you not go drinking out in the ocean.

But anyhow, that was beside the story, game fishing, charter fishing, marlin fishing [laughs]. I'll never forget the first marlin. I'd had marlin take schnapper and sway and what have you there. I had a man named George Lambert out with me and he had hired me to be on his own, see, and oh we were drifting along and getting a nice schnapper, and George had hooked this squire about two pounds - I'd put long trace - and it could have joined to a football bladder and it had drifted away from the boat. Anyhow the next thing, this ocean sort of exploded. The marlin had taken the squire and had come up and had made a slash at the football bladder with its spear, see. Turned round and it sped through the water and it came straight at the boat. George lets out a scream, I dived to get the motor started there and I don't how it happened but it missed getting the [unclear] out of the pot. By this time we had... of course, now we played this marlin. I'm just as excited as George and anyway to cut a long story short, oh we actually had got this marlin going along side there, and I passed the land to chase there, further down, and took a half hitch on him and got him aboard. Anyway he was a bit over 300 pound. It's about the first time there was a marlin ever came into group of them. As a matter of fact we only got him and we put him up on the weigh station there and to my shame there, they've got a photo of me kissing the marlin [laughs].

Oh look there's virtually no.... to a degree that was the forerunner of marlin fishing out of Brisbane.

Anyhow that was really the start of the marlin fishing. However, one occasion out there, we had nine strikes and we caught one. A fellow caught one about 75 pound and he's says, "Go here, go there," and the fellow named Bob McBride, and he played this fish and all the other fellows on board were really cursing him. A 75 pound fish

there that took the best part of two hours to land it. It spoiled the day for everybody else.

**JD** This interview continues on side A of tape two.

<sup>1</sup>Bob Dyer, the radio personality (JD)

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

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## TAPE 2 SIDE A

**MALTMAN** It was interesting just.... I don't know how to describe it. There are so many things in the business, for example, there's human nature. You're out fishing and somebody says, "Oh gee, we're getting a bit light on some bait." Immediately all bait vanishes. Here and there somebody gets seasick and, "Oh, I'll go down and lay down for a while." So, as he's lying down for a while, then whoops, he hasn't got time so he gets up all over the mattress and there that's taken care of that. You don't know this until a couple of days after you've returned to port and somebody says, "Oh, boat's getting a bit [unclear]. Everybody's grabbed bait and grabbed a bit and hidden it so several days after you've been back in port, you wonder at the strange smells. You find the one down in the cabin. It takes a few days to find the bits of bait that are in all sorts of funny places here and there around the deck. And you think, "Ah! Charter fishing! Charter boats, charter boats, charter boats!"

It's interesting there at weekends. Oh, I think we used to get 25 quid for eight people from Friday to Sunday afternoon. You're always trying to get your boat, work on Saturday and Sunday, because you're chief cook and bottle washer. You're all day Monday cleaning up your boat and what have you, so you get two days' pay for four days' work.

A fortnight trip or a week trip, that's not bad. I remember one trip we had that I say was one of my initial trips to the Barrier Reef. That, of course, the Barrier Reef it is islands anywhere around the Musgrave, Lady Fairfax, you see the Bunker Group, or the Capricorn Group, is at the bottom end of the Reef, out off Sandy Cape, Sandy Cape Shoals.

Oh my first trip north and a nice lot aboard there and we were off Sandy Cape, a lovely day, a lovely drift. We had a twelve foot dinghy on the deck and we're drifting and we're catching fish, and we're drifting and we're catching fish there and they're throwing them in the dinghy. Five minutes later we had that dinghy full of fish. So, "What are you going to do? Are you blokes going to start cleaning now?" And I said, "We're going to go into Bundaberg and get rid of them." So away we go, travelling there, somebody cooks up a meal and some's cleaning there and travelling round there, and somebody's washing the fish and scrubbing down there. I said, "After all that, I will flop there," and we finished before some of the parrot fish (what they call Tojo parrot) he's a reddy looking parrot there. Oh, he's a very, very low.... He does not crunch his food in his mouth but in the back of his gills he's got big hard crunchers there. Anyhow, when it comes to cleaning a Tojo parrot, it's a work of art and it's really tough there. Well, I threw up three or four Tojos in between there, you can see everybody pick up a Tojo and gollop them over the side. Oh we ended up in Gladstone.... in Bundaberg, oh I forget the name now, I know it was about 1000 pound of.... the situation there.... up and down fishing. It was up and down fishing that you caught. It wasn't a way of fishing there, even the deepest part, a sinker on the bottom and two hooks or three hooks and ooh, I thought oh boy, this is good. I

had three hooks on them and I pulled up two redheads, a 27 pound red emperor and the other leader had been broken.

Now if you've ever seen two red emperor that size on the circuit along side your boat and you're only allowed to get two gaffes, and "Get the gaffe! Get the gaffe!" Get two, I think it's a... I even get a glow now looking back at that situation there. But oh, we went into Bundaberg and light up and everybody had a great old time, and went out again. Then we got out and we played around Lady Musgrave, a lot round that area there. A good bunch, but some could get bloodier, especially the turtles.

So okay we got on the [unclear]. Somebody gets a turtle there and the next thing it's got to be butchered, cut up turtle steaks. Turtle meat is interesting really. So we cut up some meat there and done the turtle there, and when you put a piece of turtle meat in the pan it still quivers, it still goes on moving [laughs] while you're cooking it, but it makes a good curry, it makes a good stew. But there you need [unclear] in those days, of course, it was all part of the trip there, and it was just one of those situations there. A good trip, enjoyed the trip and I don't think there's anything nicer. A few congenial fellows having a trip around the Reef, and there, of course, you have your lagoons to go in for anchorage and you get in the lagoons on the Reef there, and your anchor's down, and you sit around.

It was interesting there, I don't know how it came about but we were sitting round there. I said, "Oh geez, what do you know." They said, "What's wrong, Snow? What's wrong?" I said, "It's me birthday tomorrow!" Well, that was an excuse then, of course, for celebrations see? Well, I had many, many trips here and there to the Reef and invariably had a birthday every trip [laughs], and they said, "Skipper, is that so?" "Oh my word it is." They're getting a bit hazy over the years but I'd say, "It's me birthday," and they'd say, "Happy birthday, happy birthday," of course.

A little situation there, on the same boat there. On this occasion I had some people out there from Brisbane. We'd been outside and got a nice lot of fish and we came back inside and we set up there, [unclear] all the fish are cleaned, everything is bedded down and what have you. It's the "happy hour" you see, and somebody said, "Hey, Skip! How about one of your favourite stews?" they know what I know you see. Well, I had a man-sized pressure cooker. She was a beauty. So I says, "Righto, fellows, celebrations." I'd just put the onions in you see and I'm celebrating. I was having a drink with the crowd out there. Anyhow I cut the steak and we celebrated the meat going in and we celebrated the carrots, we celebrated the meat, we celebrated the onions, we celebrated everything that was going into the pressure cooker. So the lid goes on there and there, it's a big celebration, let's [unclear] the cook. Well, while we're waiting for this to cook we're all really happy.

Then someone says, "Hey geez, Snow," he says, "How's the pressure cooker going? It's a bit long." I said, "Oh, it's going to take a while," and with that, the pressure cooker blew the safety rubber. It was down in the galley see. I goes down and takes a look see, and I'm pretty happy myself then. I come back and I says, "She's right, fellows, she's cooked. Come on down and eat it. George, you can have that wall." I allocated the walls, the ceiling, a bit difficult one here. It's going through the door in the galley into the next cabin. If you never seen a pressure cooker blow up in a confined space, you haven't seen nothing! But there was still enough in the pressure cooker for tea. [Laughter]

You started me talking that now about little incidents that happened here and there back over the years in charter boat work. That one come back to me there about a pressure cooker. But anyway we went up around the Barrier Reef there and I don't

know whether it was that trip or another trip there, and we, of course, Queensland is renowned for its mackerel - Spanish mackerel, guard mackerel and different types, the big wahoos. There will be certain times of the year there's a lot of mackerel up here, and we've got Sandy Cape and up around there, Indian Head there. We get around and there's a few mackerel towards there. I don't know whether you are aware of mackerel fishing. You have a wire trace, [unclear] of certain length and usually garfish, put on a certain way, double hook there, and the whole secret, of course, is garfish must swim naturally. They cannot revolve. A revolving bait will never catch a fish, so you put your garfish over at the back of the boat to see if it swims.

On this occasion this fellow put the garfish.... "Oh," he said, "Be careful of your wire there. Make sure he doesn't get any there." And this fellow who put the gar over there, got the bunch of wire in his hand and this mackerel took the garfish about ten feet at the back of the boat which, of course, pulled all the wire into his hand. He was cut into his hands there, and he's screaming. Well, I had thick gloves on so I gathered the wires. I sort of got behind him and I wrapped there - I still don't know how I did it there - from there I threw that mackerel on to the deck. But the moral of the story there, of course, is care at all times with your fishing.

Yes, I referred before there too, when you're schnapper fishing there, a lot of people got the idea of throwing the line a bit away from the boat. No, it's easier with two hooks.... I've seen it sometimes with this fellow, the second hook can unhook them. Don't throw a double-hook, always drop your line over the side. Don't try to throw it with a heavy sinker on.... ooh. You don't know you're alive until you've got somebody on board and they've got a bloody hook in their leg. So you press on the hook and then get a piece of cord through the bend in the hook and you see, "Ahhgrh!" Oh boy, hear them yell! Anyway that gets the hook out [laughs].

But you get me talking about these situations there of charter boats, charter boats there. They were good years. There, of course, price not much. You were busy making a living.

**JD** Did the recreational fishermen that you were taking out, were they able to sell the catch?

**MALTMAN** Oh some of them did. I was there. If I had ended up with a party there and a couple of them were selling the fish, they were very, very lucky to have a second trip with me. They were using my knowledge for making money, see? Some of your party there, some you've been taking out for the weekend, most of the time like that, each man had his own fish. Each man marks his fish there, on the right hand fin, the left hand fin, the top of the tail, the bottom of the tail, [unclear] well the tail's gone or they take two fins off there, and I had my mark. See, [unclear]. They say, "Oh you come back there and you're busy there and everybody's getting their fish out, you...." You come to get your fish out and somehow they've always managed.... especially someone who's been sick you know, "Oh, I'll knock off a couple of Snowy's but he won't mind...." That situation, ahhh, there were a number of times there that I ended up with no fish myself by the time that.... but they were good days.

**JD** In Queensland, Snow, is there any animosity between the professionals and the amateur anglers?

**MALTMAN** No.... well, I'll say not so much animosity. They resent.... well see.... not so much poaching but doing stupid things. Say, you working a patch of mackerel and you're going around and somebody gets the idea of diving across the middle, or doing something, or getting something chopped across your line or as they see you catch a

fish and next thing they're over where you are fishing there. Yes, you have a certain amount of resentment but no, I don't think so. But I think sometimes as I catch fish I say, I mentioned I show people how to catch fish and where to catch fish there. You can catch them there today and you can't catch them tomorrow. And I say to people, "Confucious he say, `Don't catch same fish twice". In other words, you've got them here today, that doesn't say they're going to be here tomorrow.

See, successful fishing is an accumulation of knowledge of how and where. When I say where (especially in your ocean fishing or what have you there) there are so many different reefs there, they could be on one reef today, they could be at another reef tomorrow. There you're getting on to another one of the theories or what have you there. There's so many criteria. You see, as a trout fisherman will tell you, he will tell you that atmospherical conditions, highs and lows, can make a difference to the fishing. I don't know whether you're aware of that situation, or not, but it can. Now, the same thing can happen in your.... In my boat, in my latter boat, I had a temperature gauge driven to the hull. You see, and the water temperature it can go [unclear] is there anywhere from 68 to 74 average from a distance. Current flow, temperature, time of the year are all situations there. Schooling, fish that are schooling and travelling there, even all fish that are travelling there, there's always homers. In other words fish have come there and said, "Oh I like this place." The same thing can happen in rivers where there's a fish can sometimes take up a home. In other words, whether they take that area or whether it is governed by the amount of food that is available in the area. That, of course, is criteria for the Barrier Reef. If there's a bomby there it will carry so many fish, another one there will carry so many fish. There in that area there where there's a shark who selects his area there, and I think to a degree, they can be like cattle, where they can graze (especially of a night time fishery, after dark there) they will graze a given area of the ocean floor, and certain parts of the day, on some knob somewhere. In other words that's the reason why you waste time on the Reef today where they settle down after all night grazing around.

Well, I don't know how [unclear] is there, whether it's primarily theory. But I have found so much of that, but it's interesting how life turns up. Anyway I sold out of the Army work boat and I was sort of floating round and I was doing a bit of casual skippering here and there, and I was running a charter boat or what have you.... a boat yard here and on this occasion, I had taken out a bunch of engineers and they were in the process of deepening the north west channel coming into Brisbane. Gavin MacDonald, who was the engineer co-ordinator general was there, and we were taken around the area. As the usual situation, you prepared a meal and they were just sort of sitting around and talking there. They were talking about this and talking about that, and I said, "Oh I don't know. You blokes (I forget the exact words I said) You blokes haven't got a clue what you're talking about." "What's wrong?" I said, "Look, not once has the subject of weather conditions come up in your discussions." "What do you mean?" See? I said, "Well, have you been in touch with the Weather Bureau as to weather conditions in this area and your equipment?" "Oh no." "January, February and March. It's cyclone season!" "Oh yes." "You come in April. The 25th of April, your first westerlies. April, May, June.... you get two westerlies and then you get your one south easter there. You come into August you get your really strong westerlies. Then they coming down and you get your northerlies and you get the start of your storms." "Oh."

A little while after, as I say, I had virtually retired from fishing and this Gavin MacDonald came in to the yard here. He asked me to run their survey boat. "What for? Oh," I said, "no, no, no." Anyway he prevailed on me to run this survey boat, We did all the survey work for the co-ordinator general, for this dredging, see?



That was one of the situations there of how I came to work for the Government. The point I make there is - on the subject of weather - you get some weather situations there. So many people come here and they've got to go fishing. Going to buy a boat, going to hire a boat. Bought a prawn trawler, got to go schnapper fishing, deep sea fishing, all the rest of it there, make fortunes there. Yes, yes. They say, "Oh yes...." A lot of the discussion generally goes on in a pub somewhere or a bar, see. They dip their finger in a pot there and they work it out there. There's been that much arithmetic worked out on bar counters, it's amazing. "We've only got to get so-and-so to pay for so-and-so. We've only got to get so-and-so more cooled.... so-and-so there."

Well, I said, "Now there's 52 weeks in the year," and they say, "That's right." "So you're going to work 26 of them?" "Eh?" "Yes," I say, "that's right. You're going to work 26 of them. Now," I said, "you just figure. We've had the greatest example of all times in Queensland now, since before Christmas. December, January, February, March there see? Then you're half way into April. Three quarter time the first fourteen weeks, they'd be lucky to get three days in. And you've still got the rest of the year to go, see?"

There are so many people there that don't stop to figure out that weather situation there, and they'll probably talk later on about my reef fishing there. I did want to expand on that there, and the point I make was any fishing boat (deep sea or whatever you go there) the moment you pull up your anchor and come home, you have stopped earning. Now whether it's any sort of fishing.... prawn trawlers, the moment you stop fishing you have stopped earning, and you then start to spend money. It's cost you money to steam home and it's cost you money for this and it's cost you money for that. It's cost you money to tie up at the wharf. So then if you've got insurance or you've got a thousand dollar boat, it's costing you money. So all the time where they're going fishing.... Well, anyway, that's how I ended up by working for the Government in the latter part of the years. Anyway I jumped ahead of myself there because I often had a talk about the weather.

So the weather, it has such a deciding factor in your fishing, weather temperature, ocean now is recognised by the currents that occur, coastal tides. They come in very close to the coast, another time they will sheer right away which, of course, has been now recognised as disturbing, and this marlin situation. I used to tell these fellows there that there was heaps of marlin out of Brisbane coast. Well now in latter years, we have more experienced people, more boats going out there, they found that this is so. Whereas they used to go north out of Cairns, the marlin season, when I have seen in my experience in the outer Barrier Reef there, and are now virtually available all the year round, and that, of course, is just times proving me to be right and it would be a big factor in our future to restrain the time that's come, of course, when we will find ways and means of transferring people from the outer Barrier Reef, have accommodation out there. I think the idea of the floating hotels [unclear] the basic idea was good but small units could be stationed on the outer Barrier where these vast areas of lagoons and what have you, in perfect safety. It was, of course, country seen by aerial surveys and the time would come when I think it would be quite practical.

But round about the.... I don't think so many people realise just how much the weather, highs and lows, of course, the modern prawn trawler knows it's not another Barrier Reef situation there. Certain reefs fish better on the dark of the moon. You were saying to me the dark moon tides and the moon tides. When there's a bright moonlight night and a dark one. These, of course, you get your dark nights with the south easterly you get prosperous in the water.

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## TAPE 2 SIDE B

**MALTMAN** They were using a long trace.... when I say a long trace, on given occasions I have used a trace 50 or 60 feet long, but the normal estuary fishing, I use a very long rod, twelve, thirteen, fourteen feet long, and a trace of eight, nine, ten feet, is just norm for the fishing. Basically what I do, of course, is the sinker lies on the bottom, the bait is still in suspension. There again the theory is a fish is sitting on the bottom and the eye is travelling along looking in both directions and looking overhead there, and there is the bait coming down to him. He can then come up, get hold of the bait and every possibility he has not felt any resistance from your sinker. When I said a trace of 50 or 60 feet long, this can be used in fairly deep water and in fairly strong water. But I mentioned early a spinning bait will never catch a fish, but you can put a prawn on a hook, pitching his tail, putting the hook in and then out the head.... bring out the hook at the back of the head so it lies straight, and then a long trace on a swivel and from the swivel come down on a piece of cord about three feet long and the sinker can be any weight that you like that will take it to the bottom, or of a sufficient weight that you can lift it up or feed it back a little bit along the bottom which gives you a floating bait with a sinker.

This is very, very easy and very, very practical. Another [unclear] you can do as I mentioned before, for mackerel fishing. You can fish for mackerel on the anchor with a long trace by using a couple of net cords and a long trace and [unclear] and there's your garfish swimming free and this will often catch your fish on anchor.

But there again, all these things, they're not theory, they are facts that I have been, shall we say demonstrating, that I've been doing for so long there, that's interesting when I think about some of the [unclear] do this and do that and the pressures that are felt there, and I think that I should raise the point while I'm talking and that is not so much a spinning bait but the smell of bait. I've had people out in the boat with me fishing here and there. I'm catching fish and they haven't got a bite. They're puzzled, they're getting nowhere. They get frustrated and I say now, "What have you been doing?" "Nothing." I said, "Give us a smell of your hands - oh!" The outboard petrol with oil in it is deadly, kerosene is deadly, dieseline is worse. I tell you there are so many things that you can have hands barred. [unclear] Aerogard and what have you, when they go fishing. They spray themselves, they spray their hands and their arms and what have you, and then hope to catch a fish. It frightens hell out of bloody mosquitoes and you expect the bloody fish to bite the [unclear] bait.

No, I put what's in my mind and I can throw this at you and you can sort it out, please yourself but.... oh make sure that they do it. Go on a boat and you get some meat and you do something [unclear] how exactly are you going to catch fish? No.

I'll get back to where I was before about long traces and what have you, of how to put on baits, of how to do this and how to do that, and you talk of a prawn, and you say to a fellow, "Put on a prawn." Anyway does he know how to put on a prawn? Well, you must always pinch the tail of the prawn. Next time you cast off you look at that prawn and you see the tail flapping in the wind. Something more, the tail will also catch any run in the current which will likely cause your bait to spin and then see, pinch the tail out there and you can peel the prawn, you can curl the prawn on your hook, you can put the prawn on straight. You put it in that bloody piece of fish bait. Anyway, yes....

Similar, same as the yabby up in Queensland, the other yabbies which is the same form. There are so many ways to put yabbies on. You can pinch the head off which exposes a little bit of the pink behind the yabby's head. You can put the yabby on with a curl on it. Before you do, on the claw, if you get the dake off, the little part that goes backwards and forwards, the yabby can't nip you. So there's so many variations and ways....

Anyhow I was talking about.... maybe a lot of rot [laughs] but it is little points that cross the mind and one of these days someone might hear and listen and try and say, "Well, the old fellow there had a bit of a clue of what he was talking about."

Yes, it's interesting you know, circumstances. Someone used to say if one door shuts, another door opens, and I think I've been here about that in the north, and a fellow got up there and he says, "Oh what about going to Sydney?" I said, "Yes, righto." He said, "How about picking up?" I said, "Righto. I said oh we'll pick about 175 feet. I've got a [unclear] masthead to you. A boat called the **Regal Star**. It was a refrigerated boat. Oh he was going to do with this and he was going to do with that, and going to process prawns. Anyway he brought the boat up here and the next thing he wants to go reef fishing with it, and I ended up with the **Regal Star**, with a mate of mine, and went around Clippy Island. As I said to him you know, "Look," I said, "We're going out there, geez, I want somebody with me that's got a clue or two." Well anyway, Cliffie Ireland and I ended up on the **Regal Star** on the outer Barrier, which is what I refer to as Swains.

Well, there were a few people on board had a lot of clues. Anyway Cliff and I caught a lot of fish and next thing we got short of tucker and so the owner sent somebody out there and they bought two cases of beans and I think a bag of flour. So that was about it. I ended up they got a fair crate of fish. We came back into Bundaberg and my mate says, "Give us the cheque," you know the money and Cliff says, "Jesus, No, I don't know. Come on." So we go to town and take it to the bank, and no funds, you see. So up next door was a solicitor's office and we put a writ on the mast. Next day the solicitor was given the writ to seize the boat for the finance company. They can't repossess the boat because we've got the writ on the mast you see, so they've got to put the money in and pay us before they can.... So they put their money in.... anyway to cut a long story short, I got our money back.

But the whole thing of that exercise there, when we got out and we got among the Reef and, of course, the outer Barrier Reef is fantastic. You'd have to write about it there. At its widest place there, from the inside reef to the outside reef is 120 miles. It is big, and we got in among there and then Cliff says, "Come on," so we launched the ship's boat and away went Cliff and I there, and we got a couple of lines each, and we went over near a reef there and we pulled up there and after that, I said, "Oh well, Cliff, oh well same as I used to catch most schnapper on at Southport there, we'll just put a small sinker on top of a hook." We threw a line over there and the water was clear, there was no two ways about it, it was as clear as can be. If you've been on the beach you can see how clear it looks.

So there they are, sweet lip. They are about three pounds and there they are, sweet lip. As the line hit the water the sweet lip jumps. Cliff's got one on there and away we went there. I don't know how many fish we threw over the side there and here, and there was the coral trouts coming in for something there. There's red emperor coming in there. I've never seen so much fish in all my life.

Anyway back we go there and then until late, a little line between us. We took the crate of fish off there and we got back into port with it and there was all this fuss

about the cheques - we got the cheque there - and Cliff said to me, "Jesus, Snow, we've got to get a boat..." Well, we looked around here and there, and they want a bit of finance there and at that time, a fellow named Lloyd Clarke came back to Caloundra and Lloyd Clarke was the original man to go to the Gulf to catch barramundi. He was getting barramundi on there and he had a boat, what he called the boat the **Larry Cork**, the boat he had, and he was getting this barramundi and air-freighting them inland from the north, you see, and he did pretty well out of it. Anyway Lloyd came back from the north with this boat already fitted out, big refrigeration, everything there. Anyway we ended up by buying it for a very reasonable sum and inside a couple of weeks, we're on our way to the Reef.

We got a couple of doreys, little fifteen footer there, little Chapman pups clay engines there, phut, phut, phut around the place there, and we got into the Reef there and got trays for filleting the fish, put seals on them, and pins on them there, and put them into the deep freeze, and I say there, the ship had capacity for 1400 pound of fillets. So we got so many fillets there and what have you, so what we're going to do, so we came into Rockhampton. What's his name? I think his name was Laver.... to sell our fish see? Apparently there had been a couple of other fellows playing around out of there, but he decided oh yes, he'll give it the catch for some nominal sum. I said, "We'll get it," and "Oh Christ," he said, "that will last me for a long time."

So what are we going to do with it then? So anyway we go out and we put up again see. We get another crate of fish and we came into Gladstone with them. So oh, okay, we put them on the train and send them down to the markets in Brisbane. You can do that there. Snap frozen fillets in cartons see. I arrive at the Fish Board in Brisbane. Here's all my cartons of fish stacked on the Fish Board floor, sagging. Well, they reckon the roof lifted off the fish market and the fish market made the catch there, and he was lucky I didn't grab a couple of bloody trolleys and what have you round his neck! Get the stuff back in the freezer and try and save it.

Oh we had a lot of trouble in the early days marketing fillets.

**JD** They'd left it out of the cooler in Brisbane?

**MALTMAN** Yes, they came off the train and put them on the floor and didn't put them in the cold room. But we lost money over that situation so back we go there, and the big fact there oh the buyers weren't very happy about this fillet situation, not at all. As I say, we got nothing. Anyway, there was a bad cyclone season. Anyway I said to Cliff, "Come on," I said, "We've got to go north and we're going to get some fish for Easter." So we got a nice load of fish on board there and we've got 1400 pounds, and this was the week before Easter. Now the weekend before Easter I says, "Come on," and there's a cyclone coming up. To end up we came across from the Reef to a little place called Island Head Creek which is way up above Gladstone, and down behind Capricorn there, and we're there and oh geez, she's whistling, she's blowing. I said, "Righto, fellows, batten things down." "Where we going?" they said. "We're going in to Gladstone," I said. Weighed up anchor just after daylight there and put away to sea and climbed up the balers. I had the first one and out and down we [unclear] down the side of the ledges there. Anyway, very slow, we pushed down the coast and got down behind the Kepples, and I said, "Well look, we're going to go out through the Narrows." Of course, we've never been through the Narrows which is on South Curtis Island just out from Gladstone.

So we pushed down there and got down the Narrows and it was low tide, and I got as far as I could in the dorey and I got out and I walked. There it is.... you see the Narrows between the mainland there and the shallow part there, and I put a tin up

there and I put a hunk of rag up somewhere else just to mark the channels there, and we'd been in touch with the Fish Board and told them down there. I'm the only bugger on the coast who's got any fish, see? So to cut a long story short, I remember when a Harbour Master had told me there that the high water in the Narrows.... There's a high water comes from the north and a high water comes from the south. The tide there and they meet in the middle. And they meet in the middle and the time there is exactly the same time as high water in Brisbane - Brisbane tides.

Well, to cut a long story short, I got through there and we got through there and we got scratch, scratch there, and the next thing I'm down in Gladstone there. They were all looking for me coming out through the main harbour but I came up the back way there. Lands were made.... no sooner got in there, to the wharf there.... in those days there was a plane, a cargo plane goes north every night and comes back next morning. I'd made arrangements there and it was taken off my boat straight into the plane and into Brisbane. I came down on the plane still in my fish clothes. I had nothing then. The pilot's come.... with the pilot and my load of fish in the back there. But the whole point of the exercise there, so many people brought that there.... they got them to auction and I got a good price and this started snap frozen fish in Queensland.

**JD** It was the first time it had been done?

**MALTMAN** First time it had been done. That's right. I made ten trips a year for five years, 35000 pounds of fish, it was 14000 ton fillets and I had caught an awful lot of fish. When that time so many incidents got clear. People talk of sharks, Ernie Grant, [marine biologist] he is well known here in Australia, writes books and all this here, and anything out here. He's a great man and he's [unclear] and he's taken all sorts of photos. He said, "I want to get some photos of sharks. Any idea where there are any?" As you're filleting (filleting the catch) the backbone is going over the side there, and as it goes down to the bottom in a very short time you've got five or six big tiger sharks sitting on the bottom and watching your boat.

It was interesting there and how long would it be? It might be five or six backbones slowly going down to the bottom there. A tiger shark will leave and it goes dong, dong, dong, dong and turns around and he'll go to the bottom see and then another shark will take his turn. "Oh," he said, "Gee, I want some good photos." I said, "Oh I'll see what I can do, Ernie." So I got this skeleton of a fish called a turrum (if I could only get them today, they'd be the best part of 70 pound) run the fillets through there and I tied a rope around his tail and I lowered it down see? And then one of those sharks came up there, oh yes, and I took it away from him, see. Then I put it down and he came again, yes, then I put it in the third time and he had come round under the boat to have a go. So I teased him some more and then finally he's tired of teasing him closer to the surface of the back of the boat see.

Then the last time there, just near the surface there, I said to one of the crew fellows, "Now," I said, "this time give it to me and bring it up right to the surface there at the back of the boat." So it's right at the top of the boat there and there's a platform there. There's the shark, there's the.... and I had some flensing knives from the whale station at Tancalouma. As he got his head out of the water, he's taken this big backbone aagh! then they sort of growled. The cover goes over their eyes and they growl. I hit him, ripped him right down the belly with the flensing knife. And then another shark came round and got him and I hit him with the flensing knife. Well, there was two or three sharks at the back of it and this bloke won't let go of the backbone. He must have got some of the rope somewhere there, and he was there

and these sharks and Ernie Grant was over the back with his camera and he got the whole lot of this.

Whether you could prevail on Ernie, it would be invaluable. He's very, very selective. He just might prevail on Ernie. I know Ernie, the best shot here and there for some very good reason there. The interesting thing on that, you see there on the Reef you have coral trout and the big thing is, of course, you have the true blue-spot trout. But the other trouts you get around the Reef, I don't know about in your neck of the woods over there, but trout here can come in green, red or you get the Chinaman trout, all the different colours. You get them all out of the deep water, a very deep red, some light red there, and whether there's different families or whether well they could be several of them, but things are changing colour there, or whether it has the power to do that. But oh Ernie got so much of all the stuff on film, it was really fantastic.

Oh yes, the situations out there.... on another occasion there, we took places' names.... There was [unclear] we got a bloke with us. The first time I went out there, we didn't know where we were - no idea. So here's the Reef see, we fished that reef and here's another reef, so I went over in my dorey.... Incidentally they don't call them.... they call them "reef queen", and I went over in my dorey to the next reef there, so then next day we had a new reef see. There was another one, so next day it's going somewhere further, here and there, all the time they're going new country, new country. We got used to having a new reef every day and putting a line in the water where fish had never had a line before in the water. So you can imagine to see some of those masses of fish there in that water, and it's still quite frequent for those situations to happen out there. But as I say that there was the Doctor's Corner and there was Webby's Lagoon [names given to reefs].

On one occasion there, we started a trip there. We came out there and here's this whale shot see, he was shot, and what had happened, he came through.... I don't know, he'd come through at Atkinsons Lagoon, through that lagoon into another lagoon, into another lagoon in the vast Barrier Reef, and he's inside the reef and he can't find his way out. I always reckoned he was jumping up and he's looking for that.... while he's jumping up there. The whole point of that there.... we couldn't fish that area, there were so many sharks there. In other words there, I think they must have sensed that the whale was there and getting weaker and weaker, but geez, the sharks in that area there.

One more shark incident. There was another chap out there, starting to come out there, a fellow called Clarrie Nuffer. It was a Sunday and only Clarrie and his wife, and Terry Galvan and his boy and mum was on board, and they had their boats set up so they had a board across the cockpit of their boat - oh it wasn't a big one, about 30/35 feet - across the back of this boat, and the end of this board there, there was like a little shute through there. You could see it coming out through a hole in the side of the boat. Mrs Nuffer's filleting the fish there, feeding these backbones down the side. Well, a shark must have got a bit impatient what have you, because a shark - I don't know whether it was a sharp sided or a square sided boat - and where this opening came out, he came up there. He must have been getting a backbone as it was coming out there, and his teeth had caught on the side of the boat. Well, I heard this screaming and I made a dive over there and the poor woman was in hysterics. There's this big shark thrashing on the side of the boat see? And I get overboard and I give it a smack with the wooden bar, you know it had got its teeth and what have you there. But oh it was one of those situations that occur here and there with sharks.

You know, there's a vast area of the outer Barrier and there are so many reefs that break up the ocean swell, no wind no waves. On the reef, you move nine o'clock in the morning to three o'clock in the afternoon with your sun overhead so you have colours of water so you can tell whether it's shallow water or deep water. At other times there, at odd times, no wind you had a sheet of glass and the refractory light.... I think I ought to put in there, there was a lifebuoy from a ship which got wrecked on Koto Reef out here, and oh it was so far away. I had to wait for wind before I could move. I wasn't going to move because you could not see five feet or ten feet from where you are. The whole of the area is a gigantic mirror.

**JD** This interview is continued on side A of tape three.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE B

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### TAPE 3 SIDE A

**MALTMAN** It's interesting in my early talks there, I was referring to burley (B U R L E Y) you could call it a "chumming", a "callemup". It's all so still very, very practical on the outer Barrier Reef, for virtually anywhere there. Where there's a few methods of catching fish out there because your deeper water needs an orthodox method of a heavy sinker and a couple of hooks to get down in the deep water there. But in most occasions there, you can use a line head, two sizes of sinkers might fit you up there, size 2 and a size 4 beam. There again, not so much [unclear] as very, very practical. You put a round sinker down as well. You put a round sinker in the middle of a heap of line and it rolls around the [unclear] and you become tangled. You put a flat sinker or a beam sinker down and it stops there. So therefore, a beam sinker is practical.

So there you are, by using those in that method in the other area, my main bait while I was out there was what we call "bludger trevally, bludgers". How they got that name, of course, is from the mackerel fishermen towing garfish and these damn great trevally coming along diving on them, and they got the name of bludger trevally which was very little commercial value in my day, and they say, "Oh you bludger!" That is perfect bait. But there again any surface fish in the Barrier area is good bait, but the point I was going to make with the bludger there, you take the fillet off and cut it with your bait knife up there, but scrape the backbone with a knife to put a little bit of the fish into the water. You'd be amazed how quickly some sweet lips and coral trout will be looking up the surface there and your light sinkers then.

I have caught two fish on one hook. I mean a coral trout, a coral trout on and a sweet lip has tried to get the piece of bait which has slipped, and I've put two over the side and had two sweet lips come over the side at once and that is no fishing tale or fairy tale or any one of those. Anybody's been around the Barrier Reef at odd times they must have caught two fish on the one hook.

But where I was referring to catching fish with a certain type of hook and there there is a method used by a lot of people out there who normally use.... say there's two or three boats, dorey boats, and a mother ship. One of them will go trailing or trawling, or we call it "wogging" for coral trout. That is a fairly heavy line. Oh you can make up all sorts of lures out of coloured ropes or modern times, the lures that are available now, and you just trail along the edge of the reef. The trout come out and grab it there and you spin around and get in there and, of course, now it really pays to trawl for trout because they are top quality fish and the value of a.... oh ten dollars, twelve dollars, is quite feasible now per pound (per kilo) of trout. So you get a two or three pound trout, or as happens occasionally.... Oh it was an interesting morning there.

Cliffie came in and he had a big blue-spot trout - a beautiful fish, big blue-spots there. He got one about 27 pounds, and Cliffie's never forgotten it. I came in with one of 30 pounds. Cliff's never ever forgiven me for that [laughs]. But there along the edge of the Reef tailing these wogs....

Interesting there again. Today you can wag up some wogs. You might have a yellow type of rope. You go to the Reef you want a mix a bag of multi-coloured rope, or plastic what have you there, take your rod, push it through the eye and make it a tasty squid or a tasty this, and bite like hell today and the next day you'll hardly get a bite. Of course, you never go.... if you go a little way out there in your dorey over somebody else, you always took a bit of a lure out behind you, or a small feather, a white feather or a two ounce feather. It was what they called a sharky mackerel. Looks like a mackerel, eats like a mackerel, and smells like a shark. It's a....

Oh, at times you know where they are along the edge of the Reef where, of course, they are a very, very small fish there. We refer to them as "star dust". The fish will run along the edge of the Reef and you'll see a big shower of shine. It might run for 100 yards if the fish were.... star dust there. And you say, "Oh there's some sharky mackerel over there."

Oh there's so many fish out there that come to mind. One gentleman I took there about parrot fish and wrasse. On the outer bay you get a type of fish called a Maori wrasse. About so long, but oh he could be three feet long, he could be two foot deep. Blue looking flesh but he has a certain amount of value on the scales. He would have a scale anywhere up to three inches in diameter. A big value wrasse and they are in demand by decorators, and oh yes, the big Maori wrasse, he scaled in and took those scales in, they're really valuable.

But what I'm getting on to what do you call them.... exotic or erotic, or bloody nusiances, you get a Chinaman. Not a Chinaman trout, just a Chinaman on his own. He's like a Chinaman in the face and he's got the whiskers hanging down there and oh boy! You will often get him when you're wogging. I expect he's a bit happy going over the reef. Oh they can weight up to 20 pounds, 25 pounds, and oh boy! Can he pull! Can he go! And sometimes when your deep fishing's run into him, and when you first get a glimpse of him you think you've got yourself a big emperor out there.

Then you get these red jew. See, the Chinaman, of course, is definitely a no-no. He's a poisonous fish, the same as the red jew. He grows to a big size and he's very, very similar to a mangrove jack. He grows to a big size and he's a good fighter. But there again he's also a no-no.

But in my earlier talk there, the same thing applies out there more especially the Reef. In my routine out there, early morning (because I get out of bed early) just at sun-up, and about [unclear] and away the day's ocean go, the men on board will be pulling the trays and cleaning trays and putting the lots of fillets in the cartons. At ten o'clock, the cook will have breakfast ready which is a good meal and away they go. You have brought fish home then for the cleaners. Your next session then was two o'clock, fairly short because of the warmer day, and you stress on your dorey and covering over the fish and continually throwing water over them, because in your pits in your doreys the manufacturers there say that the scupper hole in the side of your pits so the water's going out and washing slime away.

So two o'clock in you would come there and the cook would have a tray of sandwiches ready. [laughs] One point there, we christened him "Blossom" the cow, the Blossom there. He looked like Blossom there. He had a bloody great big scout hat on there. He



was last to leave the breakfast table there - first in to breakfast, last to leave at breakfast. You could always find Blossom by the banana skins, the banana peel, the apple peel, what have you there. He'd be first into dinner for the sandwiches and he'd be first there, last there, and he always waited the last [unclear] to make sure he got there. The same thing after lunch, banana skins, apple cores. Anyway that's beside the point.

The afternoon or late shift there, it was always drifting, scratching. As the sun hit the horizon the boats must be back on board, and it's... as the fellows came back longside, their fish was put aboard, weighed, and the tally of fish for each session was entered in the book on them. I paid them on contract for the fish they caught. I forget the exact amount of money but so much for 100 pound of fish. At the end of the trip, I tallied up there. They preferred they bought tobacco or fishing gear from me. That was the basic idea. At the end of the trip they were tallied up there, paid the money, finish. Then I say, "Are you coming back next trip?" "Yes." If they didn't, well, so what? That completed the contract with them for that shift.

**JD** How many dorey men would you have?

**MALTMAN** We had four doreys on the boats. But when I say afternoon, back late. Only on one occasion.... I'll describe it shortly there, and that is the rip country.

I got caught in the rip and I couldn't get back to the big boat. I smoked in those days (that's not a [unclear] I smoked them [laughs]) and I couldn't get back to the boat and I thought now, I won't light a cigarette because they'll think I'm in trouble and what have you, and they'd come out and they'd get caught in this rip themselves and could end up in trouble there. So I just sat there quietly until the tide eased down and I finally got back. I detected a panic on where was the organiser on the boat [laughs]. But "Oh, mumble, mumble...." and when I told them what was happening and I said, "Anyway...." and I suppose the outer Barrier, especially down the bottom end was the Swains which is the bottom end.

The top end of the Swains is about 120 miles through from the inside.... well, say the reef called the Egone Begone through to the Eastern Leap, 120 miles. You get a bit further there, there's what they call the hard lie. Oooh. It would go best part of 100 miles of virtually solid reef. You might go two miles, then there'd be a channel, run through solid reef, possibly for a mile or more, getting narrower, and you might go a mile, another bit of a channel through - three miles - and there you can imagine, you know, sunrise and the moon rises in the east and sinks in the west and that, of course, makes the tides, which is pulling that volume of water. That volume of water is trying to get past 100 miles of solid reef and the only way it can get past that solid reef is running through these narrow rifts. I think my first experience of that is on the inside there and a fellow named Webb, one of my top.... he was my top man and oooh! "Jesus, Snow," he says, "Come on down here, down this rip. You want to see this bloody lagoon, see the beauty." Oh we had a meal there and I went to go down this channel or rip there, to get into here, see, and I get into it. I had a boat that could do sixteen and I cut it out and I'm going backwards. I can't steam again. So I got back there and I've got a life-boat there. Anyway we fished other places there and now, with the tide easing off I went down and I ducked into this lagoon and we ended up.... we fished in that.... the Doctors Corner. Oh, used that as a base for many and many a day there but to say.... the rips in those lagoons there! You see there it goes up say 100 miles.

You know, I think I might give you a copy of my charts. No, no, I think there that sometime there, whether you photo-copy it but [unclear] really how I came by the charts.

Reef Enterprises that time were interested in drilling Barrier Reef and they were put on to me that I had been all around that area, see, and incidentally, as we were going around here and there, I was making my own chart where I'd been. I was putting names on different reefs you see, and whether it was Harbours Marine, somebody anyway, put them on to me and I turned over my tracings what have you - rough map - to them of where I'd been and what have you there. When it was all over they gave me some negatives and on the negatives, of course, where it shows the light there.... well you've seen negatives of aerial surveys where they write out the lines and what have you, shows all the location there. They gave me those negatives there and from that, I had that blown up until I've now got the master chart and sectional charts blown up, which gives you more than I can ever possibly give you with a word picture. This is my picture of what the outer Barrier looks like. Interesting?

**JD** Very interesting. Very interesting indeed.

**MALTMAN** [unclear] there to what is appreciate the fact that the outer edge of the outer Barrier, it's the first "suck of the sav", in other words it gets the first food out of the Pacific Ocean that's coming through the Reef, which means that the coral on the outer edge of the outer Barrier Reef is six, eight times, ten times, the size of coral on the inner Reef. Oh the outer Reef there.... I don't know whether you know what fan coral looks like. If you go outside you see one fan after the other. You look like you can build a bloody house on some of the fans there and the colours and what have you, oh that's fantastic! [laughs]

The opportunity yes, it's been very nice. Some of the old timers will remember it. Remember Brian Fitzpatrick in his travels, sadly we say farewell.

**JD** And thank you, it's been REALLY great to talk to you. You're obviously an enthusiast. Thanks for sharing it with us. Thank you.

**MALTMAN** My pleasure.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Snowy Maltman of Moorooka in Queensland.

END OF RECORDING ON TAPE 3 SIDE A

SIDE B UNRECORDED

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with DES MOODY

### INTRODUCTION

Des Moody of Ayr, Queensland, mainly engages in trawling in the waters close to his home port, but also nets barramundi in the rivers and fishes the Great Barrier Reef. He is the owner operator of a fairly small vessel he built himself, and sells most of his catch, whether prawns or scale fish, from his home.

In this interview he discusses the fisheries he is involved in, and also some of the other seafood industries in the area. In addition to this he discusses the effect of management decisions on the industry and environmental factors, as well as the hazards of bad weather and river bars.

Des Moody represents the smaller independent fishermen of Queensland who work in a number of fisheries, who avoid large financial commitments, and are content to make a reasonable living in co-operation with nature. Perhaps in the long run they will be the survivors in the industry, which is the view he expresses in this interview, which is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry. The interview was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Moody's home in Ayr, Queensland, on 3rd of May, 1990. There are two sides of one tape and the interview starts at 020 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

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

*MOODY* Desmond Francis Moody. I was born on 7th of August, 1944 in Swan Hill, Victoria, during the War. My mother and father came from the Burdekin area, and they moved back here after the War was finished.

*JD* And you were an infant then really, I suppose?

*MOODY* Yes, I was a baby of about twelve months of age.

*JD* And you came to Ayr?

*MOODY* Yes, our home was actually just the other side of the Burdekin River, at Home Hill.

