



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 Victoria tell their stories here.

Konrad **Beinssen**

Carl **Bryant**

Bruce **Bushell**

George **Casement**

Dr Wayne **Chamley**

Richard **Davidson**

Frank **Ferrier**

Lewis **Ferrier**

Bob **Fisk**

Don **Gilsenan**

Charles W **Hill**

Ken **Johnson**

Garry **Kerr**

Barry **McKenzie**

Keith **Melhuish**

Doug **Millard**

Dennis **Mirabella**

Charles **Norling**

Tim **O'Brien**

Kit **Olver**

Nicholas **Polgeest**

Harold **Smith**

Ray **Stewart**

Jack **Warn**

Cecil **Wilson**

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Verbatim transcript of an interview with KONRAD BEINSSSEN

INTRODUCTION

Mr Konrad Beinssen was involved in research on abalone for many years as Research Officer with the Victorian Government Fisheries Division. More recently he became a professional abalone diver in Portland, Victoria. He and his diving partner have now developed an abalone farming venture, using an artificial reef of boulders and concrete structures surmounting a natural reef that had been covered with material unsuitable for abalone culture.

The project has been well researched and now awaits only final approval by government before commencement.

On this tape Mr Beinssen also outlines the diving methods in use in this part of Victoria; some of the hazards involved in the fishery, the biology of abalone, and makes comment on the management of the industry.

The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey in Mr Beinssen's home in Portland, Victoria, on 8th February 1990 for Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry project. The interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter - there are two sides of one tape.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

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

BEINSSSEN Yes, Konrad Beinssen; that's spelt K O N R A D, B E I N S S E N, and I was born on the 21st May 1944 in Tatura, Victoria.

JD Have you lived in Victoria all your life?

BEINSSSEN No, I've travelled around a fair bit, in fact we moved shortly after my birth to Sydney and I grew up in Sydney and went to university there; then to Brisbane; and in 1968 I got a job with the then Fisheries and Wildlife Division in Victoria and came back to Victoria and stayed there for 10 years.

JD You went to Sydney University, what did you take there?

BEINSSSEN I studied Science, did a degree in Science majoring in Marine Science and then went on to the University of Queensland where I worked for 3 years as a demonstrator and studied.... or did research into plankton in Moreton Bay.

JD Were your family involved in fishing in any form?

BEINSSEN No, they weren't - in fact my father was a wool buyer and ran a business in Sydney. So no, I came from a non-fishing background.

JD What was your interest in fishing originally then?

BEINSSEN Well I've always been interested in the sea and I always had a interest in becoming a marine biologist. I learnt to scuba dive at the age of 13, and my family lived directly on the sea at Long Reef in Sydney from ever since I can remember, so I guess that was the basis of my association with the sea. And then in '68, as I said, I got a job with the Fisheries and Wildlife Department working on abalone research and that took me.... I worked for the Department for over 9 years.

JD That's the Victorian Department?

BEINSSEN That's right, yes.

JD And all the time you were with the Department you worked on that form of research?

BEINSSEN I worked for six or seven years on abalone exclusively, and then became Officer in Charge of Marine Research and broadened my interests a bit at that stage. But primarily it was working on abalone biology and the population dynamics of abalone - the abalone fishery.

JD Did you maintain your interest in diving?

BEINSSEN Yes. That was, of course, a diving based programme and it took me to every part of the state where the abalone fishery [was] - from Mallacoota right down to here in Portland, in fact that was where I became interested in the fishery and Portland as an area, and so on.

JD You'd know a great deal about the methods the abalone divers use in Victoria, would you?

BEINSSEN Yes. They started off pretty crude, of course. The fishery started in about '62 and they used all sorts of home made gear in those days, and that gradually evolved into the commonly used compressor on the boat, hookah gear.... hookah hose down to the diver, which is used nowadays. And of course things like the use of oxygen have been a relatively recent innovation. Here in Portland, most divers still work from runabouts - 20 or 25 foot fast runabouts.

My partner and I happen to work from a bigger vessel and we use a cage which is similar to the South Australian cage but modified. We call it the shopping trolley. It's simply a hydraulically driven cage. We have two divers attached to the cage on either side with umbilical cords, and we can move the cage around and stop it at any point, and pick up the abalone on either side. He works on one side, I work on the other, and we just move along in that manner. Each lift, therefore, we can lift about 400 kilograms in one lift.

JD Do you use a parachute?

BEINSSEN Well, it's more like a South Australian cage with a solid aluminium parachute, unlike the commonly used parachute and mesh bag that all other divers here use.

JD Why do you work in pairs?

BEINSSEN It's obviously cheaper to run one boat for two divers and pay one deckhand and so on, one fellow, and we find it quite efficient to work in this way.

JD There would also be an improved safety factor, would there, with two of you?

BEINSSEN I guess you can keep an eye on the other person, although while you are working you don't really have the other person in view all the time. But when things go wrong there are two of you to fix them and so on. So, yes, there is some element of safety I guess.

JD There are hazards enough, aren't there?

BEINSSEN There are, yes.

JD Is the shark a hazard?

BEINSSEN Well, I've never seen any sharks while working under water. Some of the divers here have; my partner - who has been in the business here in Portland for over twenty years now - has never seen a shark while working under water. I mean, you see them from the boat occasionally. So it's not really considered a problem here; perhaps with the exception of Julia Percy Island which has a major seal colony on it and has the reputation of being a sharky place. But even there where the divers regularly work it's not viewed as a major problem the way it is in South Australia, where it is obviously quite a bit more of a problem.

JD What depth of water do the abalone divers dive in here.

BEINSSEN In the Portland area basically the abalone occur around the major Capes - Cape Bridgewater, Cape Nelson, and the Capes out here at Cape Grant and Point Danger, and they tend to drop into deeper [water] - those Capes drop off into deeper water than other areas in Victoria - but the abalone do occur down to well below 100 feet - WELL below 100 feet - but they work nowadays down to perhaps 70, or occasionally 80 or 90 feet, but routinely down to 50 feet.

JD Is bends a problem?

BEINSSEN Bends is always a problem. It's THE major diving hazard and, as I say, being slightly deeper water here on average than elsewhere in the state, it is something we have to watch here perhaps a little bit more than other divers do.

JD Do many of the divers become bent?

BEINSSEN Well, I'm a relatively newcomer in the business, I came into it in 1988 as an abalone diver. There are still quite a few old timers around here - I say 'old timers', they've been in the business for years and are now 45 years old sort of age - and of course, they've become very experienced on how far they can push themselves over the years, and nowadays being bent isn't such a common occurrence. It does occur. In fact, when there's a set of circumstances (and a comedy of error set of circumstances)

on a boat, that tends to be when it happens. For example, if the air is pinched off and a diver has to come up quickly, or something like that - some emergency.

JD Is there a recompression chamber available?

BEINSSEN The nearest one to my knowledge is in Melbourne. There's no recompression chamber anywhere in this immediate area. There's one in Adelaide, and there's a mobile one at Sale - or there was a mobile one at Sale until the National Safety Council folded.

JD I was going to ask you, are there any Naval chambers?

BEINSSEN No, they are in hospitals. They are attached to hospitals.

JD What sort of, or what type of abalone are caught in this area?

BEINSSEN We have two species here, but by far and away the most abundant one, the one that's fished most often, is the black lip - *Haliotis ruba*. We do get the green lip, the South Australian green lip (*Haliotis laevigata*) here, too, and it occurs in Portland Bay. It prefers calmer bays than the black lip, which occur on the seaward side, or the windward side of the cliffs around here, in very high energy areas. There's a lot of swell and so on. And they are by far and away the most caught here.

JD They are the ones that are most popular in Japan, is that right?

BEINSSEN Well they are both fairly popular in Japan, it's just a matter of their abundance here. We are now on a quota system here in Victoria, each diver can catch 20 tonnes, and it just doesn't pay to go to the green lip area because they are not.... the catch rate there is much lower than it is in the other areas. And there isn't much point in bursting your gut on marginal days, catching a few green lip, when you know you can catch the quota anyway. Maybe in the old days when diving - when weather dictated that diving was impossible on the black lip - some of the divers used to go to the green lip area. But with the quota now, that's not done any more.

JD Have you come across any hybrids?

BEINSSEN Yes, I agree that there is definitely a hybrid between green and black. I've seen them mainly in the Portsea area, and in the heads of Port Phillip Bay, where both species occur naturally, and you can often.... and I say 'often'! You know, I've relatively frequently seen black lip meats in a green lip shell, or vice versa - green lip meats in a black lip shell, and they really do look like something in between. And I think that will be shown in due course by interbreeding - it will be done in a laboratory. I'm convinced that they do on occasions. Hybrids are a real thing, yes.

JD Could you outline the way in which the industry is managed in Victoria? You did mention quotas, I think.

BEINSSEN As I said, the industry started in about '62 and it grew very rapidly, and in about '68 (1968) licences were brought in, and at that stage the licence fee was \$200. It was a lot of money in those days and that culled a lot of people out of the industry. At that stage, too, size limits were imposed - three different size limits for the state. At that stage it was 4 and three quarter inches maximum shell diameter here in Portland.

And from '68 through to the early eighties - oh, '84 I think, licences were not transferable or saleable, so only those people who were in the fishery in 1968 were licensed, and at that point it was felt that there were still too many licences in the early eighties. So a scheme was introduced for transferability, but if you wanted to buy into the industry you had to buy two licences, two licensed divers out, and that functioned for about 2 or 3 years. There was some interchange - some people got out of the industry at that stage, and the numbers of licences here in Portland went from, I think, 16 to 14 at that stage. In other words four people sold out and two people bought in.

And then I think it was early in 1988 that scheme was abandoned and a quota was introduced and licences were made saleable on a one for one basis. And the quota was set in the first year of 1968 - the first quota year, which runs from April Fools Day each year, was set at about.... well, here in this end of the State - in the western zone - at 20 tonnes per diver per year. Previously to that the old timers here, the divers here, they were catching on average perhaps 26 or 28 tonnes per annum. So the quantity of abalone taken was substantially reduced at that stage, the overall catch, and consequently I believe now the fishery is recovering to a great extent. And most of the old timers here say the same thing. It's now very much easier to catch the 20 tonne quota than it would have been just two years ago.

JD About how many days would it take an average diver to get his quota?