*JD* And did you go to school, and were brought up totally in Ayr or Home Hill?

**MOODY** No, prior to Ayr I did my schooling in Home Hill. My father leased a cane farm there, and my schooling was done in Home Hill, and then when I went to secondary school, I came over to Ayr here.

**JD** And you finished school and then what did you do?

**MOODY** I finished school and I started work when I was fourteen, as an apprentice carpenter, and I did my five years as a carpenter and when that was finished I took up cane cutting - manual cane cutting. There was money to be made there. It was hard work but the money was there, and most of the young people in those days went cane cutting to set themselves up for later on in life.

**JD** How then did you come into fishing?

**MOODY** Well, in the cane industry, the mechanical harvesters were coming in, and there was only two or three in the district, and I was going to buy one of those, but the mills only let so many in each year, and I put in to see if I could get a cane harvester but I didn't. My name was in for it but I didn't make the grade for one of those, so then I thought, well, I'll go fishing. So I decided to go fishing, and I built myself a 32 foot trawler, and that was how I got in to the fishery in 1968.

**JD** Your expertise as a carpenter, of course, would come in handy with a trawler, building it?

**MOODY** Yes, I drew the plans up and built the boat myself, and I went fishing. Previous to that we've always had small launches and fished around the creek, but not commercially, just for pleasure.

When I built the trawler and the first twelve months when I had it in the water, I never had any trawl gear on it. I just went and did the Reef trips, fished the Reef, the Great Barrier Reef, and even though I caught a few fish, there wasn't a lot of money to make in the fishing - well, not big money. So I put the trawl gear on and started in the prawns and I've stayed with the prawns ever since. I mainly chased banana prawns although I did a bit of tiger prawning in the early days, but that's night time working. I don't really like working of a night [laughs]. But banana prawns, we have good grounds just off the coast here and they have treated me well over the years, and even though at the present time we're still catching banana prawns and making a reasonable living out of it - not making a lot of money - but well, if you're going to make a living these days, you be thankful for what you can get.

**JD** Have you ever fished any other areas besides this immediate vicinity?

**MOODY** No, not really. I've fished down to Bowen and then up around Magnetic Island a little bit. A couple of trips up that way, but mainly we don't go too far from here, because the grounds are fairly productive here and it's right on our doorstep, so we don't really have to travel that far to make a living.

**JD** Do you go exclusively for banana prawns? You don't go for anything else?

**MOODY** Well, prawns are the mainstay but when it's windy weather, or when there's no prawns around in the off-season, we do a bit of reef fishing, or go back into the creeks and on the foreshores with the nets, chasing mixed fish and when the river

runs and you get fresh water in the river we get a lot of barramundi, so we chase barramundi.

**JD** So you're really primarily a prawn trawler but you also support that with other.... netting then, and line fishing on the Reef, is it?

**MOODY** Yes, the main reason we chase this other stuff, is that the boat is small and we have dual endorsements on it. Once professional fishermen just harvested the sea for whatever you wanted to take out of it. But now they've got endorsements on all species: you have net endorsements, barramundi endorsements, prawning, the reef fishing endorsements, and I've been in it so long and I've had all these. When they brought endorsements in, we were issued with them, so we sort of utilised them all, to make a living. Just any one on its own is a bit hard with a small vessel like mine.

**JD** It's still the vessel that you originally built that you're using?

**MOODY** Yes, it's still the same boat that I built. I was always going to build another one after a couple of years but I never ever got around to it. The way the vessel replacement policies are now, to replace it I've either got to buy another boat to get the extra units to build a bigger boat, or I can only replace it with the size boat I've got, and I've got one that size and it's still a going concern and in good condition, so why worry about building another one the same as what I've got?

**JD** What are the markets? Where do you market your catch?

**MOODY** Oh, most of my catch I sell from the house here by licence. We did have a Fish Board depot in Home Hill, but he couldn't handle the catch that we were bringing in, so I started selling from the house here. Then he closed down and we were issued with an exemption permit from the Fish Board so we operated on those for a few years, then the QFMA took over the fishing industry and we had to get permits to sell from the house and operate on a QFMA permit to sell from the house. It's entailed a fair bit of mucking around. You had to set up to the legalised standards and council standards, and I feel that \$450 a year is a bit tough for the pleasure of selling my own catch because there's no other marketing here. You either cart it to Townsville which is an hour's drive away, and you've got to have a vehicle to get up there and it's just a hassle. I can sell all my own product here from the house. That's all I do. The licence allows me to buy other fishermen's product and resell that to the locals. I don't want to do that. I am set up just to handle my own catch and that is it.

**JD** You can credit your whole catch?

**MOODY** Yes.

**JD** Both prawns and scale fish?

**MOODY** Yes. I have no problems selling it. At times when we do get a lot of prawns, I sell to processors, and there is one processor if you can get quite a few prawn boats (up to four or six prawn boats with product) down here, they will run a truck down and pick them up down at the landing, but they won't come down for just a few prawns. If we get in excess of what I can handle at home I will sell them at the processors depending on the price. If he's paying a better price well, naturally you sell at the best prices.

**JD** Is there a big difference between the price that the processor pays you and what you can charge the public?

**MOODY** Oh at times there is. A couple of years ago the processors, towards the end of the year, when prawns were getting a bit thin, were paying better prices than what I was charging at home, so naturally I sold my product to them, but at present their prices are a little bit over half of what I'm charging at home. But the prices that I sell from at home are more or less the prices that I'd hoped to get if I sold to the processors and by doing away with the middle man I can sell to the public at a reasonable price. I think this is how I can survive because of the public, I'm not over-charging the public for the product by cutting out the middle man.

**JD** Are the prices holding up for prawn?

**MOODY** Presently not. The world market is down and the processing price they paid someone local the other day here was around the six dollars a kilo - the processors were paying them. But two years ago they were paying up to about eleven dollars a kilo for processing prices.

**JD** That's a big drop, isn't it?

**MOODY** Yes.

**JD** Is the importation of prawns from overseas a problem?

**MOODY** Well, I would say it is because we're getting it here in town and there's a lot of prawns come into the market. There should be a market for them in town. The amount of the population is there but I don't know what goes on, but they seem to be able to import these smaller prawns from Taiwan at a lot cheaper price than we can produce them here. There is a bit of aquaculture prawning here. There's one fellow here who's set up in the Burdekin now. I don't think he's turned off any stock yet, but when they were starting the aquaculture, a few of them up there in Townsville, they told us that all the prawn would be sold on the export market, but then as soon as they started harvesting they put it on the local market anyway. But I don't know how they got on because the figures I've seen on them they got something like twelve or fourteen dollars a kilo from the prawn farms, and they say it costs them nine dollars a kilo to grow them because they've got to import the food for the prawns.

So that market is not going to affect us that much but when they do put it on the local market every prawn they sell, I suppose it will hurt such fellows as myself.

**JD** Is there any evidence of a decline in the total catch? I don't mean individual people's catches but the total catch.

**MOODY** Well no, I don't think so. Well, in this area here, you have your good years and your bad years but the over all quantity of prawns, I think, is still on an average much the same depending on the wet season, because you've got to have a run in the river, and the Burdekin River is a large river and it's got a large catchment area. It drains a lot of country and when the river runs it puts the food, the fresh silt mud out there which is the start of the food chain for any of the seafood, and when we have a good wet season, we have good prawning.

But the over all catch, or the amount of prawns there is to be caught, I don't think it's really declined any significant amount, but the only thing is there's a lot more boats now chasing them.

**JD** How does that come about? Where do they come from?

**MOODY** Well, years ago when I first started the only boats you had working here was say, some boats from Bowen and Townsville would come and work this area. The boats never travelled very much up the coast, but now boats are getting bigger and also the echo sounders and that, the electronics on the boats, are more sophisticated and they are being able to pick up prawns on the bottom better, whereas before there might have to be a patch of say 100 pounds before it would register on the echo sounder. Now you get a couple of prawns pop their heads up and you seem to be able to register those.

Technology is, I think, helping to catch up with them and boats are a lot bigger than what they were twenty years ago when I first started. Most of the boats then.... in those days if you had a 40 foot boat it was a big boat, but now a 40 foot boat is just a small one - well they class them as a small boat. There's a lot of 55, 60 footers just working up and down the coast. They seem to just trawl and as soon as they get word of prawns being caught somewhere they will just steam day and night to get there and they systematically just work the grounds over and when there's no more prawns there they will just move on to greener pastures.

**JD** Are they company boats generally or....?

**MOODY** Oh mainly private boats. There's not too many company boats on the east coast, while there's company boats (as we know them) in the Gulf. There might be a couple of boats that might be owned by one family or something like that, you know, there might be two or three boats in one group, owned by one mob there. But no company boats as company boats go, like in the Gulf.

**JD** Family companies perhaps.

**MOODY** Yes.

**JD** Could we have a look at the barramundi fishery that you're also involved in? Is there any change in the size of catch there?

**MOODY** Yes. Well, there's not many, one of the main reasons being, we've been doing a bit of restocking in the Clare weir. On the Burdekin River, they put this Clare weir in there. It's not a big weir but it does hinder the barramundi from moving up the river, which is a part of their life cycle. They move up into the fresh water in the upper reaches of the rivers and they move back down, but it's just the life cycle of them.

I've had a bit to do with the barramundi here in the Burdekin and we've been restocking with a bit of assistance from the Government. They supplied some money for the restock, but most of the brood stock for these barramundi fingerlings are caught locally. They seem to think they don't want to take fish out of one area and put in the other areas, so the fishermen themselves, go down with the DPI biologists and they put the nets in. The fishermen use their own boats, their own nets. They put the nets in and most of them catch the barramundi and they milk them and release them again after they've been milked. They take the eggs away and hatch them into

fingerlings and then they restock with those which the Government made us pay for when we'd done most of the work, but anyway that is the way it goes.

But over the last, oh I'd say twelve years, there had been a decline in the barramundi stock, but mainly due to the dry seasons. We haven't had a lot of rain since.... 1974 was the last year we had significant runs in the river, until two years ago when we had Cyclone Charlie and then last year Cyclone Aviu, and then we had another cyclone which went down inland, which crossed up in Cape York and then came down inland which did give us a lot of rain here this year.

But over the last couple of years we find there is a lot more small barra being caught. Stuff being say, around six to eight inches, or a foot long, which I'd say would be since Cyclone Charlie, but previous to that there was very little small barramundi here. Well, it got that way it wasn't even economical to worry about trying to catch what was there. I suppose Clare weir would have had a little bit to do with it but the main cause, I'd say, would be the dry spell we had for those twelve years. But as I say, the barramundi seems to be on the increase and there's a lot more small barramundi being caught. Some fellows you talk to casting for prawns around the snags, say they are catching these small barramundi in cast nets. Because of the size I would say they have been bred after Cyclone Charlie and some of the smaller ones would be from Cyclone Aviu. Going on the growth rate of them, I'd say now we're getting back to the normal wet season, they seem to be on the increase again.

**JD** Is the catch by the recreational fishermen significant?

**MOODY** Yes, very significant. The recreational fishermen seem to blame the pros all the time, and the pros are blaming the amateurs. The amateur fishing is doing harm to us. They're allowed to fish anywhere with their lures and live bait. There's no restrictions on those apart from that they have a bag limit, I think, of five barramundi. There is a size which is 55 centimetres now. It was 50. They upped the size. The professional fishermen got the size raised. We wanted to raise it up to about 100 centimetres but they tell us they can't do that, not all at once, which is a big fish. But barramundi have got to be.... even a legal size barramundi which is 55 centimetres, still has not reached maturity. It's got to reach breeding stage and the professionals say that we're better off upping the net size anyway. We've gone up to the bigger size nets so we can catch the more mature fish that have bred at least once, because every fish should breed at least once before it is caught. If you're only going to take all the small ones then sooner or later you're not going to have any breeders.

**JD** Do the recreational people sell their catch? Are they allowed to sell their catch?

**MOODY** Well, they're not allowed to sell the barramundi. They can sell if they go to the Reef. They can sell reef fish in excess to their requirements under Section 35A, but they are not allowed to sell barramundi. That is selling illegally. If they catch plenty well there is always a back door, they go through selling illegal fishing. [Section 35A has since been done away with.]

The Queensland Recreational Fishing Council last year (at the beginning of last year) had proposed closures of the rivers and creeks there in the Burdekin and they succeeded in closing about 70 per cent of our netting creeks in the area. We quietly despaired when we heard about it. We went to our local Member of Parliament here and we got an audience with Mr Neville Harper, who was Primary Industry Minister at the time.



**JD** The DPI.

**MOODY** The DPI. And he assured us that we could come to arrangements. I was one of the delegates who went to see him. We worked out on this map that we had agreed on, that we would take the bottom half of the creeks and rivers and they (the amateurs) could have the top half. But they were still entitled to use our half too, so they would get all the creeks and we wanted to get the bottom half, Mr Harper said, "Yes, that's a good idea. That will be right." Anyway when the **Government Gazette** came out, we found out that they'd closed off quite a few of the creeks entirely, and approximate to what we can work out on the map, we lost 60 to 70 per cent of our fishing area. This thing compounded more trouble with the amateurs because the professionals then had to more or less just fish the creeks that were left open so instead of having probably one professional working that creek, you had three or four, and the amateurs in those creeks that were left open were going crook because professionals were taking everything out of the creek.

But they don't seem to realise that it was the amateur body that did this. I'm saying they (the local amateurs) probably had no input into it but the Queensland Recreation Fishing Council brought this upon them and they're supposed to represent all the amateurs, and that is really the story we have on the conflict with the amateur bodies here in the Burdekin because of this.

**JD** Are the crocodiles a problem in the Burdekin?

**MOODY** No, not really. There used to be a lot years ago. They were always up in the upper reaches but they don't seem to worry us down here really. There are some around that people see but I've done a fair bit of netting over the years and I've never caught one. I've seen them on the bank but I've never ever caught one myself.

**JD** To look at other fisheries. You're involved in the prawns and mainly the banana prawns, you're involved in barramundi, you do a bit of reef fishing, coral trout and sea perch and that sort of thing?

**MOODY** Yes, my catch on the Reef is coral trout, red emperor and the red throated sweet lip. They seem to have dropped a little bit over the years, but then maybe it might be because of the drought conditions, in the first.... Usually when you get a drought on land you get a drought in the sea too. But I haven't been to the Reef for the last couple of years so I don't really know whether there's been an increase in the fish population out there. But being so far off shore it might take a few years for that food chain to work its way back out to the Reef. So the stocks might replenish out there. The Marine Park Authority have closed some reefs down, put a total fishing ban on them to see how they restock. They haven't had them opened out here yet. A couple of them are still closed off so I don't know whether they would be a goer when they do open.

**JD** Are there any other fisheries like say, oystering or mud crabs, or....?

**MOODY** Mud crabs, yes, no oystering done around here. There are no professional leases and a few oysters there are just picked by day trippers if you're really hungry for them. There's not a lot of oysters there. Mud crabs are a fair business here only in a few areas. There is one place in the mouth of the Burdekin River, they seem to fish it really heavily and it seems to keep sustaining itself. I don't know how but it does. Up in Bowling Green Bay there's a fair bit of mud crabbing done up there. It's mainly mud

flats up there but yes, there's a fair amount of mud crabbing done. There's approximately oh, half a dozen who do full time mud crabbing here in the area.

**JD** Is there a shark fishery in these waters?

**MOODY** Not really. There is a couple of fellows that do chase them. There are some fellows from Bowen who do chase a bit of shark down there and sometimes they come up here, but there's no-one actually really chases them here. I wish there was because we do have a lot of shark problems with prawning, because the shark are just after a free feed of the trash fish that go back off the tray when sorting prawns.

**JD** Years ago I understand, if you wanted to go fishing you bought, for a few dollars, a licence which enabled you to go and fish virtually anywhere you liked and for pretty well any species. Now the fisheries are mostly limited entry fisheries and licences have become very expensive and restricted. Could you comment on that?

**MOODY** Yes, well years ago the only requirement to hold a master fisherman's licence (20 years ago) was that you caught a thousand dollars' worth of product a year, and you had your licence. There were a lot of licences around because it wasn't hard to catch that amount. Then the QFMA was formed and they had to look after the fishermen. They were a governing body and they started issuing licences and instead of having a licence covering all species and aspects of the fishing, they broke it all down where you had to have a separate licence for prawning, for netting, reef fishing and crabbing. Also the price of licences went up because they were specialised fisheries, and the amount of money then depending on the fishing industry, you had to find a lot more money for these requirements than previously you had needed to.

There seems to be a lot of trading in licences because they were worth money. The fisherman would go out and couldn't catch much product so they just sold their licences and got out of the industry. There seemed to be a lot more fishermen around the place willing to buy. The stocks were being over-fished all the time because there were too many fishermen, but every time one fellow seemed to sell out and go broke, there was always somebody else with a pocket full of money who wanted to buy in the industry.

Previous to this in the trawl industry when the QFCO put a freeze on trawlers, instead of... when they decided they'd have the freeze saying, "As of today, well there will be no more trawlers being allowed into the industry," they said, "as of next month there will be no more trawlers." So they have automatically brought another two and a half to three hundred trawlers into the industry, because fellows were getting boats built and back ordering them so they could be in the industry. If they hadn't put them in then they wouldn't be in the industry and they would probably have to buy someone else out. That automatically put an increase in pressure on the prawning industry.

**JD** Do you think Government listens to the fishermen enough?

**MOODY** Well, I don't know. Fishermen are a funny breed. Everyone's got their own ideas we have the QCFO<sup>1</sup> and all our ideas and things we put forward go to them and then if they, the QCFO, think it's a good plan, well then they put it to the QFMA<sup>2</sup> which in turn, have a look at it, and if they think it's all right, it goes to Parliament to be passed. Well, they do to a certain extent, they do listen a fair amount to the fishermen, but like everything, you can't get everything you want straight away.

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

<sup>1</sup>QCFO is the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation.

<sup>2</sup>QFMA is the Queensland Fish Management Authority.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** Des, is there a pollution problem in the fisheries that you're involved in?

**MOODY** Not to a great extent. In the local area here it is a farming community. There probably would be a little bit of pollution through poisons and that, but it does not seem to be to any great extent. I have never seen any fish killed or anything. So I don't think that's any major thing here in this area. One thing that has affected us a bit with the farming community is that a lot of the creeks have been dammed down near the mouth to stop the intrusion of the salt water going back into the farming area. When they did this, they cut a lot of the fish habitat back because they cut a lot of the creeks in half - or sometimes two thirds. That has probably affected it a little bit but apart from that there, as I say, there's not a great number of fish killed or any pollution to any great extent. There has been a little bit above the dam where there is fresh water. You get a lot of rain and the green vegetation will rot and rob the water of the oxygen and you see a bit of fish killed then. But that is only natural. That would happen in any place when you do get a lot of rain.

Now, on the Barrier Reef we did have the crown of thorns a few years ago, go through. In my opinion it was just nature taking its course, sending the crown of thorns through to clean up the Reef, which is sort of my theory. Now just recently the Australian Institute of Marine Science have done another bit of a study on the Reef. They've checked over a few reefs and I think they found one crown of thorns starfish. I saw it in the paper but they said all the Reef is rejuvenating so in my opinion that was just nature running its course.

**JD** Let's hope so. Des, weather must be a real problem up here, particularly in the cyclone season?

**MOODY** Yes, it is. In this area here at Cape Upstart, between Bowen and Townsville, you can say there's no islands or anything outside here to protect you from the weather and the big waves. You've more or less got to pack up and leave the grounds and go home. There's no protective waters to work in. But when the cyclone comes you have to live with that. We've not lost many boats here. When the cyclone comes they seem able to get up a mangrove creek and tie up (in a creek) and let nature take its course, and pray (much). Most of the fellows here go down and sit on their boats and keep an eye on them anyway. There have been a few pleasure boats lost but mainly through the running river. After the cyclone you get a lot of rain and the river runs, and if the boat is left unattended and then the river comes down, you get all the logs and debris on the anchor ropes and that's where most of the damage to the boats comes from.

**JD** Is there a bar on this river?

**MOODY** Yes, all the rivers in this area have got bars on them but no hassles. You have to wait for water to get in and out of the creeks. Most of the boats have to go out from Hell Hole short cut which is a tributary of the Burdekin River. There is a big sand bar at

the front and the boats come in behind the sand bar into protected waters there, then wait for the tides to get up the creek in the safer waters. But there are other creeks the same. It's like all the creeks in the north now. They use to be deep water but now they're all shallow.

**JD** Are they silting up, do you think?

**MOODY** Yes, they're silting up. I don't know what causes it. I think it might be a lot to do with the boat owners themselves. Years ago we never had all the speed boats and boats running around. If there was a boat with a motor in it, it only chugged up the creek nice and slow and no bow waves. Now you've got all that noise and boats running up and down and making big waves, washing the banks and filling the creeks in. We don't seem to get the runs in the river like we used to do. The flood would come down and just scour it all out and leave a deep channel. Now it seems to run, scour it out and as the river drops slowly it tends to just fill it in again.

**JD** Des, what do you see in the future for the fishing industry?

**MOODY** I don't know. We're getting over-run with bureaucracy for starters. It tends to be the way of things these days. Too many people doing sums, sitting on their bums trying to tell us how to make a living [laughs]. But oh, I think for the small operator, he will survive because his investments are small, but in the bigger boats, the 45 to 60 footers, they've got a lot of money invested in them, it's hard to make payments. The returns for fishing are not there. But I don't know, it's hard to say. Myself, it doesn't really worry me that much because I can sort of see a future - there's still a future in it for me. I can still make a living, as long as I'm not too greedy. Some of the bigger fellows I don't know. It seems to be the bigger boats that are changing hands all the time. Those fellows can't make the payments and they've got to sell out as I said before.

**JD** They're mostly newcomers into fishing, are they?

**MOODY** Yes, well a lot of them come into trawling. They think there's a lot of money to be made there but when they realise they've got to work a bit of rough weather and they're not suited to it, they soon have to learn to use their brains in order to make a go of it. There's hassles all right, because they don't know enough about it either. But that doesn't seem to take them long to learn, but I think the money problem.... the money side of it all seems to be where they get into trouble all the time and they have to face that they need a lot of money to get into it and they can't meet the payments let alone get their initial outlay back.

**JD** And do they tend to work the fishery too hard because of their big capital investment?

**MOODY** Yes, they seem to because over the last few years there have been a couple of times that boats have sunk out on the Reef working in weather, when actually they shouldn't be working because the forecast is too great to start with. The seas are too high but they're working rotten weather to try and meet their payments, and like I say, many years ago we never sort of had these large debts hanging over our ears. We never had that problem because when it got a bit rough we were content to come home, but now they just try and work all weathers and when they hook up with the trawlers and that's when they're in trouble and it only takes a couple of big waves over the top and they're finished.

**JD** Des, is there anything else you'd like to have on this tape?

**MOODY** Oh, something we have had to put up with the last few years is the prawn closure, it usually runs from the 15th of December to the 1st of March, but it doesn't seem to make any difference with a closure. I've kept records over eighteen years and it hasn't really made much difference to it because the seasons are naturally going to prevail. An early run in the river means early prawning but if you don't get a run in the river, the prawns don't run, so they're not on early anyway so more or less, nature looks after that side of the thing. We seem to be putting more hardships on ourselves. With the barramundi closure it's much the same. We have three month closure from November, December and January, but unless you have the run in the river, the barras don't decide to work and spawn, so really it's more or less up to nature anyway, so you know, all the closures seem to be doing is just putting hardships on the fishermen.

**JD** Right. Anything else that you'd like to say?

**MOODY** I don't think so, Jack. I've said enough. Thank you very much [laughs].

**JD** Thank you. Thanks for your interview, it's been good to talk to you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Des Moody of Ayr, Queensland.

END OF RECORDING ON TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

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## Edited transcript of an interview with ALF NESS

### INTRODUCTION

Alf Ness has been fishing for almost 30 years, having started his career in fishing in 1959 from beach boats. He has also trawled in Shark Bay and Exmouth Gulf in Western Australia and has fished in the north Queensland mackerel fishery as well as being engaged in CSIRO surveys and research.

For some time he fished in the northern rivers and nearby shores for barramundi but it was his experiences in the Gulf of Carpentaria prawning in the early and boom years of that industry that formed the main part of this interview. In regard to that fishery he gives an outstanding insight into the problems and methods employed and the successes and failures experienced there. He deals with many issues including prices, staff problems, lack of facilities, weather and health problems in the Gulf and later in the interview, also discusses the problems and pressures confronting the east coast prawn industry including marketing difficulties, management failures and increasing competition from aquacultured product.

The interview was recorded by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry in Mr Ness's home in Tugan, Queensland on the 21st April, 1990. There are four sides on two tapes. The interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

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

*NESS* Alfred George Ness, born in Murwillumbah on the 13th October, 1938.

*JD* And were you brought up in this area?

*NESS* I was brought up in Murwillumbah. My father was a dairy farmer who had a farm at Nobby's Creek which was selected by his father in 1882. He spent his full life there and I spent my life on the farm until about 1959 when I went fishing.

*JD* You didn't go fishing direct from school, did you?

*NESS* No. I left school. I tried banana growing which was a complete failure. I then went into the sawmilling trade working mainly small sawmills. I also worked in one big mill. In that time I met a chap.... I was always interested in the sea. I wanted to be a lighthouse keeper from a very small age; one thing that I've never done, which I do regret, possibly. Then I met a chap in the sawmill who had an uncle who had a trawler. I eventually went to sea with them on a weekend and I got interested in

fishing and trawling and used to go out on a weekend. Eventually when cardboard cartons started to take over from banana cases (we were basically cutting banana cases), it became a bit tough so I decided to change my occupation, much to my mother's disgust. She thought I should have been a farmer.

So I came to Tweed Heads and I worked for a couple of chaps down there, one as a fill in. I worked on the **Murray J.** for Cleve Elkerton from Evans Head for a short period of time. When he went back to Evans Head I stayed at Tweed Heads. Then I worked on the **Coral Two** which I saw being built in 1947, which was an enormous vessel, of course [being] 40 feet. It was built by Claude Edds who was one of the old time fishermen here and who is still alive. It was bought by Gordon Harrison who was a very interesting man. He had polio a couple of times and he was paralysed all down one side and yet he could handle that boat on a bar as good as the next man. This was with manual gear boxes and all that sort of thing. He could prop the wheel up with one leg and change gears and use a throttle and hurl abuse at the same time and still not miss a breadth.

We trawled for prawns and we also trapped snapper. I'm afraid the snapper trapping was probably the greatest starvation I ever had in my whole fishing career, basically because we were trying to get the best of the prawns and the best of the snapper and we seemed to get the worst of the prawns and the worst of the snapper. I was actually sacked off that job, one of the very few jobs I was sacked off, because the other chap working on the boat, he had a father-in-law who wanted the job so [laughs] I went.

I bought an eighteen foot beach boat then. It was an eighteen foot plywood boat with an eight and a half horsepower Lister diesel in it. We used to work off the beach at Rainbow Bay or Greenmount or Kira or wherever there was a good gutter to work from. The sea used to build a sand bank on the outside of the bays and then we used to come into the calmer water on the inside of the sand banks. As the sand moved from one bay to the next, well so we moved. There was about sixteen fulltime fishermen using this type of vessel at this time (1960). We used to work the reefs for snapper and mackerel, basically around Cook Island, Kingscliffe and up as far as Southport in front of Surfers' Paradise. It was a good life. Got up early of a morning and go to work and then catch fish. Then we'd come home and we'd help each other out. A lot of the tourists used to help us out with our boats. We used to have wooden rails using plywood cores for rollers underneath cradles. We'd sit our boats on it [and] we'd manhandle them out of the water. We'd come down early of a morning and we used to push our boats in, probably in about groups of five or six and then anchor your boat in the lagoon and then pull your cradle and your rails up and go on to the next fellow.

**JD** Then helped the next bloke?

**NESS** We'd all help one another into the water and out of the water. Maintenance was very light on these boats because they were only small boats. So consequently we had a fair bit of time off and being young and single in those days, it was a good life. I decided that I could trawl with this vessel, so I made up an otter trawl, small otter trawl, with it. I had no winch. I used to throw the net over the side and then throw the boards over the side and then I had rope warps. I'd grab hold of the warps and let the warps or the rope slip through my hands using that as a breaking system. It was a bit hard on my hands. I used to trawl with a three fathom net. I decided Moreton Bay was the place to go for this so I did a few years in Moreton Bay. Did reasonably well at it.

**JD** What was your target? Prawns, was it?

**NESS** Prawns, yes, king prawns. King prawns or bay prawns, greasy prawns. A lot of fairly shallow water up there.

**JD** And you hauled the net in by hand?

**NESS** Yes.

**JD** You'd put the boat into neutral, I suppose?

**NESS** No. I just go a slow head; just ran it right back to an idle and then you virtually pulled the boat back to the gear, but you mandhandled the gear. I didn't have a winch of any description on board. I can remember I made 300 Pounds. This was in 1961 or '2. I made 300 Pounds for a month one month. I thought that was fairly good, especially when fuel, I believe, was I think about nine pence a gallon. We were getting, I think, about two and six to three shillings a pound for big king prawns, the big king prawns. I just can't remember what the greasy backs were like but....

**JD** Did you sell them green or were they cooked?

**NESS** Some were cooked, some were green. I got into a bait market in the fish which was more convenient, so I sold most of it for bait to Christies Boat Shop which was under the Gray Street Bridge in Brisbane. I used to do a three day trip. I had a small icebox on board and I used to sleep round the engine. In an eighteen foot boat there's not much room but I used to sleep around the engine. Three days was enough. I used to have to get off and stretch my legs after that.

**JD** Were you working single handed or did you have crew?

**NESS** Single handed. In the winter time I'd fish for snapper and in the summer time I'd go up to Moreton Bay and trawl. I think it was probably one of the smaller, if not the smallest, boat in Moreton Bay. It was one of the very small ones, anyhow. Consequently my catch rate wasn't all that much different, even though it was a very small boat with very small power. A lot of the other boats didn't double you. The catch rate was reasonably close. Some of the bigger boats I could [out] do, the poorer catching boats, I could [out] do them. I could also work in a lot of places where they couldn't work with the heavier gear too, in the dumping grounds and that sort of thing. They used to hook up in all the rubbish there. They used to rip their nets up. I used to hook up and stop. Didn't have enough power to rip anything.

**JD** So where did you go after you graduated from your eighteen footer, hand hauling trawl? What did you do after that?

**NESS** Well in 1963 I went to Western Australia. The Norwest Whaling Company was looking for chartered Queensland boats to go over to Shark Bay. Cliff Iizard on the **Winkle** wanted a crew so I decided I'd go across as one of his crew. So I put my little boat into mothballs and put it up on the bank. We put the **Winkle** on the **Belle Air** and sent it across. The **Belle Air** was a coastal freighter. She went across as deck cargo, was unloaded at Fremantle. They brought the cradle back and then they brought the **Toowoan Bay** around from Brisbane to Fremantle. That was owned by Arthur Williamson from Evans Head. There was several other boats. The **Rambler** was owned by Reg Massey. The **Friendship** was owned by Rex Montford. They sailed them around. Rex Montford went round through the Bight and Reg Massey went round via



Darwin. We got a contract to fish for six months, I think it was, for Norwest Whaling under contract.

**JD** What were you fishing for?

**NESS** We were fishing for king and tiger prawns, blue leg or western king prawns, and the tiger prawns. That was the year that the **Nor Six**[?] was lost over there when she was on a trip from Fremantle to Shark Bay. Jackie Drinan was the only survivor. He spent, I think it was about seventeen days on an icebox; floated out to sea and back in again. The catch rates over there, we'd never seen consistent prawns like it. The **Winkle** was a 42 foot boat with a six cylinder 90 horsepower Ford diesel in it. We were towing, I think it was about one seven fathom net, a single net. We averaged a thousand pounds of prawns for every night we worked but the rubbish was something else. We were doing anything up to 22 shots a night, round about twenty minute shots we were doing. We'd fill a seven foot by seven foot sorting tray that high that you didn't know that your mate was on the other side of it. You knew you had twenty minutes to sort that and it was full of all the bad rubbish. There was crabs. There was bullrouts. There was bearded ghou and stone fish. Anything that could bite and sting was in it and so it was slow sorting. I always say that I did six months hard labour in Shark Bay and you didn't get a cup of tea or a smoke or anything to eat from the time that you shot away your first shot. You had your last smoke and your last cup of tea then and you didn't get another one until you'd picked up your last shot at daylight.

**JD** How many of you on board?

**NESS** We carried a crew of four the whole time. We used to carry a swinging crew man. We used to do two day trips and then rotate the crew [so] that you got two days off at the end of your rotation and shift, if you'd like to call it that.

**JD** You stayed there six months doing that?

**NESS** Yes. We then went to Exmouth Gulf. We did a survey for Norwest Whaling at Exmouth Gulf. Nobody was at Exmouth Gulf then. There was a lighthouse and the tracking station then was just.... The very, very early preliminary work was being done. Gascoyne Traders used to come up from Carnarvon. They used to bring our fuel, our water and food up. They'd take our prawns back to Carnarvon. We did a fortnight up there, I think it was. Then our contract finished and the boats that were contracted from Queensland had to get out of the State. They weren't licensed to fish in Western Australia so they had to be out of Western Australian waters pretty soon afterwards. The **Winkle** was sold over there in Western Australia but the rest of the boats all steamed back to the eastern states again.

**JD** And did you stay there or come back?

**NESS** I came back. I flew back from Carnarvon and went to Tin Can Bay where I worked king prawns again with Pat Sullivan on the **Hope**. I was deckhand with him for a short while and then came back to Tweed Heads and got my little boat out of mothballs again and went back fishing.

**JD** Prawning again with the little boat?

**NESS** I didn't do much prawning this time. I mostly fished but I just filled in until 1965 Well we fished mainly around the area here. I tried a little bit of school prawning and that sort of thing but it wasn't completely successful. The boat was just too small. I think in those days we were getting two and six a pound for snapper. I think for

mackerel you'd get three shillings a pound at the start of the season and then once a few fish were caught the price would drop. It was just hand lining. We were just using two hooks and a sinker, just a normal bottom rig. A couple of boats tried a bit of long lining but sharks were too savage for them so long lining was a bit unsuccessful.

I stayed at that until 1965 when a chap, a retired garage owner from Sydney, came up and he had flats at Kira. He used to look out into the bay and watch the trawler working in the bay at Kira. Then he used to go down to the wharf and see them unload and he decided that there was a small fortune in fishing. So he built a 50 foot trawler which was built by Ballina Slipway. It was named **Sea Tang**. It had a 6LX Alex Gardiner in it. It was probably a fairly well fitted out boat for the time. I got the job skippering that boat. We worked for king prawns right off Tweed, school prawns and used to work in Moreton Bay through the bay season, the summer months. Plus the bar used to get fairly bad by the end of the year and the northerlys used to blow pretty hard so it was good to be away from Tweed Heads during the summer months.

**JD** Did you have to have a ticket to be the skipper of that vessel?

**NESS** No. We didn't have to have tickets. You just went up and bought a master fisherman's licence and that was all you had to have. We've always had a problem at Tweed Heads. Being on the border, we had to be licensed in both States. Even though we worked a lot of our time in Queensland we landed in New South Wales so therefore you had to have the boat licensed in New South Wales and licensed in Queensland. You had to have a New South Wales fisherman's licence and a Queensland master fisherman's licence. So consequently it cost us double what most people cost them in the central parts of the States or away from the border.

**JD** Did it give you access to two markets?

**NESS** It gave us access to two markets and to two States. We've also come under two lots of different regulations which didn't apply in the early days. It was open slather. You could use what you liked where you liked, how you liked pretty well but that all came in a little bit later on. In 1967 Craig Mostens were running around looking for boats to go to the Gulf of Carpentaria. I made a statement once, probably a little bit prior to this, that my fishing career would finish at Cairns. Well little did I know how wrong I was going to be. So the chap that owned the boat, he came to me and he said he'd been speaking to his accountant and he decided that there was a good opportunity in the Gulf of Carpentaria, would I take the boat up? I decided that I would. I don't know why, but anyhow I was still single at that stage. So I decided I'd go up and give it a bit of a go. Bob Mosten and Paddles Taylor came down and interviewed us and had a look at the boat and decided it was satisfactory. I knew Johnny Williamson who had been up there and done a survey. He said that there was potential up there and he'd fitted out a new boat to take up there. He'd sold his previous boat, the **Toowoona Bay** to Craig Mostens which consequently was the first boat [I] ever went to sea on.

We got the boat ready to go up. I'd never done any long distance navigation at this stage. I'd been from Tweed Heads to Cape Moreton and Byron Bay and sort of point to point navigation. I just didn't know how good I was. So there was another chap.... Pat Burns was going to take a boat by the name of **Kotakoo** up and he was one of these blokes that knew everything. So I decided I'd follow him but consequently he was going to take forever to get a lot of things going. I got sick of waiting for him so in the finish I thought well, [I'd] head off on my own. I'd read a few books and I thought well

I could do it. So away I went. I travelled through and I had no problem with my navigation.

**JD** Did you have depth finders?

**NESS** I had an echo sounder. The gear we had on the boat was an echo sounder, one radio and that was all electronic equipment we had.

**JD** No radar?

**NESS** No radar. I had a steering compass, a hand bearing compass and the charts and that was it. I travelled through to Cairns OK. I had no problems getting through to Cairns. [unclear] I was going through, I thought, well I'll follow one of Mason's barges around or some such thing like that. So I got up there and found out that the barge had just left [laughs]. I finished up travelling all the way to Karumba by myself. By this stage I was getting a little bit of confidence in my navigation. So I was reasonably happy. I found Karumba first up which was fairly good, I suppose. I went into Karumba and met up with Craig Mosten [and] the fishermen that were there. At that stage there were seven boats there. They said that the banana prawns only showed on the double or nepe tides and it was too windy. Normally sou-easters blew petty hard so we couldn't catch tiger prawns. So we sat down and waited for the double tides to come.

I didn't make any special nets up. I just took up what I had for Moreton Bay which was a couple of drynan nets, [unclear] patterns. So they were fairly light ply nets. We went out the first trip and we were bottom boat for that particular set of tides. We caught about 3,000 pound of banana prawns and ripped our nets to smithereens with saw sharks and bull rays and what have you, all those big nasty beasties. So we came back in again and we decided we'd make up a ichihara[?] net for the next set of tides. Paddles Taylor cut it out for me. I sewed it up.

**JD** What's an ichihara?

**NESS** I believe that the history of the ichihara net is a Japanese pattern. One of the Japs was out here at Craig Mostens and he wouldn't part with the pattern. So they took him up to the Lodge which is the local hotel and got him reasonably inebriated and extracted the pattern from him under the influence of alcohol. It's a fairly complicated net. The wing panels are in five panels all full of tapers. It was a reasonably good net for banana prawns which get up off the bottom. You need a fairly high lifting headline. Also you could use it for tiger prawns which are a bottom dwelling prawn. We'd made this net up and put it on, went out and we were top boat the next trip which we were quite happy about.

The banana prawns at that stage, they used to school up into what we used to call a mud boil. They used to get that thick on the bottom that they used to stir the mud up and the mud used to hit the surface [and] leave a mud patch on the surface. Paddles Taylor, I believe, was probably the first person who ever used aircraft for spotting prawns. He had this theory back from when he was working in Bundaberg. He used to actually get on the commercial flights from Bundaberg to Gladstone and bribe the pilots with a feed of prawns to fly along the coast or just out off the coast a little bit. He used to observe where the mud boils were, come back to Bundaberg, hop on his boat and go back to where these boils were. He considered that he was fairly successful at what he was doing. He wanted to put this same thing into practice in the Gulf of Carpentaria but of course there was no commercial flights that he could use up there. So he finished up, we talked Craig Mostens into chartering a light aircraft. They

went out and they could find the mud boils fairly successfully. So the trial finished up being a fairly permanent thing.

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

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**NESS** Aerial spotting became a fairly permanent thing but there were certain problems with it as the fishery developed in the Gulf of Carpentaria. As more boats and more companies came into the area the competition between companies and company boat.... Each boat supplied a company so therefore there was competition between company boats and the companies. So they got secret crystals and radios on the aeroplane. Each company had their own spotting aircraft. So sometimes there was three or four spotting aircraft up at the one time. That became a problem in uncontrolled air space because planes virtually did their own thing irrespective of DCA regulations or whatever. So it became pretty well a war in the sky as well as on the sea. The aircraft used to spot a boil and then they would contact the boats by radio, give them a direction and a distance. We had no radar at this stage. This was in the '67 to sort of.... before 1970, anyhow. Very, very few boats had radar so away you went.

It could work a lot of ways. Some mornings.... I know one particular morning all the boats went out and I'd had a bit of a sleep in that morning and the boats went out and I was coming last. I was cursing my luck because I thought, well these boats will be all out and get set up, get their load of prawns on before I get there but as it was, the spotter plane found a patch of prawns right up the back of the fleet where I was. I was into it and had my load before the others got back. The other problems with aerial spotting was as the fishery moved to west of Mornington Island and across to the Bentinck Island, the distances became too great for single engine aircraft which consequently.... We're working out over the water. It was something the DCA had allowed to happen even though it wasn't their policy. So they had to bring in twin engined aircraft. The aerial spotting certainly made banana prawning a much easier thing because an aircraft at 3,000 feet can see a lot more than what a man can from twenty feet above the water sitting up in the mast.

There was problems with that as well. Of course it made the catching of the banana prawn so much easier. We caught so much prawn that the factories couldn't handle our product. We would go out and we might get one or two loads in for the set of tides which consequently made those fairly small boats.... They carried 6,000 pounds. I think the **Clan Nellie** at that stage was probably the biggest boat. She was 60 feet and carried about, I think it was about fifteen or twenty thousand pound. Most of the vessels had refrigeration, wet refrigeration on board which was something that was fairly new to the prawn fishery. So we had to learn how to keep our prawns in refrigeration. A lot of it was inefficient and landing such a big quantity.... We could land 6,000 pound in one shot. Plonking that into a refrigerated hold, well the refrigeration just couldn't keep up with it so we had to carry ice as well sometimes. Mainly what a lot of us did was put salt water into our tanks and made up a puddley ice in the tanks and then you refrigerated more seawater than what you actually needed so when you put the prawns in you had the store cold and the prawns displaced the water and you had a little bit of a chance of keeping the product in fairly good quality.

We'd come back in again and then of course we'd have to sit sometimes for up to ten days waiting to get rid of your product. Wet frozen prawns, of course, don't last too well and there's always a fair bit of spoilage and poor quality prawn unloaded. I think that possibly the market could have suffered a little bit from this.

**JD** This was a local market, Australian market?

**NESS** A lot of it was exported but I think that the reject prawn found their way into the local market and the first quality stuff was sent to Japan, mainly Japan I think it went. In 1967 Craig Mosten was the only factory that was receiving prawns in Karumba or in the Gulf of Carpentaria. It was a fairly antiquated sort of a setup. It was in an old meatworks that belonged to Walkers. It was built quite a few years before and I think it had been burnt down. They'd used a concrete base and put sheds up on top of that. The wharf was built by the trawlers. The **Rama** was responsible for that and they used a landrover and the **Rama** to build the wharf which could only accommodate one boat at the head. You could possibly put two alongside of it if you were game.

We also had to share that with the fuel tankers that used to come in. We were fairly lucky for fuel that during the War they had built a.... It was a flying boat base during the War so they built a fairly large fuel tank there. I think it was about 30,000 gallons, I think, it used to hold. It used to be filled by tanker from small tankers that used to come in. The Norman River is a fairly big river. It's got a fair bit of water in the river itself, I think about seven fathoms of water in the river itself but the bar has only got about five feet of water on it at low tide. With a sixteen foot tide range on your spring tides, well you can get a fairly large ship in there.