BEINSSEN Well, I guess the average catch is in the order of 500 kilos a day, so that's about 40 days' fishing. There is one person who did it in 28 days in the first quota year, and some people take 45/50 days. It varies a bit.

It also varies a bit if you are prepared to just stay in Portland for the whole year and pick the best days, then you can catch much better catches per day. But if you want to take 6 months off, then you have to work some of the marginal days in the other 6 months, which means the catch per day drops off a bit.

JD You are about to go into quite an interesting project, aren't you, in the farming of abalone?

BEINSSEN Yes.

JD Would you like to talk about that?

BEINSSEN Yes, well the proposal was first put to the Fisheries Department about a year ago, and it is to build an artificial reef on the eastern side of Cape Grant here in Portland, which is one of the Capes here. The area is one which isn't naturally very productive for a number of reasons, one of them being that it is adjacent to a quarry site, and when the quarry was opened they bulldozed the overburden into the sea and they covered the naturally occurring reef with limestone rubble, which is unsuitable for abalone.

So the proposal is to restore that reef with basalt boulders from the quarry. And if you look at the areas here in Portland which reproduce best it tends to be the boulder - the areas where you get boulder country - and the young abalone there can find shelter under the boulders, and as they grow bigger they take up positions around the edges. So we think that if we place boulders in this area then there will be natural seeding and it will be just duplicating a natural fishery.

JD Do you plan to try seeding the area yourself at all?

BEINSEN Not at this stage, although it's not all that difficult, we believe, to produce seed abalone. And that's being done, I believe, in Tasmania; and, of course, overseas in Japan on an extensive basis. But we believe at the moment that abalone will seed themselves naturally onto these rocks if we provide a suitable habitat for them. And, incidentally, it won't be only rocks, it will be also concrete structures specifically designed for the needs of abalone. So we will be experimenting with those as well. So it will be sea farming rather than intensive land based farming in ponds or races.

JD How long does an abalone take to grow to maturity?

BEINSEN The rule of thumb is 5 years. When I say maturity - to minimum size (to the size that you can take them in the fishery) from the egg stage is 5 years. To breeding size they usually take about 3 to 4 years. They start breeding after 3 or 4 years and then, of course, a little bit extra to minimum size. But they are a bit like humans, they grow very fast in their first few years and they stay more or less the same size for a very long time. They are very long lived animals. In fact we had tags, tagged abalone that had been in the water for over 13 years during our studies, and they hadn't grown at all. These were large abalone when they were tagged. They were still the same size when they were recovered 13 years later.

JD Is the creature prone to disease?

BEINSEN I don't think it's a major problem in the sea, although I have heard of cases where they've been washed up en masse for some reason or other - freshwater flush or something like that. I'm thinking of one particular case in Eden in the early seventies, where they were washed up in large numbers on beaches, presumably because of freshwater flush.

But there are certain problems that processors have with them. A problem that they call black spot, for example, appears on the meat when they go into the cans; and I don't think there's a lot known about that. But I see little evidence in the sea to suggest that they are dying of diseases.

One particular observation which is well known to abalone divers is that some areas are fast growing and some areas are slow growing, and in those areas where the abalone tend to grow more slowly their shells tend to be eaten by worms, or become much more brittle, and I think that's a major cause for death - when they end up with such brittle shells that any predator can break the shell and get at them.

JD In establishing this project are you getting support from government?

BEINSEN We haven't sought support (financial support that is) from government, and we don't intend to do that. We've had the application.... it's a very long process, and particularly so because it's the first one of its kind. But the process involves applying for a fish culture permit, and that involves a public advertisement - you know, to call for objections. And if you pass that stage, then the government advertises for competing expressions of interest, so it's another round of public ads. And there are environmental considerations. There are beach coastline management committees which have the right to veto the project. So it runs through a whole set of committees and bureaucracy and we're still at that stage now.

In fact today we hear that the last of those decisions were made - the committee met, I haven't heard the result yet. If we get a favourable response in the near future we'll

probably start putting the reef down this autumn. If it runs out much longer then we'll have to start the actual ground work next summer because winter is not a suitable time here to do the job.

JD You plan to establish the reef yourselves?

BEINSEN Yes

JD You would therefore expect to have exclusive rights?

BEINSEN That's right. Of course that's one of the things that is a potential sticking point - I mean we are using public land, but the legislation (the Aquaculture Legislation) allows for that, and of course any other farmer - oyster farmer or mussel farmer - uses public land or public waters for his business. So it's really not all that different in this case, although it has never been done for abalone.

JD In some of the abalone fisheries I understand poaching is a real problem. I'm not sure whether it is in Victoria, but it would be a problem in your enterprise, I think, would it?

BEINSEN Well it is a problem in Victoria, particularly in the central zone. Victoria is divided into three zones - one runs from the New South Wales border to roughly Lakes Entrance. The central zone runs from Lakes Entrance to Warrnambool, and the western zone (which we are in here) runs from Warrnambool to the South Australian border.

Now in the central zone (because it's so large and because there are so many spots that you can get down to the water from) it is a real problem. Here in this zone it's less of a problem because you really need a boat to get down to the area. You can't get down the cliffs in many areas here to get access. You really need a boat, and of course you are pretty conspicuous in a boat. In a boat you need also a very good day weatherwise to get there, so we are naturally protected here much more than other areas in Victoria.

But in terms of the abalone farm, Cape Grant is actually a quarry and it's screened off with a security fence, so the general public doesn't get access to the land immediately adjacent to the site. So people would have to come in by boat, and it is very easily surveyed. I mean to make any significant poaching inroads you would need to spend quite a bit of time there in a boat, and if you are doing that you'd be spotted. So we don't anticipate poaching to be a big problem, quite apart from the fact that 9 days out of 10 the weather protects the spot anyway, naturally.

JD Would you say that the abalone fishery in Victoria is well managed?

BEINSEN I'd say it is one of the best managed fisheries.... I'm not talking about necessarily only the Victorian one, but overall in Australia. It is a very much more profitable fishery, it is not over capitalized like most other fisheries have been.

JD That is the end of Tape 1 Side A of this interview. The interview continues on Side B.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

BEINSSEN Right, we're back again! We were talking about capitalization and I gave some examples of that. For example, each diver in Victoria can catch 20 tonnes per annum and the current price is roughly \$20 per kilo, so it is \$400,000 that the diver can catch per year; and that can be done in a relatively short time at a relatively low capital cost, because the boats are small and they don't require much fuel compared with other fisheries and so on. So the profitability there is very high.

Of course the government take a fair bit of that out in the form of licence fees and other fees, and of course the level of tax that you get to at that stage is pretty high too. Our fees, for example, have just risen (or just about to rise) from \$10,000 to \$28,000 per annum.

The objectives - the management objectives - for this fishery are pretty ill defined in Victoria and in fact I believe it is one of the faults in management - that they haven't specifically stated objectives. But I'm sure that part of the objectives, part of those if they were stated, would be on or have to do with maximising the economic rent from the fishery. And I feel that this fishery is one of the few in Australia which is managed fairly close to the maximum economic rent. So that as opposed to fisheries like the cray fishery here in Portland, which is over capitalized to a very large extent - the catches are low, there are too many boats and so on, and it would require some sort of buy back scheme to rectify that. In the case of abalone here, we would be very close to the maximum economic rent.

JD Has this profitability of the industry resulted in you having a little trouble to raise capital for your farming venture?

BEINSSEN We haven't got around to the stage of raising capital, but what we hope to do... well, there's two elements to this. We hope that the other abalone divers will invest. They have already expressed some interest in investing in the project. Originally they objected to the project because they felt there may be a loss of control of their industry, or that their industry may be taking a new turn that they wouldn't have any control over. And what we are hoping to do is to invite them to become part of this project as well, or any of the abalone divers here that wish to become part of it. So that will be one form of raising investment capital.

The other thing is that for the first 3 to 5 years it is purely an experiment to see if the thing will work and just how productive an area - an artificially constructed area - can be. So there will be a lot of research work required, a lot of R and D work.

The Commonwealth Government, of course, give 150% tax deductibility to approved R and D projects, and we are hoping to get that tax deductibility which will offset a lot of our costs.

JD Have you chosen a name for the enterprise yet?

BEINSSEN The company which is doing the work initially is called Portland Ocean Trading Pty Ltd, but we are hoping that it will be run as a joint venture of companies so that each abalone diver, or other investor, will have his own company, and the project will be run as a joint venture of those companies. So it is just really whoever ultimately joins in the experiment will do so by forming a company or putting in a pre

existing company and making investment through that company so that the 150% tax deductibility can be claimed.

JD Is there anything else that you would like to say about either the farming project or the abalone industry generally?

BEINSEN No, I think most of it has been said. I think it is an unusually productive fishery. In general terms abalone fisheries around the world are very sensitive to fishing and a lot of them have been grossly over fished. This particular one, the black lip fishery in Victoria and Australia generally, seems to be an extremely productive fishery. And one thing that I've found since doing that early research work and then coming back in as a diver, is just how incredibly productive it is because you are actually (unlike many other fisheries) coming in eye contact with the resource - you can see it. You can go to an area and come back 3 or 6 months later and do it again and compare it. It is just remarkable - in fact it never ceases to amaze me as to how the abalone just come back after you have fished an area. You'd think it wouldn't be fishable again for maybe years; but you come back maybe 6 months later and there they are again. So that's a feature of this particular fishery.

But I think, you know, I haven't got anything very much else to add.

JD Well may I wish your project in the farming all success and continued success.

BEINSEN Thank you very much, and I wish your project success too.

JD Thank you very much.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Konrad Beinsen, abalone researcher and diver, of Portland, Victoria.

END OF INTERVIEW

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

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Verbatim transcript of an interview with CARL BRYANT

INTRODUCTION

Carl Bryant entered the fishing industry as a deckhand on a shark fishing boat in Bass Strait and eventually became an owner/operator of a vessel in the same industry. He was also a cray fisherman in Victorian waters.

In this interview Mr Bryant discusses many of the problems fishermen face in these industries. On side A of the tape he deals with the uncertainty of prices and returns to fishermen as well as the effects on fishermen of the introduction of limited entry into some fisheries. He also treats with fishermen's organisations, relations with management and labour relationships. On side B of the tape he deals with crew, accidents and personalities and in naming some of the vessels lost in the waters he fished, gives some insight into the hazards of fishing there. Carl has left the fishing industry now and operates a successful poultry farm. One suspects however that the call of the sea has not yet been extinguished.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry and was conducted by Jack Darcey at Mr Bryant's home in Bittern, Victoria on the 21st February 1990. There are two sides of one tape.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Carl would you record your full name and date and place of birth please.