That was another problem that we had too in the early days that the river mouth was fairly poor as far as navigational aids. There was two sets of leads on it and buoys but the Harbours & Marine, I think, only used to supply a couple of sets of batteries per year and of course once the batteries went flat, the lights went out. We used to go out early of a morning. We used to leave sometimes, depending on how far out we go, we'd probably leave at one or two o'clock in the morning, navigate out through a dog leg course in the dark, which we'd learnt.... We used to time ourselves. We used to sort of use the echo sounder and sort of bounced off the banks and hope we'd find ourselves out at sea which was nearly seven miles from the mouth of the river to the fairway buoy. There were very few groundings, very few mishaps considering the course that we had to take.

So consequently that got better as time went by, although it took a lot of lobbying of Government officials and different people to try and get a decent light on the fairway. It took quite a few years. Also they put a light up on top of an aerial mast in the town which gave a reasonable thing to guide yourself in on but anybody who hasn't been lost in the Gulf of Carpentaria before they brought radar in is a liar. Everybody got lost up there and it was a very difficult place. The shore is very low; probably to the tops of the sand hills would probably only be, probably ten or twelve feet above high water plus the height of your trees which aren't very high. You might have, probably 30 feet to the top of the trees. Being seven miles off shore, there's not a lot visible.

**JD** Pretty featureless?

**NESS** Very featureless. There's no hills for the vast majority of the south east corner of the Gulf. There are no hills and it will flood for many, many, many miles back up to

30 or 40 miles back. Virtually the whole land will just cover with water in flood time, other than the ridges.

**JD** There'd be lots of problems to do with the isolation up there, things like keeping crew, for example. Crew accommodation must have been difficult; food supplies, repairs.... Was that the case?

**NESS** Yes. We had a lot of trouble. I took one chap up with me as crew who turned out to be an alcoholic. Of course I had to shanghai him to get him to sea. I used to kid him on board and then once I got him on board in a drunken state, you'd throw the ropes off and then drift out with the tide and then fire up the engine and away you'd go. Of course then he'd realise he was on his way to sea and he could find a million excuses why we should go back. Of course if you wanted to get off a fishing trip then, well you just kept on going. I actually caught him. He went to sea without any cigarettes one time and I actually caught him trying to smoke the cane out of the baskets. I don't think he was very successful. I don't think it probably tasted too good either but anyhow we got the trip in.

Repair facilities were virtually non-existent. There was an old lathe in the Walker's burnt out workshop which I think probably Noah used to machine his gear up for the ark. It was in very poor shape but we had a chap up there who had worked for the Tasmanian Hydro-Electric Commission. He was fairly good at improvising a lot of gear and he got the lathe going to a degree of, well the most accuracy that you'd get out of that sort of a machine. So we did a little bit of work with that but we had to scrounge steel. If we wanted to do any repairs we had to scrounge steel out of a scrap yard, not a scrap yard it was just the rubbish tip. That was left over steel from Walker's factory as well. Everything was fairly old and antiquated.

Our food had to be all flown in from, or brought in from, Cairns. It was fairly expensive. I think, to serve my memory right, I think a can of peaches, a large can of peaches in a supermarket at Tweed Heads was 50 cents. By the time it got to Karumba it was somewhere around about \$1.20. Beer, I think, was roughly about double Brisbane prices. Of course when you were not fishing all that often up there because the factory couldn't handle much, there was only one place of entertainment and that was the Lodge. So consequently most people drank more beer than what they should have done. Crew got fairly playful and we probably all.... I'd imagine anybody that went there probably all ended up partial alcoholics by the time they left the place.

The food supplies improved as time went by. All our meat was.... even though we were in cattle country, of course there was no butcher's shops. Meat was brought in from Cairns. It was all frozen. We used to get people who came across.... There was one chap, Roy McGouphy. He was a refrigeration mechanic. He used to come across from Cairns and do a bit of refrigeration work on the boats but he'd bring a load of fresh vegetables across with him which were snapped up very, very quickly because fresh vegetables were something that just didn't exist over there. Milk was another thing. I can remember going back to Cairns after one trip and going into a milk bar and scoffing down four milkshakes, one after the other because fresh milk was just non-procureable.

We had milk flown in by the courtesy of Ansett Airways (unofficially). One of the stewards used to put out a whole stack of gallon bottles and frighten the milkman to death because he'd have to fill all these bottles and he used to fly them across and drop them off to us in return for prawns. [There] was lots of little things that happened like that that you'd get people who were coming across [who] would bring you these

things. They were a real novelty, to get fresh milk [and] fresh vegetables. Bananas in the summertime used to boil. It was a waste of time but wintertime bananas used to travel OK.

**JD** What sort of a season would you spend up there?

**NESS** We used to start banana prawning in about April. The first year I got up there I spent Anzac Day in Cairns. I was in Karumba for the following set of tides after Anzac Day. That year we worked banana prawns from the end of April through to October. We worked banana prawns the whole time. The following year we started a little bit earlier and the season was a little bit shorter. Consequently, I think the seasons are becoming shorter and shorter ever since. The first couple of years we used to start working in Karumba in that south-eastern Gulf area. Then we'd move to Weipa at the end of the year.

There was a mother ship, the **Papuan Prince**. There was a joint venture, I think it was, with Australian boats [and] a Japanese mother ship and there was Japanese crew on the mother ship. They were only servicing their own fleet. So we used to steam to Weipa which was about.... I think it's about 35 hours, 36 hours, work up there for a few days or until you got a load and then steam back to Karumba. In 1969 we also did a survey for Craig Mosten. We went right up through the centre of the Gulf and [where] we didn't find much prawn at all. We went into Melville Bay, which is now where Gove stands. At that stage there was nothing in Melville Bay or Gove. The alumina company that is there now were just doing a survey.

To fuel up there was fuel there. There was also a tracking station there. ELDA, the European Launch Development Association, had a tracking station there and we got fuel from them which was all drum fuel. It was done from the beach. To fuel up we had to roll the drums into the water, row them out to the boat by dinghy and then lift them on board and put them into the tanks and then put the drums back on the beach again. We did a survey round Melville Bay and we found not a lot of prawns, a bit of banana prawn, a bit of tiger prawn, endeavour. So we moved then to Groote Eyland.

We got down to Groote Eyland then we decided we'd go ashore there. There's a manganese mining company there which belongs to BHP. We got onto the beach and they were going to throw us off. They thought we were Japs. They saw the trawlers and they knew the Japs had trawlers round the area who were licensed to fish in the area at the time. So they were going to throw us off. We did a survey round Groote Eylandt and we found reasonable quantities of tiger prawns and endeavours. Then we came back to Mornington Island where there was another party of Karumba trawlers [which] had been doing a survey as well. They had the best results at that stage of the piece. At that stage we were only using single gear. We had fairly low powered boats, 100 horse power, 120 horsepower; fairly inefficient, very inefficient, I'd say, to today's standards although I think our banana prawn catching ability is fairly good. I remember using only one net but we were still reasonably efficient with our banana prawns.

In, I think it was 1969, Craig Mosten had been negotiating with a family of American fishermen who came from Paramarebo in South America. Their boat was called the **Sea Fever** and they originally came from Huston in Texas. They brought their vessel from Paramarebo through the Panama Canal and sailed direct from the Panama Canal to Australia non stop. They came into Karumba and they, I think, were probably instrumental in bringing the first Florida flyer net to Australia. They had twin gear on. They had a 72 foot boat with a V12GM which was upgraded to 2100 revs. They didn't do very well with banana prawns but on tiger prawns they made us look silly. They

were towing two seven fathom Florida flyers with nine foot by two foot nine boards. They were towing.... We didn't have radar, of course, so we didn't know how fast we were going but they were going a lot faster than we had ever thought of trawling. They used to head all their prawns at sea. Like a lot of American boats did at that stage, they used to head their prawns as they caught them. If we caught 500 pounds of whole tiger prawns of a night, they'd have probably 1200 or 1300 pounds of tails. We soon decided that this twin gear was the way to go. So we didn't have the power, of course, but thanks to the Lane family, we scaled the nets down and they were very, very helpful in setting us up. We soon started to catch a lot better. The Florida flyer, I think, has developed in Australia since that time but basically I think that that was how it all started, or how the Florida flyer started in Australia.

**JD** Did you find that there were more and more boats coming into the area?

**NESS** In 1967 there was, I think it was eight or nine boats, no I think it was nine worked for Craig Mosten. In 1968 Markwell Fisheries.... Also the **Papuan Prince** had, I just can't remember the number but I think it was somewhere around about six boats working to it. Markwell Fisheries brought in some more boats and then in '69 there was more mother ships, the **Carbia**. Most of them, I think, were mother ship operations and the boats were increasing. Yes there was a fairly rapid increase in boats each year. Competition became a lot, lot stiffer and '69 of course was a very, very bad year for banana prawns. In 1968 I caught 227,000 pound of banana prawns with single gear. There were a few twin gear boats getting around at that stage of the piece. In 1969 I caught 13,000 pounds for the season and got most of them in two trips.

We stayed there looking and hoping that the prawns would improve, which they didn't. There was always boats at sea looking and we sort of split it up that we didn't all go to sea in one day. A few went each day but [we] made sure that there was boats there. We used to run round the ocean probably doing 100 miles a day, or thereabouts and catching absolutely nothing, not even enough for a sandwich. The aircraft used to go up each day and look around and it found nothing either. So after a couple of months of this, of course owners and the people who were paying the expenses, the owners or the operators, they decided that we should have a change. We had a meeting and some of the boats decided that they'd go back to the east coast. Some of them decided that they'd have a go at the tiger prawns which, up until this stage, hadn't been fished all that much. Tiger prawns were sort of a very, very secondary sort of a thing. I decided to come back to the east coast. A lot of the girls in the factory had gone over there to make their fortunes in the factory [and] some of them were doing quite well up in the good years but of course they didn't have any money to get out of the place. So there was a problem then with staff. They had to get out of the place and had no money to get out of the area. So they got out the best way they could, whether they could hitch a ride. Being no bus services, only plane [crafts], of course it was out of their financial reach.

So we came back to Tin Can Bay. As it turned out, the tiger prawn season that year was a fairly good year and the boats that stopped up there did quite well out of tiger prawns at Mornington Island. Some of them went across to Groote Eylandt, Weipa. They were catching mixed prawns in the finish at Weipa, mixed bananas and tigers. We stayed away then for.... I got married that year and I stayed on the east coast for a couple of years then working at Tin Can Bay and Tweed Heads on king prawn. Then we went back again with a new vessel that Don Cooks had got built. It was a 56 foot boat, still a wet refrigeration. At this stage most of the boats were still wet. So we went back to the Gulf in 1972. We missed the best of the banana prawns that year.



**JD** The bananas had revived?

**NESS** Oh yes, yes. The bananas revived in '71, '72 [which] were fairly good banana prawn years again. Some of the patches of banana prawns there, I think I forgot to mention, but there were some enormous patches of banana prawns there covering.... It's a bit hard to sort of give an area, but I would say over probably some hundreds of acres. One particular patch there, this was in around about the '72 season or thereabouts, four boats coming in to one patch of prawns from four different angles, they didn't pass or come level with one another at any stage of the piece. They all loaded up with prawns. They all put on something like 20 or 30 thousand pound of prawns each and just went away. There were prawns.... you could see them on the echo sounder up to two fathoms deep on the bottom. These were probably isolated patches, big patches like that but there was quite a lot of patches that were fairly small but fairly dense.

I know one particular patch I went through and we filled a net to the corkline with banana prawns. I'd heard about it. I'd never ever seen it but I have once in my life. I've seen it filled the net to the corkline. We lifted the cod end, we couldn't budge the net 'cause it was that heavy manually. So I said to the boys, I said, "Well look if there's that many prawns there we'll just take the cod end and go again." We lifted the cod end and we got 6,000 pounds out of the cod end, tipped out probably twenty or thirty thousand pound. We shot again and got 35 pounds and that was the end of the patch. That's banana prawn. Banana prawning, you get the lot and then [laughs].... It's very frustrating at times that with twin gear you can go through and get a net full on one side and nothing on the other side.

It's not as good now, I don't think, as what it was then. I think we saw the best of it.

**JD** This interview continues on side A of tape 2.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

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## TAPE 2 SIDE A

**JD** From 001 to 019 on the revolution counter has been lost. The interview resumes at 020 on this tape.

**NESS** In 1969 top prices paid for cooked large king prawns was 75 cents per pound. Trawl fish were eleven cents per pound. Scallop meat, we were getting 86 cents a pound. Mind you, \$1.40 for the bug meat too. That was top price at the Brisbane Fish Markets. That did fluctuate a bit though it certainly wasn't what we got all the time.

**JD** The bugs and scallops were a by-product?

**NESS** They were a by-product, yes. Trawl fish which was just a mixed by-product, we would get flathead, flounder and that sort of thing [was] eleven cents. These prices, that was somewhere around about the middle of the year. Towards Christmas time which was usually our best times and best prices, we were getting somewhere round about, up to probably about seventy cents for the king prawns, probably a little bit more for a by-product. So that was our peak price for the year. That was what you would expect for the best prices for the year. Seventy five cents, I think, would be probably maximum for Christmas prices.

**JD** Subsequently however the price of prawns sky-rocketed, did it not?

**NESS** It did later on, yes. I think once they got export markets going and certainly prices did get up a lot better. In the early days of the Gulf the prices were fairly poor. I think the companies probably had a large overheads and expenditure to get back. They were new at the caper too and they had a lot of new machinery and a lot of new.... I know Craig Mostens had wharves to build. They had factories to build. They put in their own power. There was no electricity supplied by Government. Everything was supplied by companies. They were a little bit like the old wild west towns that you read of in the western books and movies where one man ran the town and he ran everything. That was the way it was up there. The prawn companies supplied the electricity. They supplied the water. They supplied the food and they supplied all the commodities. So he had to get his money back as well.

**JD** Were the vessels tied to a particular company or could they sell to anybody?

**NESS** In the early days they were pretty well.... There was no written contract as such or not until about 1970 odd. There was a bit of contracting going on but up till then you virtually went up and you supplied a company and it was a verbal agreement which most people stuck to. There was a few that sort of had a falling out and then they'd go to another company. They'd be accepted by another company but usually that company knew it could handle an approximate number of vessels and so that amount of vessels stayed fairly stationary for that season, anyhow.

As the facilities increased, so did the number of vessels. Of course then companies started building their own vessels too. Craig Mostens built three. The **Karumba Norman** was the first one which was built in Bundaberg, the **Karumba Gulf** which was built in Rockport in Texas, no [unclear] in Texas, I think it was, but anyhow it was brought out from the USA to Australia and the **Kurumba Flinders** which was built in Sydney. It was 78 foot with 520 horsepower. They were much bigger vessels, 70, 72 foot vessels. Consequently the **Karumba Norman**, I think, probably holds the record for banana prawns in the Gulf of Carpentaria. It caught 64,000 pounds of banana prawns one afternoon after lunch and they were cleaned up inside before teatime. It probably still stands, I would think, as a record for a day's catch by one boat. His refrigeration, naturally enough, wouldn't handle it but luckily he was carrying about 40 tonnes of ice and so he could refrigerate or chill the product. There were some of the tuna boats come up from down south as well, some fairly big boats, but they didn't seem to hang around, only for a couple of seasons and then they didn't bother coming back again.

We also had another incident in 1968 when the Russians appeared on the scene. **Van Gogh**, which was approximately 5,000 tonnes of factory trawler ship had arrived in the Gulf of Carpentaria and they were doing exploratory trawling in the area. They also had another couple of smaller vessels. One I saw but I couldn't name. The other one, I believe, was the **Aviator** and it was probably about two to three thousand tonnes. They didn't bother coming back again because the catch rates weren't high enough for vessels of that size. If they could have caught prawns at the peak rate at the time they would have been quite happy but they couldn't keep that up. There was too many low periods in it. They used to communicate with the fishermen up there on the radio. The skipper was fairly hard to understand. He used to speak in broken English but he used to converse with us. He also used our vessels to find his patch of prawns. He would watch the boats on radar (he had radar). The spotter plane would put our boats into a patch of prawns, then the **Van Gogh** would come through and scoop up the lot, boats and all if we didn't get out of the road. This was a little bit frustrating for the Australian boats but being in international waters, it was quite legal. He did go into State waters

on a couple of occasions. Even though he was never seen, he used to leave an enormous mud trail from where he trawled and spotter planes would go up the next day and see this great mud trail into about ten miles or eight miles of the coast where he'd obviously been in there but was never seen.

He also helped Australian crews that were welcome on board. You could tie up alongside the **Van Gogh** and go on board. They'd show you over the vessel providing they didn't stop working. Communication was a bit of a problem because not very many of them spoke English and of course none of us spoke Russian, so most of it was sign language. They also helped out [when] one of the crew men got hurt off one of the trawlers. Of course medical aid in the Gulf is fairly hard to come by and so they took this chap on board and he stayed on board for, I think about a week. The Russian ship had a doctor and a dentist on board and he treated him and then they took him off when he was well again and he went back to work. There was also another thing which was a problem in the north. We didn't have a lot of water. We didn't have ..... I suppose our diet probably wasn't the best and so we used to break out in a tropical ulcer. We used to call it Karumba Rot and that's virtually what it did. You got a breaking down in the skin which just wouldn't heal. The Russians treated some of the chaps up there with this particular problem and whatever they used was very successful. It healed it up fairly quickly.

Also some of the Australian crews got their dental work done up there all on the Russian Government's expense. It didn't cost a cent. Some of them had up to five and six fillings done on board this vessels but the medical care on shore was also virtually non-existent. The closest hospital to Karumba was Normanton which is 48 miles away, or 45 miles by road or 48 miles by water, twelve miles by air. The hospital there is manned by nursing sisters only who do a very, very good job but, of course, they're untrained in specialised work. Any serious problems would have to be flown by aerial ambulance to Cairns or Mt Isa. This used to take a fair bit of time sometimes but luckily there was very little serious problems.

There was also a problem in that area during the wet season that once the first storms started in round about November, the roads were out until, probably about the end of April. So there was no road traffic into the area for that whole time. They've improved things since with bitumen roads and that sort of thing. The only thing that stops them now is flooding but the ground used to get that soft and that greasy that even though it was flat, you still didn't go anywhere. This was a problem with the factories as well because they couldn't get their product out so they had to store it for that whole wet period of time or transport it by river to Normanton. All the food had to be flown in through the wet season and generally it wasn't a pleasant time to be there.

Another problem that was up there in those early days too was getting staff to man the factories. Karumba was an unknown place. I think in 1967 if you'd have mentioned to 90% of the people or 99% of the people in Australia Karumba, they probably wouldn't have known where you were talking about. They had to get staff for the factories and so fishermen's wives were the main target for labour but of course if they had small families to look after, well that was a top priority. So they got women in but those first years they just got whoever they could from wherever they could. This sort of improved as time went by and more people got to know the place. Once Karumba came on the map a lot of people became curious and slowly we had a flow of tourists through the place who used to work there. Some of these girls, of course, were working on piece rates in the factory and they made very good money, some of them up to \$400 a week. This then became a bit of a drawcard for girls who wanted to make a bit of money in a short time. So some of them went up there which made labour a

lot easier to get and got the factory problem over and done with anyhow for the time being.

The labour force wasn't helped at all by Aboriginal people. Even though a lot of people think that the north is full of Aboriginals, Karumba is a taboo area for Aboriginals and so there are no Aboriginals living in that town. I believe that the story is that it's a spiritual place or [there is] some problem with it there, anyhow, through spiritual problems. So they just won't stay over night in the area. So there was no Aboriginal work force there at all. Even to this day the Aboriginal Council workers will come down from Normanton and work in the area for the day but they will not stay there of a night. They will go back to Normanton for the night.

The story was different in Groote Eylandt where a factory was established at Bartalumba Bay and that was virtually totally manned by Aboriginal labour. There was a few problems there as well though because they used to send the truck out to the mission to pick up the girls and if they didn't want to go to work, they'd simply pelt the truck with spears. So the truck driver would make a pretty hasty retreat. Groote Eylandt is fairly isolated in the respect that a lot of the Aboriginals there have never had a lot of contact with Europeans. So they still come under their own law to a fairly large degree. They still throw spears at one another and they still can.... Well if they don't want to go to work they throw spears at trucks. It's very hard to get them to change from their own way of life and to come in and do a job that we expect them to do because they'd never been used to that sort of thing but nevertheless, that factory in the early part of it did operate wholly and solely on Aboriginal labour except for the administrative staff and the supervisors and people that more or less had the know how to run the place.

Groote Eylandt was another venture, I think that was in the early 1970s. I'm not real sure who started at Groote Eylandt. I just can't remember but I know that Sir William Gunn of Gunn Rule Enterprises had the factory there or owned the factory for a few years. Also Kailis Fisheries owned it one time as well. They were one of the early people in there. They had to build accommodation there which was at Bartalumba Bay was a little bay on the northern side of the island and they got a lease.... all that being an Aboriginal reserve, they had to get a lease from the Aboriginal people. They had to completely build the whole factory there, fuel tanks, power plant, refrigeration, houses for the staff and a wharf. Some of the houses weren't bad sort of houses. They were pre-fabricated two bedroomed houses and they ranged down [from] that to small little tin sheds not much bigger than a good sized garden shed. We lived in one that was two rooms, a concrete floor, flat roof, tin on the outside, lined with tin on the inside, louvre windows and being in the tropics it was as hot as hell but it was a place to live.

The prawning was fairly good there because being round an island, the weather didn't affect you so much. If it was blowing northerly, well you could work on the southern side of the island. If it was blowing southerly, you worked on the northern side of the island. So it made it a fairly comfortable place to work. There was fairly good anchorages there and we worked in.... the water being deeper closer in shore, we worked in fairly close to shore, whereas round Mornington Island and Bountiful Island and places in the south eastern Gulf, sometimes you were working, most of the time you were working up to twenty miles off shore. It was too far to steam in and out each day so you had to stay out, anchor out and roll around. We didn't have stabilisers in our boats and in bad sou-easterly or windy conditions we either steamed a lot or had very, very uncomfortable days rolling around at sea.

**JD** Did you have problems with cyclones?

**NESS** Basically with cyclones we used to get out of the area in the wet season. It didn't close down but it scaled down to a fair degree. A lot of the boats used to go to the east coast for a refit and that was the most opportune time to do it. So there was only a few boats that used to stay there the whole season. So cyclones weren't a real bad problem although they were a problem. You could always get a late cyclone or an early cyclone. Cyclones didn't really cause problems until boats started staying around most of the year, although in the survey time, there was a boat called the **Lotami** [which] belonged to Bill Greaves. He got caught in a cyclone and finished up getting blown right across the Gulf and he got out of it OK. There was no serious problem. He was lost for a little while but they found him and got him back to Karumba again. I don't think there's been any serious problem with boats except in latter years when some of the larger vessels got caught round the Vanderlin Islands. There was a few of them sunk, I think, and several got fairly serious damage. There's been a few boats caught in cyclones there but they've managed to keep themselves out of trouble.

We used to always look for some place to go, you know, get yourself prepared if a cyclone did come. You'd find a place to go. A lot of the creeks and the rivers in the Gulf are very hard to find, the shore line being all the same. So consequently you don't really know where you are. Once we got radar it made a lot of difference but we'd find ourselves the better rivers to get into. A lot of the rivers have got very shallow mouths in them, some of them probably one two feet and three feet of water on a low tide. So a lot of those rivers you can't get into any time you like. The Gulf has one phenomenon about it, especially the southern Gulf, [it] has only got one high tide and one low tide every 24 hours. So instead of having the two highs and two lows that we got on most parts of Australia, a lot of times you get your high tide in the middle of the night. So to try and go into a river in the middle of a night can be a fairly tricky sort of a manouvre. The barramundi boats, most of them, will go up to a river and then they'll get to the river in the afternoon and they'll peg the entrance with stakes, put lights on the stakes, then they'll enter the river on the high tide at night time. Then they'll go out and take all their stakes and their lights out so nobody else can follow them in. Then going out again, of course, the same thing. You'll put your lights in of an afternoon and your stakes and then go and and then take your lights down, although a lot of the times.... sometimes they do leave the stakes there. They take the lights away.

The prawning evolved up there fairly rapidly in the '70s when more companies came in. They started building bigger boats. These boats were dry freezer boats and I believe this is one of the things that probably caused the downfall or the downturn in catch rates in the Gulf of Carpentaria. These boats were vessels, probably from 70 to up to 100 feet. Some of them were a little bigger but the majority were round about the 70 to 80 feet mark. They could freeze 10,000 pounds of product a day or more. Some of them could freeze more and with the old west boats, we could go out and catch 6,000 pound in a day or if we were on tiger prawns, we'd go out for five days or thereabouts and we'd have to go back to port again. It's probably a day's steam back to port, a day to unload and then probably you may have got to sea on the third or fourth day if you were lucky. These freezer boats, of course, had probably three weeks to four weeks, round about three to four weeks supply of fuel on board. They could catch their 10,000 pounds or more of product every day and be out for three weeks. So their affect on the industry was far greater.

In 1968 when Craig Mosten opened a new factory in Karumba there was a deputation of fishermen, Denis Wallace and Johnny Williamson and, I believe, Ted Ralph and myself. I put the deputation to Doug Anthony, who was then the Minister for Primary Industry, to protect the industry in the Gulf. It was a new industry up there. It was an ideal time to manage the fishery before too many boats got in and Doug's reply was that "You're just a greedy mob of fishermen who want to keep it to yourself. There's

more prawns here than what you'll ever know what to do with." I believe somewhere round about fifteen years later they were bringing in management plans then to try and help the industry out of a state of, well they were in a state of despair because they'd built all these big boats that were worth a lot of money and they weren't getting the return.

So this is just one example of where Government didn't or wouldn't act on something which the fishermen knew best about. Anyhow the industry continued on and the turn was from banana prawning which we thought was going to be the major industry to the tiger prawning. The seasons on banana prawns, every year was getting shorter and shorter and less and less and as the boats got bigger and more efficient, the downhill run became more rapid. The first year we were up there the banana prawn season lasted seven months. I believe now if they get a fortnight out of it, they think they're doing pretty well. So they started working tiger prawns more and they started finding more grounds, but then a lot of these grounds were getting further off shore, radar was coming in where they could position themselves better off shore and of course now we've got satellite navigation systems and electronic systems and communication systems. All our systems are becoming better than what we had before. We've got GPS in now which will give you a position, I think, about two metres error or something like that which doesn't give the poor old prawn much of a chance.

A lot of the mother ship operations that started up in the early days, they have virtually all disappeared. Some of the shore bases have disappeared. It was a boom and bust when finance companies and different companies put money into the prawning industry because they thought it was going to be a quick quid but they realised it was a little bit tougher than that. So they went out and we're down to a few companies now which are fairly big companies and running these boats that are reasonably big boats. They keep the boats at sea now for a lot longer periods because they're using fuel barges and most of the mother ships now have gone from freezer boats to fuel barges and supply boats and they supply the vessels at sea.

We came back from the Gulf of Carpentaria at the end of 1972 and my wife was having a baby so we decided I'd be a good husband and come ashore. I applied for a job with CSIRO which I didn't get because I didn't have a master's certificate and I bought a milk run and came ashore for two years which was the worst two years of my married life. My wife hated it. I didn't like it particularly. So when CSIRO put out applications for the master's job again for the same vessel which previously I missed out on, my wife said, "apply" which I did do and I got the job, not as master but as mate. So it was back to the Gulf of Carpentaria again.

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

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

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## TAPE 2 SIDE B

**NESS** I joined CSIRO as mate of the research vessel **Kalinda**. This was back to the Gulf of Carpentaria on Fisheries' research. As the banana prawns in the Gulf were in the decline, CSIRO were trying to find out why and get a life cycle on them so as they could do a little bit of planning. They also, at a later date, moved on to the tiger prawn fishery as well but initially their research was targeted on the banana prawn. We were stationed in Cairns. We went across and we used to work the whole of the Gulf of Carpentaria sampling for larvae and with juveniles and adults. We had three scientists. We were working three separate programmes in conjunction with one another and the

scientific staff were based at Cleveland. Our trips were five week trips [and] which we got three weeks' leave after each trip. We were also doing oceanography. We were taking water samples which were all sent to Sydney. All the prawn samples were sent to Cleveland and we had a lot of trouble with the vessel.

It had a fairly unreliable engine in it which gave us a lot of trouble but we had to work all sorts of conditions because the Gulf of Carpentaria is approximately 300 miles wide so once you leave one shore and head off for the other and you get in the middle and it blows, well you've got nowhere to go so we had to work some pretty rugged conditions. This became pretty difficult with some of the scientific staff who used to get seasick so the boat's crew had to do scientific work as well as their own. We had a few little problems there with refrigerators breaking loose in the galley and stoves flying around, breaking loose also but we managed to keep going. A lot of that work was instrumental in getting a management plan going for the Gulf of Carpentaria. It was slow work. A lot of fishermen like to see research work done but they think that the results should be made available the next day which is not the case. Some of this took somewhere up to eight or nine years to get the details written up.

It was a very good job but a very boring job which research is because it's repetition and repetition to most people becomes boring. The only thing that changed was the weather and another thing was [it] was getting difficult to get used to the way Government runs things. After working for yourself for many years you find that you can do things the way that you think they should be run but when you work for the Government you've got to write reports. You've got to do a lot more paperwork which most fishermen aren't used to or don't like. This was probably one of the reasons why I didn't last with the organisation because I just couldn't handle the Government way of doing things.

So after fifteen months with CSIRO we started looking around for another boat and we decided to go into fishing, get a fishing boat this time. We wanted to have a go at barramundi fishing. We found a boat in Townsville and I resigned from CSIRO. It was a 42 foot wooden vessel with a 48 horsepower Gardiner engine on a direct drive and it only drew three foot three of water which was reasonable ideal for barramundi fishing because it was shallow drafted to get into the shallow rivers. Well we bought the boat in the middle of the year and we decided that we'd have to make a few alterations to it. So we went mackerel fishing then off Cairns. I'd never caught mackerel in tropical waters. I'd caught mackerel at Tweed Heads which is a little bit different. So we went to work off Cairns and we worked, probably twice as hard as any other mackerel fisherman in Cairns but we certainly got the results. We used to just keep on trailing all day and try and find out where the fish were and I thoroughly enjoyed that particular type of fishing.

I had my wife and daughter on board. Jennifer was round about three at that stage of the piece and she used to play quite merrily on the front deck which we had all netted in so she couldn't fall over the side. Denise and I used to work down the back. I used to steer the boat and pull the lines and dong the fish and cut the hooks out of them and hand the hooks to Denise and she used to bait the lines and put them back over the side. When it came to processing, well we both used to get into it. I used to fillet and we used to cut the blood line out and pack the fish. It was hard work. It was long hours. If you caught a lot of fish of an afternoon, well it meant that you were up half the night processing and then you were up at daylight to.... well you were up before daylight. You were up to be on your grounds at daylight. They were long days. We made a few alterations to the boat to get it the way we wanted it.

The following year we went back to the Gulf of Carpentaria to have a go at the barramundi. My previous experience on barramundi had been one night on the calbah with John Ketelton and we went up the Norman River one night just to set a couple of nets to get a few fish that he had to fill an order in Mt Isa with. So that was my full experience at barramundi fishing other than talking to local fishermen and picking up what little bit of information that you'd hear round the water front. We left Cairns and we steamed up the coast and we trailed for mackerel all the way through to Port Musgrave. We got a few mackerel. We got enough mackerel to pay for our trip around and then we started fishing in Port Musgrave in the Dulcie, Dalhunty and Wenloca Rivers. We came back around, worked our way down the coast to Karumba and for the rest of the year we worked out of Karumba to the rivers on the west coast of the Peninsula. We didn't work across the southern side of the Gulf of Carpentaria but mainly stayed up at the western peninsula below the Mitchell River between Karumba and the Mitchell River.

We worked for barramundi using set nets in the rivers. We used to tie one end of the net to a tree and then run the net out and anchor the other end, weight that fairly heavily and put three or four big floats on the nets because of the strong tidal flow to keep the nets open. That was reasonably hard work in the summer time when the water was hot. You've got to run your nets every two hours at least, otherwise the fish will just go rotten in the net. The water is that hot that if the fish is not kicking, he's rotten. Sometimes I've seen fish that have actually been alive but still on their last legs and they just get on the turn. So you've got to process your fish fairly quickly, especially in the summer time. You get them refrigerated as quickly as you possibly can and if you're catching any quantity of fish well that's a fairly major job.

**JD** What, did you head and gut them or fillet them?

**NESS** No we completely filleted them and packed them into trays. A normal day's work: Once you got your nets set you'd chose a place to set your nets and if it was summer time and the water was hot you'd run your nets two hours again after you'd set your nets. You'd bring that fish back to the boat. You'd cut their throats and bleed them and then fillet the fish, skin them. You'd have to wash them to get all the blood and that sort of thing off them, clean the fillets and then pack them into stainless steel or aluminium trays, around about ten kilos in a tray, put them in the snap freezer. Then if you had any spare time, you had a bit of a rest. If you didn't you'd go back to the nets and run them again. This went on until the fish went off or you got that tired that you couldn't go on any further. If you got too tired, you just rolled the net up and put the lead line over the top of the cork line so it wouldn't catch any more fish and go and have a bit of a camp. Winter time was much better because you'd only run the nets twice a day. So that was a much easier life, or you'd go out onto the flats along the shore line and you'd set your nets on the shore line and it was still much the same process.

I think one of the problems with the barramundi fishery, and a lot of people may not agree, but I think that monofilament net was probably one of the worst things that ever happened to any fishery. It is far too efficient. Any mug can use it and I'm referring to myself as a mug in this respect because if it hadn't been for monofilament nets, I wouldn't have existed in the barramundi fishery. I would have had to use a nylon net like used to be available in the earlier days. You had to use a certain amount of expertise to set your nets, otherwise they just don't catch anything. With monofilament you can shoot them out. It doesn't matter how many holes in it, you'll still catch fish but with nylon, of course, the fish can see it and they'll baulk at it. I think that that was one of the reasons why the barramundi fishery has declined so much because of monofilament net. It just made it so easy for so many people and of



course now they've had to decrease the numbers of people that are fishing and whether it'll come back to what it was, I don't really know. That's something that remains to be seen.

**JD** Where did you land your catch?

**NESS** We used to land our catch, our first load we used to unload at Weipa. They had a barge. It was run by the Queensland Fish Board or you could put your fish on to barges that were owned by Mason Shipping. They'd take them back to Cairns and in Karumba there was.... Craig Mostens would buy the fish or in latter times there was Raptus or Sidney Faithful[?]. He was another buyer that was there. There was a few buyers in Karumba that would buy fish but there again there was the old problem of the one man owns the town and one man runs the town. We didn't unload our fish to anybody in Karumba because we could get a better price in Cairns.

So we used to road freight our fish back to Cairns by truck. You weren't allowed to tie up to any wharves in Karumba because of this so we had to unload our fish into a dinghy, take the dinghy ashore, then unload it onto a truck off the bank. We had an arrangement with the trucker that came across once a week. He used to bring vegetables and fruit and perishables across from Cairns and then back load with fish. So he used to take our fish back. He used to bring our food that we wanted across for us. Our meat from Cairns, he used to bring it across for us as well. So the only thing that we could get from a wharf in Karumba was fuel. We also had trouble getting water because we didn't supply any of the factories in town. The last year we worked up there was a very, very dry year and there was a severe shortage of water. We lived for nearly nine months on 400 gallons of fresh water. We used to bath in salt water. We used to wash up in salt water. The only thing we used fresh water for was domestic purposes. We even tried cooking in salt water which can't be recommended. We even begged, borrowed and stole water.

**JD** Did you have any difficulty with crocodiles in the nets?

**NESS** At that stage, it wasn't that long after the crocodile had been protected but they were building up in numbers and yes we did have a little bit of a problem with crocodiles. We'd get them tangled up in the nets or they'd take our fish out of the nets but they were becoming cheeky. Each year we were seeing more and more crocodiles. I don't believe that they were ever anywhere as close to extinction as what a lot of the people in high places thought they were. They were just shell shocked and they used to keep their heads down. I don't blame them, if they were getting shot at all the time. Once the crocodile found that he wasn't going to be shot at every time he poked his head up, he stuck his head up a lot more often. They became a lot more prevalent and a lot cheekier. In the days when you could take crocodiles they were quite a little lucrative sideline. We used to go up the rivers of a night time and take the small crocodiles for stuffing. They used to sell them in the curio shops and places as stuffed crocodiles. We used to get \$15 each for a small stuffer, as we used to call them. The only problem was, of course, of a night time when you would use a spotlight, the only way you can tell how big the crocodile is, is how wide apart his eyes are. You used to look for the two little red dots on the bank. Once you grab hold of a small crocodile you've got to make sure he's not going to grab hold of you. We had a few exciting moments when you grab hold of one that's a little bit big. It's a bit of a toss up to see who's going to get into the dinghy and who's going to get out but it was quite a lucrative little side line there for a while, especially when we'd unloaded and had a bit of time to spare. Of course, possibly it was a bit of a diversion, a bit of fun [from] time to time to pass the time away.

**JD** How long did you stay barramundi fishing?

**NESS** We were barramundi fishing for two and a half years and our daughter was doing School of the Air and correspondence school at this stage which was very, very good but we decided we'd bring her back and put her into a proper school situation. So we came back to Cairns in 1978, the end of 1978. We weren't going to come back to civilisation on the east coast until the following year. Anyhow a buyer, a broker came down and he said, "I can sell your boat for you." So we decided, oh well, we'll put it on the market. It didn't sell so we did our normal refit and got ourselves ready to go back to the Gulf again. Anyhow just before we were ready to go back another broker came down and he had a buyer. He saw the boat and he bought it. So we were without a boat and without a home.

We went around a lot of brokers and we saw a trawler. We put a deposit on the trawler unseen because, of course, it was a boat that was being built, and when the sale went through with the **Melville**, we came back down to Brisbane. We had a look at the boat that we'd put the deposit on. That was unsatisfactory. It was an unsatisfactory deal, anyhow, so we got our deposit back but we found another boat which was being built in Newcastle at the time. We put a deposit on that one which is the boat that I have at the present time today, which is the **Gulf Stream**. It's a 50 foot steel trawler with 175 horsepower GM engine in it. It was partially built at that time, when we saw it in about, I think it was about February or March (February I think it was). So we had to wait until September when the boat was commissioned. There was fuel strikes on at that time and we couldn't get enough fuel to put in the boat to leave Newcastle. We finally got fuel from a dealer and the Newcastle Fishermen's Co-Operative and we got enough fuel in to leave the port. We steamed back to Tweed Heads. We were using single gear. In those days it was still [unclear], virtually no management in the east coast prawn fishery. It was only, I think, around about 1972 when there was talk of the Offshore Constitutional Settlement and States taking control of Fisheries management and a few other things like that. So we worked our single gear for a short period of time.

Triple gear and multi nets were coming in at that stage of the piece on the east coast. I think this is another thing that has caused a fairly rapid decline in the east coast king prawn fishery, with multi nets. Each boat virtually became roughly 30% more efficient over night. It was the straw that broke the camel's back plus that round about this same time electronic aids were becoming more popular and radar was making positioning much more accurate. It opened up a lot of country because of the accuracy of the machine. We could trawl closer to reef. We could trawl in three [unclear]. It just made fishing so much more accurate. These two things combined really put a lot of pressure on the industry. The fishery was probably fairly well patronised up until this stage but since then, I think, we've certainly felt the downhill run in catch rate, anyhow. We've had an increase in prices each year which has sort of offset the decrease in catch rates except for the last few years where that increase in prices hasn't occurred but the catch rates are still falling.

The deep water, what we call our deep water prawn, which started probably back in about 1963 or 64, that also caused a big influx of trawlers or bigger trawlers into the fishery. That still is a fairly major part of our fishery, although that has also declined. That fishery is mainly up around Cape Moreton and off Mooloolaba, although they've found new grounds up off Lady Musgrove Island and off the Swains Reef. Our local deep water fishery off Tweed Heads was only fairly short lived. There was very good catches for a few years in the early '70s and late '60s but that's dropped right back

now and it's just somewhere where you go in the winter time where there's nowhere else to go. Catch rates have certainly dropped off a lot.

The other thing, I think, there is also a lot more fishing in New South Wales now than what there was ten years ago. There are a lot more trawlers working out of ports like Coffs Harbour and the Clarence River has got an enormous fleet. [In] some of the central New South Wales ports prawn trawling has become more common. As the king prawn migrates from down southern New South Wales, they are fished heavier now than what they used to, so we're not getting the prawn in this area that we're used to.

**JD** Is that decline in stock that's the major problem, would you feel?

**NESS** It is one of the major problems but I think there's also a problem with marketing. We're getting a lot of competition from other states which we didn't get many years ago. South Australia puts prawn on the eastern markets. I think even a bit comes from Western Australia. A lot of prawn is exported from North Queensland. It finds its way into southern markets and of course Sydney is the biggest fish market in Australia, so therefore it consumes a fairly large quantity of product caught in Australia.

At the present time we're also finding that aquaculture is also encroaching on our wild prawn fishery. This is becoming a bit of a worry for our local industry. [unclear] the aquaculture will get better as time goes by. Science and technology will come up with solutions to problems that they've had in the past. It will become more efficient and I think that it's going to be a fairly big competitor for the market. The wild prawn fishery is up against weather. We can't put prawn on the market on a certain day at a certain time. We put a prawn on the market when the weather allows us to but with aquaculture they can put a prawn on the market at a day and a date. They can possibly grow them to a specific size which is something that we can't always do. We've got to catch what's available. If the market requires a big prawn and there's only small prawn around, well we've got a problem.

I think that management has got to.... Queensland has tried to manage their fishery since OCS came in.

**JD** What's OCS?

**NESS** OCS is the Offshore Constitutional Settlement, but they've tried but they've had a few, I suppose you could call them failures, because vessels, where they've tried to reduce the efficiency of vessels, they've actually had a blow out. All these things can't be seen and there's always the resourceful fishermen who'll find a loophole in something and what you think is going to be a successful management plan turns out to be a nightmare. New South Wales is now coming into a management plan. Hopefully they will learn from other States' mistakes but a lot of fishermen realise that we've got to have management. We've got to have a reduction in effort and they think that conservation is a terrific thing providing everybody contributes except them. So this is something that's got to be dealt with in the near future, which I feel is probably ten years too late. I think that all of this should have been done ten years ago. We may have benefited from it but from here on I think it's going to be a lot harder. As our expenses climb, our catches decrease so therefore nobody wants to decrease in income and it's going to be a very difficult time, I think, for the fishing industry from here in.

**JD** You don't seem to be confident about the future?

**NESS** I was always very confident with fishing. I liked fishing but I think that there is going to be a lot of problems from here on because of the way the economy is going, with high interest rates for people who are trying to get in to the caper, with decreasing catches with problems from aquaculture, problems from overseas imports and just a lack of new ground. I think we've found all our available grounds that's for the king prawn. I think we've found virtually all the grounds that we're going to find. There's going to be no more new ground. It'll be a tough time, I think, for young people of the future. I hope I'm wrong but I don't think I am.

**JD** Well let's hope the problems don't prove to be insurmountable.

**NESS** I think with good management it can be kept at a viable level but it doesn't mean that every fishermen just now in the industry is going to stay in the industry.

**JD** Thanks very much. Thank you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Alf Ness, of Tugun, Queensland.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





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

### INTRODUCTION

George Rowell is the son of a lighthouse keeper on the Queensland coast and spent all his childhood on lighthouse stations. As a young man he joined the Fisheries Service and served in many parts of the State. In this interview he recounts the story of his life as a fisheries inspector, patrol boat skipper and training officer and in doing so gives an insight into the many fisheries found along the Queensland coast.

He also details some of the changes he saw during his period of service, changes in the function of the officers, in relations with fishermen, in management and in the methods and materials used in fishing as well as changes in the fishermen themselves and in their attitudes to the industry. George Rowell has been out of the Fisheries Branch for some years now and has turned his hand to farming. Clearly however, he has retained his interest in the fishing industry and in this interview makes a valuable contribution to Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry.

The interview was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Rowell's home in Kalbar, Queensland on the 19th April, 1990. 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** George, would you record your full name, date and place of birth please.

**ROWELL** George Edward Rowell; date of birth is 8th January, 1928. I was born, believe it or not, in a little place called Pinkenba in a grocer's shop. The reason I was born in the grocer's shop is, my father was a lighthouse keeper and, of course, he lived on an island. My mother, when she was giving birth to me, had to come to the mainland and there was no doctors near here. The only certified person was a midwife and she was the greengrocer's wife. She apparently brought me into this world.

**JD** Were you brought up on the island that your father was [unclear]?

**ROWELL** Oh, yes. I spent nineteen years, my first nineteen years on this island as a lighthouse keeper's son. Of course, everything we did was associated with the sea. This is not unusual as my father, being a lighthouse keeper, of course, had a long association with the sea. He was an Englishman by birth and he was in the Royal Navy. He spent a lot of his training in a ship that was written in history, a ship called the **Calliope**. She was a square rigging ship and I remember reading about the **Calliope** when I went to school. It was written up in all the grade four readers that I knew about and my father was in that ship. The reason the **Calliope** became well

know was she was one of the only ships that escaped a cyclone in Apia Harbour in 1824. The Royal Navy turned it into a training ship and my father happened to train in her as a young Naval cadet.

**JD** Can you trace your forebears back before your father's....

**ROWELL** Well my father came from Plymouth area and his father was also a seafaring man. He was in the Coast Guard Service in Plymouth and I believe his family before him were also associated with the sea.

**JD** To come to your own early times then, did you go to school on the island?

**ROWELL** No. We had no school on the island. I was very fortunate. I was one of six boys. There was no girls in our family. Of course, on reflection, I think that was a very good thing because I couldn't see how a girl would be able to fit into the life-style that we had. My father, being a lighthouse keeper of course, he was sent by the Government to different stations and consequently we moved around quite a bit. My older brothers in the more isolated light stations, did their education by correspondence but the island that I was born on was relatively close to the mainland and we could get access to a mainland school by boat. So as long as I can remember, in my early days I had to go to school by boat. Consequently we became very experienced in handling boats under all sorts of conditions.

**JD** Did you children handle the boat yourselves?

**ROWELL** Oh yes. We actually worked the boats. We rowed quite a lot, of course and we rowed to school and back, of course. We were, in a way, privileged when you look at it because I can remember our teacher.... It was only a small school, only one teacher school. I remember our teacher, if there's a storm approaching, he'd say to the class room.... It was just one big class room with all the pupils there, he'd say, "Right O, the Rowell family can go now. There's a storm coming." So we'd get home early that afternoon. So it has its advantages as well.

**JD** Did the weather often stop you from getting to school?

**ROWELL** Oh yes. The weather played a big part in our operations, of course. We found it very difficult at times to get either to school or back from school at the normal time. Therefore we had to wait until the storm eased or whatever or my father, realising what the situation was, would come over in a motor launch and then take us back in it.

**JD** Did you do your whole schooling there?

**ROWELL** Yes I did. I did all my primary schooling there and went as far as I could. As I grew up I felt the need for more education and I then took correspondence schooling myself when I was in my 30s. So I managed to gain a little bit more learning from that period.

**JD** But you'd have left the island by then?

**ROWELL** Oh yes. I was certainly a long way from that island then.

**JD** George, after you'd left school and had left the island, what did you do with yourself? Did you go into employment?

**ROWELL** Well, you realise that living as we were in some isolation, it was very difficult to get to higher education. So being one of six boys, our first priority as soon as we could was to earn a living to help manage affairs at home. Actually I left school when I was thirteen. As you realise, my date of birth is the 8th January, and I turned fourteen on that 8th but the school year finished in the December prior to that. So I left school during my thirteenth year and I went into a cake factory, my very first job. I thought, "Well there's not much to be gained here." This is during Wartime and jobs weren't easy to get. I was only there for a few weeks and I went into a ply mill. Again I wanted something better. I always had my mind set on being an engineer at that stage and I wanted to be apprenticed to an engineering firm, if possible. So after the ply mill episode I eventually got into an engineering firm where they were advertising for a young lad to eventually be apprenticed to an engineer. So I joined this firm and after about six months I found that I wasn't going to be apprenticed in any shape or form. I was put into the foundry section of this engineering, not in the work shop at all. Of course, by this time we were well into the War period and it was very difficult to change occupation without what they used to term a clearance, in those days.

Anyway, an older brother of mine at that stage had been in fisheries and I thought, well if I can't be an engineer, I wouldn't mind being in the Fisheries Service. So because of the long association my family had with this Department of Harbours & Marine, I approached the Head of the Department at that time and asked was there any position available in Fisheries.

**JD** Fisheries was part of the....

**ROWELL** Fisheries was then a branch of the Harbours & Marine. Harbours & Marine was a fairly big department in Queensland and it covered dredging, navigational aids, wharfage, piloting, lighthouse keeping and fisheries was a branch as well. So the chief at that time said, "Oh yes, we'll get you in fisheries, but look firstly, would you take on another job we have in mind?" I said, "Well, what is that?" They said, "To be a lighthouse keeper." I said, "Oh well, I'm not very keen on lighthouse keeping seeing I lived on one for so long." They said, "Well look, this is a bit different. You'll be sent down onto a structure with three other men." They said, "Can you cook?" I said, "Oh yes, I can cook." Then I was asked, "Could you read morse?" I said, "Yes, I can read morse." So they said, "Right, you're on." I said, "Well look, how long will I be there?" They said, "Well only three weeks. You do a three week stint on and a week off. We send a supply ship down and it will take you off after your three weeks." I said, "Right O."

So I then went to this place and obviously it was in the middle of Moreton Bay and I had to travel by ship. We went down on a little steam vessel which was quite unusual even in those days. They're not known now, of course. I went to this place. It was called the Pile Light Signal Station. Bearing in mind that I was only going to be there three weeks and then I'd be transferred to Fisheries, I thought, "Well, I'll give it a go." Well I ended up being there two years and every three weeks that I came up, when I was relieved for my week off, I used to go to my Head and say, "Well look, three weeks are up. When do I go into Fisheries?" "Oh look, don't you worry", he said, "It won't be long before we have a vacancy in Fisheries for you." Well anyway this went on for two years. I must admit, on reflection, it was one of the most interesting periods of my life because it was right in the middle of the Pacific War period. I was a young boy doing signalling and handling a lot of signal material for the Navy. The

Australian Navy and the American Navy would use us as their centre and I got to know quite a lot about wartime activities there, I can assure you.

**JD** So when you finished that stint you then got into fishing?

**ROWELL** After the two year period I again went on this week of leave and my boss then said to me, "Look, you can go to Fisheries next week. You can join one of the patrol vessels." So that's how I became involved in the patrol service of the Fisheries Branch. I stayed there for another 24 years. Initially I was appointed as boatman to the Fisheries patrol vessel and the senior man eventually became promoted into the office and I eventually got promoted to taking over that vessel in charge of the patrol boat. My area of patrol operations was Moreton Bay. After doing many years in Moreton Bay I was transferred to other centres of Queensland. I went from one extreme to the other. I went to Cairns in those days. That was 1953 I got transferred to Cairns.

Another significant step in my life in that same year was I got married and so my young bride and I, we went to Cairns together and we started a new life up there. I say "started a new life" because they had no Fisheries officer stationed in Cairns previously and I was the first one. Now when I went to Cairns, of course being in North Queensland, my area of patrol was from 100 miles south, that's Cardwell up to the extent of Queensland which was Cape York and Torres Strait and out as far as the Gulf of Carpentaria. So, of course, I had a fair area to patrol. I was there for nine years and I found that one of the most interesting periods of my life because everything as new, not only new to me to see, but the experience of administering the work that I had to do was also new to the people I dealt with. To get the public used to having regulations for their fishing activities was an experience in itself. I had quite a few experiences up there, I can assure you.

**JD** Did you travel mainly by water or by road?

**ROWELL** Well to get to those places, I must admit, I travelled in every shape or form I could imagine. I used to go by boat, of course, a lot. I used to fly by small aircraft. In those times the small airline company was called Bush Pilots and they used to have fabric covered aircraft called Austo Auto Cars. They're only a two seater plane and I used to travel a lot up there to Princess Charlotte Bay and areas like that where they could land on a salt pan quite easily but they couldn't travel any higher than about seven or nine thousand feet because the pressure was too great for them. I had quite a few trips in those aircraft to get to places where I had to inspect.

Then, of course, I used to use a cattle barge quite a lot. They had a cattle barge working from Cairns and you used to go into the rivers of the Princess Charlotte Bay area particularly, where cattle stations would have their loading ramps and pick up cattle or discharge cattle or heavy machinery or whatever. I made many, many trips with the **Wewak** which was the name of this cattle barge. Other times I would commandeer a commercial fishing vessel. They would take me up, rather reluctantly I might add, on inspections, up as far as TI which is Thursday Island. I did several trips there. On the way back, if the only passenger ship was coming southwards at the time, which was the John Burke's **Elsana**, I'd hitch a ride back on her, getting to know the skipper very well, or he'd drop me off at any port if he could. It was amazing the way people went out of their way to help you, really. Road traffic was limited to about, oh one, I suppose, in those. I mean you had to have a four wheel drive vehicle to get there anyway. It was only in the best of dry conditions that you could manage that. So most of my trips would have been done by sea.



**JD** You would have been up there in the days before prawning became so prevalent up there. What sort of fisheries were you supervising, George?

**ROWELL** Yes, well most of my work dealt with mackerel fishing or reef fishing. That was in the offshore areas but there was also another method of fishing which they had been using in the north for a number of years. It was originally a native method which was called trap fishing. It was for this purpose that I had reason to visit most of these remote areas because the traps would be set quite illegally in rivers. These were wire netting traps. They're fences really with a trap on the end which catches the fish. They were illegal. They were against the then Fisheries' law to operate them within a certain distance of a river mouth. My job was to ensure that there was no illegally operating or erected traps anywhere.

Of course I did not only enforcement, I did supervisory work. If we were going to introduce a new method of fishing I'd be asked by my Department to go up and supervise the operation and to report on the results of the captures or whatever. So it was quite a diversified type of work that I did. It wasn't only solely enforcement but apart from mackerel fishing and reef fishing, I was involved, of course, in the enforcement of the trocus and pearl shell laws as well. This was both a Commonwealth and State administration and we were appointed under both Acts.

**JD** Where would the people who were fishing in those days market their reef fish?

**ROWELL** Well, the main centre would be Cairns in those days. They'd go away. One fishing vessel I used to travel in quite a bit would do [a] six week trip and she'd come back to Cairns with her hull loaded with fish. Other smaller vessels might do ten day trips but they would go as far as they could in their five or six days and catch their fish and then return to Cairns; always used Cairns as their base. I'm going back before there were mother ships and before there was any prawning in the Gulf area. My reason to go to the Gulf, of course, was for barramundi fishing. It was being exploited in those areas in those days and there was very, very little control on the method that was being used. Of course, a lot of unscrupulous fishermen would use a method which was against the conservation measures that we wanted to see permitted. My job was to ensure that they weren't breaching these rules in any way. Of course, in the centre of all this were dynamiting of fish. That was very prevalent up in those areas. They'd go to these inland streams, people would, and just use dynamite to catch their fish which was, of course, illegal anyway. So you really had your work cut out, being one man in an area of that nature.

**JD** Were many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders involved in fishing in those days?

**ROWELL** Yes. Obviously they weren't involved in commercial fishing but they did fish. Now two species of animals that were in the sea in north Queensland which were used by Aboriginals, the exclusive use of Aboriginals, were the turtle and dugong. Now, of course, Europeans tried to exploit the turtle fishery and it did flourish for a while but through lack of demand, it just faded away but the Aboriginals, they were always allowed to have turtle and/or dugong for their own use. Not in those days, there was no Aboriginal community using them for a commercial purpose. Bearing in mind, I used to visit quite a lot of the Aboriginal mission stations to investigate their use of those animals as well, whether they were over exploiting them.

**JD** The pearling that you mentioned, was that cultured pearl or pearling in the wild?

**ROWELL** No. That was pearling in the wild. In the 1950s the pearling fleet was still in prominence. Of course, pearling crashed about in the middle '50s I'd say, when the

plastic trade came in and took away the demand for pearl shell buttons and the like. Towards the end of my period in Cairns which was in the '60s, the Japanese were coming in with the cultured pearls and we actually had some cultured pearl farms operating before I left in the northern part of Queensland.

**JD** This pearling in the wild, was it hard hat diving?

**ROWELL** Yes. They were still using that method and the pump, of course. They had the compressor going all the time. They had mostly islanders who did this diving, of course, with usually a European master or owner.

**JD** After you left the north, then, where did you go?

**ROWELL** Well I was then transferred.... After nine years in Cairns in '62 I was transferred to a little place on the southern coast which was called Tewantin. Now Tewantin was a major fish producing area. In terms of aggregate quantity, it was the third highest production of fish in the State, Brisbane being the first, then Maryborough, then Tewantin. So therefore it was of some importance as far as the Fisheries were concerned but their prime fish there was mullet. It was all seine netting of mullet.

**JD** Was that a beach mullet or a sea mullet?

**ROWELL** It's a sea mullet which was netted on the beaches during the run of the sea mullet but Tewantin consists of a series of rather large shallow lakes. A lot of their mullet fishing was done in these lakes.

**JD** To carry on with your career, where else did you serve?

**ROWELL** Well from Tewantin I was then transferred to Maryborough which is a bit further north of Tewantin. Bear in mind, I seemed to have been used as a pioneer inspector for these areas because Tewantin hadn't had a permanent inspector. It would be serviced from the Brisbane area. Well, of course, it was getting too big for them to be able to service it satisfactorily. So the Department Heads decided to put a permanent man there, so I was sent there. Then Maryborough became a major station. Although it always had had a permanent man, it had had a period where it didn't have supervision. So I was sent up there to reopen the area again. I was given rather a fast patrol vessel. It was during this period that our mode of transport changed considerably to what I had been used to many years earlier. Of course we didn't have outboard motors. Whenever we went on patrol, we had our mother ship which was our accommodation vessel, but to do the actual patrol work, we invariably rowed. This might involve us rowing something like eighteen miles in a night. It wasn't unusual for me to do that at all but by the time I got back to Maryborough, the equipment had improved so much that we were given very fast, small mobile runabouts to operate from trailers that could be used in many places. The actual mother ship or the mother vessel was also of the fast type, a speedier hull type. The earlier boat that I was in would do eight knots, where the last one I was in would do 23 knots no worries at all. So you see our equipment had changed considerably. Of course this meant greater efficiency. We would cover much more area than we could using the older methods and obviously our effect would be so much greater.

**JD** Were there changes in terms of your role and function as a fisheries inspector, George?

**ROWELL** Yes, yes there would be because in early days we were purely there for enforcement. In other words, if we saw a fisherman breaking the law, we'd simply have to go to him and get all the evidence required to make a prosecution. As the years went on we realised that education was just as important as enforcement. So we would then try to educate the fishermen as to why it was necessary not to do this or to do this this other way. We found that this role became more and more in use as the years went by. In fact, after the Maryborough period that I was stationed there, I was returned to Brisbane and it really was the start of a new era in our Fisheries operations because the branch became an autonomous branch of its own. It's name changed from an inspectorial naming to a patrol and the emphasis then was placed on patrolling the waters for infringements of recreational boating. In other words, people exceeding speed limits or people not observing safety equipment or people not observing other laws non-related to commercial fishing. So it really changed quite a lot from about the '60s.

Well I was transferred to Brisbane in 1964 so from then on the Department's image changed a great deal to the public in general on fishing. The commercial side of fishing took a back seat, you might say, to a large degree. One of my first jobs was to work out a curriculum for a school to be introduced into our branch so as we could educate our Fisheries officers to go out into the field in a different form to what I had been taught. I found this quite a challenging period.

**JD** Did you find that because of the changed role, that the relationship with the commercial fishermen also changed?

**ROWELL** Well personally, I found that the actual commercial fishermen themselves changed. It was a business and they were very astute people. To set themselves up with good equipment cost quite a bit of money and, of course, by this time prawning had been the number one fisheries industry. To operate successfully at prawning, as in any other business, you had to be efficient, you had to manage it properly....

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

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** George, we were talking about the relationship between the commercial fishermen and the Fisheries officers and you were saying that the fishermen themselves have changed. Would you like to say some more about that?

**ROWELL** Yes. Well you certainly had a different style of fishermen then to what I was used to in the early days because the men who came into the industry then looked upon it purely as a business approach. They had invested quite a bit of money in their boats and, as I say, this was the period when prawning was coming into its prominence and to set yourself up into a successful prawning vessel required quite a large sum of money and people who had that money or who could borrow that money to invest, they wanted to ensure that it was going to be invested wisely and they took great pains to ensure that their gear was proper and they kept proper records. All in all you got a better, I don't want to use the word "type" of person to denigrate the earlier fisherman because the earlier fisherman was a very, very honest sort of fellow but this man was more of a business like type and consequently you found that he understood why the regulations were necessary. In fact, very often their own branch, their own union would come to us and say, "Well look, we think you should impose this

for our benefit as well." There was great co-operation in many ways between the fishermen and the authorities, the controlling authorities, for this very thing.

**JD** Do you feel that the Government took note of what the fishermen had to say?

**ROWELL** I think they did in most cases. I find that governments are very, very reluctant to change. This would be my experience. I can recall many instances where an enquiry was asked to look into a certain aspect of a method or a type of fishing and a report would be done and submitted to the Government and nothing would be done on the recommendations within that report. Yet many years down the track and in some instances where I personally was involved, I can recall 30 years after the event, the changes were made. To me that was 30 years too late. Even I could see the need for a change 30 years prior. By this time that the changes had been made, the fishery that has been affected is so down, is so low in production, that it's going to take a lifetime to build up again. I feel that change should be made much quicker. Once a situation is summed up, it's investigated as best as possible and a firm recommendation is made, I think it should be acted upon, even if only for a trial period.

**JD** I know you've been out of the industry now for some time George, but thinking back to your own time, where would you say the main problems for fishing lay?

**ROWELL** Well there's no doubt in my mind. In earlier days ignorance would be certainly the main problem with the depletion of fish stocks. Again I'd like to stress that I'm not saying that to denigrate anyone but in those days when fish were fairly plentiful, fishermen could go out and just select the quality of fish that he wanted and discard those he didn't want. Well invariably the discarded ones died. They were caught, but he didn't want them because there was no market, he couldn't sell them so he used to.... In the case of crabs, he'd kill them; in the case of fish, they'd be stranded and they would die. So obviously he was doing harm to two or three years' stocks of fish. This went on for some years until the likes of the enforcement people came along and said, "No. You must not use that method because you're killing far too many fish." It took a long time for these changes to be made.

Of course, consistent with that you've got to understand the methods that were being used, the materials that were being used. When I first was involved in fishing commercially they were using cotton and hemp nets. You never see them today. They're all nylon and monofilament nets, nets that never wear out. They are almost obscure in the water. The fish have no threat of danger by seeing something ahead of them. They're colourless. In fact, today you may be aware that many monofilament gill netting in ocean waters is being banned for that very reason. Well I must admit, when monofilament net was being introduced in this country, I was one firmly against it then. I could see where it was just going to kill fish regardless because they could not see. It was an invisible mesh and the fish just swam into it and got caught. So the industry has changed in their technology and the type of material that's being used. The fishermen's education, of course, has been improved considerably. We're getting much more business approach by the fishermen in the industry and all in all I think today, fishing as I see it, and I've been out of it now for some time, but fishing today is a much more regulated and controlled and understood industry than it was.

**JD** Was pollution a problem in your day?

**ROWELL** No. You would not hear the word "pollution" as far as Fisheries were concerned. In fact you wouldn't hear it much in general conversation anywhere. Of course, over the 26 years that I had been with the Department and involved in fishing

and since then, of course, I've been still associated with the water, pollution through the increasing activities of pleasure boats, in restricted areas, congested areas, the pollution of waste being disposed of into the sea thinking that it was not going to do any harm, has been proven to be a bigger problem than anything known before.

**JD** George, would you say the management techniques that have been introduced in an attempt to reduce effort and to prevent over fishing, have they been effective?

**ROWELL** I would say that initially.... You see when you speak about management, you've got to have some reason to impose a new regulation or a method of control. People with that knowledge would be the scientists, the biologists. Well, of course, in early days we didn't have those people working at great strength in Queensland. It wasn't until the Fisheries authorities saw the need to have people of that calibre researching these problems and then coming up with recommendations and then introducing the same recommendations, that we could see any effect. Of course this takes many, many years. So certainly now I can see the effect of this improved management but at the same time, much of it has been, in my mind, too little too late.

**JD** George, in such an extended period of service you'd have come across many people and incidents that have remained in your memory. Would you like to record one or two?

**ROWELL** Yes. Well, of course being an inspector, you weren't the most popular man in town. Very often you were faced with situations that could have been a little bit dangerous at times. I can recall a couple of these incidents. Actually I was patrolling the Brisbane River. In those days we used to have a great number of prawn trawlers operating in the river with their little beam trawls and most of them were of foreign origin. My job was, of course, to ensure that they were using the correct type of nets and had their licences and whatever. So this was night time. All these things seemed to happen at night and, of course, they worked at night because they thought they wouldn't be detected. Of course, we worked at night thinking that we were going to detect them. So I came across these couple in this boat and went along side. Sure enough, I found that his net was under size and, of course, in the case of having seen an under size net in use, you had no alternative but to seize the net. The only light that this fellow had in his boat was, (he had a mate with him, there was two of them) a hurricane lamp. So I measured his net with the equipment we had and I said, "Look, this net is under size. I have to seize it." He got quite upset, picked up the hurricane lamp and took a swing at me with this hurricane lamp. That was the only thing he had to probably throw at me. Well anyway, I dodged him and it hit the side of the boat and, of course, just broke into many pieces and we were all in darkness. I said, "Well now you've fixed it now. We can't even see each other, can we?" So that broke the ice a bit. He calmed down a bit and we got away from it. What I didn't realise at the time, my mate, I had a mate too, he was on the boat above me, he was standing over this fellow with a bucket of sand ready to drop on his head. So we got out of that one very easily.

There was another time I was sent north of Brisbane with another chappy to investigate a dispute that had flared up amongst some mackerel fishermen. It was a case of the mackerel net meshes against the anti-mackerel fishermen. One of the townspeople was causing quite a bit of trouble there, who was also a fisherman. It was a little fishing village so they were all fishermen. He was against this meshing of mackerel and he wanted the authorities to stop it. It was illegal so we were there to do just that. Well, of course, this fellow who lived in the town and made the complaint, he wasn't very popular either. By the time we got there it was well into the night time and

we knocked on his door. The door opened a few inches and I got greeted with a double barrelled shot gun. I said, "Hold on." He said, "Hey, who are you?" Once we presented our credentials we were accepted but I tell you what, it was a bit of a dicey situation there for a while. So we eventually sorted that one out without any worse affect than that.

One of the most unusual incidents, I suppose, had nothing to do with fishermen. As I said before, I used to travel up into Princess Charlotte Bay which is a big bay in north Queensland. It's 43 miles across. It's the big hook in the shape of Queensland. If you recall in your mind, Queensland starts off at Cape York and then comes down and then swings away to the east in a big hook. Well that big hook is Princess Charlotte Bay. I was dropped of there one time to do a job and I had to row down a river called the Kennedy River. I was rowing down with this flat bottomed boat and, of course, in those times the place contained quite a lot of crocodiles. It was low water. I had to do this work at low water and consequently there was steep banks exposed by the fall of the tide. Now crocodiles love to get on the top of these banks to sun themselves. As I was rowing down this river, I would disturb these crocodiles who had been at rest up on top of the bank and their first instinct was, of course, to get back into the water. I was between them and the water and I would say that I'd had crocodiles go over my boat, go under my boat and go ahead of my boat but I never had one come into my boat during that time. I thought to myself, I thought many times later, I don't know what would have happened if one had got into that boat because there's no way in the world he and I could have stayed in the one boat, and I'll tell you what, there was a lot of crocs I passed that time going down.

In the same area actually, this job that I had to do.... I had to survey a fish trap site and it required walking 500 metres along a foreshore, mangrove foreshore. In this area it's all muddy foreshore. So I left the boat at the edge of the water which was low water, bear in mind, and it's just one big mud flat up to the mangroves. I walked ashore with my gear and my compass and whatever. As you realise, you leave your marks in the mud as you progress. So I went up and did this job and after I finished my work I retraced to the point where I came in and started to walk back to my boat. What do you think I say alongside my tracks, but the big pads of a big crocodile. I must have disturbed him when I went in and he came out. So I knew he was out there somewhere and I had to get into that water. Of course by this time the tide had come back and my boat was in the water. So I had great fun and consternation trying to get in that boat without that crock seeing me. I saw him first, fortunately. So they're the little things that happened that help to make life a little bit different to the norm. I tell you, it was never dull. That's for sure!

**JD** It wasn't because of crocodiles that you got out of the service was it?

**ROWELL** Oh, no. No it wasn't because of crocodiles. It was because I felt that.... Well, look. I had 26 years of service. I was still a relatively young man. I was transferred back, as I say, to Brisbane. I was promoted into this position looking after all these new recruits that we were getting in. Oh, I don't know, looking after their welfare and whatever and expanding rapidly. I thought to myself, "Oh jingos, I miss the field work of my job and it looks like I'm going to be office bound from here on." It really didn't appeal to me. I was stuck in four walls and two telephones and a desk full of files and I thought to myself one day, "Look, I'm going to die here. I think it best I get out." So I simply made up my mind one day. I'd always yearned to be on the land somewhere and I thought, well I'd go and buy a farm and that's how it happened.

**JD** And you bought a farm and you've been farming ever since?

**ROWELL** Well, I bought a farm. Well I bought a piece of land, put it that way. I don't think anybody who knew anything about farming would have called it a farm. It was a piece of land but my wife and I, we had three children. By this time, of course, they were school age children, they were going to various high schools and so on. We went up to this property in the sunshine coast area. There wasn't a house on it. The house I lived in in Brisbane at the time was an old house and I sold the property to a developer who wanted to put units on it. So I said, "Right, I'll have the house." So I pulled the house down and took it up and re-erected it on the farm and that was our first house we had on that property. I stayed there for the best part of twenty years on that property and grew various crops, had cattle and ended up growing turf for lawns.

At the same time, towards the end of the period, I was farming, I was approached by a private developer, would I build a golf course. So I said, "Yes, no worries. I'll build a golf course", not ever having been on a golf course in my life but I said, "Yes, sure." So I got into the development of this golf course complex. It wasn't just a golf course, it was a golf course complex. It was a tourist park area and we built that. I ended up taking that over myself and it was in one of the prettiest areas I've ever been in. That was the biggest challenge, I suppose, I've had in private life, anyway.

After doing that we decided, "Well we've done enough now, we'll go and retire." I thought, "Well I was born on an island, I'll die on an island." So we eventually lived on an island in Moreton Bay, a small island. We had three idyllic years there; lazy life-style. I still felt I was still healthy enough to want to do something more than just look at the sea all day. So I said to my wife, we decided well, "Why don't we go back on the land?" So we decided to go and buy another farm. So this is how we came to be where we are. Well, so far, I haven't been able to sort myself out yet. We've only been here a short while but it's a beautiful spot where we are as well. So we've been very fortunate. Where ever we've been, we've really had some lovely areas and lovely people.

**JD** Alright, George. Well thank you very much for talking to us.

That is the end of this interview with Mr George Rowell of Kalbar, Queensland.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with **TREVOR SETTREE**

### INTRODUCTION

Trevor Settree of Port Douglas, Queensland, comes from a well known family of east coast boat builders. He started fishing in New South Wales in fish trapping and set lining and later went into prawn trawling on the New South Wales coast, and then later still in Queensland.

After some years of prawning in the Princess Charlotte Bay area he moved to the Gulf of Carpentaria trawling from Karumba, Groote Eylandt and Weipa at various times. Later still he was a pioneer of the Torres Strait prawning industry.

He has also been much involved in the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organization and was a State Councillor. He was very prominent in the establishment of reasonable port facilities in Port Douglas through the Port Douglas Fishermen's Enterprise, of which he was Chairman.

Trevor Settree is a strong advocate of zoning and control measures to prevent over exploitation of the prawn stock. He is strongly opposed to very large trawlers and sees owner-operated vessels of about 50 feet as being most suited to a viable industry in the future.

The interview was recorded in Mr Settree's home in Port Douglas by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry on the 9th 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** Trevor, would you record your full name please?

**SETTREE** Trevor Alfred Settree.

**JD** And your date of birth?

**SETTREE** Fourth of the fourth '38 [04.04.38.]

**JD** And where were you born?



**SETTREE** Kaitaia, New Zealand.

**JD** New Zealand?

**SETTREE** Yes.

**JD** Did you spend your early years in New Zealand?

**SETTREE** Until I was four. I had Australian parents. My father was over there working in the timber industry and wharf constructor.

**JD** And at the age of four you came back?

**SETTREE** Came back to Australia.

**JD** Back to Australia, yes! Whereabouts in Australia?

**SETTREE** Huskisson.... on the south coast, Jervis Bay on the south coast of New South Wales.

**JD** You had a fishing background didn't you? Your family were in fishing?

**SETTREE** My family side of it was mostly in the boat building side of the trawler fishing industry. My father, my grandfather and my great grandfather - it goes back into the boat building side of the trawler fishing industry. During those periods my grandfather and father were involved with building their own trawler and doing a little bit of promotion themselves. They were particularly involved with the south coast fishing industry because most of the fishing vessels were built from say Newcastle to Eden - of trawlers and set line boats and trap boats and all that sort of business.

I was always involved in my own little sideline of fishing as regards our side of it, although the trawler my father had he sold out.... it must have been in the forties because they were building ships for the copra trade, pearling for New Guinea and copra trade for New Guinea, and also ships for the Army during the war. I can't really think.... ever since I was a kid I have been involved with catching a bit of fish and so on.

I served my time with my father as a shipwright after school. During this period I had a 16 footer, and when the boat building slackened off I had a 25 footer, so we used to go set lining in that. Where I got a lot of my education as regards the fishing industry was from the [unclear]. When we used to do the refits I used to leave a lot of the gear on the boat and so we used to go out with them and I set their gear, and all the set lining side of it. Also on the seine trawling, see how it worked and so then you'd pick it up yourself and have a go yourself and see how it works.

My old man had a 25 footer so that's what I started off on. Doing a bit of fishing and taking on a few fishing parties when there was no work for the yard. (I'd just started trapping on the south coast with six.... actually it wasn't, it was four traps, and I used to do a bit of that.)

**JD** [Unclear].

**SETTREE** No, bottom fish on the reefs. It was the same as what had been done on the north coast of New South Wales but it had only just come into that area on the south

coast. That was probably in the sixties. So then the 25 footer wasn't big enough for this carrying six traps and no cockpits, so then I.... There was a 32 footer work boat out of Bermagui at this sale, the engine had blown up in it so I bought the hull and put the engine together and started trapping out of Huskisson.

When I had the trap boat we used to also do set lining for yellow fin. The southern trawlers used to get the yellow fin up and seeing that's [unclear], so we started set lining for yellow fin as well. But that was a spasmodic thing really. We had the same gear as the Japs used and caught a few. But at the same time as this a friend of mine whom I'd known for years, the Innes brothers from.... well, they were from Bateman's Bay originally. They had gone to Newcastle, trawling for king prawns with the **Ajax**. The **Ajax** was originally built in Moruya as a fishing boat, but they used to do a fair bit of troll fishing and it wasn't a very big boat, only 40 foot or 45 foot or something. About 40 foot!

At one stage I left with a load of traps on and it was coincidental. [Pause]. That morning I loaded the traps up I [unclear], and that was the morning that the **Melbourne** ran the **Voyager** down and I was in the distance.... well, she was on the horizon. The helicopters were flying over to rescue them and I didn't know then. So I loaded up over ten traps, as many as I could get on the boat, and I turned to new grounds with the trawler south and from then went to Ulladulla with the boat; worked back to these grounds for a while from Ulladulla, and went from Ulladulla to Bermagui - trapping and working my way down to Bermagui.

When I was at Bermagui I blew the engine up in the boat so I went to Bermagui, put the engine in the back of the truck and went to Sydney with my engine. When I was in Sydney my friends from the **Ajax** they were working out of Newcastle, so then I went to Newcastle got a job for this engine to be fixed and I went out with them on the **Ajax** trawling for two prawns in 38 to 42 fathoms off Newcastle. Now that was really my first [unclear, bird chirping] when trawling for prawns.

So when I got the engine I took it back and put it in at Bermagui, went out and picked all my trap gear up, straight back to Huskisson. At Huskisson I built a set of barlow boards because we'd built boards for the trawlers before so that was no problem. I got a winch from Barlows in Ballina and set the 32 footer up as a trawler. And from there it was up to Newcastle. I fished out of Newcastle for a few months trawling in deep water, which is a bit [unclear] with a boat with all its trawl gear on. Then at the same time when they died off, I had the yellow fin set line gear with me so I did a bit of set lining and we set lined up towards Nelson's Bay.

Around the sixties I was.... better come back south. I said "No, there's prawns in Moreton Bay". I'd never been on the east coast north of say Newcastle by boat. So off I go to Moreton Bay with a road map.

**JD** And that was your only chart?

**SETTREE** So on our way up the coast there were trawlers working in different areas but there were trawlers working at the Clarence, they were trawling outside the river for school prawns. So I said, "Oh well, I'll stop here on my way through and see what happens." So we worked there for a little while and I went in and found where they unloaded. The only prawns were school prawns there and of a night time they used to go out and catch king prawns. So I ended up at Iluka - we were there for a few months. We worked the school prawns and then the king prawns which are night prawns, we were there for a few months.

At this time the 32 footer is getting too small, so the bigger you get the easier it is to handle things. So during this time I'd organized with my father and brother to start building a 50 footer; this would be '66. So I kept on working up there and making a few bob and when it sort of died off a bit in the pass I took the boat back first to Newcastle and then back to Jervis Bay. When I got back there they were at stem keel and frames up. So I spent a couple of years - '66, early '67 in [unclear] building the sea boat. It was a 50 footer similar to the south coast seine trawlers - flush decks, [unclear, tweeting bird] a little bit different but of course I wanted to be different, and a lot of things the old man used to do I changed a little bit because I wanted it for myself. We had a few arguments but we got through in the end.

The **Seeker** was launched in April '67. We did the final fitout in the water and by August '67 I was trawling off Newcastle. I stayed there for a little while and went to Evans Head, Ballina, trawled there for a few months. During the period I had the **Buccaneer** at Evans Head prior to the **Seeker** being built I met quite a few fishermen there and one of them was a fellow by the name of John Williamson. And when I came back with the **Seeker** Johnny Williamson wasn't there. Where he'd gone was The Gulf.... he had gone quite a way up further to trawl for banana prawns but they'd lost them. So I got a plane from Brisbane, left the boat there, got a plane from Brisbane and surprised them. There were some trawlers in there and I went down to see them and they said, "He's gone to Karumba". So I made a flight from Townsville to Karumba in an old DC3, and on that day I went prawning with him on these short trips and completely filled the boat with banana prawns, and she'd be.... I don't know what she was - she'd could be probably 60 feet - and as much prawn as I'd ever seen in my life - a complete prawn. You couldn't handle it. Very big, you couldn't handle it. So I said, "This is alright!"

So back [unclear] I went and started to bring the **Seeker** up the coast. At the time I was [unclear] on ice with the [unclear] and the fish room hadn't been completely finished. So I couldn't [unclear] until that fish room had been finished, which I did in Townsville. I worked in Townsville and Cairns to finish this fish room off to go to the Gulf. '68! I tried, we trawled up the coast - what we used to do was.... While we never trawled the east coast from say Bowen north, when I got up the coast the first place I really worked for a little while was at Bowen, catching tiger prawns there. So I worked there for a little while and then I wanted to come north - that was my intention.

So the maps that we had, charts that we eventually had, they showed that it worked out that tiger prawns seemed to lay about 10 fathoms in mud. So what I did was, I got all the charts of the east coast from Bowen north and marked off the 10 fathom patches and areas between 9 and 11 fathoms which showed mud on the charts. And when I got to the areas and took shots and found out what was there and it was alright and you'd keep on working, and go to the next one. 10 fathom in mud wasn't too bad, we didn't get many rip ups.

So then we worked our way up to Townsville, through Townsville and up to Dunk Island, and we worked out of Dunk Island for quite a few months. A certain term [unclear, bird squarking]. And then to Cairns, these patches at 10 fathoms [unclear]. But there were no trawlers, all the trawlers went straight past and went straight for the Gulf [Carpentaria] to do the bananas [prawns]. None of them really stayed on this coast, there may have been a couple of trawlers in Townsville, and there was one in Cairns or something like that, but there were no trawlers on this east coast much at all.

So when I got to Cairns they said that there had been trawlers working in Princess Charlotte Bay. So they kept that real quiet for a while and eventually I went to

Princess Charlotte Bay to trawl for tigers - still on ice. During this period we were into the seventies. I worked there for a couple of years and then I made enough money to pay off the refrigeration in '69/'70 which was done in Cairns.

That's another little interesting subject. If you want to talk about finance and government and all that side of it, which was [unclear, squarking bird]. We had to go to the banks and try and borrow money. The credit rating of the fishing industry is nil, so we had to come in as trawler operators and then our credit ratings had to be brought up from south. We had to start up a whole new financial business to get us moving. In Cairns itself there was only one receiver depot, that was the fish wharf. The prawns had to be cooked. Had to be sold in Cairns, there was only local market. There was no export processing plants at all in Cairns. The only way we could get rid of it was, as I say, is cooking it.

During this period there were a few endeavour [prawns] but mostly tigers. One of those in Cairns started to buy some of the prawns in Cairns first, and then market was started with some of the prawns in Cairns first. Then you ended up with more agents in Cairns where we could sell the prawns so that we could sell tigers at a price. Then when we went to Princess Charlotte Bay we stayed up there and unloaded to the Annan River, which is in the bottom of Princess Charlotte Bay, to one of those which used to cart the ice up from Cairns in a semi-trailer through the Marina Plains and put them in 44 drums, and take them back to Cairns for processing.

There weren't many boats working the Bay, probably ten boats out in the Bay, and as I say [unclear]. There were no mother ships on the coast then supplying any [unclear] fuel, water, anything. [Background noise, unclear].... take on fuel out of 44 drums and well water out of an old water mill, and back out again. [Unclear - background noise].

In this time other companies started to prawn - like Markwell Seafoods, and at that time there was one mothership Carbia which was fitted out for mother shipping. She was owned by two fellows from New Guinea. The intention was to make the Princess Charlotte Bay first stage and then go to the Gulf for the banana prawns in the next stage.

In those days itself, the biggest suppliers were South Seas Fishing Company and Mosteyns. They were the two. South Seas Fishing Company had an ex-tuna long liner set out with refrigeration [unclear]. There was the **Nathaniel Wilson**, that was a cargo ship, big refrigeration with [unclear]. That was from New Zealand. But at the time [unclear] they were after some boats to go with them to the Gulf to supply their ship. There were eight or ten boats, I'm not too sure now the number of boats, but anyway we went up and supplied them in that boat with banana prawns. That's after we left Princess Charlotte Bay with it, we had refrigeration on it, and up to the Gulf. And we went up to the Gulf.

There were still banana prawns worked by other vessels there, particularly in the earlier months of the year - April, May, June. I worked a couple of years in the Gulf banana prawning but it wasn't.... it was too time consuming. They had planes up and they spotted the boils, and you'd go and shoot the boils and it was all a big rat race. And then you'd wander around all day looking for prawns on the bottom, and then you'd shoot them in and then you'd have to.... And you are given thousands of pounds a shot and you have to process them and handle them. It wasn't really my cup of tea that big [unclear]. I was more interested in the tiger prawn.

So at that time Kailis had just started a processing plant up on Groote Eylandt. So they asked me to go over there and they said, "Yeah, you're welcome to go to Groote

and supply Kailis." So I did that for two years - '73, '74. I did one year out of the Gulf and then across to Groote and where most of them were the tiger prawns. There were a few odd Jap companies there prawning, unloading to motherships and sending abroad" - didn't even touch Australia.

We went back from there to Brisbane for a refit one year, and then that year back to Groote Eylandt again. Fished the Gulf a little bit for banana prawns and across to Groote for the rest of the year. And the next year from Groote Eylandt back to Bundaberg for a refit. At that time we used to work Weipa, Karumba, Groote Eylandt, back to Weipa in the latter end of the year because the tigers used to show up at Weipa in the later end of the year, and then you'd turn to come home.

During that time we used to call into T I [Thursday Island] on our way home and there were a couple of fellows there who service you for as little as maybe 35 quid. They'd just been trawling in the straits. One of these fellows was Snow Whittaker. When we went to the east coast for a refit we used to call in at Weipa at the end of the year because the tiger prawns used to show up at the end of the year. At that time Snow Whittaker was there on a tiger trawl with other boats, and Snowy Whittaker being an mackerel fisherman, it's all relevant that the mackerel often used to have tiger prawns when he was mackerel fishing in the Torres Straits. So he said "There must be [unclear]. Sure enough! At the time there was only little boat lying around, a boat with about 40 foot of paling or stakes for tigers. [Extreme background noise - unclear]. Four boats worked the Torres Straits. That would be '74, and that started the Torres Straits Trawl Fishery for prawns.

**JD** Since then it has become quite an industry.

**SETTREE** Oh, it's an industry on its own. It's a closed shop now.

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

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**SETTREE** There's a bit of a thing that comes through the mind at the moment. When I was coming up the coast and I called in to Ballina and worked there for a while, Bobby Pugues was there; and knowing Bobby from the south coast and their family through the fishing industry at Ulladulla, he asked me would I like to go to South Australia with my new boat. He had just had the **Angelica** built at Barlows and the South Australia Government had asked him to do the survey of Spencer Gulf. I had it in mind to come north so he went south and that must have been, as I say, in about June or July '67. So he must have started off the Spencer Gulf fishery in the prawning industry.

But getting back to the top end again. We worked for quite a few years in the Straits and on the east coast there, well up into the early eighties. Most of the time now is spent fishing on the east coast in Princess Charlotte Bay and Innisfail. Probably early in the eighties, the end of the seventies, the port facilities in Cairns (or when we first came to Cairns) there were no port facilities whatsoever at all. The Harbour Board didn't really want the trawlers in Cairns, they used to push them up and down the big wharf. This fellow [unclear] Isaac came along too, and he could tell you a little bit about the stories of the fight we had in Cairns to get representation for the trawlers

and to see what has eventually happened over many, many years. The industry is recognized now in Cairns as one of the major industries.

We had the same problem here in Port Douglas where I live now. I got involved with.... I was a member of QCFO, but when I came to Queensland there was no QCFO. In Queensland there was a fisheries organization, master fishermen's organizations, and there was no united body of fishermen in Queensland. They all had to get along with their own representation and we decided that there just had to be some.... well actually we were told that you will just have to pull yourselves together to get some representation. And that's where QCFO was eventually formed after a lot of internal bickering.

**JD** That's the Queensland....

**SETTREE** Commercial Fishermen's Organization. A representative of fishermen which is now a compulsory organization and you've got to pay your levies and all that just like a union, which a lot don't agree with but they agree with the outcomes. And it had to be forced onto them actually to get some representation through government of the problems within the industry because the government would not recognise individual lobby groups or individual lobbies.

There I was involved with the management and the industry as an owner operator. As an owner operator I had offers to run companies when the industry first started in North Queensland as regards a free caster and all that for companies. But I still wanted to be an owner operator because I could see that is where the major interest is actually. It has been so enlightening rather than being in a country site trawler office [? unclear] to run a fleet of trawlers.

When QCFO was formed I automatically joined and during the years I've held positions of Branch Representative, State Councillor; Branch, District and State Councillor (Queensland) for quite a few years. During this time one of our problems, as I said before, was our poor facilities. In Port Douglas there is money allocated out of government to do a harbour and a small boat trust fund of Queensland, which is levied on every small boat owner. We had no facilities here for unloading or loading, or wharfage or nothing except the old sugar terminal wharf.