BRYANT Yes. My name's Carl Robert Bryant and I was born in 1928 in a house in Hastings. There was no hospital in those days.

JD Hastings is a town quite near to here, isn't it?

BRYANT Well Hastings is on the Mornington Peninsula, Western Port Bay.

JD Right. Your family have been in fishing for a long time, haven't they?

BRYANT Yes. My grandfather on both sides of the family were fishermen (on my mother's side and my father's side) and my dad was a fisherman. All his brothers were fishermen.

JD And your grandfather came out from the Orkneys I understand?

BRYANT Yes I think.... He came from the Isle of Hoy, I think it was in the Orkneys.

JD And did he become a fisherman out here?

BRYANT As far as I can work out, he was a fisherman.

JD And then your dad became a fisherman?

BRYANT Yes. My dad moved down with a family from Melbourne. They were boat builders at Coode Island. That's up on the Maribyrnong River. Appleton Dock now is in Coode Island. They dug the Yarra and cut off the bend in the Maribyrnong River and it created this island, Coode Island.

JD So he was a boat builder initially?

BRYANT His father used to build boats, yes. The family moved down to Western Port but [had] been fishing in Western Australia [at] Denmark at one stage.

JD And then they came back here where you were born?

BRYANT I'm not sure whether they were in Western Australia or whether they were here first and went to the West and came back or what happened there.

JD But you were brought up in this part of Hastings, Western Port area?

BRYANT Yes.

JD Did you go fishing straight after you left school?

BRYANT No, no. I was an apprentice fitter and turner. I had to go and live in Melbourne with private people. I sort of got homesick I suppose you could say. I came back from that and I got a job with my brother with a saw mill. They were cutting timber and palings and things. Then I left that and got a job on the railways. I was a porter on the railway station at Stony Point and the crayfish ketch **Julie Burgess** used to come in and unload at Stony Point. The people there lived in Melbourne and the railway station was on the end of the pier at Stony Point so it was usual for the old ketches and their crayfish to land their fish at Stony Point because it was handy to send it up to the market in Melbourne on the railways. So I got friendly with these people and I was keen on fishing. I liked boats and things. I ended up leaving the railways and going with them on a trip to Hobart.

From there I started fishing. I came home from there and I went down to Port Welshpool and got a job shark fishing and started from there. That would have been 1949, yes.

JD You were a deck hand were you, on that vessel?

BRYANT Yes. They were just fitting wheel houses on fishing boats in those days and there was just a few that had two-way radios. Most of them were, oh series I suppose they were termed, FS6s, which were Air Force Disposals.

JD You'd have seen a lot of changes, wouldn't you? Apart from the radio there would have been changes in radar. Did you have radar in those days?

BRYANT No we had no radar. The rest of the changes in boats were in the electronic area. You know, the early boats you had to steer with a compass. This was a tedious type of operation 'cause you were travelling night time as well as day time. Yes.

JD Whereabouts were you fishing in those days?

BRYANT Well we started off.... My first trip was across from Port Welshpool down Wilson's Promontory and across to Three Hummock Island and we worked down off the north west coast of Tasmania. We were running the fish back into Stanley. The Stanley Fishermen's Co-Op, they were processing fish those days and we never had refrigeration or ice or anything like that at all. The fish were caught and they were put in.... I suppose the fishing boats in the shark fishery in those days were crayfish boats and they had the wet well. So the fish were caught and gutted and headed and thrown into the well to wash and they washed in the well. I suppose it was a form of preservative to [them]. I don't know but they were kept in the well and we took them into port and gaffed them out of the well to the processor or buyer.

JD How many days would you be at sea?

BRYANT Up to a fortnight I suppose, a week, you know 'cause we were working on the baits. They were salted baits to preserve them and we were working on having one good shot and taking your fish in. So you waited and waited and waited until the time was right.

JD So it was a netting operation?

BRYANT No we were long lining.

JD Long line.

BRYANT From memory I think we shot about a thousand hooks.

JD What would your catch be normally?

BRYANT Well mainly in those days we worked on the school shark. This way, if you got into a patch of school shark, you had good, you know [a] pretty good catch.

JD Was it measured in boxes or tonnes or....

BRYANT Yes, yes, we talked in boxes which was 70 pounds. 70 pounds was quoted as a box.

JD Yes, and what sort of catch would you be taking back to Stanley after a fortnight's fishing?

BRYANT Well there were times we got a hundred boxes. This was the objective, like the magic figure [laughs]; a hundred boxes, if you got a hundred boxes you were going well. From memory the price was six to nine pence a pound and the livers; the livers were a valuable part of the fish in those days. They went to Aspro and APC. They were put in kerosene tins or tins that shape; two four gallon tins in a case. The livers brought as much as the flesh. So you got nine pence a pound or something for the livers and six pence to nine pence for the flesh.

JD How many crew would you have had on board?

BRYANT Three. Used to work on three, the skipper and two deck hands.

JD You later on acquired your own vessel, Carl, didn't you?

BRYANT Yes. That wasn't till 1968 but I was fishing. Then there were times I gave it away and got a job ashore. It had this factor about it, the personality thing like I say. You're living and sleeping and eating with the boss present all the time and you've gotta be compatible, you know, to spend a week together at sea.

JD There would be tensions develop I imagine?

BRYANT Oh occasionally. [you'd] Get a bit hot under the collar at times, especially if you weren't catching much. The skipper, he always had the bills and the pressure was on him.

JD I suppose the crew were a bit anxious that he would be a bit successful too because you'd be on a share, would you?

BRYANT Yes. We were paid, I just forget now in those days how much it was, but it worked out usually on so much a box.

JD So it was in your interest for the boat to be a success?

BRYANT The more we caught, the more we earned.

JD Right. Did you have much trouble raising finance for your first boat?

BRYANT Oh, not really. It was based on.... Well we had an investigator from the Commonwealth Development Bank come down and he assessed what sort of business people we were, how we could operate it as a business and what type of people we were; whether we could pay the money back and what assets we had etc, all those factors. I don't really feel that there was any great difficulty with finance.

JD Did you buy an existing boat or did you have one built?

BRYANT No we had a new one built.

JD Could you describe that boat?

BRYANT Well my brother built it. He had an engineering shop in Frankston and he worked out what he could build for how much and so we worked on that. At the time the scallop fishery was going well in Port Phillip and there were boats being built for the scallop fishery and he got two boiler maker/welders that had been working on these scallop boats and he employed them to build for us. So they were fairly skilled boat builders. The boat turned out anyway. I was pleased with it in the end.

JD Was it a steel vessel?

BRYANT Yes.

JD What sort of power did it have?

BRYANT Well we fitted it with a 671 series GM (Grey Marine) GM diesel.

JD What length boat was it?

BRYANT The boat was 57 feet [with] a seventeen foot six beam.

JD Good sized boat.

BRYANT Yes I was pleased with it. It was a good sea boat. I don't think there was any weather in Bass Strait that worried us too much; just the weather part of it was that we couldn't work and earn money. The boat was capable of handling anything.

JD That's a notoriously rough part of the ocean, isn't it?

BRYANT Well you treat it with respect. It's part of the job [laughs]

JD And you were fishing out of Hastings?

BRYANT We worked out of Hastings, Western Port.

JD Yes and still down towards the Tasmanian coast?

BRYANT Well we used to work from one end of the Strait to the other. I worked down the west coast of Tasmania but we worked from the Shelf. We worked along the Shelf, the west side of King Island and along the Shelf to the east side of Flinders Island and everywhere in between.

JD How long did you remain shark fishing out of Hastings?

BRYANT Well thirteen years from memory I was fishing there.

JD Did you try any other fishing as well as shark?

BRYANT Yes I was crayfishing at times. I worked on a crayfish boat out of Hobart for about six months, the **William Flair**. We were fishing around South West Cape, Maatsuyker Island, Mewstone Rocks.

JD Did you ever have a go on your own account for cray?

BRYANT Yes. When I gave shark fishing away I sold the boat. I bought into a partnership with a friend of mine crayfishing around from Western Port to Port Phillip. There was just nothing in it, no money. The crayfishing was pretty poor.

JD What because of the size of the catch or the price?

BRYANT Yes the catch. He eventually bought my half share and he's still fishing. I got out of it.

JD Carl, with that sort of experience in the industry in both shark and in crayfish, you'd have come face to face with many of the problems that confront the fishing industry. What would you say the main ones were?

BRYANT Well I felt that.... The biggest problem I felt was the marketing. Somehow your rewards for your effort and investment, the marketing has control over all this. There's something wrong with the system of marketing that you're not getting your just return for your efforts and resources.

JD So you felt that the amount of money you had invested in the vessel and gear and running the vessel, you didn't get enough to warrant that sort of investment?

BRYANT Well I felt that there were times it was frustrating if I can express it in that way. What you got paid for the market when you had a good catch, it was based on what somebody else caught. Sometimes you wouldn't get enough to pay the fuel bill or your crew and yet you'd caught a considerable amount of fish. It was just the way the things were sold in the market - the supply and demand system of the auction. If there was a lot of fish in the market well the price was down. It wasn't only the effort you put into [it] and the good luck you had, it was tied up with what somebody else had. If they had good luck and you didn't catch so much well the price was down and this is just ridiculous to work your returns out on this basis. If you go and buy a motor car from General Motors, it's sold on the basis of percentage profit on their costs of manufacture. We didn't have anything like that what it cost us to catch the fish and what we got in the form of a return. If there's one thing [way] that the fishing industry would assist the fishermen, [it would be] to tidy up the selling system.

JD Some sort of controlled marketing, you feel?

BRYANT Well I think you need to get a percentage profit on what it costs you to operate a business and successfully show a return and incentive to put your best into it. You need to get value back.

JD Carl you finally got out of the industry, didn't you, or you left the industry anyway?