So through State Council as our representative of the body of fishermen, we approached the government to do something about making a safe boat harbour here for the trawlers in Port Douglas. There were quite a few plans put forward and most of them were knocked back, and eventually an area was allocated up past the slipway for the trawlers. Then we had internal problems. The internal problems were.... some wanted it and some didn't want it. So then we had to go around and start raising money to put in power, wharfage, pontoons - whatever they wanted. So then we ended up with a division among the fishermen in the Port itself of what they wanted and what they didn't want.

So then we had to go to the Harbours and Marine and say "Now what do you want here? What?" I said, "This is what we'd like to see. Right!" So then we formed a company called the Port Douglas Fishermen's Enterprise, and I was Chairman of that company. Then we had to raise a bit of money through the fishermen; then we had to buy the piles and then subcontract the pontoon jetties, and eventually we got eight pontoon jetties in - enough for two trawlers, for sixteen trawlers. So sixteen trawlers in the bay as Port Douglas Fishermen's Enterprise which is up there now.

The other section, well they just had to go and find somewhere else because there was no public wharf facilities at all.

**JD** Trevor, can you discuss the problems that arise in the ecology in this area and the effect on fishing?

**SETTREE** Well, one of our major problems I think is the Australia's continental shelf is not big enough. We have trouble the whole of Australia. We have a bigger problem up here because although our continental shelf goes out a fair way, the only area which can be trawled economically and where the prawns are, are inside the Barrier Reef. In the Torres Straits it's different. In the Torres Straits you trawl all sorts of depths - 25 fathoms plus - and it is different bottom and a lot of prawns are on that bottom that are not on this bottom here. So we have a very small farmyard amongst the flood to keep on over exploiting.

I'm a believer in some sort of conservation as regards the industry itself. If it keeps on going as it has proven already, the more boats that are put on the ground don't produce more prawns. It has been proven, and the economy goes down; the fishermen themselves go down, so you are going to end up with a completely annihilated fishing, plus annihilated fishermen, plus annihilated fishery. The reason for fishermen to have a 50 footer is.... 50 footer! Say 45 to 55, maybe 60, no bigger! It's the economy of it, the price of it, it can be run by two people, and it is mostly owner operators that have the actual industry at heart - and they can see the viability of it.

Quite a lot of fishermen can go and buy an 80 or 90 footer, there is no reason for it. They'd sooner have two 50 footers because of the economy, the weight, the boards on the ground, the chains, the whole lot of gear. It's like a steamroller when the big company boats go through. And it takes a long time to recover. When a fleet of 50 footers go through it recovers in a very short time, that same ground. If you put a big company boat through that same ground it takes nearly a whole year to recover, or into the next year, because of the gear - it's so heavy! And what I can see too, is that bottom is mud. It's a grey, gluey mud out there. It's only thin. Underneath that is solid clay, and when you get bogged at sea you end up with clay on the boards. Now they eliminate that, you gradually eliminate that. Every time you go along it is just like silt - you eliminate a bit more and a bit more. And that's happening here now, and you find that the gear (the fishermen's gear) is a lot harder now than they ever used to fish with. They fish with harder gear because the bottom has changed.

It all gets back to economy and the survival of the fittest. There has definitely got to be some control - whether you want to call it zoning, or whether you want to call it viability. But viability is a funny thing because viability is survival of the fittest, and survival of the fittest is those that have got the most money in the bank. And that's the one who can get the most money, which is the companies. So you've got a natural fudge - you are sort of annihilating the actual fisherman owner operator by his financial position, you know. So there has got to be some sort of culling or....

One of the major problems with Queensland is something I noticed coming from New South Wales recently, is the number of speculators in the industry in Queensland. New South Wales - the majority of fishermen in New South Wales are owner operators and they work for that. Through families, to generations, to owner operators of their own business - their own fishing vessels. In Queensland they don't. In Queensland any man who can put the money up, whether he's a solicitor, doctor, lawyer, banker or pharmacist - anything! He can buy a prawn trawler and put a skipper on it. The attitude in Queensland is not to own. To the crews or coming on crews is not to own a trawler it's to run a trawler. And when you talk to the new generations they are not

interested in owning, only running a trawler; they just want to sit back behind the wheel of a big trawler as wheelhouse jockeys.

They've lost everything! They've not lost everything.... they've lost a lot. They don't know how to make gear, they don't know how the gear works, it's all done for them in a workshop. They don't know how the trawler works, they don't know how the machinery works, they don't know how the fridges work. Whereas we on a 50 footer have got to know to make the thing work. These people have got engineers, they have got fridge mechanics, they've got radar mechanics - they are all there as part of the crew. They are reaching a stage where it's not going ahead - let's put it that way. And what's making it not go ahead is the way our dollar is changing, our overseas export, the way Japan is controlling our market (which is one of our biggest buyers of prawns). It has just got to get back to.... As far as I'm concerned, I'm an owner operator, I think there should be some sort of zoning or some sort of restriction - just like a farmyard - where the men in that industry, in that area, control their industry.

As it is now the whole coast of Queensland, one of major production.... one of our major spots in this area is Moreton Bay or Murwillumbah, and they come up and down the coast when the seasons change. But what about the bloke that lives here with his family and he's got his establishment - he goes out here; one night there is one trawler, or two or three locals, the next thing there are thirty trawlers or forty trawlers. Now there is only a certain amount of prawns in that ground - set up between four trawlers they will stay there for a month. Put thirty trawlers on it and it's one or two nights. So they've got to go chasing their tail up and down the coast. And it's not the owner operators, it's mostly the ones that have financially bought trawlers and put skippers on them.

**JD** Trevor, how do you see prospects for the future in prawn trawling?

**SETTREE** The prospects for the future have already been proven by over exploiting, and that's what it amounts to - over exploiting of the area by putting more trawlers onto a small piece of ground. A lot of people think the Queensland east coast is a big yard in a set area - there's nothing out on the reef on the east coast here actually for trawling much at all. So lots of people go on and try at their own expense and try and field through this area.

What happens with the tiger prawn, he spawns in shallow water (say 5 or 6 fathoms) - the small stuff goes in to the mangroves and the creeks, it lives in the [unclear] for a year and it grows faster wherever whichway they go. When it gets into say from 9 fathom to 15 fathom, and it is most probably its most.... it stays there for quite a while, a few months. But then after a while it travels out further. During the year when they are fully grown and fully roed up they come into shallow water, and at this area here (six and a half to seven fathoms) towards the end of the year they come back.

One of our problems are the trawls that exploit these fully roed females in these shallow waters for just a short time of the year. But they have just got to in one way to do it, because of the speculator attitude of most of the trawlers. Now an owner operator fisherman won't do it. He just knows that it is not to his benefit to kill the females. But when a vessel is run by a developer or a speculator and his crew is just wheelhouse jockeys and the crew is the same - they've got no interest, only interested in the pay cheque, they will catch the small prawns and catch these roed up females. Now there has got to be something done about that in this area of up to 7 fathom, 8 fathom in those months. Now it is not needed, the amount of production that comes off it is not very much, but it would probably be safer for the next year.



The amount of area inside the Barrier Reef to trawl is only a couple of miles wide - could be three miles. Two miles wide out here anyway! So there is not much movement in the area. We start off here in 7 fathoms and work our way out through the year. So a ground will produce so many tonne of prawns with three or four trawlers for the whole year. Put thirty or forty trawlers on that, within a couple of nights that ground is completely annihilated. They don't seem to recover in that area for quite a while.

One of our greatest things up here is the weather. If we didn't have the weather we would have no industry because the weather gives the prawns time to recuperate in that week off period, or whether it is a sign of recovery, because they work day and night - the bananas and the tigers here - and the greatest proving point of that is the closing of this east coast from Tribulation north for three months of the year, which is refit time and....

**JD** [Interjection - unclear.]

**SETTREE** .... and can be proved by the amount of production. But the dominant problem as I see it is the over exporting of the reserves, and I think there should be some sort of zone - some sort of viable zoning for trawlers, whether it's Cairns, Port Douglas, Bowen - if they can work that area and know that they can get a good income out of that every year and don't have to travel up and down the coast, they don't have to worry about all these boats that come up from Brisbane and Moreton Bay every year - which is an open slather. You can have a look at the register in Cairns, probably the majority are from Moreton Bay and Moolooba.

Then they go back and do their season once they've finished with our season here, but very few of the trawlers or the residents that live in this area go back down there unless they've got a skipper on the boat that sends the boat back down for the scollops. See that's another one! For the scollops! They don't even come out of Cairns for that, back down to the scollop area.

Well, getting back to our major problem, it's definitely management. Management should be done by the people that know best about the management, and that is the owner operator fisherman. Not the developer, not the government, not the CSIRO (that's where the CSIRO gets all its information from - fishermen, not from their own work. The amount of work that they do on this east coast, that's another thing!) If they explored between the Torres Strait and the Gulf there's no exploratory tiger fishing done on the economy side of it on the east coast of Queensland. That's how good the CSIRO is! And that's where the major pretences are. So we're not getting much government help.

A fisherman and owner operator if he's been in the industry for a while, he and his family would have got themselves to a position where they own a 50 footer or two 50 footers. The reason for that is it is the most economical, it is the most viable, it is the easiest to handle, doesn't cost a lot to outlay and can be run by an owner operator. A company can't do this. A company has got to have big turnovers, big crew, bigger units of production, also big gear on the bottom - and one of the big problems out here is the big, heavy duty that these trawlers use. And they really knock the bottom about. That's been proved in the Gulf, one of the major problems in the Gulf was the trawlers and the bottom and how much damage they did.

So I think it should be back to the owner operator. He's been in the industry, he knows what the production is, he knows what the ground can stand, and I expect it should be.... I think it should be back to zones of so many boats for so many areas, and not

up and down the track chasing each other's tail (which they do - they chase each other's tail up and down the coast here) every time the weather comes on.

**JD** Well thank you very much Trevor, it has been very, very interesting to hear so much about the fishing in this part of the world. Thank you.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Edited transcript of an interview with NEIL THOMPSON

### INTRODUCTION

Neil Thompson has fished the east coast of Australia from Cape Byron in the south to Torres Strait in the north over more than twenty years. Currently his main effort is in prawn trawling but he is also interested in other types of fishing. He is a past branch chairman of the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation and State Councillor and has served on many committees involved in the industry.

He started as a deckhand on his own vessel and learned fishing from the bottom up. Health problems now prevent him from going to sea regularly and he has relinquished the positions he once held in industry organisations. However he has retained his interest in all aspects of fishing and in this interview discusses many of them from management to marketing and such things as prices, costs, pressure on stocks and the threat to fishing from onshore development, among many others.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry and was recorded by Jack Darcey in Townsville, Queensland on the 4th 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* [first few words not recorded].

*THOMPSON* Yes. My name is Victor William (Neil) Thompson. I was born in Sydney, the Royal North Shore Hospital on the 21st June, 1936.

*JD* And were you brought up in Sydney?

*THOMPSON* I was, brought up and educated in Sydney. My father had oyster farms in the Hawkesbury River as [did] two of his brothers. I think this is where the point of my involvement in the fishing industry came to be, because as a young fellow I used to do them all the time. That'd be out net fishing, oystering. One of my uncles had a trawler and we used to go to Lion Island and trawl there in a little 25 footer. That's how I started to get involved in the fishing industry.

*JD* Did you spend all your early years in Sydney?

*THOMPSON* Yes, yes I did. We lived at Hawkesbury River, Mooney and then we moved to Manly, or Harbord actually. We based our lives at Harbord for 27 years, 25 years I think it was in which time I was in the surf club. I was involved in the boats in the surf club. I was there for a while. I started my early working days as an apprentice

mechanic and I worked for John Crouch Motors in Sydney on Bristols and Austin Healy Cars. On the completion of that I entered the Army. I came out of the Army and I got away from quite a bit of things and went into automotive industry. During this period I met a fellow that I used to deal with quite a lot whose son was an otter trawlerman at the Gold Coast. As it turned out, I decided to go on holidays and when I did I came up here, right to the Gold Coast, met John and strange enough I'd met him before 'cause he used to be in the neighbouring surf club.

After I got involved in the otter trawling because there weren't many boats around at that particular time. I asked him if he was ever going to sell his boat [because] I'd buy it off him. He did sell it and I bought it. That's how I started.

**JD** So you started off with your own boat really, rather than started as a deckie and worked through?

**THOMPSON** No. I bought the boat and I got on that boat as a deckhand. I had a skipper and I towed it along like everyone else and learnt the industry from the bottom up. It took a good twelve months and then I went on my own. That's how I started.

**JD** This was trawling for prawns?

**THOMPSON** Yes.

**JD** Did you do any other trawling or other fishing beside prawning?

**THOMPSON** No. The form of trawling is the otter trawl which brings up various species, as you are aware of but, no. Basically otter trawling has been the basic principle. I'm interested in long lining and I have been for the last three or four years. I am endeavouring to pursue that issue in the next eighteen months.

**JD** That's for reef fish, is it?

**THOMPSON** No. That's for long line tuna.

**JD** Tuna, oh the yellow fin?

**THOMPSON** I've got a licence for it.

**JD** Oh, right.

**THOMPSON** But that's what I will be doing.

**JD** And are you still working your own boat or have you got a skipper on it?

**THOMPSON** No. I've just got off the boat. I just trained another skipper. I had my son on the boat for five years and we had a little altercation. I think we had the father and son situation but I used to go on the boat if he wanted a rest or a break and I'd go on then. Apart from that I used to do all the maintenance, make all the nets and all that sort of stuff. Fishing generally, I've found out over the years, and I've been in it now for, I think twenty odd years in all.... I've worked the east coast from Cape Byron to the south to Torres Straits in the north. My basic operation is generally within the vicinity of Townsville, 100 miles either way.

Fishing is, in my opinion, a job or a situation where you've either got to love it or understand it, thoroughly understand it. You've got to understand the sea because if you don't you won't succeed. I don't care who you are. It's not a five minute jump on and jump off situation. I've had people on the boat, they've become violently ill for various reasons. It could be just the smell of the bottom which sometimes can be quite vulgar, or the constant roll of the vessel. It just doesn't help them any. The people themselves have got to be a pretty hard sort of a character to muster on out there because it's not a nine to five job. It's a situation where you might leave port today. You might'n get any sleep for 48 hours or 72 hours, depending on what product's there. If there's product there, you catch it. If it's bad weather the same thing applies. You've got to ride it out. You don't become foolish. I'm not suggesting you become foolish and work extremely bad weather, but it becomes very uncomfortable out there. You've got a lot of weight underneath you. You have a responsibility of the crew and the vessel and I think all these things have got to be taken into account. Certainly it's not a job for the weak hearted. I can assure you of that.

**JD** Neil, do you fish through the cyclone period?

**THOMPSON** Yes I do. I have done. I've been in a cyclone, unfortunately. Actually I was blown here by a cyclone. I've found that here, we've had quite a few cyclones come through Townsville in the last ten years, and it doesn't really become uncomfortable out there up until about four, five hours before the cyclone is actually going past or coming towards you, or whatever. That period prior to a cyclone always appears to be good weather, for some unknown reason. It's workable weather, put it that way. So I think we get constant warnings, cyclone warnings. We keep an eye on it. I know cyclones travel very fast but we're never that far away from a safe anchorage or a reasonably safe anchorage. Yes, I've worked in cyclone warnings.

**JD** Another hazard can be shipping. Do you fish in the shipping lanes at all?

**THOMPSON** Yes.

**JD** Is it a problem?

**THOMPSON** I've never found it to be a problem ever. I do carry VHF and if a ship is on a collision course, which I plot on the radar constantly, I always give the boat a call and 99% of the time the radio operator will pick it up. As a matter of fact, I've found the big fellows very courteous. We are a restricted vessel. We've got gear on the bottom. Our manoeuvrability is very, very restricted. Well they being large, they can manoeuvre better than we can. I've seen a lot of boats working in shipping channels and I've seen the big steamers go right through the middle of them. It doesn't seem that close [laughs].

The handling of the catch has changed over the years. We used to be a wet boat, what they call a wet refrigeration boat. We've bought in wet prawns which really couldn't be over five or six days old to be [a] top marketable product. Since then, of course, we've gone into a different system where we've got dry refrigeration. I process. I grade, process, snap freeze and refrigerate all my product in cartons of twelve kilos. I think this is going to change dramatically over the years. I think the presentation of the product generally speaking has been down and has been poor but that's only because of the way in which the system has been working for this period. Bulk pack, I think's the worst thing that was ever introduced into this country, simply because everyone got paid the same price. They never got paid for quality control, they got paid for volume. I feel that this was one of our biggest downturns in the fishing industry of Australia, for Queensland especially. I handle the product that way and I sell to an

agent, a registered buyer. I get my money [and] that's the end of the story. I have a DPI vessel and that product is and can be exported overseas.

**JD** It could be exported direct from your vessel, but you choose not to do it that way?

**THOMPSON** I choose not to do it simply because I haven't got the time.

**JD** Neil, you've been prominent in fishermen's organisations in Queensland. Could you tell us something about that involvement? There are two organisations, are there not? There's the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation and then there's the Queensland Fish Management Authority. Which one were you involved with?

**THOMPSON** Well I think you've got to clarify the two points. First of all there's the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation. Through that organisation and through the Government we had a series where we had to have a controlling body, a Government controlling body which made the final decision and took it to cabinet or to the Minister. This is where the QFMA or the Queensland Fish Management Authority came into it. I do have varied views on both organisations. I have been a member of the QCFO since its inception. I've been deputy branch chairman and branch chairman here in Townsville. I became chairman and state councillor. I have been on the 26 State Council for quite some time. I was elected two years ago as a vice-president on the management committee which is a different insight into the fishing industry, personally, in the personal sense; simply because you get to understand the problems associated with trying to get a fishery in Queensland established, get the rules and regulations together, and the right channels in which to go. A fisherman is a fisherman. Don't get me wrong. He's a dead set fisherman but when you get yourself into the level of office in the QCFO, you've got to sacrifice your fishing to do that work and it's 90% voluntary. You don't get really paid for it which is wrong. I feel it is wrong because we all pay a levy and I feel that the system, as it is now, the structural system is not working as it should. I've left it. I got out of it completely.

I don't do anything at all now but I can see big problems in the industry in regards to management. We don't have a management, or we lack it, put it that way. The Fish Management Authority's supposed to be a fish management authority although it doesn't manage any fishery, it manages fishermen. It manages and controls the funding and the licensing structure, your boat licences and all the licences that are incurred throughout the fishing industry. So their function has gone the opposite way to where they've supposed to have been. Instead of coming into a Queensland fishery to manage a fishery, they're in fact managing fishermen. So that's, in my opinion, where they've gone wrong.

The QCFO, on the other hand, is a group of people dedicated a bit more. Ex-fishermen are the majority who have tried and tried and tried to get it right and they have, or they do actually bash their heads against a brick wall simply because they can't relate [to the] situation. The other problem I see with the management of the QCFO is that the east coast of Queensland is too big to manage singularly. I've always said this and I firmly believe it. You have a base in Brisbane controlling fishing in the Torres Straits, on the whole east coast of Queensland. In my opinion it should be a zoned area.

**JD** It's not zoned.

**THOMPSON** I know it's not zoned. I'm saying it should be zoned.

**JD** So it's done fishery by fishery, not by geographical zones.

**THOMPSON** Well I have established, and I think it can be easily distinguishable that up the east coast there are distinctly five different fisheries. Fish area relates to a different fishery. So in my opinion those fisheries should be zoned and managed. The way they are now means that 50 boats or 100 boats from anywhere can come boring down here into a fishery they don't understand and wreck it. There's no control. The fishery, in my book, should be managed by the effort. It's not being managed by effort at all. It's not being managed at all. So I can't be any more precise than that. If they want to fix up the Queensland fishery or fishery on the east coast of Queensland, they must manage it. That's something we don't have.

**JD** Is it because the Government doesn't listen to the fishermen through their organisation?

**THOMPSON** For as long as I can remember, zoning has always been a dirty word in fishing simply because, I think, you have certain people that want to go from one end of the coast to the next. They want the freedom there should be for east coast fishermen, for Queensland fishermen. I don't think that's what it's all about. I strongly feel that we have a resource which can be diminished. It can be depleted if it's not managed and managed now. If we want a fishery to remain viable, that fishery must be managed and we've got to be looking at it very, very quickly, in my opinion.

**JD** Who should do the managing?

**THOMPSON** Well you can have a single body, same as GBMPA.

**JD** What's GBMPA stand for?

**THOMPSON** Great Barrier Marine Park Authority. They have broken up the Reef into four stages and therefore different zones. I'm not saying that'd be the same way to go, but on the same token, you've still got to the one authority which could be the Queensland Fish Management Authority, right? Each area would be responsible for their own management.

**JD** And there would be input from fishermen or from industry and from government, presumably?

**THOMPSON** I'd say yes. It'd have to be that way.

**JD** And processing....

**THOMPSON** No one knows a fishery more than a local fisherman. The local fisherman knows this area backwards. He knows what month the tigers arrive, what month the tigers spawn, what month the bananas arrive here and if the bananas come on early, they might be too small. Right O. If it was a managed fishery, that area should be closed down until such time as the prawn becomes a marketable prawn. That's managing a fishery but we're not doing that.

**JD** Could we have a look at some of the other matters of concern in the industry. What about ecological factors: Pollution, the starfish that cause all the problem on the Reef, the destruction of mangroves and draining of wetlands. Is that of concern?

**THOMPSON** Yes it has been. It's a big concern of mine because fortunately I was on the Environment Committee of the QCFO for quite some time. I've seen some shocking things go on with [the] environment. Destruction of mangroves is one thing that

should be stopped. You see crabs walking over dry roads to get to the sea because their estuaries are being closed down and all this sort of thing. I think we've got to preserve our ecology, our mangrove system and wetlands as much as we can. Tourist companies also see the wetlands. In every country in the world where fishing is depleted is where they've ruined and wrecked their ecosystems. We should learn from them but we're not learning. We're still ripping them out at great rates. This should be curbed right down to zilch, nothing at all; left alone as is because I really firmly believe that if a development has to develop anything, it can be developed back a bit where it's not going to harm the ecology. I don't see any sense in destructing one of the biggest fisheries in the world today and put it in the status of America where they haven't got a fishery any more. That's where we're going. That's the track record, anyhow, if we continue to destruct our mangrove systems and our ecosystems.

**JD** Do you feel our fish stocks are reducing?

**THOMPSON** I don't think the fish stocks are reducing. No, I don't. What's happening is that our catching methods have improved, bearing in mind there's more vessels. So if you take 50% of the vessels out of the industry, control your fishery effort by designated gear that can be hauled, you'll come back to what the catch rate used to be years ago, but what you're doing now, you're dividing a volume of product up between twice the amount of vessels. No I don't think the fishery's declined in that regard. Certainly we don't get as many as we used to get but, as I said, we're competing with twenty or 30 more boats in the same area. Our little area off Magnetic Island, when I came here ten years or more, fifteen years ago, in [a] mail boat, we used to catch anything up to 600 tigers a night off Magnetic Island. No worries at all.

**JD** 600?

**THOMPSON** Pounds, but there'd only be two or three boats there. Now there's five to ten boats working that area constantly. It's a big difference. You take it per volume of product that comes across the board.

**JD** Neil, we seem to import a lot of fish of all sorts now in frozen form...

**THOMPSON** and prawns;

**JD** ... from overseas, and prawns. That must surely be a concern?

**THOMPSON** It is. It's a great concern in two respects. I'll take the prawn issue first. As I said to you earlier, we are importing damn near twice as much product as we are producing in this country; hence aquaculture came into it. That was going to be the shortfall. That was going to fit the bill for the import of prawns, aquaculture was going to try and shaft that downwards. So, what has happened? Instead of that.... once again, go back to the management section again. Instead of that aquaculture producing [a] product to offset the import markets which is basically the small stuff, the cocktail prawns and all the rest of it, which they can in mass numbers, they are developing these prawns now in the prawn farms to compete against our local markets. Now there's degradation straight away to the fishing effort that's been put out here.

This is where your management has gone down the tube again. Instead of managing it correctly, it's purpose was.... and bearing in mind that's what Taiwan, China.... China had, ten years ago, the same production as Australia. Today they're the biggest producers of aquaculture prawns in the world. The way they become that way is because they're exporting it to us and other countries like us. I think it's stupid. If



anyone can't see the novelty in that one, they want to really have a good look at themselves.

**JD** It's made a difference to the price that the fisherman gets for his prawns, has it?

**THOMPSON** Yes. Yeah, the price structure is down. I firmly believe this is done because of the tariff, the import tariff. If there was an import tariff imposed on incoming seafood into this country, it would give our fellows a little bit of credibility and also give them a better price structure. At the moment we've got to compete with overseas product. They're producing by the millions of tonnes. We're producing by the millions of pounds. Big difference.

**JD** When you turn to the scale fish, or wet fish, or call it what you like, it's interesting that the overseas product can be sold in Australia well under the price of the fresh product from our own fishermen. How does that happen?

**THOMPSON** Same. I'd say exactly the same way. Another point. I think even Taiwan, China (especially China), America, most of their fisheries are subsidised by the Government. We're one country who have a resource out there [which] really hasn't been tapped and yet this Government wants us to go out there at our expense and pay them a levy to go out and find the fishery; not a developed fishery, an undeveloped fishery.

**JD** I understand they can't give you a guarantee that you would get a licence to fish there if it proved successful?

**THOMPSON** That's right. If it did become successful, they've got every right to turn around then and sell it to offshore fishermen such as the Taiwanese or the Japanese or anyone else. So I don't really think that they're playing the game fair.

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

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** Neil, continuing with the matters of concern to the industry, what about recreational effort? Is that of concern to the professional fishermen?

**THOMPSON** I firmly don't believe it's a concern for the professional fishermen. I think everyone has a right to go and catch a fish. I firmly believe that. What I am against is amateur fishermen working in a professional capacity. This is one area that ought to be really cleaned right up. I think it's a common resource. It's well renowned as a common resource. Everyone throws it in your face every five minutes but we pay for the privilege to go out and fish professionally. You get the amateur fishermen that go out there and they catch hordes of fish to subsidise their fuel bill for their boat.

**JD** They sell their catch?

**THOMPSON** They sell their catch. I firmly believe this is not on. It should be curbed. There should be a limit on species of fish they catch and the amount of fish they catch.

I firmly believe too that on no account should they be allowed to sell any product whatsoever for anyone and there ought to be very stiff penalties for doing so.

**JD** Are they allowed by law to sell their product?

**THOMPSON** Yes they are. They come under a Section 35 licence which gives them the right to sell excess fish caught. There have been slight amendments to that in the last eighteen months to two years whereas that they were only supposed to unload X amount of tonne per year but that's another management area that's not policed. That's the way it goes.

**JD** Do you feel the Fisheries Branch has the resources available to it to adequately police the fisheries?

**THOMPSON** I think it was stated once, and I'm not sure who it was stated by, but they stated that if we wanted to police the fishery to the degree that it should be, it would cost something like five million a year and that was going back quite some time ago. I would suggest that would probably be ten million today. We certainly haven't the resources to do this but, the answer to your question is no. I don't think they have the facilities, nor they ever will until such time as they, as I said earlier, they break the east coast down into four or five parts because then it is more controllable. The east coast as it is is far too big, as I've said before and while it comes under that one jurisdiction, it's too large, uncontrollable. Break it down [into] little parts and you've got easier control of the situation.

**JD** Neil, could we turn to another problem and that's the question of presentation of the product. There is in some parts of Australia a tendency to label what you might call trash fish with the title barramundi, for example. Is that a matter of concern to the people in Queensland, the fishermen?

**THOMPSON** Yes it is, to the fishermen that fish exclusively for one particular species. His price structure is getting knocked to blazes simply because the import of certain species coming in are relabelled barramundi. As I said to you earlier, I addressed this to Mr Kerin in the delegation that went to Perth last year about this problem, and it is a problem. There again, it's like everything else, if you're going to import something, import it and sell it under its rightful name. Barramundi is barramundi. South African ocean perch is ocean perch. That's two species which we're speaking about. There are others but they're the main ones, but yes certainly, I think that there should be a greater control of ALL imports of ALL seafoods into this country. Once you get that straightened out, I think you've got a lot of problems straightened out.

**JD** Would you feel that we handle and present our product well?

**THOMPSON** Can I divide that into two parts? Firstly, the direct answer to your question is, no. The reason for it is acceptability. We used to produce [a] good product. We were renowned for it. The Japanese, American, Canadian, all over the world would prefer our product to anyone else. They would pay for it too because we used to present it well, look after it well and send it over but as I said to you before, they introduced bulk pack where it became a percentage of. So what they do, no one got any more for having good stuff, so all the rubbish went in anyway and they took a percentage. If there was 30% recovery or 40% recovery, whatever it may have been at the time (I forget to be quite honest), that is an acceptable situation by each country, so a bulk pack was introduced. So when bulk pack was introduced, the quality and presentation dropped. Now those countries don't want bulk pack because there's

too much waste, because aquaculture is producing [a] perfect product, the presentation is perfect.

So we've got to now.... and I think you'll find the genuine fisherman is really doing it now, to reproduce quality product; lift boxes, lift lid boxes so that they can lift the lids and see what they're buying instead of the old type carton we are currently using. This sort of stuff; view windows in small three kilo packs. They'll have to be introduced. I can see all this sort of thing coming in the near future because to survive in this industry, I feel your product has got to be very, very well presented.

**JD** Do you think we present it well enough on the local market?

**THOMPSON** I think we could do it better there too. I honestly do. I think we can do a lot better there but that really comes under the buyers strain. Now I get no more for my product. If I was a wet boat, for instance, on the local market scene and I came in and I bought in [a] perfect product, good stuff, the next fellow can come in with a not so good product. So the buyer, what he usually does or what he has done and he still does, he just tips them in with the good product, mixes them up and he gets an average. Still gets his price but the product doesn't look as good. So this is where you've got to curb that little situation. If we get those people educated, that presentation has got to be 100%, and if we had some guarantee that our product when it's brought in, is sold without any interference.... Again it comes under pure management. I firmly believe, anyway.

**JD** Well any other matters of concern that you'd like recorded on this [tape]?

**THOMPSON** Oh matters of concern, I don't really think so. I've looked at the industry long and hard for a long time. I've been associated within its structures, with its body, I've worked with other fishermen. I know that they're working damn hard and getting very little return. They're paying exorbitant fees for nets, rope [and] shackles. All the stuff we use we're paying very, very, extremely high prices for and I'm getting the price for my product. That I was getting five years ago. The thing that annoys myself and a lot of my colleagues is that when we go up the street and we look into a fish shop, we see the product that we're getting eight and nine dollars for, sold for \$22 in the shop. Now the other avenue to this is, where is the price control structure that should be in the management? Another breakdown in the management too or system again. I think, really, the Government's got to really look at the management of fishery on a broad sense and bring it in line.

**JD** For all the many concerns, would you go fishing again if you had your time again?

**THOMPSON** If I had my time again I'd stay in the Army [laughs] but, no I do love fishing. I've really given it away for medical reasons, that's full time, otherwise I'd still be on the boat full time. I love it out there and it's a very healthy and a very fresh way of life if you like that style of life. I'm not an office man, never have been to any great degree. I get very itchy feet very quickly but out there you can move from one point to another. You introduce your own system. The boat gives you a sense of power if you're on a vessel of fairly decent size, you've got crew under you. All these things come into account. No, I love fishing and I think the genuine people out there still do love fishing. I certainly don't know of any other job I'd like to do at this present time.

**JD** Good. Well good luck to you Neil and thanks very much.

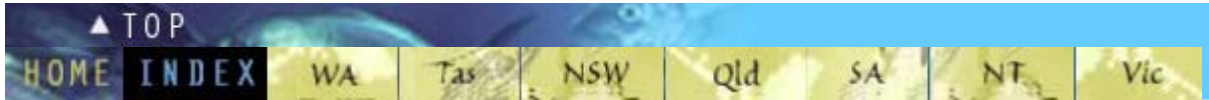
**THOMPSON** Pleasure.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Neil Thompson, of Townsville, Queensland.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with **BARRY TOWNSEND**

### INTRODUCTION

Barry Townsend has been a licensed master fisherman in Queensland for 24 years. He owns and operates a primary vessel and its attended dorys in the Great Barrier Reef and is chairman of the McKay branch of the Queensland Commercial Fishermens Organisation and a State Councillor.

He is an industry representative on the Queensland Fish Marketing Authority and serves, or has served, on many of the industry's committees. He is a Bachelor of Business.

In this interview, Barry Townsend speaks of his own sector of the fishing industry in terms of species, catching, methods, crew, markets and handling methods. He also deals with the industry organisations in which he is so heavily involved.

In the second half of the interview he tells of the problems confronting the industry. Problems such as over fishing and consequent decline in catch rates, falling prices, pressure from development of foreshores, pollution, tourism and recreational effort and the need for more vigorous enforcement of the regulations, increased research and government support, all receive attention in a most thoughtful and thought provoking interview.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian Fishing Industry and was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Townsend's home in McKay, Queensland on 1st 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

**TOWNSEND** Barry John Townsend, born McKay 22nd December, 1945. Basically came up in a rural primary industry of cattle and sugar cane. Continued on there until the late '80s: branched into the fishing industry on a net fishery basis. Consequently sold interests in sugar and cattle and bought a tourist resort: operated that for a few years. Branched out of that and went full time fishing. Since then, I've been involved in the in-shore gill net, fin fishery, mud crab fishery and the Great Barrier Reef line fishery. At this particular stage, I am basically wholly and solely in the Great Barrier Reef line fishery operating a twelve metre planing hull vessel. Employing six to seven crew per trip.

**JD** What species are you fishing for?

**TOWNSEND** On the Great Barrier Reef line fishery, we are targeting all marketable species that the Reef has to offer - predominantly coral trout. The reason for coral trout is that it produces the best return, profit wise. But by the same token, other species such as red throat emperor and coral trout mackerel are quite acceptable and do offer a good profit margin. On the off season: basically cyclone season is February, March, April we move in-shore and chase mud crab, barramundi, crudder [sp?], mullet, etc.

**JD** I think you said that you came into fishing in the late '80s. That wouldn't be correct, would it? It would be earlier than that?

**TOWNSEND** Oh yes, I myself have held a Master Fishermens' Licence for some 24 or 25 years, but on a full time scale, it is basically since about 1980.

**JD** About 1980?

**TOWNSEND** Yes.

**JD** Could you explain the operation? Do you use dory?

**TOWNSEND** On the Great Barrier Reef line fishery, yes. Like I said we have a twelve metre primary vessel from which I operate four tender vessels. They are of fibre glass construction powered mainly by a 20 horse power motor of around four metres in length. They operate from the primary vessel around the fringing reefs, over the reefs, lagoons, etc. chasing coral trout, gill fish such as red emperor, red throat emperor, mackerel and so forth.

**JD** And how many dorys would you put out?

**TOWNSEND** I would have the four dorys fishing at the same time so the primary vessel's main operation is a tender vessel/mother ship. The dorys are actually the catching vessels. We put one to two crew in the dorys depending on the experience and skill of the person in the dorys. An experienced fisherman you would have one per dory, if you have a trainee, you would have him with an experienced fisherman so at that point you would have two. But normally on our four dory situation, we have usually about six fishermen in the....

**JD** Are the crew paid according to the fish they catch?

**TOWNSEND** The crew are paid on a contract basis, so much per kilo wet weight straight over the side. The normal payment is on the quality of the fish and the return that you can get. Coral trout commands the highest price also to the fishermen. They range from about \$1.60 to \$1.80 per kilo wet weight to the fishermen. Your red throat emperor species are mixed A type fish, red emperor etc, will command about \$0.80 per kilo wet to the fishermen. Spanish mackerel, etc. around \$0.50 to \$0.60. The other species such as yellow sweet lip parrot fish, \$0.45 to \$0.50 per kilogram.

**JD** And is there any processing takes place on board the mother ship?

**TOWNSEND** There's two ways that you can do this. You can produce a whole wet product where the fish is gutted and gilled and either put in a slurry or a brine, or packed on ice and taken to the market and sold as a whole wet fresh fish, or it is

filleted packed into either three or twelve kilogram packages [unclear] snap frozen and sold as a fresh frozen product.

**JD** And where's your market?

**TOWNSEND** I market myself... I sell to one of the local wholesalers who operate in McKay - the major wholesaler being Seafresh Products - where I supply. There are three or four other reputable organisations around the town, but the operator's point of view.... This particular operator provides a unloading facility, etc. All the fish are in so consequently that's where I supply.

**JD** Is there an export market for these reefs species?

**TOWNSEND** There is an export market for it, but for some reason or other, Queensland fisherman just don't seem to have become totally involved it, like they have on the prawn species. I don't particularly know the reason why. A couple of the exercises that were done it appeared that the return would be quite good, but I think it's a situation where the home consumption demand is such that nobody has looked to the export market.

**JD** Are there many people fishing the Reef for reef fish?

**TOWNSEND** Yes, there is actually. In McKay itself, there's possibly about 40 commercial vessels operating in the Great Barrier Reef line fishery. It's not only the commercial side, there's quite a big recreational side to the fishery - charter boats, etc., so all in all it is a very popular area and the Great Barrier Reef does command a lot of attention.

**JD** Do you have any difficulty getting suitable crew?

**TOWNSEND** Crew is a major problem to industry. There does appear to be an extreme shortage of master fishermen, trainee fishermen and the masters for manning vessels as such. I don't know why. The return to anybody out there is quite good. There's quite a lot of money to be made, but people just don't seem to wish to go to sea anymore.

**JD** Are there training facilities for the crew?

**TOWNSEND** Yes there are. There's a lot of on-board training. Say for example, I've got a young fellow comes along. He wants to embark on a fishing career: he gains himself a trainee fishermen's licence. He will then go and work on a vessel under a master fisherman. The Master will provide on-board training in fisheries techniques, legislation, resource management, manning skills. Then he has the opportunity to go along to Brisbane to the training school operated by the Queensland Fishing Industry Organisation Training Committee where he can continue on and gain his Master Fisherman's certificate and his appropriate manning certificates for the vessel that he has served upon. They are two independent things: one is issued by the Marine Board which is a Manning Certificate, the other is issued by the Queensland Fishing Industry Organisation Marketing Act under the control of the Queensland Fish Management Authority.

**JD** Now you're very heavily involved in both the Commercial Fishermen's Organisation and in the Fish Management Board. Could you talk about the Fishermen's Organisation first and tell us about how they operate, and your role in it?

**TOWNSEND** Yes. The Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation is the statutory body and it is the organisation set in place to represent Queensland Master Fishermen. It had a membership of somewhere in excess of 2,700 members in Queensland and as part of the Marketing Act, every person who holds a Master Fisherman's Licence is compelled by law to be a member of the organisation. The organisation itself, is broken into four parts which is a trawl fishery, a net fishery, a line fishery and a crab fishery.

About 26 branches in the organisation through Queensland going from Carumbra in the Gulf area down to Southport in the southern end of the State. Each branch has a branch chairman, a secretary and a State councillor. The State Councillor represents the branch at the general and annual meetings of the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation. There's usually two to three of these held yearly which goes through the function and the administration of the organisation. My position here in McKay is Branch Chairman and State Councillor of the McKay branch. This lends me to basically know what the wants and needs of the local fishermen are. Also, in addition to that, I'm State Chairman of the Net Fishery of Queensland which further gives me an insight to the requirements of net fishermen in other parts of the State. Also I am on the Board of the Queensland Fish Management Authority so that also lends me to the wants and the needs of other sectors of the fishing industry as such.

**JD** In the Gulf fisheries particularly, but perhaps in other parts of Queensland, there's quite a number of companies who run vessels. Are they represented on these organisations?

**TOWNSEND** No, not as such. The Queensland Fish Management Authority itself is actually drawn from all representatives of the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation. One representative of the Queensland Sports and Recreational Fishermen, a representative of the processors, one from marketing, one from Local Authority, and two from the Queensland Fish Management Authority as such.

**JD** Are these people elected or are they appointed by government.

**TOWNSEND** They are appointed by the Minister for Primary Industries. On the establishment of the new Board last year, nominations were called by government and a short list was drawn up and presented to the Minister and the Minister made the final selection and appointment to the Board of the Fish Management Authority.

**JD** Do you think in all of this, the fishermen, or the voice of the fishermen - the actual hands-on fishermen - is heard adequately?

**TOWNSEND** It's a difficult sort of question, but a lot of it does get through and a lot of it does get lost during the process. It's not an easy exercise. A lot of the exercises cannot be thoroughly completed, through the lack of funding and resources, but all in all, yes, I think that the general feeling of fishermen is getting through.

Coming back to your question here before on the Gulf fishery.... Gulf fishery is basically a two part fishery. We have an in-shore net fishery, but there's 110 endorsed barramundi fishermen in the Gulf of Carpentaria which is called the Gulf Gill Net Fishery. So it explains itself really that the prime species being targeted are barramundi, but as the years developed and markets have developed, this is not



actually [noise] you'll find that the fishermen in this region are also targeting other species such as [unclear] king salmon, blue salmon, shark, mackerel, etc. There's also quite a large mud crab fishery in the Gulf and the in-shore fishery. Then we move out to the off-shore which is basically a prawn fishery known basically as the Northern Prawn Fishery which is quite an extensive fishery and there's quite a lot of operators in it and for this State being a really profitable fishery.

There is now, under the ACS agreement, indication that the Commonwealth is desirable of introducing a trawl fin fishery. Just exactly whether the Gulf waters can sustain this at this particular stage, is a question that at this point is unanswered.

**JD** What do those initials, ACS, stand for?

**TOWNSEND** ACS is All-shore Constitutional Settlement where the Commonwealth government will be passing administration rights and management of Commonwealth fisheries over to the State controlled departments. The Commonwealth will retain management of certain types of fisheries within the old proclaimed Commonwealth waters, mainly tuna, squid and developmental fisheries.

**JD** Barry, could we have a look at some of the problems that confront the industry?

**TOWNSEND** Yes Jack. There's several of them that you can identify. One is the resource itself and the pressure that is being exerted upon the resource, both from the recreational and commercial side alike. Everybody is out there fighting for their share of it and consequently there's got to be stringent management policies put into line to ensure that the resource still remains viable for all concerned.

The commercial sector within itself has been regulated to a certain point. Over the last couple of years there's been no additional licences let out. So we could say there hasn't been an increase in the commercial effort: it has remained constant. We know basically what the effort is through log book programmes etc. They have been introduced over the last couple of years as part of management. There's now starting to show the benefits of it, we're starting to get a handle on what volumes are being caught of different species, what areas they're coming from and getting some idea of the actual dollar value of the commercial industry. But unfortunately, from the recreational side we do not have this information as there's not a part of management [unclear] being a compulsory format, but what we do know is that the recreational effort is exploding at an extremely alarming rate. Here in McKay alone we have almost 8,000 privately registered vessels which participate in all the fisheries. A lot of them have freezers aboard; capabilities of staying off-shore for two to three weeks and these alone are causing enormous problems with the resource and we have no idea of the actual product that is being landed by these ways.

We also have the problem of the illegal fishermen. It is not known. It is been suggested, especially in the Gulf of Carpentaria, that the catch taken by illegal means would exceed that of the commercial catch. So you can gauge from that that it is a major problem. There are efforts being made to try and constrain it, but unfortunately lack of money and lack of manpower again, seems to be the major problem.

A lot of the areas that also contained in the in-shore fishery in particular, are closures to commercial fishermen while they are being heavily exploited by the recreational fishermen, or illegal fishermen, perhaps would be a better way of putting it. This is forcing commercial operators further afield: it is creating excessive cost and the general catch in itself is not there so consequently the general income has dropped to the in-shore fishermen. Some of the ones more intent on remaining in the industry

have upgraded into larger vessels, moved off-shore and are consequently now operating in the off-shore line fishery. I would say over the next five years that you'll find a massive reduction on the in-shore, possibly to a stage where it will be basically non-existent, because the pure and simple reason that it will be unfinancial and nobody will be able to remain viable in it.

The off-shore itself is experiencing problems because of the reduction in prawn catches. A lot of the prawn vessels are moving into the reef line fishery as such. They're getting movement from north and south entering into it. At this particular stage there are noticeable reductions in catch. There's also a notable reduction in size of the species that are being caught. We have problems in the weather which does contribute a major management toll I suppose. There's possibly six months of the year that you cannot operate within the fishery.

Management of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park as such, is creating a major problem for fishermen. It is seen that possibly that the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park itself is wanting to become fisheries managers. What they have really achieved in closing areas to commercial fishermen they are increasing massive pressure to the area that is left open. So consequently the toll will happen and it will happen extremely quick, but what we are finding, is while a lot of money is being spent in research and by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, there has been no indication of what stocks were actually in areas that have been closed prior to closures. We have no technical data on fisheries mortality versus natural mortality. There's still a lot of biological questions that need to be answered and need to be answered quite quickly. The resource itself is quite large out there, it can sustain a lot of pressure. Nature itself will control a lot of pressure through wind, current, tide, etc. There are vast areas that cannot be fished for quite large periods over months, regardless of whether the weather is good or not because of currents. The expanse of the Reef itself will protect quite a lot of the species, but when you force concentrated effort onto certain areas, there's no doubt that the toll will be found. But once again, I do stress the point that we have not got the biological evidence to approve or disapprove of the areas that have been closed. The knowledge is not forthcoming and so consequently, the research side is somewhat lacking.

Moving on to the in-shore fishery, in particular the barramundi. There has been quite an amount of research conducted into the species by CSIRO and Queensland Department of Primary Industries and a lot of industry funded research as well. We've had a few seminars and workshops: one being in Darwin where we have leading scientists from all over the world and Australia headed by Professor Fox - William Fox junior, from the University of Miami, where we came up with a computer model known as GXPOTS. This is designed to try and control biological fishery management. This particular stage it is on hold - it hasn't been developed any further, but this particular workshop did highlight a lot of problems in research. A lot of problems with stocks as such.

A continuation to that seminar, we have had Dr John Sellini from CSIRO conduct an intensive research programme into the genetics of barramundi. There's been a lot of knowledge gained from Dr Sellini's research and a lot of parts which should be taken on board and noted if we want to control management of these species as such. What Dr Sellini did identify in particular, there's seven different species of barramundi in Queensland and genetically each of these species are totally different. While the fish as such, look the same to any other fish, the genetic makeup is different and [unclear] breeding of these species will eventually end up with infertile stocks. This is also borne down the line through James Cook University and QDPI as well.

However, from Dr Sellini's discovery, our own Queensland Department for Primary Industry has been really involved in research into the barramundi fishery. There was an in-shore fisheries research programme headed by Dr John Russell of Queensland Department of Primary Industries and there's on-going research by Rod Garrett in Cairns. A lot of this has been put into place: we have taken a lot of it along to the Authority as such (Queensland Fish Management Authority) and management has been put into place. It is fairly obvious that a lot of this is working and hopefully the increase of stocks will increase.

We go on to other areas of research - past and present. One was the introduction of detailed log book systems to try and gain information to help manage fisheries on a broad basis. Industry itself through the Authority, is assisting in funding through licences etc. On an on-going basis, some of the fisheries that are being researched at the moment in general, would be the south east Queensland prawn fishery, the east coast prawn fishery off McKay, the scallop fishery, Princes Shark Bay prawn fishery, salmon fisheries; new projects that may be introduced as research into the Great Barrier Reef line fishery, the spanner crab fishery, turtles as such, and signatara poisoning. This is just a problem that has emerged in recent years that's hopefully receiving the funding that it should be getting and an on-going thing is that while it will not be totally eliminated, but there will be measures taken where it's not going to pose the threat to industry as it is now. So hopefully, we will get a lot of valuable information.

The people involved in QDPI are extremely reputable people, extremely well qualified scientists in their field. A sad point is that a lot of other industries are not coming forth with this sort of information that is required. We ourselves, here in Queensland do experience a problem of trying to fund this research and making the appropriate machinery such as vessels and oil available to conduct these experiments and research is a problem but hopefully we will get there. In conclusion there's still a lot of fisheries that need vast research done, particularly the mud crabs fishery and the in-shore fishery continuing of prawn stocks and the in-shore areas that over a period of time, this will be achieved, but our major problem at this stage, is acquiring the necessary funding to conduct research.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## **TAPE 1 SIDE B**

From the prawn situation: now we've got a major problem within our area with the production of prawn. There's several factors that I can see have contributed towards reduction of catches, etc.

Here in McKay, as you're fully aware, there's been a reduction in the prawn fleet and the Torres Strait fishery. A lot of the operators operating out of this port were dual endorsed, some were triple endorsed. They held Torres Strait fishing licences and they held Northern Prawn fishery licences, or Gulf of Carpentaria licences as well as East Coast. Now with the reduction by the Commonwealth of the Torres Strait fishery it has forced operators out of that fishery and back onto the east coast. There has also been a reduction in the Gulf fishery which has forced operators from that fishery back onto the east coast. On management of the northern prawn fishery they've introduced a closure to enable the tiger prawn to reach up a more marketable level.

With all these things put together, these boats have had no where to go. As a result, after the closure and after the reduction of licences they've found their way back onto

the east coast prawn fishery with a devastating result. Consequently, the resource itself on the east coast is being enormously overfished, the production is failing, and the returns are failing. This year has not produced an early wet season so consequently, our large catches of banana prawns did not occur. The tiger, king prawn and endeavouri [sp?] prawn fishery has been exploited quite considerably with the result of a lot of people going broke. It is obvious what I've seen here, out of this port, the catches have substantially reduced to an uneconomical point. The size of the prawn itself is not an acceptable prawn for market and consequently, the price generally, the trawl operator has reduced.

There has been one light in the tunnel. Fortunately, this year, we had an extremely good scallop season in the summer months, basically through the Hydrographer's Passage. Returns to operators have been extremely good. Operators have experienced good returns for the product that they have produced, but then again, that is an off-shore fishery. It is a fishery that a lot of the smaller boats are unable to participate in through currents, wind, distance from shore and difficulties experienced in the fishery through the reef areas. A lot of the bigger boats that were also engaged in the in-shore prawn fishery but once again unfortunately, the returns have not been great enough to constitute their existence here so basically they have scooped the top and moved on, leaving it rather barren and dry for the small operators.

Quite a few have got themselves into financial difficulties, quite a few more will go into financial difficulties. I think, myself, that we are progressing down the research and the biology of the animals here, but the signal is that the resource is being overfished. Now it is becoming, I would say at this point, extremely urgent that this matter be addressed. The only way to address it is to reduce the effort. So how we're going to embark on this, I don't know. We have the problem of the additional effort being thrust upon the east coast from the reduction in the NPF and the Torres Strait fishery.

We could look at a buy back situation. I don't know whether this is actually going to work. I have seen it in the NPF where money was placed into a buy back scheme but it was only for licences in limbo that were bought out so the reduction in effort was actually nil. Whether it will be a self culling exercise with people going broke, I don't know, but it is a big problem for the scientists. It is one that there is going to be no easy solution, but in the meantime the resource is being depleted further. Where it will end it is not known, but the very large and fear fact is that unless something is done rather quickly, the resource itself is going to be in extreme danger and a lot of people in the industry will go out on their back. There is no doubt whatsoever as to that. It is already happening: how much further the resource can sustain what it is being taxed is an unknown, but it cannot last for much longer under its present fishing effort.

We will also come onto the in-shore problem of the banana prawn, [unclear] and coastal fin fisheries species: barramundi, [unclear] etc. A poor wet season. We had a problem of residue, pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers. As you are probably aware, the pioneer valley is a very productive primary industry area in the areas of sugar, consequently there is a major fertilizing, major herbicides, pesticides, etc. being applied and with the high rainfall that the area does receive, we get a terrific amount of run-off which enters into the river streams, estuarines, etc., causing problems. We have milling activities and other heavy industry on our rivers and foreshores. This is creating heavy metal problems, residue problems. We have the power[?] alcohol plant in Sereena which is continually producing effluent, there is large recorded fish kills. We have been assured every time there's a breakout, the matters have been rectified, but at this particular stage, it does not seem as though this is actually happening. There have been recorded heavy metal contamination in oysters on foreshores and nearby

islands. A lot of this has not been exactly identified as to where it is coming from, but the problem does exist there.

We also have the on-going problem of the destruction of natural habitat estuarine, mangrove bush [unclear] etc. A typical example is in the Repulse Bay area where we had an area known as the Guganga Plains which is a vast area of wetland. This was an extremely good area for the breeding of barramundi itself, juvenile banana prawn, but of late, this area has been totally drained, the mangrove foreshore has been destroyed so consequently our recruitment area for this juvenile stock has gone so one can only assume that our future stocks are going to be further depleted.

As we go further the increase in pressure from tourist development etc. recreational users, is creating problems. There is more and more destruction of mangrove. It should also be noted that the important role that these coastal estuaries, mangrove colonies do play have been quoted by some of the well known academics in places such as the Australian Institute of Marine Science and the importance of the mangrove colonies on the foreshore and the development of recruitments of small crabs, baits [?] species, etc. It's been established that a lot of the [unclear] species, etc. that move out onto the Great Barrier Reef and are a food source for species of the Reef are actually recruited and grown out on the coastal estuarine. So consequently, the destruction of the mangrove and the coastal estuarine, will not only have an important part in the reduction of species on the east coast, it will also move into the Great Barrier Reef waters.

It can also be noted possibly at this point, the ever increasing explosion of recreational pressure on the fishery. We have a situation in McKay where its starting now to get towards the 8,000 privately registered pleasure boats. We have quite a large influx of tourists, where quite a few charter boats operating in the fishing charter etc. This, in itself, is creating an enormous pressure on the stocks, both coastal and off-shore.

We've had situations where boats are chartered, people go out and are basically catching as many fish as they possibly can. The catches that are caught are commercial and consequently a lot of these catches are finding their way onto the black market. This not only happens here, it happens in on the coast: a lot of the coastal estuaries are heavily netted illegally. This in turn, creates another black market problem. We have an extreme problem in this area: it's quite a vast area. It goes from St Lawrence in the south the Prosperpine in the north.

We have three fisheries patrol officers: they have an excuse for a boat - about twelve or thirteen foot long. They have one four wheel drive vehicle: they do not have the funds or the manpower and the local knowledge to fully police the area. That's an unfortunate part of life, but it does happen and it is happening and so consequently our enforcement agency through no fault of the officers concerned, is basically ineffective. We have made application through various government departments through our organisation, through the Queensland Fish Management Authority, and direct to the Minister to have an allocation of funds made available for increased policing of regulations and illegal activities, but at this particular stage, it has not been forthcoming.

...have a problem. I don't know whether you aware that Queensland is one of the few states where recreational fisherman can actually take fish for sale without being a licensed commercial fisherman. Under the Queensland Industry Organisation and Marketing Act we have what we call Section 35A of the Marketing Act where a permit can be issued which allows recreational fishermen to sell fish over and above what they require for their consumption. Like I say, it is quite ludicrous. It is being taken

and sold for money so one would assume that once fish is taken for sale you should be recognised in the category of the commercial fisherman. This does not occur in Queensland. There have been massive efforts to have this removed. It is getting strong objectives from the marketing sector and recreational sector. Unfortunately government has not seen fit to remove it. In the mud crab fishery itself, it poses a massive problem. While mud crabs cannot be sold under Section 35 there's an extremely large black market of the species. In this area it has not been brought to task and consequently, the bag limit that was placed on the species is not adequate to totally police this problem. There are problems in the legislation as such. Legislation is so loosely written that it makes it almost impossible for officers to get a conviction.

Further to the illegal sales, we also have the problem that when a conviction is gained the amount that is being added a fine to these offenders is not substantial to really curtail the activities. There's quite a lot of money to be made actually in the sale of illegal fish - fish [unclear] species and consequently the fines do not really offer the deterrent that one expects them to do so. I realise we cannot tell magistrates what they should be fining people, but I think it's a point that should be noted and taken on board by these people that these people are actually out there raping and pillaging the resource and surely somewhere along the line they must be brought to task. The message must be got over to them that the whole community as such, cannot tolerate such behaviour.

As we go down the line I'd say possibly the next thing now, would be our marketing. Marketing does tend to pose quite a major problem in several aspects. Firstly, I would say the presentation lots of times is not the standard that it should be. If we look on our frozen products, most commercial operators are extremely good: their product is snap frozen, nicely presented, interleaved and does constitute a highly sought after product that can be sold retail or wholesaled to commercial restaurants etc.

Our fresh fish problem which is one where we seem to fall down badly. A lot of the correct care in actually cleaning, handling, cooling is not done. It is not done adequately so we basically finish up with an inferior product before it actually gets to the market floor. Marketers are inclined to have it, put it straight in a box, leave it for a while, their display lots of times, leaves a lot to be desired. Presentation is not put forth to the public in a manner that will really sell the product itself. We need a lot of education in that area. Fortunately at this stage, we have a branch in the Queensland Fish Management Authority, that is Queensland Fish Promotions Branch of the Authority, where a lot of promotion is being stressed. We have highly qualified people in this area that is getting throughout Queensland, into the marketing sector and hopefully we're well on the way to addressing the problems that exist there.

Also to the fishermen, we do have the problem of imports. One particular area that is possibly ludicrous is importing shark from South Africa. This is one particular thing where it's being sold extremely cheap: we have an abundance of shark, but here we go! We have no tariff on this particular thing - it is being dumped on the Australian market. There's a lot of other things that are being dumped, so consequently the operator himself, is out there trying to compete with the cheap imports that are being lobbed on our markets.

In the [unclear] sector a lot of the high quality prawn - tiger prawn etc - are not getting onto the markets. The Australian consumer is not even being able to purchase this product. It is going direct into overseas market. We all realise we must have export, but by the same token the local consumer is getting inferior imported products dumped on its doorstep. This is also happening in other species of fish.

Overall I think the marketing sector does need to have a real good look at itself. Possibly in their approach to their presentation, what they are marketing. There is a problem between the actual catching sector, the marketing sector and the consumer as such. I have noticed through my own records, even in species such as coral trout, the price to the catching sector has decreased quite considerably in the last two to two and a half years. Going back further the price that is being received now of no major significance on an increase to what it was some four to five years ago. It still remains pretty well constant, but the price to the end user has escalated quite dramatically. This would indicate that the marketing processing sector is endeavouring to gain a major part of the money that is involved in it. A lot of the profits are not being transferred back to the catching sector as such. The profit margins that are being applied by the marketing sector are not really necessary and consequently the end user is paying a significantly high price in comparison to what the actual catching sector is.

I think you will find as time progresses, as indications are now, that a lot of the catching sector will take out marketing licences and branch into a lot of the marketing fields itself. This is sad in lots of ways. They will not have the expertise required for the marketing consequently a lot of market processors possibly will have to reduce the size of their staff etc. and consequently I think it will finish up in quite a fiasco. It is becoming very evident now that whether you want to market, catch or whatever part of the industry you want to be involved in, one must look at his finances. Finances, as you realise, are becoming harder, interests are high, production costs are high and the overall return both to the catching sector and marketing sector are being drastically reduced through these high burdens. At an overdraft rate of currently 22% it doesn't matter whether it's the catching part of the sector or the marketing part of the sector, one must have an extremely good business to be able to sustain such high interests. Unfortunately government has not taken this. Here in McKay alone, there's something like 25 to 26 million dollars generated into the income of this district through the fisheries and it's a lack of linkage of our necessary services provided.

One thing of note export earnings of seafood in Australia doubles that of sugar. This possibly something that government does not really wish to discuss. I may point out also that your loss of schemes that are available to primary producers of the sugar industry, wool industry, beef industry and all adjustment schemes, low interest schemes, things like that, are just not available to the fishing industry. The fishing industry for some reason does not seem to lend itself to these loans. One thing in particular stands out. Fishing industry is classed as a primary industry, but there is not primary producers rate on sales tax to vehicles used in the fishing industry especially on a coastal operation or a land born operation where you have four wheel drive vehicles etc. to haul boats out of water, carry nets, ice boxes, etc. They have a very short life, possibly two to three years and the rust [unclear] and they can be written off and unfortunately there is no sales tax relief to people in the industry for this type of thing which is extremely sad.

I think that if the industry is going to remain a viable industry, in our present economic climate it is very obvious that government should be endeavouring to ensure the fishing industry does remain a viable and a major part of our primary industry as it is. It is going to have to come to terms with some of the grants that it could offer to industry. Industry assistance as such and ensure that the people who are left in the industry remain viable and produce a high quality standard that is needed to contain and capture the export market that we are seeking. It seems ridiculous to me that we have an abundance of seafood in our waters and we are importing an inferior product and basically dumping it on our own consumer. I think that it's time government looked at a import tariff or some other means of constraining this and looking at a dumping effect. There are quite a few aspects of marketing I've seen where it is quite evident that

the product is only being dumped and I really feel that our departments of trade should look at this and take means to combat. We're very fortunate that we have some of the best seafood in the world and it's time we got up in marketing and catching and made this available to all Australians.

**JD** Barry, thank you very much for that. Thank you for this interview and thank you for raising so many important issues.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[added note: The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park has now identified that 70 per cent of fish taken in Queensland is taken by amateur fishermen. BT]

Disclaimer







## Verbatim transcript of an interview with VIC UGARTE

### INTRODUCTION

Vic Ugarte of Innisfail, Queensland is almost 70 years old. He started fishing when he was fourteen years of age and still spends almost six months of every year at sea fishing mainly for Spanish mackerel in northern Queensland and Torres Strait. He is the owner/operator of a unit comprising a mother ship and three dorys.

In this interview he describes his operation and some of the changes in fishing technique and in fishing technology he has seen. He also discusses pressure on the resource from both professional and recreational fishing and is a strong advocate of closure to protect the breeding grounds. He discusses many aspects of the fishing industry including the lack of supervision and lack of government support for fishermen as well as the effects of imports of overseas product and the mislabelling of fish.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry and was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Ugarte's home in Innisfail, Queensland on the 6th 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* Vic, would you record your full name, date and place of birth please.

*UGARTE* Full name is Victor Thomas Ugarte; born Innisfail, 5th November, 1921.

*JD* And have you lived all your life in this Innisfail area?

*UGARTE* I've lived all my life in Innisfail, yes.

*JD* Yes. Went to school here?

*UGARTE* Went to school here.

*JD* Yes. Were you a member of a large family or a small family?

*UGARTE* A member of about five, three girls and two boys.

*JD* Did any of the other boys go into fishing?

**UGARTE** No one, no.

**JD** Was your father a fisherman?

**UGARTE** No.

**JD** How then did you come to get into fishing in the first place?

**UGARTE** I was very interested in catching fish in the river and stuff like that when I was going to school. I knew a chap by the name of Alf Willis, who I think was one of the first fishermen here, if not the first fisherman. I used to go out with him to the reef in the school holidays, providing I got a note off my mother. He wouldn't take me otherwise. At that time there was a terrific amount of fish, a lot of fish but there was only a certain amount could be sold.

**JD** Did you fish the river as well?

**UGARTE** No, no. Never fished the river, no.

**JD** So how then.... When you left school, you carried on with this fisherman?

**UGARTE** I carried on fishing. As soon as I left school I got a job with Alf Willis at fifteen shillings a week and tucker found.

**JD** And how old were you then?

**UGARTE** Fourteen.

**JD** And you were still fishing the reef with him?

**UGARTE** That's right.

**JD** Yes. Could you tell us the operation in fishing the reef. What sort of fish were you after?

**UGARTE** A line off the bottom; cord lines, no nylon or guff[?] lines at that time. We used to fish for red emperor, coral trout and sweet-lip, the red throat sweet-lip, grays, snapper, which we used to call.... The red emperor was right, sweet-lip was [unclear] snappers, trout was coral trout, [unclear] that was a gray, and chinaman and the bass, the red bass. They've still got the same name, I think, the chinaman and the red bass which in latter years was supposed to be poisonous. We sold hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of pounds and no one ever died. The red bass at the moment has been taken off the poison list.

In the years I'd been fishing, say about eight or ten years, they decided to have a talk to the fish shops about spanish mackerel. They didn't like buying them because they knew nothing about them. So a chap by the name of Harry Cole and Alf Willis, the [unclear] here, sold a few mackerel to each fish shop, or gave it to them, I wouldn't know which, and they decided they were very good fish. So from then on mackerel's been the top seller.

**JD** Is it still the top fish?

**UGARTE** Still the top seller, yes; though [laughs] the mackerel are possibly the fish that are sold in the largest quantities. Coral trout and stuff like that, well they're luxury fish. They're for, say tourists and stuff like that.

**JD** They're more expensive to buy?

**UGARTE** Expensive types of fish. At the moment I think if you went to a shop to buy coral trout, I think you'd be paying about \$19 a kilo, whereas mackerel you'd pay \$10.00.

**JD** You then moved into the mackerel fishing, is that the case?

**UGARTE** Mixed, everything, whatever we caught. Everything went through the [unclear] those days or [were] sold whole or fillets to the public.

**JD** Can you recall the sort of prices you used to get, Vic?

**UGARTE** Well from three pence a pound to four pence, up to six pence.

**JD** And what would a fisherman be getting now for similar fish?

**UGARTE** Oh well mackerel now is average about \$6.00. Trout, coral trout are between \$11 and \$12. Sweet-lip and stuff like that which is nearly off the list now, they're fished out.... Trevally and all that stuff I suppose is about \$4.50, \$5.00 for fillets. All I'm talking about is fillets. I'm not talking about whole fish.

**JD** Are you still line fishing?

**UGARTE** Yeah I'm trawling for mackerel. That's all I fish for now, mackerel. I fish the Torres Straits and up as far as Bramble Coy which is the furthest lighthouse that Australia looks after. They only maintain, I suppose, three miles around Bramble Coy and Black Rock which is east of Daroo.

**JD** It's getting over towards New Guinea, isn't it?

**UGARTE** About 30 something miles east of Daroo, anyhow.

**JD** And you fish out of this port, Innisfail, do you?

**UGARTE** Yeah I fish out of Innisfail. I have fished out of Townsville but that's only in the mackerel season.

**JD** And how long are you at sea when you go up as far as Brambles Coy?

**UGARTE** Round about six months.

**JD** Six months?

**UGARTE** Six months; be there about the end of June and back in December, early December.

**JD** Where do you land your catch?

**UGARTE** We send it on my mother ship. We pay between 25 cents to 30 cents a kilo freight.

**JD** There's quite a fleet moves up to the north, is there?

**UGARTE** Quite a fleet, yeah; possibly twenty odd boats up there, mackerel boats; a lot more prawners. I've got a prawning licence. I have been prawning too.

**JD** Do you still prawn?

**UGARTE** Not for a little while.

**JD** Vic, has the number of boats increased very much in your years in fishing?

**UGARTE** Oh yes. Mackerel boats have increased a little bit prawners, there was no such thing as a prawner here; no such thing as a prawner here. I think the first prawner I ever saw here was Frank Boansley. He came up here with a boat and fished outside of here and made a bit of a living. Lived at Five[?] Fish Point. He only had single gear. In '65 or '66 a few boats started to come up this way and started prawning. That's when they opened the Gulf, I think, '65 or something like that. I decided I'd throw a bit of gear on and go up and chase the [unclear] of banana prawn. We caught a few but we threw just as many away as we sold because of the mother ships. The mother ships would go to Cairns and we wouldn't be able to hold them or they'd have too many so you'd have to dump them which was a waste.

**JD** Are you operating your own vessel?

**UGARTE** Yeah, always except a few years with Alf Willis when I was young. I think I had my first boat when I was about seventeen, I think.

**JD** And you'd have changed boats over the years?

**UGARTE** Well I've had a few, half a dozen or so.

**JD** What's the boat like that you've got at the moment?

**UGARTE** Oh well it's built for fishing. It's 42 feet by fourteen feet by about six foot six. A very beamy boat. It's a nice boat, a good looking boat, clean looking boat plus three motor dorys which we fish for mackerel.

**JD** How many crew do you take?

**UGARTE** Two and myself.

**JD** When you're fishing from the dorys, would all three of you go into the dorys or would someone stay on board?

**UGARTE** Oh yes, we'd all go on the dorys, yes.

**JD** What, you'd anchor the boat?

**UGARTE** Anchor the boat. It's a mother ship. It's a base. We process on the boat; all fillets.

**JD** Do you have trouble getting suitable crew?

**UGARTE** Well I've had a bloke for about 26 years and I've had other chaps for quite a few years. There's no trouble getting a crew.

**JD** Some are better than others, I suppose?

**UGARTE** Oh yes, I suppose they are but it's much the same, I think. If they're keen, they can fish. It's not the boat that gets the fish, it's the fishermen on the boat that catch the fish. If you're a good manager, you catch fish. If you're not a good manager, you don't catch fish. When you go up to fish you fish as many days as you can.

**JD** Does the weather stop you much?

**UGARTE** Weather stops a little, not a hell of a lot up there. We've fished in up to 25 knots.

**JD** Do you fish throughout the cyclone season?

**UGARTE** Not me, I don't.

**JD** Some people do?

**UGARTE** I leave here and I'm away for five and a half months, four and a half months fishing for about nineteen tonne.

**JD** And you're back in port for the cyclones?

**UGARTE** Yeah.

**JD** What bait are you using?

**UGARTE** We use other fish for bait and garfish.

**JD** Do you catch the garfish yourself?

**UGARTE** Yeah we catch them on the way up. We catch about, I suppose about two tonne, I suppose.

**JD** What and freeze them?

**UGARTE** Freeze them, yeah in baskets or trays. That does us for the season and we might have a few left over when we come home.

**JD** And are they saleable when you get home?

**UGARTE** Oh well if anyone's short, we give them to them. They're saleable, yeah.

**JD** Are the crew on a share basis, are they?

**UGARTE** Yeah on a share basis. Share the expenses; share everything; pay their own tax. That's fair. They're working for themselves. They're actually working for half of what they can catch.

**JD** So the better they are the....

**UGARTE** What they catch but we don't do it on our boat. We pool the fish and they have their share 'cause some might catch more than others.

**JD** So you take a third each?

**UGARTE** Well say there's three dorys and they catch a thousand kilos each. Well I get 1,500 and they get 500 kilos each. See they're using my dory, but they're fishing for themselves.

**JD** Vic, are there many accidents on board?

**UGARTE** Well we've had a couple and a chap lost half a finger and I got speared by a mackerel. That's all we've ever had in our boat.

**JD** Over how many years would that be?

**UGARTE** Well [laughs] over 55, 56 years.

**JD** Would that be typical of the fleet or some people wouldn't have as good a record as that?

**UGARTE** Oh I don't think. Some get drowned. Some [in] trawlers get their head chopped off or squash their heads or [the] sorting tray lid falls on their head or something by not tying it up properly or something like that, but our boat, we're pretty careful. [There's ] minor accidents like a cut with a knife but no coming home and getting stitched up or things like that. You carry on working. There's quite a few of those; small cuts and some of them fairly deep but you put up with that. What I call accidents, is [when] you've got to come home. That is an accident.

**JD** Over the years you'd have had some much better technology put on your boat wouldn't you, things like echo sounders and all that?

**UGARTE** Oh yes and over the years we've got showers and we've got [a] toilet, we've got radars, we've got echo sounders. Some boat's [have] got satellites now. Some's got coloured sounders and coloured radars. Three or four [have] radios. Well I've got four myself, anyhow on the boat. They're a big help, four radios. I haven't got [a] colour sounder. I've got radar. I've got radio, two-way radio with about 90 channels and I don't know how many [unclear] ones [unclear].

**JD** Have fishing techniques changed much?

**UGARTE** Oh, well I supposed it's changed from cord lines to nylon lines and it's changed from rope to stuff they call a geraglin or the [unclear] we make, or wogs we call them and head gear and stuff like that which we never used years ago but this was sillier then, I think, and we had a bit more freedom. The fish today, you've got to fish for them down south here. Up north they're still a bit silly up there. We don't go to much trouble. We use wire lines for mackerel up there and wogs and garfish, spinners,

jigs, stuff like that. Some days we catch a lot of fish. Some days we don't catch many at all.

**JD** Does the weather affect the fish?

**UGARTE** I don't think it affects the fish. It affect's the fisherman that's trying to catch them. [laughs] Yeah, we've tried everything. We've caught them in the rough but we've [been] pretty wet and thrown about in our little seventeen foot dorys but we seem to manage. We come home and fillet them, have something to eat, have a rest, get up, maintain our dory again and slip out around about half past four to five o'clock, come in just on dark. Sometimes we've got a good light. Sometimes we haven't. Just depends on whether the fish want to co-operate or not.

**JD** Do you feel catches are fewer, you don't get as many fish?

**UGARTE** Oh yes, definitely; definitely fewer. Fish are fewer now than they were before. Maybe they catch as much fish but there's a lot more boats; a heap more boats. Although, talking about years ago, we only had ice boxes and our capacity was around about two and a half thousand pound, about twelve hundred kilos. It was all iced fish. You couldn't stay out for long but today the boats are from say, one tonne up to seven or eight tonne capacity of fillets, you see. We can carry seven tonne ourselves.

**JD** The boats are more efficient now?

**UGARTE** They aren't any more but the fish are less. They're harder to catch. Before when you could catch them on a cord line, and go out and catch a load in a few days, that equivalent load might take you with three dorys a week or a fortnight.

**JD** Vic, could we have a look at some of the other problems that are of concern in the fishery in this area. What about management techniques, government rules and regulations?

**UGARTE** Well I don't know how they're going. I know they cost you a lot of money. It cost us \$1,800 just for our licences. I don't think that's behind it. I don't know what they're doing. They make a mess at times. [There's] a lot of red tape, I should imagine. Instead of coming up and having a yarn with the fishermen that have been fishing a long time and seeing what's going on with the fish, instead of them trying to work it out. I don't think they can work it out. When you're fishing and you catch a fish, he's finished but I think if they manage the spawn grounds, the spawning grounds and close the spawning grounds down, each spawning ground for one season as they went along.... It wouldn't hurt the boats to go to the other reef and catch fish and give the fish a chance to spawn. I would say that would solve part of the problem but you see we catch most of our fish when they're spawning.

**JD** You catch most of them when they're spawning?

**UGARTE** Most of our fish when they're spawning, yes. In September, October, November, that's when we catch our fish. The weather's better then too.

**JD** Do you think there's enough known about the fish and their [unclear]?

**UGARTE** I think they know a little bit about the fish. They tag fish. The Fisheries told me that fish tagged up at Bramble Coy, they come from up New Guinea way and the

fish around the Torres Straits, they come from around the Gulf. Very seldom they reach down the east coast; too far. The fish outside of Townsville, they've caught them down the Queensland border and into New South Wales. They've learnt a bit, I should imagine but the quantity of fish, I don't think they could have aquaculture with mackerel and restock or replenish the shoals of fish. I mean by that, they just have to close down spawning grounds and let the fish spawn. Well they're doing it for prawning. They're closing down the grounds for three or four months. Now they're doing that and stuff like that. They'd have to do something about the mackerel if they want to keep catching mackerel, I should imagine. There'll always be some; always be some.

There's some Fisheries chaps come out to my boat from Lucinda and there was some third world country, not Taiwanese, I think they were Malaysians or something like that, and they catch mackerel over there. They wanted to know how we caught them and how we processed them. This biologist, or whatever he was, he told us that there's mackerel in three parts of the ocean. I don't know if that's true or not but that's what he told us; there's mackerel in three parts of the ocean and flathead too. They haven't the knowledge of catching them I don't think. They might have now.

**JD** Vic, are the other reef fish holding up in numbers?

**UGARTE** No, no, no. The sweet-lip for a start, they're fished right out. You're lucky [if] you catch one or two. Coral trout, well when I had a smaller boat, we used to fish for mackerel in the season and [in the] slack we used to fish for trout, sweet-lip and stuff like that and hold our heads above water. I used to catch quite a few, but now you'd starve. I think that's because they're over fished by recreational fishermen. Too many boats. I don't know the number. I know there's a lot. There's hundreds, put it that way.

**JD** The take that the recreational fishermen catch makes a significant difference, you feel?

**UGARTE** Oh it has made a difference, yeah. No worries. It made a difference. It'd have to make a difference. Like they fish and the shift, shift, shift from one bomb into another. They catch the fish and what they can't eat they sell, things like that. [unclear] They cut your throat. They cut your throat anyhow [laughs]. They sell it at a lower price than we can sell it.

**JD** Vic, I've heard a comment about tinnies. What are tinnies?

**UGARTE** Tinnies are a small aluminium dinghy about twelve feet to fourteen feet that they fish out of it but they use a mother ship.

**JD** This is professional fishermen?

**UGARTE** Professional fishermen. They use a mother ship and some mother ships have up to six or eight tinnies.

**JD** It's different from the dorys that you use?

**UGARTE** Yes, different from the dorys. Dorys are wooden boats with diesel engines in them. A tinnie is a boat with an outboard. They go out on the reef and fish. Tinnies go. They run from one reef to the other and they fish every bombie and they fish when they knock off biting. They fish to another reef. Apparently they've stumped down at



the Swaines outside of MacKay and now those big mother ships with tinnies are off fishing in the Torres Straits and east coast north of Cairns. They're starting to fish that out now so I would say that in another two or three years trout will be nearly off the menu. They're only [for] rich people down to the [unclear]. We [unclear] down there but we're not rich you see.

**JD** Vic, in Queensland if you get a licence for fishing a particular species, you can go anywhere in Queensland to fish, is that right?

**UGARTE** Yes. Well my licences (I can tell you about mine, I don't know about anyone else), I've got a licence to fish for prawns. I've got a licence to fish for crabs. I've got a licence to net fish. I've got a licence to line fish for bottom fish and mackerel. The licence I haven't got is to catch [unclear - bower?] which I should have, I've caught them before but you can't catch everything at once. Then my other licence is for the Torres Straits. Not everyone's got that licence but there's quite a few with it but I've got the Torres Strait, mackerel and line fishing. That's the Torres Strait [unclear]. That's why my licences cost me \$1,800, something like that, \$1,900, anyhow.

**JD** But it means that in Queensland fishermen can move from say, the south of Queensland up north chasing....

**UGARTE** Yeah. They catch right around the Gulf to the Queensland border but they can't fish in the Torres Straits because it's a protected zone, but they can fish anywhere in Queensland with an east coast licence.

**JD** Does it mean then that when a fishery is thriving, people from all over the State descend on that fishery?

**UGARTE** That's right, especially in the Gulf. If you've got a Gulf licence for prawns not for mackerel, I'm talking about prawns now. They come from West Australia. They come from South Australia. They come from interstate, from New South Wales, they come up right along the coast and big companies up too: Kailis and there used to be Mark [unclear]. I don't think they're in it any more and Raptus and those people. I think they dominate the mackerel and their prawns. I think they dominate the prawns alright. There's lots of other private boats that catch those too and things like that. Lots of companies, I suppose that lots of rich people run and probably got skippers on them. I wouldn't know but I should imagine they would.

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

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** Vic, do you feel that government listens to what fishermen have to say about the industry?

**UGARTE** Well I don't know. I don't know that they listen. I'm not that sure that they don't. They should listen to them because I think the fisherman's more experienced than the chaps in the Government fisheries. I think they're more experienced. I think they should listen.

**JD** But do they?

**UGARTE** [laughs] As far as I know.... I don't know. I don't think so, anyhow. They might listen to some. Some of them might listen but the majority wouldn't I don't think.

**JD** Do you think the Fisheries Branch has enough people to supervise the industry satisfactorily?

**UGARTE** I don't think so, no. No I don't think they can police the industry, no. It's OK, we see them quite a bit up in the Straits. They seem to be watching that a little but the east coast is a big coast and round this area here there's a lot of dredges, pleasure boats here that go out to the reef and I don't know whether they have under size fish or they have more fish than they require for themselves or selling over the limit they're supposed to sell, I wouldn't know, but that's what they should be looking at. Stop looking at the professional fishermen so much 'cause I think they're pretty honest. There might be a few crooks but I think they're pretty honest. I think they look after the industry more so than the Government thinks.

**JD** Does the import of overseas fish worry fishermen?

**UGARTE** Well I think it would. A lot of stuff that comes from overseas, they can sell it a lot cheaper than the fish we produce but the quality is nowhere near as good as our quality because the buyers will even say that. They'll tell you that themselves but the fish shops, some of them want it because probably they can sell a fish a little cheaper than the other shop and some people'll eat anything if it's cheap.

**JD** Some people have to eat it because it's cheap, I suppose.

**UGARTE** Some people don't earn enough money, some are on the dole and if they want a feed of fish they've got to have the cheapest stuff. It does hurt the fishing industry, for sure.

**JD** There's a tendency in Australia to put names to trash fish that are good. So barramundi, for example, there's far more barramundi sold than is ever caught. Does that worry fishermen?

**UGARTE** Well I should imagine it would, if somebody's chopping up a fish that is inferior to a barramundi, inferior but they call it barramundi. Of course it'd affect the fishermen and it'd worry them. It'd worry them if that goes on. I know myself, they thought they had me trapped once. They were going down to Brisbane by train years ago. One of the shops, I won't mention names, I asked for grilled barra and I got grilled mullet. I told them so too.

**JD** Course you would know the difference but most of the community doesn't know.

**UGARTE** [unclear] I don't know every fish but I can tell a mullet and they've got that little black streak in them too. It was mullet. She admitted it. Anyhow I ate it, so I paid for mullet [laughs].

**JD** Do you think in the fish shops that the product is presented well in Australia?

**UGARTE** Oh in some, yes; some not. Some fish shops, they present their fish very well. Well not so much fish shops now, they're mostly in the supermarkets now, but

they present it pretty well, yeah, for their condition, the northern class boxes, refrigerated glass boxes. Not like the old days, you see them in the window with a few rocks and a bit of water running down the window and a bit of ice slapped around the fish and they pull them out and they put them in next day again and all this. I suppose, yes it'd be better presented today but there's a lot more in fish than people think. It's the commodity that you sell, the fisherman, sells. They've got to look after their fish. I know we come in after about two and a half to three hours fishing and we clean our fish [and] fillet them straight away. We've got to do that. I know that some, not all, some, fishermen will stay out too long. It means the product is starting to deteriorate so you haven't got a real fresh fish.

**JD** Does the fisherman get a better price if his product's in good condition?

**UGARTE** No, not really. I have got a better price for the fish while it was going 'cause they knew my fish, the coral trout and mackerel fillets. Put it this way, it used to be [an] auction system but the Fish Board used to buy mine outright. That was the Government. They knew it would sell straight away. The [unclear] Jones and a few of those used to buy my fish straight out. They'd buy it before I unloaded it; buy it off the Fish Board.

**JD** Has it been an advantage for the fishermen to see the disappearance of the Fish Board or has that been a disadvantage?

**UGARTE** Well I don't think it's made a hell of a difference. The Fish Board'd keep the prices down, that's for sure. I think they had too many working and too many not working. The old saying is, "How many working for the Fish Board - half of them!" You know what I mean? Blokes are running around doing nothing and the Fish Board wasn't making a cop. That's why they went broke. I wouldn't say [it was because of] the managers, but poor salesmanship [unclear]. Co-ops work OK. They seem to be working OK in the south.

**JD** Vic, do you feel that the industry gets enough consideration from the Government?

**UGARTE** Well for my way of thinking, I don't think so. Take this for instance, that sales tax now. I bought a new vehicle a couple of years back. I think you have to buy a vehicle [with] tonne capacity, put it that way, tonne capacity. I bought it to use it on the boat, to carry nets, carry fishing gear, load up, bring engines home and all that stuff. I tried to get sales tax off it but [to] no avail. So I think fishermen should because I know for a fact that every fishermen in Innisfail here, they've had a utility [to] use it for their boat. They've got a private car for home.

**JD** Every fisherman or every farmer, do you mean?

**UGARTE** Fisherman, I'm still talking about fishermen. It's not fair to see the farmers get sales tax off their utilities when they don't use it on the farm, or hardly use it on the farm. I'd say they'd use it for towing speed boats down to the river to go up the reef to catch fish to bogg our industry. [unclear]

**JD** Right. Vic, anything else that you'd like to have on this tape?

**UGARTE** [pause]

**JD** Vic, you're almost 70. How long are you going to continue fishing so hard as you're doing?

**UGARTE** Well I'd finish today if I had a boat that'd sell. The boat is up for sale but we've got to go through a lot of red tape with our licences, transferring licences and things like that. I think the Government should step in and help the fishermen who want to retire 'cause he's going out of the game and someone buys his boat to come in to it and he can't go and get himself a licence, although he'd been out to sea and can prove he'd been out to sea, even though it is on a pleasure boat or his own. I know for a fact that these people who are trying to buy my boat now.... I've had to get onto the Fisheries and I have to write to the Queensland Fish Management and try and get some sort of a licence to fish that boat.

I can't see why they can't get a licence to fish the boat, a licence to run the boat, a temporary licence because I don't think they're that stupid when they have a boat of their own for three or four years and go up to the reef and catch fish for their own use. I still can't see where there's a problem but all this red tape might stop me from selling that boat. So I might as well [unclear] and bury it there in the sand bank up there. I definitely want to sell the boat. There should be a little bit more help with the development back for some of these chaps too, providing that they've got a little bit of property, which these people trying to buy my boat have got ten acres of property at Cairns, or close to Cairns in a developing area and also have a house on the property. They're tradesmen, both men are tradesmen. There's two chaps going in for it. One's a carpenter and the other bloke's a tiler and they're pretty steady blokes. I think they could pay for that boat, no trouble. So I think the Government or the development bank or some such could help people like that.

**JD** When you do sell the boat, what are you going to do with yourself?

**UGARTE** Probably go to the river and catch whiting [laughter]. I don't know what I'll do. I might go for a bit of a gallop around the place.

**JD** Anyway, all the best Vic. Thanks very much for this interview.

**UGARTE** Yeah, same to you.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

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## Verbatim transcript of an interview with CECIL WATKINS

### INTRODUCTION

Cecil Watkins, commonly known as Cocky Watkins, started fishing with his father when fourteen years of age. The following year his father lost an arm in an accident and could fish no more so the fifteen year old Cocky with his thirteen year old brother as crew operated their father's 42 foot fishing boat along the Great Barrier Reef, thereby supporting the family.

In this interview Cocky Watkins tells of those years and the primitive gear and vessels of the time. Later he worked the prawning grounds of the Gulf of Carpentaria and then was engaged in charter work for various government agencies for many years which took him to virtually every reef off the Queensland coast. In his fishing days he was engaged in the mackerel and barramundi fisheries and in this interview tells a great deal about those industries. In the second part of the interview he speaks of the changes he has seen in fishing and the problems confronting present day fishermen, problems of over fishing, primitive weather, pollution and silting, decline in the fish stocks and management problems.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry and was recorded by Jack Darcey in the Watkins' home in Cardwell, Queensland on the 5th 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** Would you record your full name please.

**WATKINS** Yes, right. Cecil James Watkins. Born in Tully which is near Cardwell where I live now, where I've lived for many years in 1932.

**JD** You're commonly known as Cocky?

**WATKINS** Yeah, Cocky Watkins. That's a nickname my father gave to me when I was a kid. A lot of people think it's because Cecil Watkins and Cocky Watkins is a bit similar but it's not really. How I came to get it was there was a half mad guy here called Cocky Bennett. That was his nickname and my father always said, "Oh, Cocky Bennett". So a lot of people, when I was a kid knew me as, [and] my brothers knew me as Cocky Bennett but it's always been Cocky Watkins.

**JD** How many brothers did you have?

**WATKINS** I've got three brothers, one brother who was never involved, my eldest brother, never involved in the fishing industry because he had infantile paralysis. My other two brothers, Fisco Watkins, his proper name is Frank Watkins, and Micky Watkins, his name is Fred Watkins who has been running boats and fishing, barra fishing in the Gulf and mackerel fishing on the east coast. My other brother wasn't so much involved in the fishing industry as probably my brother, as Mickey and myself. He's done prawning for the last three or four years but he was mackerel fishing years ago too.