BRYANT Yes. I gave it away. Mainly, well the main reason was the plant was wearing out. It had done a lot of work and the thing was going to cost me a lot of money to replace some of the more obsolete parts: the automatic pilot, the radar, more up-to-date, more efficient electronic equipment, fish finding, the engine, the winches. All these things, they wear and the boat got to that stage where these things had to be looked at in terms of replacement cost so I decided to sell it. I had two sons working with me at the time and they were a bit.... They didn't want to keep on with it. One of them's fishing at the moment and I think he was a bit sorry when we sold it but we thought that we'd sell it and maybe have a spell for a while and then have another look at it, but a few things happened in between on that.

JD You were moving out of the industry at about the time when there were restrictions on the number of licences issued. Is that right?

BRYANT Well they talked about that and they talked about it for years before they finally did something. When they decided to do something they went back to the '82.... I think it was in the '82 to '85, that was the criteria they set for the issuing of or the licensing. If you couldn't have an "A" class licence, they broke it up into categories "A"s and "B"s and we fitted into this pattern. My son was working a scallop boat at the time because we'd sold our boat with the shark fishing potential. He'd gone into scallop fishing then and of course that put him outside the criteria. He'd been fishing

for nine years as a shark fisherman but he wasn't fishing in the right time so that put him out of it.

JD So he couldn't get a licence?

BRYANT He now, as I understand it and I've spoken to a few people involved in it, he's got no hope of ever getting a licence to operate as a shark fisherman.

JD So what's he doing?

BRYANT He's running a boat for someone else now. He can only be employed working for someone else. I'm a bit disgusted about it. It applies to a whole lot of fishermen's sons. Our son had never learned anything else. He'd grown up from.... He used to come out with me fishing in school holidays and he'd gone into the fishing from.... His first job was fishing with us. He's fished most of his life now, 22 years, and here he is in a position where he can't buy his own boat because of the restrictions on the licences.

JD And you'd have to be very wealthy to buy a licence, wouldn't you, from an existing licence holder?

BRYANT I don't know if there's any bottom of the harbour schemes or something like that, I don't know, but I'm not interested in these anyway. That's the position with him at the moment.

JD Yes. What about yourself? Could you go back into fishing?

BRYANT Well I understand not. I think, if I wanted to be a crayfisherman and a scallop fisherman I can buy the licence. The last value I had on a scallop licence was about \$150,000. They fish for about three years and then have the next five or six years doing nothing so that's a bit risky.

JD What's a crayfishing licence [worth] now?

BRYANT A crayfishing [licence], they value them at so much a pot depending on the area you propose to operate. They have eastern and western licences and the crayfishing is a bit.... There's a few factors. It doesn't appeal to me.

JD It's a pretty expensive proposition.

BRYANT I'm not sure what. I think, I could be wrong on this, but the cost of an eastern zone licence for crayfishing is something like \$1,000 a pot as I understand it. So if you have a 30 pot licence you [have to pay] \$30,000 but experience with the crayfishing is.... When I was doing it we were going out every day and that involved starting at half past four every morning seven days a week (weather permitting) and for this.... I worked it out, we had \$30,000 invested in the business and if you took this away on what you could earn with that invested in say a building society, we were making \$35 a week. So if I'd have sold my \$30,000 and got it back and put that into a building society, we'd have earned as much with that as we were earning crayfishing less \$35 a week and the week, as I say, [is] seven days starting at half past four in the morning. So that's how I found crayfishing in the area I was working.

JD Carl have catches declined?

BRYANT Yes well crayfishing has. There's a lot of amateur fishermen now that have access to the coast and scuba diving and fairly sophisticated methods of going under the water these days that they can go and catch fish by the bag full. So they have this ability to clean up the stocks I suppose with all the accessible coastline.

JD Can we turn to the survey of vessels. Is that a good idea or not?

BRYANT Well I feel a survey's a good idea. There's a certain laxity here. You get.... well you say to yourself, "I must fix this. I must do this job" and it goes on and on and on. When you have a survey coming up, well you have that pressure on you to do that job and you know yourself it's usually something fairly important because when you leave home you're at sea for a week at a time and you're economics and well being and everything is affected by your vessel and its equipment so it's pretty important. I see the survey as being a good thing.

JD Do fishermen generally feel that way?

BRYANT Well a lot of them don't. You hear them complaining. I've never had any complaints about it. The people I've dealt with, the Marine Board, have always been polite, nice friendly people to deal with. This is how I've found it.

JD How about the Fisheries Inspectors? Are they good to deal with?

BRYANT Well I haven't had much trouble with them but mostly they are. I never had any differences of opinion or any complaints with the Fisheries people. No, they're always pretty good. That's just speaking personally.

JD Do you think the managers of the industry, the people in the Fisheries Division of the Department, take notice of what the fishermen have to say in drawing up the rules and regulations?

BRYANT Oh I think they do mainly. In fact maybe they take too much notice. I think they try and do the right thing. I think they're.... Perhaps I'm not clear how to put this but I think they do a pretty good job. They're a lot of enthusiastic people in this area and I've always sort of felt satisfied with their efforts. There have been times when I've felt they shouldn't have listened to the fishermen because the ones they're listening to are getting a bit hysterical about things at times. I suppose that's.... They listen and that's important.

JD Are the fishermen's organisations, [unclear] the Professional Fishermen's Association, are they effective do you think?

BRYANT Not really. I've been a member of one and they haven't had a meeting for twelve months. They should be. In theory they are an organisation of fishermen who, maybe they have their problems and they put it to someone who goes to the fisheries authorities and discusses it. In theory it's good but somehow fishermen are too individualistic. They're a selfish type of a.... It's part of survival to work on your own and so for this reason unions, associations or groups have always got problems, I've felt.

JD What about the deck hands? Do they have any sort of associations or unions or such?

BRYANT [pause] I'm trying to think. When we were working with Allied Fisheries they had big problems because they were working for, I don't know if you'd call them a corporate body, but they were working for Allied Fisheries [which] was a company, management company. Deckhands and crews even the skippers had problems there and they organised themselves at one stage into a Fishermen's Guild. I wasn't too involved in that so I don't really know what happened and how they got on with that but somehow they were all dissatisfied with the operations and the returns for their efforts. So that went that way there but normally with the normal fishing.... like a port like San Remo, no I don't hear any complaints. Deck hands seem to enjoy life or whatever.

JD That is the end of side A of this interview. The interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD Carl we were talking about labour relations and you've been an employer of crew. Would you like to talk about the problems that are associated with that aspect of your fishing career?

BRYANT Yes. The crew, they were.... Well it was quite an interesting sort of relationship. You had to live, eat and sleep and [do] everything under the eyes of the boss and so you had to be compatible. There was times of tension but the crew, you needed someone that was reasonably intelligent and yet would accept the hardships of the job. We were long lining initially and this involved starting at 2.00 in the morning and shooting the gear out. We worked till about 4.00 in the afternoon before we'd finished. Then the fish had to be cleaned and they were gutted and headed and put down in the fridge. We were using ice as a refrigeration media and that was shovelling ice, and a layer of fish, and shovelling. It was pretty tedious.

When we changed to nets we changed our fishing style and we worked then all night and slept through the day (when we could sleep), but then we had brine. We had a refrigeration system of a brine tank which is just chilled sea water and this simplified the fish. They were just dropped in the brine and left to wash around in it but the crew, they have to cook. They need to be people that'll stand up to the hard work and yet be intelligent enough to do it. The money, sometimes you don't catch anything and we were paying on the percentage basis. If we never caught many fish well they didn't earn much money. I found we were operating from Hastings where there's a whole, a big, big industrial development in the area and they'd be comparing what they could earn with me fishing with what they could get at the steel mill at Lysaghts. We had this to contend with at times.

JD Was it difficult to get crew?

BRYANT It was really. One of the problems was sea sickness. A lot of people were keen but they couldn't stand the rolling of the boat plus the smell of the fish when they're gutting them. So this was a major problem actually, sea sickness.

JD You'd have had a pretty big turnover of crew then Carl?

BRYANT Yes. They came and went all the time.

JD Was there any sort of steps up the promotional ladder?

BRYANT Not really, not really. It was a dead end job for the crew I'm afraid.

JD Is it still that way?

BRYANT As I see it, it is, yes. I had one chap with me for seven years but most of them just came and went. I think a lot of them too.... Somehow they didn't see it realistically and they thought shark fishing involved sitting on the back of the boat with a fishing rod or something like that and instead of being at sea a hundred miles off the coast or something, we were rolling about for a week. There were times we laid on the anchor. When it blew too hard to work we just laid on the shot. If the weather looked like it wasn't going to be bad for weeks, we'd just lay there and wait for the weather to fine up. They had to adjust to this.

JD Were there many accidents at sea?

BRYANT Not really, not when we were netting. When we were long lining we had a lot of accidents with people getting hooked with flying hooks. We used to shoot fifteen miles of.... 3000 hooks a day was our objective, weather permitting. You had to go to achieve this and so the hooks would be flying a bit. Sometimes they'd catch on things. We always had a knife handy if they caught on something and the line was still winching in, you'd grab the knife and chop them off. There were times when they hit things and flicked and it'd hook somebody. We had things like this. There was only one crew we had.... I think everybody on the boat got hooked at some time when I was long lining but there was only one chap I remember having time off. He had a couple of weeks off with blood poisoning. He had a blood poisoned hand.

JD You were the doctor on board I suppose?

BRYANT Yes, yes. I had to be the doctor. Oh it was mostly common sense. If there [was] anything I couldn't handle I used to get him back to medical treatment somewhere quickly.

JD Did any of the crew acquire their own vessels?

BRYANT [pause] I can't remember. I don't think so. No, not my crew, I don't think any of them.... I had some personalities on my crew. I had Les Jackson at one stage. Now Les was nicknamed Wallaby Jackson and he owned three trading vessels operating around the Furneaux Group and he worked for me for six months. Patsy Adam Smith wrote a book about Les.

JD Why did he work?

BRYANT He came up to work on the scallop fishing in Port Phillip. He had bad times with that and had to go and get a job somewhere so he came and spoke to me and I needed a crew. Les was a (perhaps I shouldn't say this), he was rather a heavy drinker and possibly he drank his way out of his.... One of the boats he had was **the Sheerwater** and I think that was lost off Bridport or somewhere on a trip from Flinders Island to Launceston. So I don't know what the circumstances were.

JD Carl were many of the fishing fleet lost in these waters at sea?