**JD** Your family came to this area in the early days, Cocky, didn't they?

**WATKINS** Yes. My grandfather, William Watkins, came here and started the otter running business because in the old days before the rail came here, or the road, small ships used to call to Rockingham Bay or Cardwell and he had a small lighter, a lighter ship and they used to pole it out in those days and unload cargo onto this lighter, bring them in to the jetty that was here and then they had a shed on the end of the jetty, store the cargo in there and it was distributed to people who got it up by ship. My father also went to the War when he was young, that's the First World War, and when he came back.... They were fishing before he went but when he came back he also.... My grandfather actually died when my father was at the War so naturally when they came home, they took over and did the same thing, him and his brother, William. They bought a boat called the **Bess** and had different boats. It was an oyster boat from Maryborough and they did the lightering and they also did fishing.

Fishing that they did in those days virtually was barramundi fishing mainly because there was a lot of barramundi in the area, terrific lot, and also line fishing on the reef. They used to only go out for up to three days at a time because, naturally, they didn't have very good ice boxes and the insulation was made of [unclear] bark and charcoal. So the ice never kept. They used to buy the ice here from the local butcher who made it but mainly all the barramundi fishing, my father virtually, my uncle then, William, my father bought him out. So my father, when he used to go fishing, they would go out for a few hours actually, more or less. Say, he'd go out one night, fish during the night till about eight or ten in the morning with nets and then they would bring the fish back here which went on ice and put them in the local butcher's freezer, a big freezer room.

The fish in those days were sold.... he had a contract with the Railway Refreshment Rooms at Cardwell. The trains going north and south always stayed there for lunch. So my father sold the fish to them and they used to keep it in store and that was how the fish were sold at Cardwell. He used to sell some to Ingham to a guy called Midcron. He was a Greek cafe owner. That was the days before the Fish Board came. The Fish Board came during the War period. So when the Fish Board came he used to still put the fish into the refreshment rooms where it was sold and the dockets were sent up because it had to go through the Fish Board because of percentages and certain things like that. In those days he was getting.... from memory when I first started fishing with my father at the end of the War, he was getting one and three pence a pound for mackerel. That was with the heads off and guts out.

So he then lost his arm in a motor car accident and, of course, my brother and I started fishing his boat. That was in about, I think in around about 1947, '47 it would have been. We used to go mackerel fishing. We used to bring it back into Cardwell to the refreshment rooms and when they were over stocked.... and a couple of cafes in Cardwell used to buy of us. Then we used to also, in the mackerel season if we were fishing the reefs, further towards Townsville, such as Bramble Reef or Rib Reef, we used to go into Townsville and unload our fish and then get more ice and then come

out and then probably do a trip back to Cardwell. By that time a lot of the fish would have been used by the cafes and refreshment room, the railway refreshments.

**JD** Cocky, you'd have been very young when you started working your father's boat?

**WATKINS** Yeah, well I was born in 1932 so, say 1947 would make me about fifteen.

**JD** And you were the older of the two brothers?

**WATKINS** The two of us, yes, the two brothers that fished that boat.

**JD** So a fifteen year old boy was running this vessel?

**WATKINS** Yeah and in those days we didn't know what made engines work. We had an old kerosene tractor engine, a McCormack Deering tractor engine. You started it up on petrol and then it ran for a little while and then you ran it on kerosene. We didn't have any electric lights and, put it this way, no showers. There was no stove. We had a primus. We used to sit on the floor and cook with the primus on the floor. We had no table. We sat on the ice box and whatever we ate. The cooking wasn't too good. We ate a lot of tinned stuff, I guess. So it was more primitive in those days. We had no navigation equipment at all. We had no navigation lights on this boats particularly either, nothing. So there was no anchor winch. We had to pull the anchor up by hand. It was a 42 foot boat built by Norman A. Wright called the **Ailsa**.

**JD** How far afield did you go?

**WATKINS** Oh we virtually would go from Cardwell and we used to fish, say to the reef in front of Cardwell which is approximately 30 mile. Then we would work our way down to the reefs, say Bramble Reef and we'd [unclear] there and go into Townsville.

**JD** Did you have a compass?

**WATKINS** Oh yes, we had a compass. Naturally you had to have a compass. We had a compass and a chart. Not that those days the charts had a great lot on them in places you went. They had the inner reefs marked because of the inner reef for the big ships but if you got our a little bit you just sort of had your own knowledge of what the area was. Of course it wasn't very far that we went. We only went out 34 mile, 40 mile and went along and then went into Townsville but that was only in the mackerel season we went to Townsville. In the off season we barramundi fished around Missionary Bay on Hinchinbrook Island, down in the Hinchinbrook Channel and off [unclear] in Rockingham Bay where we used to get a lot of big king salmon and barramundi.

**JD** You got the barramundi at sea?

**WATKINS** No. We got the barramundi in nets on the coast. In those days we didn't have any monofilament nets. We only had what they called seamen twine and cotton nets. Every year we used to have to get a new net and you'd have to make it yourself. You tanned it with mangrove bark. You went down to the mangroves and broke off sections of bark and also wattle bark and you had a mixture of about two parts of mangrove bark to one part of wattle. You boiled this all up in a 44 gallon drum and then you soaked the net in it as a tanning and preservative. The National Parks put us

in. They didn't like to see that going on for days. We got fined. We didn't have any outboard motors. Wherever you went, you rowed. We had no outboard motors at all.

**JD** Did you sail the boat at all?

**WATKINS** The boats that we had had an auxiliary sail on them. So whenever we were going and the wind was suitable, we always pulled the sail up as a steadying sail and also helped a bit for speed, or if we broke down also. So we always used to sail which was a good thing for us. In those days we didn't understand what engines were about.

**JD** How old was your young brother when you started?

**WATKINS** Frisco, my brother, would have been.... He would have been about, well when he started he would have been about fourteen. He's about two years younger than me, yeah, fourteen years old. 'Cause I did go with my father for a year. Then he lost his arm and, of course, he couldn't go any more. So my brother had just left school. Well actually my brother left school. He was in grade seven and he actually left school to come fishing.

**JD** To help you out?

**WATKINS** Yeah.

**JD** And you were supporting the family?

**WATKINS** Yeah. We supported the family. In those days we didn't get any money. We just went out and worked and we brought the money home for the house and all we ever got was if we went to the pictures, which was once a week, here at Cardwell. We never, ever went anywhere because there was no where to go. Put it this way, all our sort of activities revolved just around boating. On weekends when we were fishing or anything.... Each day was just another day. You never worried whether it was a weekend or anything. So we never, ever actually went away from Cardwell for holidays or nothing like that.

**JD** What happened then? You skippered this boat for the family. Then what happened?

**WATKINS** Well in about 1950 my brother and I.... Naturally the boat only had one steering wheel and only the two of us. We weren't on so our father decided that it was best, he sold the boat. He sold this particular boat called the **Ailsa** to a guy called Jud Zafer and it went crocus fishing. The boat eventually got burnt at Red Island Point up in the Gulf of Carpentaria, up near Cape York actually. So then my younger brother and I teamed up and bought a boat called **Fourth** which was built by Norman [unclear] also. We bought that [unclear] east which is the centre point. My brother and I, Micky, we fished for ten years. In the meantime we got a boat built in Cairns by Harold Collis called the **Polaris**. It was a schooner and we went fishing in that. We sold the other boat to our brother, Frisco. So from then Micky and I dissolved the partnership.

I then bought a boat.... That's right, I bought a pearling larger and was with a girl called Jenny Lott who was also fishing in the Gulf of Carpentaria. So we went fishing for about three or four years and also in mackerel fishing, mainly, all the time. I operated a bit out of Cairns but then I eventually went back to Townsville because the fishing was better down there for the mackerel season. We dissolved partnership, I forget what year, I think in 1967, I think it was, or '65, '66, something like that. I then



bought.... What did I buy then.... I bought a boat off the Harbours & Marine called the **Ursula** which I renamed the **Compass Rose**. Then I went mackerel fishing for two years with it. I worked all along the coast. Then I sold that and started building a boat called the **Sea Cock** which was a 55 foot boat which I did.... I didn't do any mackerel fishing with that boat. I did a bit of charter work and then I put prawning gear on it and then I went to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

**JD** Did you actually build the boat or did you have it built?

**WATKINS** When I say I built the boat, I got the hull built by Norm Taylor in Townsville who were boat builders. Their father was there for many years, Mat Taylor. They are out of business now because they retired. They built the hull and a friend of mine who I also employed fishing, he was a fairly good wood worker and I'm a wood worker myself (not that I'm an expert, but I do wood work). He kitted it out and built the wheel house and installed the engine and all the tanks and all that sort of stuff.

Then we went around to the Gulf of Carpentaria in 1970. I went around there prawning and I went around there for four years. Not that I stayed there for the full four years, I used to go around when the opening was on in February. Then come back in about August/September. I only used to do the banana prawning in those days. There was a lot of banana prawns there. I had refrigeration in this boat and I used to [unclear] the prawns and I sold to Markwells Fisheries in Karumba. Then I sold to a mother ship called the **Alarta**. Then I also fished to [unclear] Childane had a trawler from England called the **Southern Endeavour**. I fished for them for a couple of years too. I sold that boat and eventually went to Gladstone and my brother, Mickey, had a boat. Then he had another boat he got built and he and I were getting a boat built to go into the tourist industry in Newcastle, but they went broke. So I then went fishing with this Jenny Lott [who] had a trawler. I went back with her fishing for one year up to Bramble Cove for a season, not a year there, what they term a season which is three months.

Then I came back to Townsville and started thinking, "Well I'll have to do something about getting a boat again." So I employed a boiler maker and myself and started building a 65 foot charter boat. Mind you, what I've got to say now has got nothing to do with the fishing industry. So that's up to you. You want me to go ahead or not?

**JD** Go on, yes.

**WATKINS** Right, OK. So I took two and a half years to build this boat, which I worked on seven days a week. Then I got it going and then I was doing mainly work for AIMS. I didn't do very much tourist chartering.

**JD** What's AIMS, could I ask?

**WATKINS** Australian Institute of Marine Science and Barrier Reef Park Authority, Parks & Wildlife, I did quite a lot of work for them up in the Rangler[?] Island area which is a place where turtles are the biggest [unclear]. It's up towards the Torres Straits. I did a lot of work for them. I did work for the Department of Inland Resources, a lot of work on crown of thorns. I did work for Bob [unclear] on crown of thorns. So I [got] stuck into that game.

**JD** You were taking scientists....

**WATKINS** Taking scientists out. I didn't do the actual work. I just took the scientists to places where they wanted to go. I took them down all along the reef. I took them to

the Swains and the Torres Straits, never any further than that. That was as much as their limit was. So from there on I sold the boat and I now live at Cardwell. I've bought an old trawling lugger from Thursday Island and I am now refurbishing it at Cardwell as my hobby, I guess.

**JD** Cocky, to come back to your days in fishing, you were fishing for reef fish, I understand, and netting for barramundi and also fishing for mackerel. Could you tell us a bit about the mackerel fishing side?

**CARDWELL** Yeah, right. Mackerel fishing, when we first went mackerel fishing we used to use.... In latter years there they used what they called bowden cable. We bought a galvanised wire called bowden cable. When I first started with my father, there was no bowden cable in those days. So what they used to buy was rolls of signal wire from the 1940 War and also a rubber coated signal wire. We used to stretch it out and then run a knife blade along it and all the rubber would peel off and you had the bare wire. So we used to roll that up and use that as the wire but it never lasted like the bowden cable because it wasn't galvanised so it never lasted a great lot in salt water. You always had to be changing it, especially where you joined it or you put swivels on where it rubbed against each other when you sort of broke the outside casing of the wire.

The fishing, we had spoons but mainly used garfish. You catch garfish in the winter months behind sheltered bays and we used to virtually go so a place off Cardwell [unclear] called Groote Eylandt. We used to get tins of garfish. We used to get kerosene tins, cut the top out, then brine them with salt and put a bit of formulan with it. Then you used to store them in refrigeration so that when you went mackerel fishing at the end of the year, well you couldn't catch garfish because the garfish was gone. They would come and spawn and then they would go. We always had a stock of garfish salted. It was salted because when you had them in motor dorys.... We had motor dorys and used the big boat as a mother boat. Also the bait lasted out in the sun because you were out in the sun all day and the bait was being sold to them brined. It helped [unclear]. We used to use backing cord then, probably 100 to 150 feet of bowden cable and then about 50 to 60 feet of what you call piano wire which is actual piano wire for tuning pianos because it was a thinner wire and it was a sold wire but it was thinner. Therefore it seemed to be that the fish didn't see it as well but naturally people used different sorts of lengths of lines. Everybody had their own thing but in say, in a big boat, of say a 40 foot boat running around, you had a longer line than in a mackerel dory. Some only had up to 100 feet in mackerel dorys. It all depends on the type of day, type of fishing to everybody's tastes.

**JD** It was hand lining, was it?

**WATKINS** Yes. That was hand lining, pulled in by hand. You wore gloves. Some people wore canvas gloves but we always used.... We used to buy motor bike tubes or disused motor bike tubes, cut it in a length of about ten inches, put a hole in where your thumb was and that's all we ever, ever used for gloves. It left your fingers free to tie the garfish on with your copper wire. Some people used rubber gloves and different [things] but we always used just motor bike tube. In latter years then people for mackerel fishing started making what they term "wogs". They were like a lure made of.... people made them out of different nylons and you wrapped them on the hook and you put different little ears on and everybody had their own taste of colour. Silver oak was another good thing you could make it out of. So it went on and on to what people thought they had the best lure. The fishing virtually day, some have got hand reels. A lot of people use hand reels which we didn't have in those days. A lot of people use hand reels for winding the fishing in now. Probably, a lot that I've been

fishing in latter times, when the fish are shy the use [unclear] reels but virtually it's still a pretty primitive way of catching fish. Like nobody netted them out there and the netting, if it did take place, it would be disaster, I think, for the fishing industry, plus there'd be a lot of arguments between fishing on grounds.

The reef grounds which are virtually mackerel known areas which are from Townsville, virtually there are only the reefs off Townsville, between Townsville and say Ingham, that catch mackerel all year round, Britomart Reef, Bramble Reef, Rib Reef, John Brewer or Rock Reef, Loadstone Reef and a bit of fish at [unclear] in the early part of the river. These seem to be the only main reefs in the area of the whole Queensland coast that carry fish of great quantities for long times.

**JD** That's mackerel?

**WATKINS** Yeah, mackerel fishing. Off Cairns and that, I've fished off Cairns up there myself and further along and there were no grounds that were within the same category as these reefs bar Bramble Cay, the Whittakers and boats go to there and stay there for quite a period of time. It can only carry a certain amount of boats, not like, say Rib Reef, is only a small reef of Townsville but sometimes there was 70 or 80 fishing boats there for weeks and all catching mackerel, not every day. You catch more mackerel when what you call the dark tides are on and also when the tides are the biggest. You don't catch as many fish virtually on the real light tides or [unclear] on the reef in the mackerel season. The main tide, because you have a lot of run, the tides will have highs and therefore there's a lot of run in the water and they seem to be the best catching times.

**JD** Is that Bramble Cay that you mention, that's up in Torres Straits?

**WATKINS** Torres Straits, yeah. That's Bramble Cay and Bramble Reef is off Townsville. They're two different places. So getting back to the fishing industry such as when we were barramundi fishing, in Cardwell with the type of nets that we had that rotted also, like we didn't have the outboard motors to run around. We had to row. Also the nets lasted.... If you didn't dry them every day.... When every day you used them you had to bring them out, put them on the, we had a rack along the jetty, and we used to have to dry them because otherwise they would sweat and mould and they'll rot very, very quickly. So it was very time consuming where monofilament now, they put it in the dinghy, put a cover over it out of the sun and they don't even have to worry about it. Not only that, the monofilament catches a lot more fish, it's finer, where the old nets we had were very stiff and coarse and therefore fish also veered off them. So that's with your modern fishing techniques, the industry is just going down hill.

As a matter of fact, I was speaking to a barramundi fisherman here at Cardwell the other day and if they catch something like four or five fish for the night, they're doing quite well. When I've been with my father, we've caught up to twelve and fifteen hundred pounds for the morning and had to come home. So when you think of the days of what it was here, to what it is now, the fishing is way out. As far as I'm concerned.... They cannot actually make a living here in Cardwell net fishing. They've got to do line fishing and the whole lot to make a living. Then it's just a living too because they've got very small boats for that sort of fish. They haven't got the sophisticated gear trawlers have got or all that sort of thing. So the actual fishing industry, not the trawling industry, has deteriorated terribly over the years. In my opinion it has, anyway. We also [unclear] to note around here, you used to catch a lot of mullet, blue tail mullet. You don't see hardly a one now. The dugongs that used to frequent this bay, you'd see in the summer months, particular around September,

October when the dugong grass was at its best, and the dugongs would come here eating it, you would see twenty and 30 in a mob. I've been here for three years since I've sold my charter boat. I probably have seen no more than a handful, ten or twelve dugongs....

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

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** You were talking about the dugong.

**WATKINS** Right. The dugong came and eat the dugong grass. Well the jetty of Cardwell now goes out to past the low water mark. So you can walk out on the jetty at the lowest tides and you can see exactly what the bottom's like, whereas years ago the jetty was very short. We couldn't go right unless you walked out in the mud. I've not seen a blade of dugong grass since I've been here in the last few years. I walk out on the jetty all the time. The mud in the bay here at present in Cardwell is not as soft as it used to be. It's not as muddy, although people think it's muddy. It looks muddy too but it's not as muddy as it was years ago because, in my opinion, a lot more cultivation takes place up in the banana farming and all that and therefore the rivers are more sandier. Under your feet here it's muddy, it's more sandier and also a lot of pollution's come down from farmers and that which also, I reckon, makes it more sandier for the grass and also more poisons. In the old days there was no poisons at all. So the dugong, naturally.... Mind you, I've seen reports from different organisations [which] reckon that the dugong are still fairly fit. Well I don't know where they see them because I don't see them around here and I muck around in my boat. If you ask other people where the dugongs are; as I say, you see twenty or 30 come up in a mob. Well I say, I've only ever seen an odd one and about ten since I've been here.

**JD** They're a protected species now, aren't they?

**WATKINS** Yeah. They're a protected species now, yeah. I think natives can catch them. I don't know, I think they can.

**JD** On a native reserve.

**WATKINS** Yeah, it's only on native reserves, is it, right. Also fish like blue salmon, you used to get a lot of blue salmon here and you don't catch them any more. People fish off the local jetty. They catch an odd couple but not like it used to be. So in my opinion, the fishing industry in this particular area has deteriorated terribly.

**JD** What about reef fish, coral trout for example?

**WATKINS** Well coral trout and reef fish also, I've seen.... Well Wendy Craig (I know Wendy Craig from Barrier Park Authority) has interviewed different people in sporting clubs. Some reckon they are just as thick as they ever were but I can remember Alf [unclear] because she's been out on my charter boat. I used to go with my father when I was going to school and we used to go to Britomart Reef and we used to go out there and we would catch all the fish, about a thousand pound because that's as much as the ice box held in those days. We would catch a thousand pound of sweetlip in one

night when they were spawning in September, August, September months. We only had old, not nylon fishing lines, with lead sinkers. In those days you had old green [unclear]. You had dog strikes from the railway line for sinkers. So, in my opinion, unless you saw that sort of fishing and to see what it is now, there's just no comparison.

**JD** There'd be a lot more vessels fishing in the area now than in earlier times, wouldn't there?

**WATKINS** Yeah. Definitely there's a lot more fishing taking place, a lot more people out there fishing. A lot of professional fishermen blame amateurs and amateurs blame professionals, blah, blah, blah. The only thing is that regardless of what it is all about, the fish don't know who's catching them, whether it's a professional or an amateur, he's getting caught. So I think if there are restrictions put on amateur fishing.... The professional wants more feed back. I think in lots of cases, too which a lot of professional fishermen would be against me on saying this, but I think there's got to be some sort of more protection from professionals because it's still money to them and it's a living and even though everybody says they [unclear] for preservation and everything, but don't worry, a lot would catch them all out. They're all human beings. It's money to them.

**JD** Has much of the mangrove margins been removed in this area?

**WATKINS** Well getting back to say, when I came back here three years ago, I went for a couple of week trips with my lugger around down the Hinchinbrook Channel, into Zoe[?] Bay on the outside of the island, around Georde, Dunk and went ashore because we used to go ashore a lot when we were kids there in all sorts of places. So I went for a look around up creeks and went ashore and walked around in places. I can see no difference, myself, although National Parks tend to.... put it his way, over emphasise what the human being is doing to the places, I saw erosion taking place in Missionary Bay where no people go at all, hardly. So that's only naturally. There's a sand spit on Guild Island that's changed quite a lot but our island had changed. Dunk's changed but of course there's a lot of human activity there. So the sand pits change. Virtually for going to say, Zoe Bay, there's no difference. Admittedly there is in certain places with camping sites, there is litter which is hard to stop but virtually I don't class litter as primitive as such as poisons or anything where you can clean up. The poisons around the place, are again caught around this area. There is the Forestry Department, everybody here and it's just poured into the ocean.

They have a barramundi farm down here at the [unclear] Fisher's Creek and I saw Mr Harper when he was from TV one time, said that this barramundi farm had started up in the most carefully placed, and no pollution, blah, blah, blah. Just not very far away the Forestry had big prawn [unclear] and therefore bloody hundreds and hundreds of gallons of poison on it. So I definitely think that all these things, there's a lot of lies told about all this sort of stuff. It's going through the mangrove. Well, the mangroves in Missionary Bay are no different to when I was a kid. Naturally their mangroves that got cut down near Oyster Point over the Hinchinbrook Harbour development which went broke and there's been a lot of controversy about, but in my opinion, if they do nothing there and leave it, that the mangrove will grow back just as strong as ever but it will take a bit of time. So virtually, no, I can't see any difference about the mangroves in this area, any difference.

**JD** Cocky, you've spent virtually all your life in ships and vessels along this coast and into the Gulf. Has weather been a problem?

**WATKINS** Oh, getting back to weather, no not really. Naturally, years ago we didn't have the cyclone warning system we've got now and the radar tracking and satellite stuff and all that. Years ago people got caught in cyclones, yes because now with it all, you can tell by the swell but there were cyclones or small cyclones going by years ago and people didn't know unless there was a ship out there reporting it who was near it. Unfortunately about travelling the coast in weather, it's virtually only as good as how good a boat you've got to go. If you've got a primitive boat, well weather's a problem but if you've got a good type of boat with power and these sort of things, and navigational aids, of course, around today radar and echo sounders another thing, virtually not really a problem. Don't worry, you can still get caught. Anybody can still get caught. It doesn't matter what sort of stuff you've got, you can still get caught on the reef in the cyclone months by something springing up very quickly at night that's a bit odd that won't be reported in time.

**JD** Now you've been out of fishing yourself for some time, you've obviously kept in close touch with the industry. What's your views on the current management techniques that are employed?

**WATKINS** Well, put it this way. When I was prawning off Townsville in 1967/68 with a small boat that I had called the **Compass Rose** which I had bought from Arthur [unclear], I was only pulling one net, one old tart cotton net in those days. We used to get, working along towards Palm Island and that, those days we used to tail the prawns, take the heads off them. We used to catch something like 300, 350 pound a night. All depends on the weather. We could work blah, blah at the time of the season but they will never get that there now. As far as I am concerned, it's just over fishing that's doing it.

**JD** Cocky, how do you see the industry shaping up in the future?

**WATKINS** Well I think, say in the fishing industry, the mackerel fishermen seems to be just a certain body go there now. They seem to be making a living. Naturally there are fishermen and fishermen. There are certain fishermen who are experienced. They'd catch more fish than others that aren't. I think in the prawning industry the person who is going to survive it all better is the person who mostly owns his own boat, is paying nothing off, him and his wife, and his wife's on the boat also working as a team, and they're employing may be one deckhand. I think that type of boat in the long run is probably the most economical than the company boats and big boats (I'm talking about the east coast now) where overheads and big slipping charges and also the person who owns their own boat looks after their own boat. He does his own engine work and maintenance and he is that sort of person that doesn't have to go to yards and get expensive labour and he naturally can't do everything but there is a lot he can do. I think in the long run.... I didn't think that once. I didn't think it would have been that way once but I do now. I think that's the person who's going to survive.

**JD** That's the owner/operator type?

**WATKINS** Yes, yes.

**JD** What about yourself? What are you planning now?

**WATKINS** Well [laughs] just to prove that I'm not planning very much at all, I have this lugger actually, my own boat because boating is my hobby also. I would like to go back and do a bit of fishing, not to be in it in a real serious way but to go out and do some mackerel fishing, but to be quite honest, under the system, it's very hard for me

because although I had a licence for 27 years, under the present system of management and all this, and because my lugger is 52 foot, which is in a primitive criteria for licensing for buying a licence. I can't licence is. I have to buy a licence which I think the whole system is very wrong. It should be in the fishing industry, if the boat's a mother boat, it should be up to how many dorys it's got or how much capacity it holds, not the size. If a person wants a bit bigger boat in certain ways, for comfort, say a man and his wife employing crew, if they want a little bit of privacy and want something a little bit more for themselves, I can't see where that has anything to do with catching the fish. You can have a catamaran under certain lengths. They're lengths in this fishing industry and you can have a catamaran which is not near as long but probably four or five times the volume, and it's still acceptable.

So I think these methods have been going on and on and nobody seems to change them, such as in the prawning industry. They had a ruling on different sorts of ruling, for catching and all that to stop catching and that. Well they had a horsepower rating which is also, in my opinion, stupid. They should have a [unclear] a horsepower rating, which horsepowers can be put through different reductions and [unclear] and the same horsepower in one engine can give two or three times the thrust power if it's utilised through different reductions and [unclear] nozzles. So it should have been [unclear] for, in my opinion. So a lot of their things that, these people make the rules and I don't think there's a lot of common sense put into it.

**JD** When you say had to buy a licence, or would have to buy a licence, is that buy it from another fisherman?

**WATKINS** Yeah. I would have to buy.... There are licences people have that have got them and they're what they call in limbo where I would have to buy one off a boat that was sunk or burnt or got out of the industry. Even for me to get a fishing licence, I don't exactly know what it is now, but I've got to go to school again and learn to be a fisherman. They can teach you a lot of things at these schools but they still don't teach you how to catch fish. If you go to the grounds, everybody can be taught a thing at a school, but there's always certain people out there who will catch more fish than others. At my age in life, I'm 58 years in September and for me to go down to college or go to some college, even though I've been onto nearly.... I haven't been on every reef on the Barrier Reef but I've been on 99% of them doing work for these government organisations everywhere. So to me it just sounds pretty futile.

**JD** What would you expect to have to pay for a licence for, say, mackerel fishing?

**WATKINS** Well, put it this way. Because this present boat I've got is 52 feet, it's a primitive thing. I think it goes to fifty metres, it's not too primitive but from then over there's not too many of those licences around. Well licences are coming down because more people are getting out of the fishing industry, I think. So it all depends on supply and demand at the time.

**JD** Anyway, whatever happens, the best of luck with it and thanks very much for this interview.

**WATKINS** Yes, but that's my opinion. I wouldn't like to think I had a son to go fishing. Honestly I wouldn't. When I see what's happened over, even in this little area, over the time, it's crook. You know, once here you'd go down fishing on the wharf and you'd get bloody sharks, about this long. You would try to catch salmon or something and there'd be bloody sharks; shark, shark. You'd pull them in and you'd bash them on

the head and catfish. Now [unclear] catch a bloody shark of the jetty even. So it's just gone and gone and gone. People don't realise it until you see it.

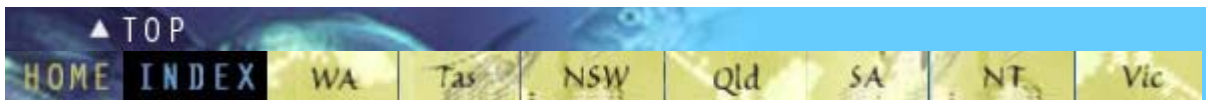
**JD** Thanks anyway.

That is the end of this interview with Cocky Watkins of Cardwell, Queensland.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer







## Verbatim transcript of an interview with BOB WICKS

### INTRODUCTION

The Wicks family is a very large and very prominent family in fishing in Queensland. When he was thirteen years of age Bob Wicks started fishing with his father in the Clarence River. Since then he has fished in many Queensland fisheries as well as in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

In this interview he tell of his experience in those fisheries and also speaks of many of the problems confronting fishermen. Problems of pollution and depletion of stock resulting from the clearing of tidal mangroves and the damming of rivers are discussed as are management problems and the need to restrict effort. He also records his views on buy back schemes, developmental licences, foreign incursions into Australian fisheries and the Queensland ban on fish trawling, among many other matters of concern in the industry.

In this interview Bob Wicks makes a significant contribution to Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry. The interview was recorded in Mooloolaba, Queensland by Jack Darcey on the 24th April, 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* Bob, would you record your full name please.

*WICKS* Robert William Wicks, born 1935 at Ballina New South Wales.

*JD* And did you live your early life in Ballina?

*WICKS* Oh we lived on the Richmond River up at Woodburn. I think I might have been around about five years old [when] the family moved to the Clarence River and that's where we grew up, on the Clarence River.

*JD* Your family, they're a very well known family in the fishing industry.

*WICKS* Yeah, well known and very large, quite a lot. I wouldn't like to put a number that's in the fishing industry at the moment but there's quite large families. Most of the sons of my uncles and my father have taken up the fishing. It is a large family.

*JD* When did the family first come to Australia, roughly?

**WICKS** Oh dear, it would have been back in the convict days when they settled down in Sydney, somewhere around Ryde, we are led to believe.

**JD** Was that your grandparents or your great grandparents?

**WICKS** Oh no, the great, great, great; we go way back, right back. They settled somewhere around Ryde. They were given a heap of land there and they were settlers but we didn't come into the fishing industry until my father [who] was the first of the fishermen. All the family before that [were] farmers and he ran away from home, I'd suppose you'd call it in those days, when he was fifteen which was a big thing to do I think, at the age of fifteen. He went down to Ballina, although actually the family was living up from Ballina somewhere there around Austinville, at the time on a farm. He came down to Ballina and wanted to go fishing. So he got a bit of net and started fishing.

**JD** That was in the estuary there, was it?

**WICKS** In the estuaries, yeah, in the Richmond River fishing for mullet and scooping prawns and selling them at the pubs. He used to take a can of cooked prawns into the pub and sell them for six pence or whatever he could get for them and that's how he started.

**JD** Your father had a very large family, Bob, didn't he?

**WICKS** Yes. I'm one of ten. Five brothers I had and four sisters so it was pretty hard, I suppose, for him. He worked mostly on the Richmond River in the early years. I know, I've been told when my elder brother and myself were babies, my mum and dad used to take us out fishing with them in the boat in baskets. I think it's pretty true because it's been handed down all our lives. Yes, he had a pretty tough time way back when they had to barter fish for vegetables and it wasn't always like it is now. You couldn't make an appointment with the Japanese to sell your product. You had to sell it locally and money wasn't always available. So you had to swap a big jewfish for a cabbage or something or whatever was available at the time.

**JD** Bob, did your mother work with your father?

**WICKS** For a while because she was too busy having babies, I think [laughs].

**JD** And looking after them?

**WICKS** And looking after them. So yes she worked with him. She fixed the nets when she wasn't able to go to sea, oh out in the rivers, it wasn't to sea. I get the habit of saying "going to sea". Anyway she fixed the nets and helped with that kind of thing on shore.

**JD** Your father's brothers also went into fishing?

**WICKS** Yeah. After a few years they gave the farms away and came down. Basically they started when the prawning.... It was later on when they came down and went prawning but that was a long while later. We left the Richmond River and went over to the Clarence River to live. We went to school on the Clarence River at a little place called Cowper which is up the river. I think it's around about 26 mile up the river from Yamba and went fishing for mullet. As I grew up we used to go out with my dad at night time. Fishing for mullet at night time was a pretty hard job. You'd fish up to

midnight and then set the net out and leave it for the rest of the night and go and have a bit of sleep but it didn't do my school days much good [laughs]. Teachers often had to wake me up [when I was] asleep at school. So when I reached thirteen my dad wanted me to go fishing with him full time so there was agreement made that I leave school and go and help him. So that's what we did.

**JD** What about your five brothers, did they go fishing?

**WICKS** They were growing up still. One brother, my elder brother, he was away. He wasn't real happy with fishing at the time with the net fishing but when we started prawning, which was only down the track a few years, he came back prawning and is still fishing for prawns up in Cairns. He stayed at it once he got back at it and got committed [laughs] but the other brother, Les, the younger brother to me and then Kevin and Ken, the twin brothers and Butch, who is the youngest, they're all still fishing. Les is not, sorry. He gave it away because of health but there were all in the fishing and my dad's brothers, they came into the prawning mainly, then came to Moreton Bay. They started at Ballina fishing there and then moved on to Moreton Bay when things moved up there. They all came together and we were still at the Clarence River at that time. My two twin brothers were still going to school. We moved up to Moreton Bay as well and started fishing out of Moreton Bay.

**JD** Did you have cousins as well that came into fishing?

**WICKS** Yeah. There was quite a, well some of them gave it away. There was cousins on my dad's sister's side but they came into it for a while and gave it away. Dad's brothers, there was, I think, five brothers, went prawning and fishing. They're all still, well some of them are too old now. They've given it away but they own boats and their sons are working them. All their sons are still fishing and most of them are still doing it one way or another. One of my cousins is making nets full time. He gave the fishing away and went net making so he's still involved in the fishing industry. That's it.

**JD** You also have a son in fishing, don't you?

**WICKS** Oh I have two sons fishing at the moment. One of my sons is running the big boat we've got at the moment, fishing for whiting. My younger son, he wanted to do it on his own so he's got two boats of his own. Of course he's working up north at the moment. He's up on the prawns in Torres Straits. I expect if they have sons, well he's got one son, I expect they'll be fishing too [laughs].

**JD** What about your nephews? Did your brothers' sons go into the fishing?

**WICKS** Vince's son is fishing. Les's sons didn't do any.... or Vince has only got one son so he's fishing. Ken's sons are both fishing and Butch, of course his son.... No, I don't know where they are. They're not fishing. I've got to think here [laughs]. Irene's sons are fishing, that's my sister's sons, they're fishing. That's about it. There's Kevi's son.... no, he won't be fishing. [laughs] He got sea sick so he doesn't go out. He decided that's enough. He loves it but the sea doesn't like him. Les's sons never fished. That's about all. Yes, I've just about covered them all.

**JD** Are they all in Queensland still?

**WICKS** Yes. They're all in Queensland.

**JD** They would represent a pretty large sort of percentage of the Queensland fishermen, wouldn't they, as a total family?

**WICKS** Yeah. When we look at Alf's son, Michael, (that's my dad's brother) Alf and Frank are twins and Frank's got.... I think he's got three, four sons fishing and Alf's got the one. Les's son, Brian, he's net making. Then there's my sons and Vince's son, Kenny's two sons are fishing. Yeah they make up a pretty fair percentage of it for one family.

**JD** To come back to your own career in fishing, could you outline it? What did you do? After you started with your father in the mullet and the prawns in the river, what did you do then?

**WICKS** Well we came from the Clarence because we were booted out basically by the fishermen. We were trawling for prawns. We were the first trawlers. I know I've got to go back on that because Jack Ebling was the first prawn fisherman on the Clarence River. He started catching for bait. That's how we got on to prawning 'cause Jack, we got to know him pretty well and Vince and I took his boat out. We were only young and we were on his boat for a little while and me being, I don't know whether I was a go ahead or what, but I wanted to catch prawns. I took his net off on the weekends and copied his net and we went prawning ourselves then. That was when we started prawning but after that we moved up to the.... We got kicked out of the Clarence River because they reckoned we were disturbing the fish and gave 100 reasons why it should be closed to prawning, so that's what they did. In the end the Government decided that it wasn't worth sacrificing the industry for one family. So they stopped prawning in the Clarence River.

We came up to Moreton Bay then. With dad's other brothers being in Moreton Bay at that time, we knew what the possibilities were there. So we packed up and shipped off to Moreton Bay only to hear two years later that all the excuses they gave for closing the Clarence River, they denied them all and got the river opened again. That's been going on in history in the fishing industry and it's still going on today. Even in the fishery I'm in at the moment, it's still going on.

**JD** After you came then to Moreton Bay for the prawning, what happened?

**WICKS** Well we had one boat then, which we built ourselves. It was called **Seaspray**. We built it in our own back yard down in the Clarence River and brought it up to Moreton Bay. It was a big boat, we thought, then. It was only 32 feet, had 130 horsepower engine drive [laughs].

**JD** That was your father and the boys?

**WICKS** Built the boat, yeah.

**JD** What sort of timber did you use, Bob?

**WICKS** We used spotted gum, mainly and [an] ironbark keel but the spotted gum were the best because it was the easiest to bend, hard timber and we thought it was the best because it was the easiest to get, anyway. Also it was the best to bend. You could bend it into shape a lot easier than most others. So we came up with the **Seaspray** then and my dad didn't move at the time. He came up with us for a little while and left Vince and I on the boat. We operated that boat. He went back and said he'll build another one because we were doing quite well, you know, or we thought we

were. He went back and finished another boat at the Clarence and launched it and then I ran that boat then myself, and Vince ran the other one.

**JD** Up at Moreton Bay?

**WICKS** At Moreton Bay. We brought that one straight up to Moreton Bay. That's where we started basically making a little bit of a go of it. As the years went by we built another boat at Redcliffe. By that time the family had all moved up to Redcliffe Peninsula and we built several boats there, sold the others and built bigger boats up to 55 foot and started moving to the outside grounds outside Moreton Bay fishing for king prawns, starting off in the shallow waters twenty to 25 fathoms out of Southport and Caloundra and Mooloolaba, Tin Can Bay and finally found the grounds in the deep water, 60 - 80, 100 fathoms off Cape Moreton. She's been a good ground ever since. It's still carrying a lot of fishermen but over the years we did OK but we weren't satisfied with that.

We wanted to move further up the coast so we moved up to Bundaberg for a little while [and] fished there. We decided that wasn't where we wanted to stay in those areas so we had bigger and better boats. At that time we started putting refrigeration on our boats. So we moved up around Cairns and did one season in Princess Charlotte Bay which is, well to the north of Cairns up on the Peninsula and decided on the following year.... We were given an opportunity to go to the Gulf of Carpentaria to Darwin and that area for a company, Tipperary Land Corporation. They wanted us to fish there and we took that opportunity and went and did the whole year in the Gulf and around Darwin, right around to the Ord River.

**JD** Was that fishing to a mother ship or....

**WICKS** Some of the time, yeah and some time we were taking it back to Darwin because we were dry freezing it and they were able to keep it on board. Even though our boats weren't big enough to hold the amount of prawn we were catching, we weren't getting much for it though [laughs]. We were only getting 35 cents a kilo, I think, from memory.... or was it a pound? Anyway it could have been pounds; 35 cents a pound for that product we were catching then.

**JD** Was that before the export market developed?

**WICKS** It was just starting to develop at that stage. There was tiger prawns, I'm talking about, at the 35 cents. Banana prawns we were only getting 20 cents a pound for them. So we had to catch big quantities, which we did, but the following year after we came back from Darwin and sort of finished our contract with Tipperary Land Corporation, we had to have a contract with them because otherwise they didn't want us to fish. We had fish for almost a full year with them. We came back and got our boats ready to go to the Gulf the following year. We got a little bit larger boat and we went to the Gulf and fished for banana prawns for about five months in the Gulf there which was very large catches, catches like 18,000 pound in ten minutes trawling. We were actually shovelling the prawns down with the few fish that was in with them straight into a freezer hull of seawater brine and unloading them with pumps and things into mother ships. They were processing on board mother ships. We couldn't process that many prawns on board then but there were bigger vessels [which] moved in a couple of years later and did all the processing on board but we never got into that category.

After working the Gulf for about five years with our boats, they were about 56 foot, we were getting pushed out at that stage by companies because of their excessive

amount of money they could put into boats. It was just overshadowing us. We just didn't have a chance. They had better equipment and they had bigger boats and they could freeze the product as they brought it out of the water. We didn't have a chance. So then they started putting skippers on. They got twenty boats in a company and they'd put skippers on them. Well they could drive a boat but they weren't fishermen and they were starting to do all sorts of terrible things like not giving the right of way and very aggressive fishing. So we said, well no, we'll go back to the east coast. There's gentlemen over there. So we came back over here and we've been here ever since.

**JD** Whereabouts did you come to?

**WICKS** Innisfail. We shifted to Innisfail. That's about 80 kilometres south of Cairns. We bought a property on the river. We bought the land and built a home there and had our own pontoons right at our front door. So basically most of the time I've had two boats, two 50 footers two 52 foot vessels working that area up there. We decided then to look into other things because of the farm prawns started to be.... Oh going back ten years they started farming prawns but it wasn't real successful.

**JD** This is mainly in Asia, was it?

**WICKS** Yes, mainly in Asia. We were getting the news back on what was going on and I said to my wife and son, I said, "Look, I don't think the prawning is going to be that good for too many more years. We'd better look at something else." So with that I sold one of our prawn boats and bought a smaller fast vessel from Western Australia to go tuna fishing, long lining for tuna on the sushimi market in Japan.

**JD** That was the yellow fin off the east coast?

**WICKS** Yeah, off the east coast. We did two seasons on the yellow fin tuna with that boat but decided it wasn't capable of holding the amount of fish that we could catch and it wasn't a good enough pay load because we could only catch one plane a week out of Cairns and to keep the fish.... Sometimes you would go out and the weather conditions weren't right so you'd have to go out and set the lines but [for] a couple of days there mighten have been any fish, then on the third day you'd get a big load and you couldn't hold them. So it was a waste of time in that sense that you couldn't always judge the right amount of fish to catch that plane. It wasn't very successful but we got reasonable prices for the fish we caught.

So leaving that, we did shark fishing. In the meantime, while the tuna weren't there, we turned the boat into a shark net with a shark sail?

**JD** Shark net?

**WICKS** Yeah, netting for shark and developed a good market in Melbourne but there was a bit of a problem with the marketing of shark in Melbourne because there was always a little bit of a stigma left over from the Darwin product that was being sent down a few years prior. They were using too long a nets. A lot of the southern fishermen went up there catching sharks and they were letting them in and leaving them in the nets too long and they were deteriorating. There was a little bit of a stigma against the northern shark, warm water shark, as they call it. So we had a job getting that into the market but we got the prices and built up. Then [the] Taiwanese started marketing shark into Melbourne. They cut the price to blazes and there's always been a resistance to the warm water shark from up here. So with that and prices dropping, we decided to give that away for the time being but [I] kept that in

the back of my mind all the time. There'll be a market there eventually. We decided to build a larger vessel to accommodate three things. At that time Raptus were catching with their vessels on the nor-west shelf [and] were getting big heaps of scampi and deep water red prawns over on the nor-west shelf. So we decided, well they should be here too on the east coast. There was a boat got into it just a little bit before us, Sandy Wood, a local fisherman here. He got stuck into the deep water prawns out here. So we were getting a boat built while he was getting stuck into them [laughs] which didn't help.

So we went straight on to the deep water prawns after the boat was launched. We did a little bit of time on tiger prawns just to break the boat in and break ourselves in and get used to the boat. Then we went on to the deep water prawns but after we got on to them for about three months, there was a crash in the market. So we had to go on to something else but the boat is there now for tuna fishing, shark fishing and [the] fishing we're doing now, whiting trawling. The boat is capable of doing drop lining out on the sea mouths, deep water prawning for the scarlet prawn and the red prawn. We are eligible, with endorsements, to do east coast tuna fishing long line for yellow fin and also now the whiting fishing.

**JD** Did you have any trouble getting all those permits?

**WICKS** Yes [laughs]. I'd better not go into all that because the night would run out, but yes there was a problem. I had to manipulate. I was entitled to all of them but because I was selling the vessels that had those endorsements on them, I had a hell of a job convincing the people that I was building this boat to do those specific fishing. In the end I convinced them that they'd have to give me the endorsements but I had to use those licences that I had. So I had to sell those boats out of the fishing industry with a great loss of my money, to be able to put those endorsements on to this boat when it was finished. It cost me something like, oh without the loss of price that I could have got for my boats with the licences on them, without that loss it would have cost me in the vicinity of \$120,000 for licences and endorsements and things to get this boat established in these fisheries.