BRYANT Yes. I think there was, what in ten years there were five boats lost at King Island. Keith Todd was drowned from San Remo. I've got to think on that one who they were. **The Kyeema** was lost; she was a 60 foot wooden vessel. [pause]

Elizabeth Margaret was the name of one, I think, that ran up on Sea Elephant Rocks on the east side of King Island [and] lost. What was Keith Todd's.... **Patricia** was the name of Keith's boat. He got in too close picking up pots of Cape Wickham. **The Evening Star** was one that was.... He ran up but I think he got it off and salvaged it. I can't think. There was a few of them.

JD Still plenty of hazards in the industry?

BRYANT Oh yes. **The Zircon** ran into the cliff at Cape Woolamai; **the Neilgabar**, she was lost on the Glennies (that's down Wilson's Promontory). I think **the Alicia** was burnt. Yes I couldn't tell you any more. I don't think about lost boats. I wrote everything in my log books. They were all recorded, everything but....

JD Fog was a bit of a problem in these areas wasn't it?

BRYANT Well fog was a problem till I got radar [laughs]. That eliminated those problems. Yes, an incredible piece of equipment, radar.

JD Can you remember any other incidents at sea that are worth having on tape?

BRYANT Well there was a few funny ones I suppose. I got to know a lot of people. You know the radio was your life line and people talked. We worked at night and I spoke to boats up the coast: Queensland, South Australia. They were working at night too. The Lakes Entrance trawlers used to.... I'd only know them by the boat's name or their first name but we'd talk at night. They'd ask me what the weather was like. I'd be working round King Island or that area, Western Bass Straight and they'd talk [about] what sort of weather because the weather was coming from us to them; the westerly flow. So I got to know quite a few people like that with [the] radio.

The frequencies changed and then they got CB radios and this took away a lot of the friendliness. I'm not sure how to put this, but people then got a bit secretive and [with] their little CB radios, they could talk on a channel that nobody else could listen to. So there was a lot of boats [which] went off the air.

JD Carl, anything else that you'd like to have on this tape before we finish?

BRYANT I can't think of anything.

JD Do you regret having left fishing?

BRYANT I do yes. It was a most rewarding experience of my life. I suppose it was an experience of boating in the sea and you were so close to the sea and I couldn't imagine going yachting or anything like that because somehow my association with the sea and everything was complete. I was fishing and seeing what was underneath us and what the bottom was like and everywhere I went I had this [feeling of] looking under the ocean and seeing what was underneath us as well as what was around us and above us. I couldn't imagine going to King Island on a trip just to look at the shore or anything like that. There would be something lacking if I wasn't fishing and looking

at the bottom. Yes, all the different types of bottom. It [has] different depths and different things growing on it at different depths.

When we were long lining, unless we were straight up and down on our gear, we'd be sweeping it, pulling it sideways across the bottom and the hooks are snagging into things and pulling little bits of sponges and things up all the time. We caught things like a whale harpoon and it was off a Russian ship. It had Russian writing on it and we pulled up a six gallon tin of explosives. That was something to do with the Western....

JD The Western what?

BRYANT I think it was **the Western Spruce**. She was doing an oil survey down off Three Hummock Island at the time. We saw her down there but we pulled up this tin of explosives on one of our shark hooks and it was quite full and wet. I presumed it was unstable so we just slipped it back overboard and let it go [laughs]. We pulled up all sorts of funny things like that. Steel cables was one we got a lot of. I suppose the ships would throw their old worn lifting gear, their winches and wires and things over board.

JD Was there much litter in the ocean in those days Carl.... plastic bags and things?

BRYANT I don't know how I could judge that. I don't really think there's much. You know, the little.... the things we pulled up.... I suppose we covered miles of ocean floor so shooting fifteen miles a shot, we didn't really find that much; just that they were interesting. There's something interesting about associating things with human beings. Well it's a fairly lonely area and when you find something associated with other humans, it's interesting. I think so anyway.

JD Right, anything else then before we finish?

BRYANT Well I suppose there's lots of things if I sat down [and] spent all day or all week or.... but I enjoyed the life. The economics of it was.... Perhaps there's more lucrative forms of fishing than what we were doing but it was a bit of a worry whether you'd earn enough to.... I suppose we did alright out of it over all. We don't sort of spend it in the pub. We don't drink so we managed ok with what we earned.

JD You've gone into farming now, haven't you?

BRYANT Yes. We've got a broiler farm. It's steadier [job]; [a] nice warm bed at night. The bed's not rolling around [laughs]; TV [laughs]; nice tea. Well the boys used to cook well on the boat too. We ate well on the boat always.

JD Right. Well thank you very much for this interview Carl. It's been great to talk to you.

BRYANT My pleasure Jack.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Carl Bryant, one time fisherman, now turned farmer, of Bittern near the port of Hastings in Victoria.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with **BRUCE BUSHELL**

INTRODUCTION

This interview with Mr Bruce Bushell, scallop fisherman and mussel farmer of Portarlington, Victoria was conducted by Jack Darcey at Mr Bushell's home for Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry on the 14th February, 1990.

With no previous experience in boat building or in fishing Mr Bushell and a partner built perhaps the first ferroconcrete fishing boat in Victoria and entered the scallop fishery in Port Phillip Bay. When that fishery declined he relocated to Lakes Entrance and became prominent in the industry as the fishermen's representative and spokesman. At this time and in an effort to protect the resource the fishermen succeeded in having catch limits imposed only to see them removed again by government.

More recently Mr Bushell has become involved in experimental mussel farming at Portarlington and the interview outlines some of the difficulties being encountered in that venture. It is apparent that Mr Bushell is dissatisfied with the management of the fisheries in which he is engaged and while his point of view might be challengeable in some respects, it is nevertheless important that his story be told as it is here.

There are four sides on two tapes. The interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Bruce would you record your full name please.

BUSHELL My name's Bruce Kirkley Bushell.

JD And where were you born?

BUSHELL I was born at Warrnambool on the 12th of the 11th '38.

JD And have you lived in this area all your life?

BUSHELL No, no, not at all. We've possibly lived here about 30 years. Prior to that we lived in the western district; brought up in the western district.

JD Did you have a family history of fishing at all?

BUSHELL No, not at all. I was virtually going from job to job after giving farming away and came down to Geelong and took whatever job was available [and] ended up selling floor coverings.

JD Well how did you get into fishing?

BUSHELL Oh I just decided one day that I wasn't going to make it as a salesman. I was doing reasonably well but it was getting more onerous and [I] decided there had to be another way of making a living and happened to see somebody building and constructing a concrete or a ferroconcrete cement boat one day and decided I'd like to do that and get into fishing.

JD Did you build a boat?

BUSHELL Yes the scallop industry had started in Port Phillip Bay in about 1963. It started with Tasmanian fishermen coming over and fishing the Bay and I was living at Portarlington at the time which was central to the Port Phillip Bay area and seeing the activity, decided that if I built a boat I could perhaps get into the fishery which had no restriction on entry at that time.

JD Did you actually build the boat yourself or did you have it built?

BUSHELL No I found myself a partner who was as gullible as I was and thought that building a vessel would only take a mere three months or so and we could get into the fishery together but it took us eleven months working virtually every day with no time off. We built the boat in 1967 and as I say took eleven months to build [it] and applied for a licence which we got to scallop fish all Victorian waters and we then commenced fishing.

JD What size vessel was it?

BUSHELL It was a 37 foot vessel. It was the ferroconcrete cement. It was the first one that was built in Victoria as far as I know. It had its problems. It was something that was new. We tried to contact as many experts as we could and we were not able in the final analysis to get the sort of information we wanted so we just put our heads down and tried to nut it out and took it as we went. That vessel's still on the water to this day.

JD Did you rig it initially for scallop fishing?

BUSHELL It was built wholly and solely for scalloping, to operate at that time, virtually [in] Port Phillip Bay because there was no knowledge of any scallops outside Port Phillip Bay so it was built initially for that.

JD And you started then as an owner/skipper with your partner. Did you employ crew as well?

BUSHELL No. At that time.... By the time we came in there was a catch rate of about twenty bags per day which is a bag we call an average potato bag. It had been a lot more lucrative but it was starting to wind down a little and we were advised that we were entering at the wrong time but we decided to operate it, the two of us, together without any crew.

JD That was a quota that was imposed was it?

BUSHELL No that was the limit that was virtually catchable on a reasonable day's fishing that time of approximately twenty bags.

JD And that gave you a satisfactory return in terms of income?

BUSHELL Yes. It gave us a return probably similar to that that we'd enjoyed as salesmen. I think he worked in the concrete industry. It was a very similar sort of a way. There was no fortune to be made but you were working for yourself and that had some reward.

JD You didn't have any training at all to operate this vessel?

BUSHELL No, no. There was no.... In fact I'd never been on the water prior to that at all. I recall the first day we went out we didn't have any ballast in it and we had to learn in a hurry [laughs]. It was rolling all over the place but no it was something we decided we'd like to do and we just had to learn.

JD You didn't have to have tickets or anything of that sort?

BUSHELL No not at that time. All you needed was a five pound licence to say that you could go and fish. There was no Marine Board to concern yourself with. You just needed a Fisheries and Wildlife (as it was called then) licence to catch scallops. That was all that was needed.

JD Things have changed dramatically, haven't they?

BUSHELL They have, yes. The regulations have gone somewhat over the fence but a lot of people were learning at that stage because when the Tasmanian fellows came over they used a different type of dredge. They pulled two dredges called sputniks which were only about three or four feet wide. It was a slower process, the actual fishing and we came in at the stage where we were starting to mechanise [with] the self-tipping apparatus which is an apparatus that enables the dredge to come over the stern of the boat instead of up at the side. It came over the stern of the boat, hit the self-tipping apparatus and tipped itself onto a table.

Prior to that there was an "A" frame they used to call it which had the cable running on the top of the "A" frame. The dredge came up and literally swung in the "A" frame with the crew trying to catch it, undo the base of the dredge which is a steel container with a trap that you undo at the bottom of it, and you undid that and let the contents fall out onto the deck usually. Then you literally manhandled the empty dredge then back over the side and while that one was fishing you pulled up another dredge. Then you stooped down to deck level and picked up the scallops out of the cunje and oyster shells and the rubbish that came up. So at the stage that we entered it was interesting because it was becoming more mechanised and we had a self-tipping apparatus and we built a tray on the boat and it became a lot more comfortable to actually handle the scallops.