I dare say now, I make a judgment now, that within two years or three years, they'll try and take them off me because I have more than one. That's the attitude of the Government at the moment that if you've got more than one endorsement, they try to rip it off you without any compensation, of course. I hate that sort of thing because you've worked hard to get those and establish the fact that you can diversify into something else and that's where the Government is wrong at the moment. They're doing the wrong thing by the fisherman.

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

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** Bob, you're currently in the process of moving down the coast to this Mooloolaba area. Is that the case?

**WICKS** Yeah, that's right. We have decided, with this larger vessel we have now, the season we can fish up north on the tiger prawn is getting shorter. [The] closures they've put on and restrictions to try and protect the tiger prawn is miserably failing.

In my opinion, I don't believe that has helped at all because of the influx of boats each year [and] because it opens at a certain time, all the boats hit it at once and they can't take that pressure. Because of that and the versatility I have with this new boat, I believe it's going to be better for me down this area in the future. So if they carry on the way they're going, with the closures on the tiger prawning, there'll be no tiger prawning in the future, or very little. It'll get shorter and shorter and end up with two or three months fishing with a reasonable income. I don't believe it's worth my while living in the north. Besides [with] the boat I've got now, I can't get into the Johnson River where I have my home at the moment and my lovely pontoons at the front of the house. So it's actually because I can't get in the river and the failing fishery, that I've come back this way to look for better fishing.

I have started on the whiting. One gentleman or one boat has been fishing the whiting for quite a while. For four years he has pioneered it and gone through a lot of problems. We decided to go on to this fishery and it's been quite good up to date. The future will tell. I think [if] too many boats get in, it might deplete very quickly but we don't know yet and I think it's a good opportunity for the Fisheries to actually control this fishery and see where it's going, whether there can be more boats brought into it over a period of years or whether it can be kept as it is and only let four or five boats. Better to have four or five boats fishing an industry and making it viable for four or five rather than letting heaps come into it and bugger it up for everybody.

**JD** It's a fairly deep water whiting that you're fishing for?

**WICKS** Yes. Basically we're catching mostly in around about 30 fathoms. It's a little bit like banana prawning. We use long sweeps from the net to the board, long sweep wire. It runs along the bottom and kicks up a film of dust, if you'd like to call that, on the bottom. The fish, because they're herded by those ropes into the net, you cover a lot more bottom area which you have to do for whiting. They're trying to take those sweeps away from us but without those sweeps, there is no whiting fishing because of the way they're in little clumps. You might be lucky to pass, say a single net through those whiting once in a trawl but with the long sweeps, you are picking up several lumps. That way it makes it viable but without those sweeps you just don't do it. We're having a little bit of trouble at the moment with the Fisheries on that one.

**JD** What is it their thought that the sweeps are damaging the bottom?

**WICKS** Well that's a misconception, but that's what they think and that's, I think, the basis behind it. Because the prawning industry has been carried on down this way for the past 30 odd years and there's more numbers of prawn fishermen, they at first thought the same thing. They complained about it. Our biggest enemy is recreational fishermen who believe we're catching too much of the bait fish but it's hard to believe that that is the case because of only the small amounts of that type of fish we catch with this set up.

So that's the reason I've come down, anyway, to establish myself in this fishery and I'll be fighting hard to stay there [laughs], that's for sure.

**JD** And you process on board, do you?

**WICKS** Yeah. We process in twelve kilo cartons. We have a special hopper. For whiting fishing you've got to have this set-up on the back deck where you dump the fish straight into circulating water and you have a grid across the top to stop any big like shark or anything else getting in and they don't squash. They go into circulating water and they're semi-floating - buoyant, and they don't squash. Then you have a



conveyor belt which picks them up out of that hopper onto a sorting conveyor. There's three or four people sort the fish out, grade them, sort them out and they go....

**JD** Into size?

**WICKS** Into sizes and then they go inside to the processing room where there's another couple of people [who] put them into cartons and put them into the snap freezer straight off the tray there, almost alive when they go into that situation.

**JD** They're not gutted?

**WICKS** Oh no. No scales off, no gut out, straight into the cartons. That's the way the Taiwanese.... Well they end up on the Japanese market but they start off, they go to Taiwan to be filleted or butterflied by hand [laughs]. It amazed me when I was told that they do it by hand. To fillet or butterfly sixteen tonne of whiting, is mind boggling.

**JD** There must be a lot of cheap labour up there. Never do it in Australia, would you?

**WICKS** It's getting to the stage where they're trying to get a machine to do it and I believe in the future if we can establish this fishery, that they'll be bringing machinery out to do it, to butterfly them.

**JD** Bob, could we have a look now at some of the problems that confront you and have confronted you and the industry generally. Problems that are very much in the public mind are depletion of stock, for example, pollution and I suspect from what you've already said, that questions of management are a real problem for fishermen. Could you make comment on some of those problems?

**WICKS** Well I think going back a few years ago was the biggest problem to the prawning industry and nobody ever took much notice of it, was the aerial spraying for mosquitos. See the small fish or small plankton float on the surface of water. They're no good to the mosquito. It never killed hardly a mosquito because the mosquitos all live under the leaf. That's where they [are], upside down on a leaf of a mangrove. The poison would come down from the sky, float down and get into the water and kill all the small prawns and kill all the small fish and never kill a mosquito. They did extensive spraying, I know, around Brisbane and areas such as [that]. Also the spraying of sugar cane and things like that. They don't allow for the wind. It only takes a small drop of that poison to get on to those shallow waters, the warm shallow waters where that small stuff is. Without any proof of this, I could safely say that that would be a big factor in the depletion of fish stock and prawn stock now.

There are other things. The cleaning up of the mangroves, that is a big disaster in Queensland. There are mangroves, it doesn't matter if they bulldoze them down but where the tidal mangroves are, the tide comes in and that's where the small stuff is safe from a lot of predators and that. That is probably one of the worst things as well, along with the spraying. They're the two most damaging, I think, anyway.

**JD** There's been a big development of built up areas along the coasts in southern Queensland certainly, and in New South Wales. Do you think that has an affect on the surrounding ocean?

**WICKS** Yes, it has to have but not as much as a lot of people think, only the clearing away of mangroves, because people, no matter whether they're living near the water or whether they're living back off the sea, pollution from sewerage etc still goes to sea.

Most of it ends up at sea because it goes into the river systems. Even if it goes underground or into a gutter, it ends up in the river system somewhere and eventually ends up at sea. No, I wouldn't say the actual population on the seashores have done any damage. What has done the damage is the clearing away of some mangroves in areas where it was tidal.

Half of the development hasn't been done on tidal waters. Half has been done on mangroves that were growing out of [where] no tide ever reached it. So there's no problem there. Unfortunately that development goes along with all the rest. You're not allowed to cut a mangrove down, regardless of whether it's up on a hill [laughs]. That to me is silly thinking. [The] only areas, in my opinion, [which] should be stopped from development is tidal mangroves but why can't they build the buildings back a little bit? No need to build them on the water. People are not coming to Queensland to see something just being made like Honolulu or something. They should be coming to see it as it is, crocodiles and all if necessary. That's what they want to see. Leave it there for them to see.

The worst thing that's happening to [the] east coast of Queensland is the damming of the rivers. Alright, they need their electricity. They need their drinking water. They need their irrigation but at what cost. It might be the cost of the Barrier Reef yet. A lot of people don't realise that unless that Barrier Reef has fresh water.... I don't profess to know what makes things grow but I do know that that Barrier Reef's not there for no reason. That Barrier Reef didn't form there because it's got to be fresh water coming out of these rivers and all that tropical rain that formed that reef in the first place. If they dam those rivers, I don't think you'll have much Barrier Reef for too many more years.

**JD** Do you think we're doing enough research into these things?

**WICKS** There is no research into them. I don't know any research that is being done into it. No, there's not enough research done into it. Besides, when they dam a river off, they don't think of the brackish water that the fish need to breed with. See fish need a brackish water, sweet water before they breed. They won't breed unless they get that sweet water. If you're blocking water off and letting the salt water come right up to the dam, there's no fresh water there. It's not getting there and they're not getting that brackish water. So that's why the depletion. They blame commercial netting and if they just go in and learn about these things, they'd know that that's not.... Why can't they, anyway.

If there is a depletion of stock, why don't they re-stock those rivers. They can grow all these little fish that go in those rivers like perch and barramundi, etc to a certain size, then release them very cheaply because they've got 100%, almost, recovery. I know barramundi's a bit harder because you've got to release the barramundi back into the same river system that it comes out of that but that shouldn't be hard to do. For perch and other fish that have been depleted like bream. Bream are a thing that are.... You can grow millions of them in closed areas and release them when they get up to about two inch in size and then they'd survive. All the anglers wouldn't be hassling the commercial fishermen all the time then [laughs] and it would make everybody happy.

**JD** Do you think some of the fisheries have too many people in them?

**WICKS** Yes. I sometimes wonder if we need them at all. Yes. I think you need a minister or a minister and a couple of people to go and talk to about things. Yes it's getting out of hand with the QCFO in Queensland, then it has to be passed on to the

QFMA. QFMA can't make a decision then. It has to go to the Minister for Fisheries and he makes the decision then. So I think there are a little bit too many committees etc.

**JD** Do you think the regulations are becoming somewhat difficult to adhere to from the fisherman's point of view?

**WICKS** They're becoming almost impossible. Mainly the cost is getting ridiculous because the new concept is "user pays". We pay \$900 a year just to be DPI approved to export our fish. We pay all our licence fees. We are now told.... I was told two days ago we have to come under the survey requirements for safety factors. Now they are inspecting and you've got to have a certificate every year. If you've got a gas stove on the boat you have to have a certificate each year. You have to have a certificate written out by an approved electrician of all the 240 volt points etc, etc. If you put an extra appliance or an extra, say an electric motor on your vessel between last year and this year, I was told two days ago by this electrician that I have to pay the Harbours & Marine \$150 charge for that extra fitting that went on the boat. Now why should I.... I've installed it. It should be good enough that it's inspected and approved of by an electrician. I shouldn't have to go and pay the Harbours & Marine \$150 extra to say that it's fitted there. This is the type of thing that's going on all the time. An extra cost here, an extra cost there, it's accumulating to the stage where you just can't.... Some of the operators can't keep operating. They're getting down like with the fuel prices just soaring and all the other things that are going up, net prices. It's getting pretty hard.

**JD** You mentioned in relation to the Gulf fisheries that it was very much a company show, it's becoming a company show.

**WICKS** It's got away from that a little bit now because the companies have just about all gone broke because they over capitalised on their boats and they got a Government grant to build those boats and, well to put it bluntly, stuffed the fishing up by a Government grant. If that Government had have said to smaller operators, individual operators, "We'll give you the money to build boats. Go out there and do it and do it properly", they'd have still had viable fishing in the Gulf of Carpentaria. The company boats went up there and for years and years they couldn't be told that fishing that fishery for 24 hours a day, they'd bugger it up, but they did. They wouldn't listen and now finally they've got them stopped working day time a few years ago but they've brought in a six months closure for the year. Now I don't believe any industry can survive with a six months closure. That's what its down to now, a six month closure in the Gulf.

No. It's not so much company now. It's gone back more to individual and private, may be private companies, private say with three boats, two boats. We've got no worry about companies coming into the east coast because there's too many private boats there now. We need about 600 less boats on the east coast. Where the problem arose here, was rejected smaller boats from companies from the Gulf, were put on the east coast because they had a Queensland licence and because there was no restrictions they could build as big a boat as they wished in the Gulf and replace that boat. Then when they got sick of it they replaced another one and pushed it back to the east coast and that happened from South Australia. It happened from Northern Territory, New South Wales and I only knew a couple of Victorian and Tasmanian boats that came up. In Queensland because of a lack of administration, we copped all the overflow from other states, every state in Australia.

**JD** It would be very difficult to take 600 vessels out of the industry, wouldn't it?

**WICKS** No. I think over a period of say, twenty years, we could do it quite easily with not much assistance, but no body wants to take the bull by the horns and toss it.

**JD** How would you suggest....

**WICKS** I know if I was in charge.... We've got what they call management areas in Queensland now, number one, number two, number three and number four. If want to fish. I live here in Mooloolaba and that's what I claim as my area of fishing, I should go out here free of charge, only my licences etc, but if the area starts at Bundaberg, area two, I should be paying a toll to go into that area and fish. Not stop from fishing, I don't want zoning. All I want is [to] put a levy of a reasonable amount, a thousand dollars if you want to go into that. Then if you want to go to the one further up, you pay an extra thousand dollars. That'll keep a lot of fishermen back in their own area without zoning them off. If they want to go, they can go but they must pay that thousand dollars. Now that thousand dollars MUST go into trust or somewhere where it'll earn interest to a buy back scheme. That buy back scheme must never be allowed to be put in to the Government's hands. They may be able to take their licences and do that sort of thing, do that part of it, but if they get it, the buy back scheme will only get 30 cents out of the dollar.

I'd like to see that dollar that's paid, the whole dollar go back to a buy back scheme, not 30 cents of that dollar. Then after a few years with it earning interest, they can start buy back and they should make a bonfire. Doesn't matter whether that boat is two years old, one year old, they should not be allowed to be sold. It should be not even out of the industry, it should be burnt in front of the people and destroyed, licences and all go. No way it can be bought, the licences off it. I think over twenty years you'd get rid of 600 boats but pay the market price to the fisherman who want to get out. Don't try and short change them. Whatever the market price is doing, pay that. They'll get out with their money. You've got a boat out of the industry. Everyone's going to benefit. I don't believe there's any more fairer way of doing it than that. I've brought this up a few times. I don't get listened to but I think it would be a fair way because it's not zoning you off. I'm not saying you can't go up here and fish. You must pay to go there and fish and if you don't want to pay it, stay where you are.

**JD** Do you think it's a reasonable thing now days for a young man who, perhaps doesn't have a father in fishing, to have an ambition to start fishing?

**WICKS** I'd hate to be on the outside with an ambition to go fishing and try and make it there. It wouldn't be easy with the regulations. As the regulations stand now, you can't even save units up. If you want to accumulate units to buy a boat or build a boat for a special purpose, you might decide all the boats around are not good enough for you, which has been always a thing with the Australian fisherman [laughs]. They've got their own ideas. If you wanted to buy boats and scrub them and save your units up, you can't do that, accumulate, because after three years they're redundant in Queensland. Now I don't believe that should be so because I think if you want to buy a boat over here and it's got 30 units, and you're striving to get a boat with 70 units, you should be able to buy that boat this year if you've got enough money, toss it away out of the fishing industry, keep those units in a bank or whatever, then in a few more years you've worked your heart out skippering a boat for somebody and you've accumulated enough money now to go over and buy another 30 units, now you're getting close to the units. You still haven't put a cent into the building of a boat yet. You've still got to save that up, a certain amount. Young people can't do that. That's what I.... I didn't even get.... I got three backers on that at a meeting. That's all I got but I was told to keep working on it because after ten years they might listen to me.

**JD** It might be too late then?

**WICKS** Oh yes, too late then. We won't have any fishermen. See every fishermen son's decided to.... Not everyone but a lot of them decide to give it away. Where's our fishermen coming from? That's what we've got to look at. Besides, what's Queensland going to do? We've been having arguments recently about fish trawling. They won't allow fish trawling to be done in Queensland. We're fishing with a permit. We haven't even been issued with a permit to do this fish trawling. We're fish trawling illegally in Queensland, illegally mind you. Fish trawling's done all over the world. It's just as much as you cutting up a beef to eat for tea. All over the world it's a natural way of catching fish, the same way as you would go out and catch a fish with a hand line for recreation. Fish trawling is not a damaging way of catching fish. It's a selective way and yet Queensland decides not to allow fish trawling. Now, they do it in New South Wales. They do it in Victoria. They do it in South Australia, West Australia, Northern Territory but Queensland, no.

**JD** What's the reasons given?

**WICKS** They don't want to give many reasons. The main reason is tourism and recreational fishermen. That's their biggest.... boats; it's boats. That's what counts and if you look like upsetting some area of the population that they might get votes from, that's when you get into trouble.

**JD** Bob before we finish, is there any other issue you'd like to raise?

**WICKS** [laughs] Probably after I leave here there'll be a thousand but [pause] you might be able to prompt me [laughs].

**JD** I think we 've covered things pretty well but it's a pity to let the opportunity slip by if there's anything else.

**WICKS** Yes it is. One thing I would like to bring up is the new Commonwealth or Federal views on looking for new grounds. We can get a licence, what do they call it, a developmental licence to go out and look for fish in the deep water. Now I've got a boat that can do it. We've got the right attitude to do it. We've got the experience but if we do, we take on that licence for six months and after six months it's cancelled. I have to apply for another one and if I don't do any exploratory fishing in that six months, I don't get a re-issue. Then, even if I do comply and do everything and find product, there's no guarantee that I'll get a licence to fish in that fishery that I've discovered. Now they have not put a cent towards it but yet they won't give me the guarantee of fishing that product. Now I won't go, have no intention, and I've told them categorically face to face with John Stewart, that I will not go out there and be bloody stupid and spend all my money looking for a product with no guarantee. I'll think you'll find that all way along. Unless they're prepared to put their money and put a research vessel out there, that product is not going to be found. You know what I think? I think they want the foreign vessels to come in and get a levy off them. I don't think they want Australian fishermen there and that's just my opinion.

**JD** Is it a worry among the fishermen, the sort of incursion of foreign capital into the industry?

**WICKS** It's not a big worry because if we're not doing it, if we're not doing that fishing, we can't stop other countries from coming in and taking them. That'll be like a dog in a manger attitude, wouldn't it? That's what I think, anyway. If they want us to

find those fish out there, they've got to give us an assurance that if we do, we get a licence. Then I'll be right out there looking for them.

**JD** And good luck to you and thanks very much for this interview, Bob. It's been good to talk to you.

**WICKS** Thank you.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Edited transcript of an interview with SANDY WOOD

### INTRODUCTION

Sandy Wood represents the new generation fisherman of Queensland. He entered the industry as a deck hand in the early days of the Gulf of Carpentaria prawn fishery and gained further experience in Shark Bay and Carnarvon before becoming skipper of large company vessels prior to acquiring his own boat. He now operates two vessels, one prawn trawling on the east coast of Queensland and the other fish trawling for whiting for the export market, the latter on a recently introduced yearly permit scheme.

In this interview, in addition to outlining his own career in the fishing, he discusses the pressure on the prawn fishery in the Gulf of Carpentaria and the consequent pressure on prawning on the east coast. He also discusses the need for regulating the industry and the question of competition from other sources of prawns.

The interview was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Wood's home in Mooloolaba on the 24th April, 1990 and is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry. There are two sides on one tape and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

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

**WOOD** Alexander Kenneth Wood

**JD** And where were you born?

**WOOD** In Dubbo, New South Wales.

**JD** And when?

**WOOD** 3rd of the sixth, '51.

**JD** Where were you brought up?

**WOOD** We were originally from Sydney but for myself, on a farm from the age of five in northern New South Wales between Inverell and Glen Innes.

**JD** And your family were not involved in fishing at all?

**WOOD** No. Actually my grandfather had a hat manufacturing business in Sydney and my father didn't pursue that. He decided to go into the life on the land so he went to

agricultural college and then after the War bought his own property and expanded that into three properties. That was in my childhood, when all that was happening.

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

**WOOD** I left boarding school and did my HC.... won a scholarship to go to university which I deferred for a year and just wanted to go and do something a little different after six years in boarding school and [a] fairly limited experience from childhood on the farm. I thought I'd like to get out and see Australia so from somewhere (I don't recall where) I heard that fishing was pretty exciting out of Cairns so I headed up to Cairns. That was late 1969. Early 1970 [I] started working on prawn trawlers [in the] Gulf of Carpentaria.

**JD** As a deckhand?

**WOOD** As a deckhand.

**JD** Could you outline your career then in fishing? You've gone on a long way since those days.

**WOOD** Well some people wouldn't even think that was a very early start in the Gulf but I recall things were pretty primitive when I got up there. There was only about 30 boats working, about fifteen in Weipa and about fifteen in Karumba and not the sort of boats people imagine the Gulf to have these days. They were very small, mostly from Southport, Bundaberg, northern New South Wales; quite primitive, virtually no electronic equipment and probably not very effective in their catching capabilities but the prawns were pretty thick in those days.

My memory is, we used to work out of Weipa and it was just a matter of taking off early in the morning. Somebody would start a motor up and all the other boats would start and away we'd go. Normally it was only half an hour off the heads from Weipa [where] the action was. The prawns seemed to be pretty thick and the guys knew how to catch them. [They were] all catcher boats, of course, unloading onto mother ships in Weipa and Karumba. So it's certainly changed from those days. That was 1969. I think the first boat started working in 1965, '66. Even in 1969 there was still only approximately 30 boats working the Gulf.

**JD** And how long did you stay as a deckhand in the Gulf?

**WOOD** I did that year, or a better part of that year and then I think I left in about October/November and went back home for a little while. While I was up in the Gulf I heard that Shark Bay was very lucrative and it seemed millions of miles away from where I was. It also seemed pretty exciting so I went home, saw my folks and then headed off there with a friend. Picked a boat up in Fremantle for the start of that season and then for the next four years went to Shark Bay, Carnarvon.

**JD** Were you prawning out of Shark Bay?

**WOOD** Prawning, yes.

**JD** What boat were you with?

**WOOD** Well I started off on a company boat with Norwest Whaling which is Angliss or really an English corporation. They owned the prawning factory and they owned a



substantial percentage of the prawning fleet and I worked on one of their boats the first year. The second year I worked on **Signora De Fatima**, a private boat owned by a major fishing identity in those days, Sammy "De Jesus" De Souza. The third year I was there I worked on another company boat, the **Nor 4**, still as a deckhand under a skipper called Charlie Fuss. Then the fourth year I worked again on the **Signora De Fatima**. On that boat we used to work half the year in Carnarvon and the other half we used to stay north and finish the year off up in the Gulf, November/December head back to Fremantle for refit.

**JD** Did you run into Alf Ness at all over there?

**WOOD** No. No I don't recall that name.

**JD** You stayed there then for quite a considerable part of your fishing career, as a deckhand?

**WOOD** Well yes. Well when I think about it, we're getting up to 1974 now. I actually got my ticket in 1972. I was doing some relieving [in] '73. I got another ticket, a bigger ticket. In '73 I started skippering. In '74 I was doing probably 50% of the skippering on the **Signora De Fatima**, so [unclear] experience wise and certainly good for accumulating some sea time.

**JD** So having got your tickets and some experience as a skipper over there you then came back to the east coast, did you?

**WOOD** Well what happened was, it's history now, but 1974 was the biggest year, I think, in prawn fishing in Australia. It just seemed to be big every year, everywhere except the prawns were coming up, instead of hundreds of kilos, they came up by the tonnes. We actually got involved in the latter part of 1974 onwards on **Signora De Fatima**. We never got past Darwin but we would shoot away anywhere and just trawl for 24 hours a day and pick up a couple of tonnes just general trawling. There were boats targeting banana prawns but we didn't really know a lot about it and the skipper/owner of the boat wasn't familiar with [the] banana fishery so we used to just drag around. We were flat out handling what we could catch just general trawling.

So everybody got pretty excited about the Gulf. I'd seen it quite early in the piece but it had a bit of a dormant period. In '74 because of the massive whack and the abundance of prawns, all of a sudden everyone wanted to be up in the Gulf including myself. I left Carnarvon in 1975. I went back to the Gulf as a mate come skipper and back with the Angliss Group. They bought out Tipperary which was a company, one of the original companies in the Gulf; had some boats and Angliss bought them out which instantly put them in a situation where they had a Gulf fleet and shore base facilities in Cairns. So I went back working with Angliss under the name of Penpack in Cairns. They had, I think, five or six boats and I went on as mate/relief skipper with them in '75.

In '76 I was skipper of the **Cape York** and in the latter part of that year I started working for Raptis. I started skippering the **Raptis Pearl**. It was a greater challenge for me because it was one of the biggest boats in the Gulf and Raptus just seemed to have this stigma about him, that he was accumulating top guys and seemed to be getting a larger proportion of the prawns than anyone else and seemed to be the company to work for and he really knew to look after his skippers. When I think back now, he must have been in a very similar situation where I am now. He was expecting the absolute maximum from his skippers because he must have been very highly geared at that point of time. They were building a couple of boats a year; big boats,

boats that were unheard in the Gulf, the gear and the conditions on board. They were quite luxurious really. He wanted his pound of flesh as well. It was very hard work working prawning but all the same, exciting and certainly rewarding as well.

**JD** And what was the next step in your career?

**WOOD** I stayed with Raptis from that period right through to 1981 actually. I drove **Raptis Pearl** and I took the **Brisbane Pearl** from new in Adelaide. By the time I took that over, that was 1980. I did the '81 prawning season up there. I also had my own boat up in the Gulf working and had accumulated that along the way. So I had a skipper on my boat and I was skippering or mother shipping my boat and skippering the **Brisbane Pearl** for Raptis right up to '82. End of '82 I sold out of the Gulf and I didn't like what was happening up there. I thought there was too many boats. '81 was a fantastic year but I didn't like what I saw. I thought I'd spent enough of my life up there. The isolation [unclear] and the conditions and the heat and the wet seasons and I was living at Cairns. I'd accumulated some assets in Cairns which wasn't enough to keep me there. I sold out of Cairns.

I moved down to Spencer's Gulf in South Australia. It was a regulated fishery down there. I went down with the idea in mind of buying a boat but when I arrived I could see what was happening. Because it was regulated and because it was very heavily licensed to the extent that there was only 39 boats in the whole Gulf, I saw from the first year I was there to the second year that the price of licences had increased by approximately 200%. I just saw myself being priced out of the market. I couldn't buy a boat down there with the limited amount of money that I had. It was just not possible to buy a boat. When I first went down there licences were about \$250,000 but after the first year, that was an exceptional year. It was '82; '82 was the exceptional year and licences sprang to about a million dollars because of the turnover of the boats.

So I just stayed skippering boats down there until '86. I could see that there was big money to be made down there and I thought, well I'll just stick it for a while (skipper's remuneration was good) and save your money and accumulate my money. I thought well I can't buy a boat down here. I can come to Queensland. For the same amount of money you can buy three or four boats in Queensland because licences hadn't escalated. The licence content on a boat was about \$30,000, whereas in Spencer's Gulf it was about a million dollars. So that's what I actually did. I came to Queensland. Instead of buying a boat down there I came here [and] I bought two boats in '86.

**JD** And went prawning?

**WOOD** Prawning out of Mooloolaba. I always liked Mooloolaba and I knew the place reasonably well. One of my friends from Carnarvon, Brian Symks had come here. He was doing well and I still kept in contact with him and I had a pretty fair idea what was going on. I thought well it's closer to where my parents live. It's close to a capital city. It's a nice place to live. It's a very nice climate and it's reasonably lucrative. So that's what made me decide to come here.

**JD** So you're now running two boats and have skippers on both of them. One's prawning, is it and one's scale fish?

**WOOD** Yes. Now we've got... When I came to Mooloolaba I bought a boat and then my friend from Adelaide wanted to come, wanted to get involved. So he bought a quarter share in my company and then we bought another prawn trawler and we bought an engineering workshop to facilitate the boats. When I look back, [unclear]

the workshop was more experience than a good business decision but anyway it was a base. It was an office and served its purpose. I bought my partner out. I sold the workshop. I sold one of the boats and built a new boat in South Australia in Port Lincoln Ship Construction, the **Valkyrie Voyager** and then sold the original boat, the **Valkyrie III**. Then last year I built another boat to replace that, the **Valkyrie Venturer**.

**JD** Sandy, could you detail something of the major changes that you've been involved in in the industry, or that the industry has been involved in really?

**WOOD** I don't think the most major change in my period has been in boats because when I recall the vessel I mentioned before, the **Signora De Fatima**, it was built in 1971. That boat's quite similar to the boats that are being used now. Sure, he was probably ten or fifteen years ahead of his time but those boats were around then, the same freezing, the same snap freezing capabilities, the split winches. She [had] twin radars and the dollars that he spent on that boat, the air-conditioning and all that, at that period of time, even though it was revolutionary then, those boats were in the industry when I started. Not exactly when I started, but after about two or three years. I don't think that major changes have been in the boats. When I say that, I'm really only talking about prawn trawling. There's some pretty nice boats around [unclear] a bit earlier in the piece. The **Sirenia Pearl** which used to work up in the Gulf and had processing gear; had conveyers on, those sort of things; big brine tanks, beautiful accommodation.

So I think the most dramatic change that I've seen is the fact that boats just cannot cruise the coastline, around Australia like they used to. We used to leave Carnarvon, like I said earlier, and at the end of the season leave one fishery and just head up. We could virtually go anywhere in Australia if we wanted to. I see in Spencer's Gulf they changed the situation fairly early in the piece that guys were using tuna boats to catch prawns. The Fish Management Authority down there said, "Right guys, you're either trawling or you're tuna fishing. You can't do both. The smart guys in that instance were the Yugoslavs. [They] decided, "Right, we'll leave that boat prawning. We'll build a separate boat for the tuna." So they ended up with two boats whereas the Australian guys, not outright but a bit of a generalisation I think, but it happened on more than one occasion, whereas the Australian guys said, "Right, we'll just stay prawning", instead of taking the opportunity of having the two boats. I think that explains why the Yugoslav fishing was so successful.

In the instance with Carnarvon, guys like Sammy Souza, there's a few of them down there, thought well, "OK if we've been stopped from going up to the Gulf, we've got a perfect opportunity now of leaving the boat we're using in Shark Bay, leave that vessel there and we'll build another one for the Gulf"; instead of saying, "Oh we can't go to the Gulf any more. Right O, we'll forget about the Gulf and just stay here." They took a very shrewd business opportunity and [said], "Well, the Government's stopping us doing that but they're not stopping us being able to build a boat to go into that fishery." The movement of the boats was stopped but the limited entry into the Gulf of Carpentaria wasn't stopped at that point. So you found that these guys were leaving their boats in Shark Bay or some guys were leaving their boats on the east coast and then building separate boats for the Gulf. [unclear - If you stop and think] "Well I can get away with it", but all of a sudden the authorities realised that they were creating a bit of a monster because the guys were using the Gulf as an opportunity to expand. I think this is where the first pressure was put on the Gulf. I speak of the Gulf because really, everything in Australia prawn wise, you can relate it back to the Gulf because

that's where all the action was. That's where the big company operators were and that's where the money and the boats were being spent.

Not only that, it was also becoming a bit of a dumping ground because guys would say, "I've got an excess of boats" or there's boats coming out of fish trawling and going up into the Gulf because the money was to be made. It wasn't until they actually said, "Right, that'll do for the Gulf. We don't want any more boats up there. We're going to have limited entry". When they did that, that stopped it but it also created another problem because the Queensland east coast was the new dumping ground for boats. When I say dumping ground, an operator built a new boat for a fishery, say Spencer's Gulf or the Gulf or Shark Bay and they can build a new boat and then the old, they send it off to Queensland. So what happened was, every possible boat that people could get their hands on or wanted to get rid of was ending up in Queensland and that's what put the pressure on the east coast. It was ultimately the Gulf and then a spin off to the east coast. I think now we've got about 1,200 boats on the east coast of Queensland. All this was brought about by regulating other fisheries, I believe anyway. I look on it as the east coast of Queensland's become a dumping ground. There's a lot of old boats here and a lot of inefficient boats, but it still adds up to approximately 1,200 boats. Now you've got a situation where everywhere else is regulated and finally they've regulated the east coast of Queensland but I think that's five or six years too late.

**JD** Why were the regulations put in place in the first place? Was it to limit effort?

**WOOD** Well I'd say to limit effort, I think, because if you could use the east coast of Queensland.... I wasn't in a situation.... I'm in a situation to comment now but it's alright to be smart after the event or in hindsight or whatever but I think the guys in Queensland should have realised that boat owners (I wasn't a boat owner I was just a young deckhand and a pretty wild one at that) should have realised.... Well I could see it because I went to Carnarvon very early in the piece and there was already quite a high dollar content on licences then in the very early '70s. I think guys in Queensland should have said, "Well right o, well there's only 30 or 40 boats in Shark Bay, let's have 30 or 40 boats in each port and close it up." I think if they'd done that and had, say 30 in Mooloolaba and 30 in Townsville and 30 in Cairns, I think if they'd made that decision then, we'd have a totally different situation; have million dollar licences on boats and you'd have guys with a regulated industry and a good livelihood out of it. I think that's when they should have used these areas like Spencer's Gulf and Shark Bay as examples and fish management or whoever should have instigated it.... should have brought those policies into effect then because this regulation, it makes an industry out of it.

It's highly lucrative for those that are in there but that's what it's all about, if you get in and set it up right, then you've got something good. Whereas in Queensland now, we've got a situation.... Sure licences appreciated a couple of years ago but now they're virtually back to nothing because licences are purely based on.... you guarantee a turnover, the way I see it. If you've got a lucrative fishery of 30 or 40 boats who catch exactly the same each year, you've got a perfect situation, but if you've got 1,200 boats running up and down the coast line with no real strategy in place, there's virtually no value in the licence because nobody really knows what the next season's going to have.

**JD** Sandy, would you say that the total catch is declining or is it just being shared between too many boats?

**WOOD** I think you'd have to say it's declining. It's pretty hard to tell because unless you've actually got boats in areas and compare your catches each year.... It's been hard for me because I've been in the inshore fishery and I've been out of it. I've been out of the inshore fishery now for a couple of years but with our deep water operation it's very hard to tell. Nobody really wants to talk figures and because of the price fluctuations [which] are there and different species [are] being caught, I'd say.... I'm speaking solely of the east coast of Queensland. I've got a pretty fair idea what goes on in the other places. I know at Shark Bay the catches have been really very level each year. Spencer's Gulf settled down into a good performing fishery. The Gulf's definitely deteriorated, and badly and the east coast is very hard to tell with so many boats and people doing scalloping; people doing king prawns; people doing tiger prawns. It's just very hard to keep up with what's going on. I think the tonnage is probably similar but the effort has increased substantially.

There shouldn't be any more boats. The boats have become more efficient on the east coast, for sure. Instead of limiting to the original application for each boat, they just said, "Right, everyone can have 400 horsepower." That put on, probably double the effort of the fishery because boats became more efficient. I think that the catch rate on the east coast of Queensland is slowly declining. I wouldn't say dramatically but slowly declining. Then again, I'm probably not in a situation to comment on it.

**JD** Do the fishermen, through their organisations, have a sufficient say in the management of the industry in Queensland, would you say?

**WOOD** Well I think that's the way it's meant to be. The way I see it, the Fish Management Authority or the Fisheries Department, whichever State they're in or whatever name they're referred to as, they should be there purely to bring into force the wishes of the fishermen. I think that would be the logical way of looking at it. I'm sure there's different interpretations. Most fishermen can't express themselves properly because they don't know the [unclear] way of putting these things into force or legislation, whatever's required for rulings. In Queensland, we've got the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation. I don't think anything the Queensland Fish Management Authority, (the Government body) should do, should be done without the authority of the QCFO. Basically that incorporates most of the fishermen in Queensland. They have regular meetings with delegates from up and down the coast. As far as I'm concerned, the Fish Management Authority are there purely to police what QCFO require.

**JD** Marketing's a particularly sensitive and important area in fishing, of course. Is your catch exported or is it marketed locally?

**WOOD** Well predominantly exported. I'm in a situation where I'm not big enough to get involved in exporting my own product. There's a lot of pitfalls with that, unfortunately. I use an agent in one situation with a new fishery I'm involved in now. I go through an agent but we export this trawl whiting. One of my vessels, the **Vakyrrie Voyager** is involved with trawl whiting. We're exporting that direct from the boat into a container. We've got an agent handling that in Brisbane. Another product, at this point of time anyway, is king prawns. We've found a niche in the market with that product. They're doing our three kilo pack. It's probably the highest quality king prawn you'd find any where; graded superbly; packed well. We're selling that direct into Sydney, local market, through Raptis through Poulos but it's done as an export standard pack. Just at this point of time the local market's paying the price and that's how we're going. We had a fairly extensive project with the deep water prawns dealing through Raptis but doing direct export off the boat with the current scale of red and

king prawns. We did about two years on this fishery but I wasn't exporting it myself. We were going through Raptis as an agent.

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

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** What other problems are you face to face with, Sandy?

**WOOD** Well normally we've been working out wide, especially the last two years. We've been working out three to five hundred fathoms, anything up to two hundred miles off the coast and merrily trawling along minding our own business; never seeing any other boats. Some areas that we've worked with [we've] gone for weeks and weeks weeks without sighting another vessel; occasionally the coastal surveillance, places like Cato Island, two hundred miles due east of Bundaberg. Nice and peaceful out there and nothing to worry about. At the end of the trip you just pack up and go home, unload and get ready for the next trip. That's about it.

Since the deep water prawn market collapsed, due to about 20,000 tonnes of that same product caught in Argentina, it's since recovered but not to the extent that we want to go back into the fishery for the time being. Since then I've had both the boats working on the inshore fishery again. Because we work out of Mooloolaba in close proximity to the premier tourist resort of Australia, I suppose, Gold Coast, Sun Shine Coast, capital city Brisbane, Moreton Bay, you can imagine that the boating fraternity, amateur fishermen, tourists, all come into play because when you're prawning you're working close to the reef so you've got your amateur fishermen. With this new industry we're involved in, it's probably one of the most contentious issues faced in Queensland. We've had numerous meetings in the last three months over the fact that Queensland have suddenly got to realise there's a resource out there which we've been trying to hide because [the] amateur fishery lobby and the tourists lobby and environmental issues. They decided some time ago, prematurely may be, I don't know, but they didn't want fish trawling apparatus of any description used in Queensland.

It was rather a strange situation that they allowed one boat to trawl for the fish, whiting in particular, using our prawn trawling or otter trawling apparatus. Then he started using sweeps and nobody seemed to want to stop him. I've been watching him closely, this operation, for about four or five years and even to the extent that I formally applied to the Fish Management Authority for the right to do the same thing. It was refused and they said they were going to stop this boat because what he was actually doing was illegal in Queensland. Two years later he's still doing it so we decided we're going to do it too. Another boat came in. There's three boats actually illegally using fish trawl apparatus in Queensland but being allowed to do it because they're using prawn nets. It's incredible actually. Now that there's three boats doing it, all of a sudden Fish Management want to know why and some environmentalists want to stop it and marlin fishermen want to stop it and amateur fishermen, everyone.... All of a sudden the whole situation came to a head.

So we had some meetings over it, quite hostile meetings. I thought our lobby was quite good. There was only three of us against 1,200 prawn trawlers plus I don't know how many thousands of other people were in that position too but we seemed to have got our point across, the fact that it's an export revenue earning industry. It's a good

industry. We're not damaging the bottom. We're not trawling over reefs. In fact we're doing quite contrary to what everyone seemed to think. We're not into it to bleed the coastline, leave the dead fish up on the beaches or trawl over reefs and trawl up spanner crab pots and all that. We're environmentally conscious as well. We're just trying to make a living and expand what we believe's good business.

So what was thought of before as... or the transition that I've made from miles and miles out to sea to all of a sudden being into this very hot issue, it's all happened the last three months. I think that common sense has prevailed and I think that the Fish Management Authority, through [the] Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation, the point I was making before that we've gone through the right avenues. We've had the meetings. We've had unanimous support from 1,200 other prawn fishermen in Queensland through their local delegates up and down the coast, their unanimous support for what we're doing. I think not only are we utilising a new resource, but also because of the fact that we're on this fish, we're not taking prawns. We're actually taking effort off the industry. Well what came out of the meeting was that a permit system would be put in place. Any fisherman in Queensland, prawn fisherman that is, would be entitled to apply and the Fish Management Authority would regulate that as a permit, not as a licence or limited entry, but as a permit situation to be reviewed at any time or at the end of the year as to whether [there's] too much effort or not enough effort was going in or if environmental issues came into play. If it was found that damage was being done, well then it would be reviewed and permit holders would have to comply with the regulations.

So I think that is the way to go. That's the way these decisions should be gone about. I think this industry, for one it's a new industry and I think we've put in regulations ourselves. If we want a closure, if we want areas, if we're going to clash with the prawn fishing. We want them closed for fishing. We decided that we wouldn't trawl any closer than [the] 20 fathom contour line which, in most parts, is five or six mile off the coast. We actually put all these conditions in place ourselves. We believe that... When I say we, I'm only talking about three or four fishermen, we thought that was the way to go about it. We'd try and set this up as an industry from day one with the right regulations in place and try and comply with these contentious issues in regard to environmental factors and amateur fishermen and the like.

**JD** To go back a little bit, you mentioned earlier that there was considerable competition from the Argentine some year or two ago. Has that settled down now? Is overseas competition still a problem in the prawning industry?

**WOOD** Well it's all competition. It affects the market at that time and if there's over supply in one area, well if you're in that business catching that product, well you'd better get out of it. You'd better find an alternative, which we did. We didn't know what was going on. The only time that we knew was we had a container over there trying to sell it and all of a sudden nobody wanted to buy it because there was a cheap alternative.

The major problem we've got is... I don't know whether it's going to be major or not but it's certainly looming up as a problem, is the competition that we're having with the cultured prawns. I think that's a major one. I think everything else is seasonal. I'm sure Argentina will have a big year. Next year they'll have a poor year and those prawns will be back in demand but aquaculture's I think here forever.

**JD** Is that the aquaculture in Asia that we're talking about?

**WOOD** Yes [unclear] even to the extent that Australia's on the band wagon now. I think aquaculture's going to play a major part. I made some reference to the problems, the way I see it, in the Professional Fishermen's Magazine. They did an article on my operation and I went into some detail over the way I thought that we as fishermen could approach the problem. I think it just comes back to quality. I think that sure, it's a substitute but it's a poor substitute. I think the sea caught prawns will always have a place in this market.

**JD** Any other problems that you'd like to talk about? Can I ask you about the hazard from shipping with trawlers? Is that a problem in your operation?

**WOOD** I'm glad you mentioned that because it was only just the other day, a trawler was run over by a ship. It was a hit and run and I was just reading in the paper today that they've limited the ship down to one. It looks like they're going to catch him but these are problems we have on this coast, more so than anywhere else in Australia probably. The east coast shipping route from Sydney right up to Cairns. There's always a problem with shipping because they're limited by their draft and they believe they've got to get from A to B and the prawn fishermen believe that the best prawns are always on the shipping channels so I think it's always going to be a problem.

We experience it quite regularly in the deep water when we're working off Southport. We're only about 35 miles off the coast in very deep water. We trawled out there for about eighteen months, not solely there but from Swains Reef down to the border. We trawled that area for about eighteen months and we never had a problem once with ships. We had the right signals up. We had the right lights on at night time. I think that's a lot of the problem. We were well lit plus we had the right navigation requirements as far as lights and day signals, plus most importantly, we maintained radio contact with these ships. I think that's [unclear] because the ships travel quickly. We travel slowly. We technically have got right of way and sometimes they just don't see you. I think that's a problem with a lot of the smaller boats. They just don't carry sufficient lights and don't maintain a proper watch either. I think it's the same as the highway. It doesn't matter how many police are out there, how many road signs, how many traffic lights, it's just the element of human error. I think that's just a problem that you've got to face. You're out at sea and those things do happen.

**JD** Weather would be a problem on this coast, I would imagine?

**WOOD** With accidents? For sure, yeah; weather and big ships and rain and small boats. I think also a lot of guys try to force their right of way with ships too which is OK but you've got to bear in mind that there comes a time when, if they leave it too long, it's just not enough time to bail out. I think you've committed yourself and you say, well I'm going this way and he's going that way, but if he doesn't shift, then you're in big strife. I think there's a lot of flexibility there too. You just can't be too careful.

**JD** Thank you very much for all of that. It's been interesting to talk to you Sandy. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish?

**WOOD** No. I think we've covered it pretty well.

**JD** Thank you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Sandy Wood of Mooloolaba, Queensland.



END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

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