JD When the scallop fishery was at its peak in the Bay, about how many operators would there have been?

BUSHELL Well when it initially started, it started with three or four Tasmanian boats that came over and it didn't take long to encourage a lot of other boats to come in and

try the fishery. They came from South Australia. They came from Queensland because the Bay was very lucrative. There was approximately 200 boats, or in excess of 200 boats, at the peak of the industry. They were fishing 24 hours a day on two shifts and catching anything from 150 bags per shift. Now that was I suppose you would call the peak of it, the peak of the catch. They were getting next to nothing for the catch and there was a terrific amount of waste because they were just bagging up everything that came up. That was juvenile stocks. That was everything in fact.

The bags were caught, they were manhandled up onto the pier, they were manhandled off the pier and loaded by hand onto semi-trailers and then taken off to the processor. The processor then used to have an open wire mesh table and he'd pour the contents of the bag onto the table. What fell through the table went to the tip and what remained on the table were split. So there was a terrific amount of waste in that processing of the product at that time.

JD So all the young scallops that hadn't bred yet, that were caught, only went to the tip?

BUSHELL They did, they went to the tip. There was no regulations of the hours, size of fish, quality or anything else. You just bagged up.... You literally shovelled off the deck all that came up and when you were catching 150 bags a day it was a lot of work because 150 bags on the small boats.... A lot of the boats were very small at that time. A 40 footer was quite a large vessel. The vessel would come in heavily laden down and you had to physically manhandle those 150 bags up on the jetty, throw them then up onto a truck and then sort of virtually collapse while somebody else took the boat [laughs] out for another period. So there was just no regulation in any way, shape or form.

JD And the inevitable happened I suppose?

BUSHELL It did. We were advised when we entered the fishery in '68 that it was on the decline and there was no thought.... The Fisheries & Wildlife felt that there was no necessity to try and govern or protect the industry because it fluctuated so violently that it would have [its] ups and downs. It would either carry on or it would cease and the fishermen [would] wander off and do something else. That virtually came to pass in 1969. We had been fishing our boat single handed at that time. We'd go out and fish single handed. [I'd] work for three days on and then my partner would work for three days on and we just fished from daylight till dark or in fact longer than that. We had to be fishing for a couple of hours before dawn and we'd finish a couple of hours after dark and come in at that time with about two, if we were lucky three, bags for the day's work. So we used to work single handed. That meant operating the boat, watching out for other traffic, dredging, sorting and then bringing the catch in, manhandling it off yourself and putting the boat away; cleaning up the boat and putting it away. So it was pretty hard work in those days in '69 but that was virtually the decline through just over fishing then.

JD And you did all that for about three bags?

BUSHELL Yes. We got down to about two bags. There was a restriction brought in then by the Fisheries & Wildlife that we should work only daylight hours. Then a size limit was also brought in which was three and three-quarter inches, the actual size of the limit. At that time the fisheries policing got fairly intensive and they used to have a measuring apparatus called a ring. They would jump on board the vessel, empty your bag and any scallop that passed through the ring placed you in a position of being liable for prosecution so it was fairly frustrating and worrying. We were working to

three and three-quarter inch and anything that went slightly under that was under size but the majority of fishermen stuck to those rules. There was always someone of course that would take under size. Probably about 10% of the fishermen would take undersize but the majority of fishermen observed that size limit and we were inspected quite regularly and found that you were barely making a living at all. It was just enough to keep you going.

It was at that time that Fisheries & Wildlife had been asked to ascertain whether there were scallops off Lakes Entrance because trawler fishermen had found scallops coming up in their nets. They did a survey and declared that there was virtually nothing of any consequence there, or [of] commercial value there. One in particular and a couple of the fishermen from here went up and tried on their own and they found scallops and that alleviated the pressure in Port Phillip Bay. There was a great exodus to Lakes Entrance mainly because everybody was almost destitute by that time [laughs]. We'd been struggling on. Quite a number had gone and got other jobs and worked off shore. They worked on shore I should say. Myself and partner, well we'd been working odd jobbing for three days and then working the boat for three days so we sort of kept going with the fishing but it was easy to see that the Bay, as we were told by [the] Fisheries [Department] had had it. There was nothing there. They weren't particularly concerned about conserving it. The feeling was, "That's the end of the scallop industry".

So I begged and borrowed a title of land off a friend and was able to borrow \$1,000 to put a radio on board the vessel to give us some safety and we then took our vessel with most of the other fishermen up to Lakes Entrance and started fishing at Lakes Entrance then which proved to be quite lucrative.

JD Is that fishery still going?

BUSHELL No. The fishery there are having the same problems that we're currently having in Port Phillip Bay. It was over-exploited. As I say, the majority of fishermen went to Lakes Entrance in '69. The history of the industry is that a number of fishermen, approximately 22, found for one reason or another they didn't leave the Bay. They either had a boat that wasn't satisfactory to take out to sea, it was only a Bay vessel, or they had commitments. Some of them had to go on the slips type of thing and try and get the boat in a safe condition to go up there. There were no regulations as far as the type of vessel. If you were going to go outside the heads, off you went.

When we fished at Lakes Entrance it was easy to see that there should be some sort of a limit imposed and to that end an Association was formed and we self-imposed a twenty bag limit. We had fishermen come again from other States. We had the local fishermen at Lakes Entrance making overtures to the Government saying that the scallops were in their beds, their fishing grounds, and they should be entitled to take them. The scallop fishermen who had a licence, just a Victorian licence, felt that they were the only people eligible to take those scallops. We petitioned the Government to make it clear to any other fishermen that we were the Victorian scallop fleet and as such we were the only ones entitled.

If you can appreciate [that] we'd put a self-imposed bag limit on. We were regulating the industry. We'd organised transport. We were looking at some 200 mile distance from Lakes Entrance to Melbourne. There was a transportation problem. We had to fish a long day. We had to travel quite a distance. We used to have at least three hours' steaming off Lakes Entrance one way and then three hours back at the end of the day. It meant crossing a notorious bar. There were a lot of hazards and there were a lot of

problems to overcome just with the logistics of transporting the quantity of scallops caught down to the processing operations in Melbourne because there was nothing available at Lakes Entrance. For that reason as I say, we self-imposed limits and we organised all that cartage and freight. We were most concerned that Lakes Entrance fishermen who had other types of fishing.... We were only able to do scalloping. We were licensed.... Yes the industry as I was saying, had organised the transportation and the limit which was a self-imposed limit and all fishermen did observe that limit. That's all fishermen with a Victorian licence.

The locals decided that they should have the right to catch the scallops and a number of fishermen put gear on and they went out and fished. Now that created a confrontation and it's been well documented that there was a lot of trouble at Lakes Entrance. We had boats coming in from all directions who had heard the story that the Lakes Entrance fishermen were able to catch the scallops. The Port was congested beyond belief. The Port officer was losing control of the Port, we felt. To try and alleviate that problem he asked Fisheries to stop any other vessels coming to the Port. That was when Fisheries & Wildlife decided that those boats that had not left the Bay by that time, by a certain date, must remain in the Bay. To that end they issued them a Bay licence which was different to the normal licence that a scallop fisherman had. They received a Bay licence and the fellows that had proceeded outside and fished Lakes Entrance received an all Victorian licence to enable them to fish outside.

That was the first problem I think - with administration [laughs]. It immediately made the scallop industry subject to licences. The feeling of the Victorian fishermen was that there shouldn't be anybody else eligible to take those scallops. The argument we used is that the Lakes Entrance fishermen were trawler fishermen. They were cray fishermen or whatever. We were not entitled to take the crayfish or anybody else's crayfish. We were scallop fishermen. They held other licences and they should have been restricted. There were quite a number of confrontations. The Police were not really able to handle it. The Fisheries & Wildlife were called in. One vessel was tied up; a local vessel was tied up at the request of the Victorian fishermen and the Fisheries were called in to try and solve the problem of who was entitled to catch scallops off Lakes Entrance.

The Victorian fishermen felt that the Fisheries had made the move of tying up one of the local vessels, that when a meeting was held [for] the local fishermen, any other outsider would be told exactly what the situation was. Unfortunately in their wisdom the Fisheries of that day decided they would issue 32 local licences to the local fishermen. Now that to my mind and the Victorian fishermen (scallop licence holders), that to our mind was something that had never been done before and to give credence to just local fishermen and enable them to catch another species of fish in their area, just because it was locals, created a precedent that would be hard to overcome; but the Fisheries issued those licences to those 32 fishermen and we had the scallop fleet grow by 32. They were given a restricted licence, restricted to the Lakes Entrance area only and they couldn't proceed past Wilson's Promontory.

So all of a sudden out of the blue we had a three tier licence structure. We were told quite definitely (all the fellows at Lakes Entrance) were told they would NEVER be allowed to fish outside the local waters and would NEVER be allowed to proceed to Port Phillip Bay. That was made quite clear to them. Now at least half of those fishermen sold their licence off very quickly and went about doing the type of fishery that they'd been engaged in. We had new chums come into the game that had purchased those licences. They had to be brought into the marketing, freight structure that the Victorian fishermen had set up at Lakes Entrance. That created some problems. That created quite a few problems actually but they were all absorbed in virtually and

everyone observed the set limit that was imposed by the Victorian fishermen and everybody did, I think, quite well. The limit was dropped to fifteen bags with the introduction of the other fishermen and [as] you can appreciate, it was a drop in income to the Victorian fishermen. It all balanced out in the end and everybody was able to get rid of their catch.

In the early days you were quite lucky to be able to bring your catch in and have it sold. Because of that we had a criminal element move into Lakes Entrance. Because of the money that was involved with a fifteen bag catch, they found it easy to talk to processors and say that they would take over the freight which they did by standover tactics. They took over all the freight and if a fisherman objected, his catch wasn't processed for that particular day. It became very vicious up there. The Police were involved. One of the local Policemen was fire bombed; the gaol was fire bombed; there were sub-machine guns; there was everything on the waterfront. [it] Became a very dicey industry to be in so we did get a bad name over that but a lot of it was not the fishermen's doing. It was people seeking to exploit the industry.

I was involved on the Association at that time trying to clean up perhaps the industry and make a fair income for everybody and I found it very difficult to form a committee. Any committee man that suggested he.... or anybody that suggested they would go on the committee had his ribs broken or his head kicked in which literally happened. The Police were powerless. In fact it was found later that the Police were working with the standover people. There was quite a lengthy look at the whole situation later on and it was found that a number of Bairnsdale Police were involved and the information being passed on by the local Police wasn't getting through. So it was really not a nice place to be at Lakes Entrance and unfortunately we did get a bad reputation but again, not of our doing.

That industry continued on till 1971 when the fishing started to decline. There was a large number of boats operating out of that area by that time and as soon as the fishing did decline substantially, the risks were too great to be involved at Lakes Entrance [namely] the cost of carting the scallops all the way to Melbourne and the risk of the bar. A number of boats were lost on the bar and are still being lost at the bar at Lakes Entrance. So even though there was two local processors established at Lakes Entrance at that time, the majority of fishermen started to wind their way back to Port Phillip Bay.

JD Now the number of boats in total that are involved in scallop fishing has greatly declined. Is that true?

BUSHELL Yes. There are a number of vessels or fishermen that gave the industry away between the period of say '68 through to 1970. A number didn't want to take the risk of fishing out of Lakes Entrance and all the problems associated with that. They virtually let their licence lapse. There's quite a number that did that and some of them that were fishing Port Phillip Bay that were not then allowed to proceed out of Port Phillip Bay found that [the] a bag and a half which [was] all they were catching over that period, was not sufficient so they virtually sold their boats or they found something else to do and they let their licence lapse. So the number reduced down considerably by that time. We had probably in 1970 (I'd have to check the records) but it would be in the vicinity of about 85, all Victorian licence holders, 22 Bay restricted and 32 Lakes restricted people that were involved in the scallop industry at that time.

JD The scallop fishery in the Bay has now been closed, has it?

BUSHELL It's closed at the moment. Closed by government regulations but closed with the consent, in fact even asked for, by the fishermen.

JD Is it closed in the hope that the stocks will regenerate?

BUSHELL Yes. That's the hope. There's been a series of setbacks for the scallop industry. I think the problems we face now are the result of nature but probably 90% [are] the result of interference by government or lack of foresight I would say by research staff.

JD Is it the quality of the research that is not coming up with the right answers or is there just not enough research being done?

BUSHELL Currently the quality of research is.... or over the last five years the research information has been particularly good. You couldn't very well fault the information that has been given by fishermen and the information has come from the Marine Science Laboratories at Queenscliff. They do a number of surveys to try and determine the scallop stocks for the coming season and they have been quite close with their assessments on potential stock that's available.

JD Is there evidence that the stock is regenerating?

BUSHELL There's some evidence that it is regenerating now. The problem the industry's faced with is that the fishermen have not really had an income for some three years and they're finding it very, very hard to hang onto a vessel that's been tied to the jetty because most of them have nothing else to do. A number have branched out into other fisheries but through the turmoil that's been created with government instrumentalities at the moment you're not sure whether you can fish today or fish tomorrow. It's quite difficult to try and set up for another industry when you find that you do outlay money and then all of a sudden there are zoning restrictions or limits on catch or actual closures of fishery. It makes it very hard to go into other fisheries at the moment.

JD Those vessels would represent a very considerable capital outlay I would think?

BUSHELL Yes. I did say earlier that the average size of a vessel in Port Phillip Bay at the commencement of the industry would have been about 40 feet. The history of the industry has been that at Lakes Entrance it's recognised that the catch rate will fluctuate quite violently because it's an open water fishery and the scallops will appear or disappear with very little knowledge on what actually happens with the stocks that are available out there. Port Phillip Bay has been or is quite different. There's prolific growth of scallops at times in Port Phillip Bay but usually....

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

The Bay we find recovers very quickly and the spat [unclear] gives an indication. It's fairly easy to monitor. Neil and myself have been doing that to monitor the spat collection in spat bags [which] will give us a good indication of the yield for the oncoming season or the following season. So we found that the Bay has been quite bountiful at times and it's always been accepted by the industry that we'll have our ups and downs. We've always worked on a cycle of about two and a half good years

and approximately eighteen months of lean periods. In the past the fishermen have always done, much like I've done, the economics [which] virtually determine when you decide to tie your boat up. You tie it up [and] you get a land job until somebody goes out and starts to catch a few. You monitor what's being caught and when you think well there's enough for you to give up your land job, you come back and you start to scallop again. That had been the history of the industry that you accept those leaner periods but currently we're having a real downturn. There's been very little fishing over three years. There's virtually none existent stocks in the Bay and the recruitment is not looking particularly good for the next season either.

Port Phillip Bay is basically land-locked water and the thing that we're not sure of and MSL (the Marine Science Laboratories) are looking at this all the time, is the pollution aspect. Currently as I say the recruitment is not looking good for next year as well which would give us four years' lay off. Some of that can be put down to pollution. I think we're more concerned about the pumping out of ballast water of vessels entering the Bay. As you probably appreciate, [in] the port of Melbourne and the port of Geelong there's a terrific amount of shipping that takes place and the practice of dumping ballast water puts the Bay at risk, especially with the algae blooms, the red tide that you have in other parts of the world, but also coupled with that is the heavy metal pollution from industry from Geelong and also Melbourne.

The fishermen are of the opinion that there are different metal effects on the stocks with the amount of dredging that takes place in the rivers and Corio Bay. That dredging material is dumped out in Port Phillip Bay which dissipates as a fine silt over everything and we believe that that has quite a bit to do with the problems that we're faced with at the moment. The actual fishing in the Bay has been reduced through over fishing by fishermen and we've reached a stage where there's really not sufficient stocks to replenish. We feel now, even though the fishing hasn't taken place, that replenishment has not taken place and the growth hasn't occurred because of the pollution problems and the associated problems with that.

JD There's a view abroad that the dredging technique damages the marine eco system. Is that thought to be the case among the fishermen or not?

BUSHELL Well most of the scallop fishermen would say no. I would have to say that I've always believed that there is some damage done with the dredging. I think [the] best thing is to try and sort of go over the history of the industry after the fishing activity at Lakes Entrance from 1971 to get an insight into what has happened in the industry. There's been a number of things that have affected the fishing in Port Phillip Bay. I think we need an overall view of what the fisherman has done, what has actually happened to the industry as a whole and the effects of that.

Now when we returned from Lakes Entrance the catch rate in Port Phillip Bay was approximately one and a half bags per day. The fishermen returned in the hope that they may be able to find something because we've always found that the scallops are notorious for coming good as the saying is, and we felt that there wasn't enough boats in Port Phillip Bay to really cover.... There was only 22 at that time to really cover all the known areas. When we returned we were advised by the local fishermen that we were wasting our time but the boats came back in twos and threes and we probably.... over a period of two months, there would have been at least 50 boats returned to Port Phillip Bay. We struggled on with two and three bags. We slowly increased that then all of a sudden we started to find on our very doorsteps that we were getting terrific catches. I would say within four weeks we were catching 50 bags a day per vessel right on the very doorstep of the local fishermen that had been operating. We worked

out of our home ports. We didn't have to travel and we found that there were scallops in abundance.

For some reason just an isolated dredge working here and there didn't really seem to pick up those scallops and it needed a little bit of activity to get a bit of movement with the scallops. So that induced virtually everybody out of Lakes Entrance to come back home as we called it to Port Phillip Bay. The feeling was in the industry that we couldn't let happen that which had happened before and excessive limits and no restrictions fished the industry out and we went back to hard times again. So it was proposed by a lot of fishermen that were fishing off Portarlington at the time.... Everybody just stopped their boats. We had a meeting, I was elected as a spokesman to decide what we should do and I proposed that a fifteen bag limit should apply and I was asked to try and have that regulated by the Government. We had at that time daylight to dark fishing, a three and three quarter size limit on them but we felt that we should impose a bag limit that 50 bags per vessel was just not on, that it was going to create more troubles than we thought possible.

So I commenced to get that or to request that regulation to be implemented by Fisheries & Wildlife and was quite surprised to find that they couldn't see any reason to put a restriction on it. They felt that the scallops fluctuated and you just took them when they were there and you didn't worry about it. There was no point in fact in trying to conserve stocks. Now at this time the criminal element (if we can call it that) from Lakes Entrance decided to come in to Port Phillip Bay. They had at that time [an] all Victorian licence and were quite eligible to come into the Bay and they commenced fishing open limits which were 50 to 60 bags per day while 75% of the fleet were fishing a fifteen bag limit. We self-imposed that limit and we sought to make that limit a regulation. Now it took us some three months of very bitter fighting and many, many requests to Ministers and to Fisheries & Wildlife Directors to try and have that limit implemented.

We had at that time the situation of fellow fishermen taking 50 bags a day and we had a move then by the criminal element to tie up Port Phillip Bay as they had done at Lakes Entrance. To that end I was invited to a meeting at Werribee, a central point in Port Phillip Bay, to discuss a proposal put by the outsiders that we call them (rather than criminal element) that they should handle every scallop caught in Port Phillip Bay for all the fishermen and they would then pass those scallops on to the processors and they would then pay the fishermen. Now I used to keep a copy of that contract. It was just a blatant contract that said the processors would get what scallops the middle men decided they would get, the fishermen would have handled for them (those scallops the middle men said that they would handle) and they would be paid what price the middle men decided they would pay. Now all but one processor was prepared to go along with that proposal. They had been coerced into going along with it. They knew their factories were vulnerable and they knew how these people operated at Lakes Entrance.

In fact they had been operating with them at Lakes Entrance and they did very well operating with these people because [at] the fishermen's return the scallops are normally split and the fisherman gets a return on the yielded meat. So in fact you send your bags in and you were told the following day what sort of recovery you got. So you can see that there was quite a scope there for the middle man to say a fisherman should get a fifteen pound yield per bag, the processor could pick up two or three pound for himself and the middle man got the extra. So there was a lot of money involved. At that time we were getting about 40 cents a pound and with the number of vessels that were operating, we were operating approximately about 110 vessels in the Bay on fifteen and some of them on 50 bags per day so there was a lot of scallops

going into processors. The processors thought that they would be best.... their interests best served by working with the middle men but after some coercion they decided to go along with the Port Phillip Bay Scallop Fishermen's Association and buy their fish directly as they had always done in the past from each individual fisherman.

The move was still on to have a regulated fifteen bag limit. I received a lot of problems with the Director of Fisheries & Wildlife who would not concede that there was any merit in regulating the catch limit. He then decided that perhaps it should be a higher limit to allow the fellows fishing on 50 to not lose quite as much. We saw it as a conservation measure. He didn't seem to think conservation was important. We had a lot of problems with the middle men as I've called them before and we were only successful in getting that first major regulation because of the intervention of the Minister, Borthwick who was concerned with the policing of Port Phillip Bay. He intervened, called me to Parliament House and asked exactly what we wanted. There was a chief inspector, Harvey Child that was present at the time who was the fellow that I used to contact when we wanted a meeting. He used to arrange to pick up the criminal element which was the only way that scallop fishermen could have a meeting without somebody being recognised and being injured. So he was aware of it. He was called to a meeting and the Minister at that time asked me to go back to Fisheries and request a limit again and made the statement that he would not have the criminal element operating in Port Phillip Bay as they had done at Lakes Entrance and that an enquiry was taking place regarding Lakes Entrance and as I've said before, it was subsequently found that each and everybody was in on the scallop fiasco up there. So I went back to Fisheries and I was literally thrown out of the office and told that I would get my limit. That was the first limit that was implemented. It was a fifteen bag limit and that limit stayed in for quite some considerable time. In fact we had some of the best fishing that we had. We fished more consistently than we ever had done before and the industry got down to a fairly stable, well organised industry.

It was a few years later that scallops at Lakes Entrance were found in abundance again and a number of fishermen proceeded out of Port Phillip Bay with their all Victorian entitlement to fish at Lakes Entrance. Now that meant that those Bay fishermen that had been locked into the Bay were still, even though they requested, were not allowed to leave Port Phillip Bay. The local fishermen at Lakes Entrance put their gear on again and they fished Lakes Entrance. They used to fish limits at that time but it was found after a period that they were travelling further and further from the beds and the move was on then to increase that limit. Unfortunately Fisheries & Wildlife went along with that request that the limit be lifted. It was lifted to 30 bags a day from fifteen or twenty that they used to work on. It went to 30. It then went to 50 bags a day and very little policing. That induced the fishermen remaining in the Bay to upgrade their vessel, to build a bigger vessel so that they could get out there and catch some of this 50 bag limit. The feeling was that Fisheries weren't policing it [and] you could get what you wanted anyway. A lot of people moved into larger vessels.

The limit then was subsequently dropped and there was no limit and it was open slather in all Victorian waters. We saw vessels bringing in 200 bags a day. It caused havoc with transport. It caused havoc with processing. The price dropped to fishermen and the average fishermen were faced with the prospect of either upgrading to a bigger vessel to get their share or virtually remaining just in Port Phillip Bay. The fishing in Port Phillip Bay was declining somewhat and we then moved for a further restriction of catch limit down to ten bags a day. That brought us back up to a reasonable income but in looking at what was coming in at Lakes Entrance, the price had dropped. It wasn't a particularly good income but we put up with it and we fished on [a] ten bag limit in Port Phillip Bay whilst they were catching huge limits off Lakes Entrance. There was no thought at any time then of restricting the catch limit because of the mileage they were travelling but fishermen should be free to catch what they

could and exploit the industry as they saw fit. So we had a problem with the actual size of fishing boats in the all Victorian fleet going from average 40 up to about 60 feet per vessel. That meant they put on bigger dredges. In fact they changed the style of dredge from what we used to know [as] a bay dredge into a different dredge that had teeth and everything to make it hang on to the bottom; a heavier dredge; bigger teeth that would literally plough the bottom and hang on with the swell and the rough water that they were faced with.

That I believe brought about some of the problems we're faced with today in Port Phillip Bay. Naturally that type of fishing onslaught reduced the stocks to such an extent that there was virtually no point fishing off the Victorian coast and the majority of vessels then came back to Port Phillip Bay prematurely. They would have normally fished a full season at Lakes Entrance and then came back to the Bay when the Bay was in its peak. That was the way the industry had worked for a number of years. They came back to a lesser limit of ten bags with much increased cost because of the larger vessels and the crew that were required.

There were problems then in the industry because they felt that a ten bag return was not sufficient but we did hold that ten bag limit up to 1981. Unfortunately we were stuck with the bigger vessels who were dragging bigger dredges and a dredge of a different type in Port Phillip Bay and I believe that where we normally fished in the middle and well offshore in Port Phillip Bay, we started to have vessels going closer inshore and probably getting into weed where they shouldn't normally have been. We always held the view that the industry is best served by catching a smaller limit as quickly as possible on known beds and keeping those beds with good recruitment and not going too close in shore and to get off those beds as quickly as possible to leave the Bay virtually to the amateurs at the weekend. To that end we could see that even at ten bags we were having problems, that we should induce further restrictions. The size was dropped to three and a half from three and three quarters (three and a half inch size). We decided not to work weekends. We only worked a five day week but we still kept the ten bag limit and we fished fairly well at that up to about 1980. Then we had a down turn which we would normally expect by that time. We'd had a very good run and the industry sort of suffered after a long time its first sort of downturn. Unfortunately those vessels that were more expensive to maintain were a more expensive object to tie up to the pier so we did have some problems them.

Your question about dredging, I feel that was the point where fishermen turned away from the traditional bay dredge which I believe lightly runs across the Bay floor and doesn't sort of plough down if you can use that expression, but dig deep into the sea bed to extract the scallops. We virtually take what are on the surface and we used to always work continually over and over the same ground. With this newer type of dredge it was found that we very quickly got what scallops were available and we moved on to other beds instead of going over and over the same areas, the traditional areas. So it did alter the type of fishing and [to] your question about harm, because we can't remain on our known beds we are going into areas that we would normally not have fished in and therein lies the harm. We're getting in closer in shore. We might hit weed that we would not normally work in and the fishermen work with their bigger boats a lot harder than we worked with the smaller ones so I would concede that there is an element of harm there but an element that can't be corrected by changing that type of dredge or the fishing method that's been employed.

Now the unfortunate situation that arose from 1980 on, it was a downturn, that because of the lay-off and fishermen sort of finding other work and just lightly fishing, we found in 1981 the Fisheries Research people decided that there was untold quantities of scallops available on the eastern side of Port Phillip Bay. In fact they even

had it worked out to the number of bags, the number of kilos and it worked out to millions of dollars; seven to ten million dollars worth of scallops that could be caught, enough for the next five years. Their attitude was that this is a resource that should be exploited, that a ten bag limit falsely increased the price to the public of scallops and if the beds were exploited heavier, then the price would drop and the public would benefit and there would also be greater export earnings for the Government. Now myself as representative of the industry lobbied very hard on the basis that we should not over exploit the beds. It's always been our experience that if you try to extract too quickly scallops that are available, then you kill more than what you actually take. That's always been our experience but we were told by the powers that be, by the Government and by the Minister that it must be exploited and when we refused to exploit them and said we would catch only the regulated ten bag limit, we would not consider their proposal of doubling to a twenty bag limit, we were told then that if we didn't catch them, they would bring in Lakes Entrance fishermen who would be entitled under the normal licence situation, to fish the Bay. To that end a secret meeting was held at Lakes Entrance from which all Victorian licensed fishermen were excluded except myself. They let me in after some sufferance but all other licensed fishermen were excluded. The Lakes Entrance fishermen were told if they proceeded to Port Phillip Bay to catch the bonanza (as it was put) they would probably get an all Victorian licence and lose their restriction.

Of course the attitude was, "Lets get to Port Phillip Bay" so we were forced to fish a twenty bag limit. There was no point trying to hold ten bags while Lakes Entrance were catching twenty. We'd been through that exercise before. The industry started in '81 on a twenty bag limit. We all caught well. Everybody did very well. We caught the limits quite easily for that year. The next season we started there was not a scallop to be caught on those beds. They were dead. It had been decimated. There was nothing there and the Port Phillip Bay and all Victorian licensed fishermen were forced to fish in other areas other than those supposedly abundant beds. That had lost a lot of area to the Port Phillip Bay fishermen. We found that we all fished as a group in anything we could find and we started to rove around rather than just fish in our own areas that we'd been traditionally doing for about the last five years.

At that time Lakes Entrance fishermen tried to enter the Bay again. They were told that there were no stocks there but they wouldn't believe that so they came down and forced their way into the Bay and they were then evicted by Fisheries & Wildlife but the Minister in her wisdom (who was Joan Kerner at the time) decided that all Lakes Entrance fishermen should receive something. She conceded that there was very little fishing to be had in Port Phillip Bay, that we were in for a bad time; conceded that errors had been made with the projections by her research staff but Lakes Entrance fishermen were having a bad time as well and to give them some consideration she said that no dual licence holder or all Victorian licence holder was allowed to fish Lakes Entrance area.

So that had the effect of the Lakes Entrance fisherman having their area up at Lakes Entrance which wasn't particularly good that year, having it themselves but the effect that was missed by the Fisheries is that all those larger vessels who would normally leave the Bay and fish outside (and that relieved the pressure in the Bay) were not able to leave, so they continued trying to make a living out of Port Phillip Bay. Now that again gave the general public the impression that we were damaging the Bay and we were. We had vessels that were too large for the Bay operating with dredges. I've always held they're not the right type for the Bay. We went around and we extracted anything that looked like a scallop. The Fisheries were sick of trying to police it, police the size, and at a request from the majority of fishermen in the industry that there should not be a size limit, the Fisheries conceded there shouldn't be a size limit but when the size got down too small, they would close the Bay but unfortunately it didn't

happen. Many fishermen were fairly desperate by then and we saw sizes of scallop taking that we would never believe possible that they would be taken. We got back to a situation where scallops were being sent in and falling through the table again and going down to the tip. So we literally decimated Port Phillip Bay.

We've had a couple of years where it's recovered but with the size of boat that now operates in the Bay and the lack of scallops that have been available off Lakes Entrance and they've had their bad times. After the last three to four years they've had very little scallop production up there [and] we've found now through necessity the vessels are all working Port Phillip Bay instead of proceeding outside. I believe that the dropping of the limit outside [and] the doubling of the limits in Port Phillip Bay have put us in the position where all that conservation work done by fishermen in the past has just gone down the drain and we are not in a position now to recover. We find now that with pollution problems and algae problems (the heavy metal and algae problems) we find now that the recruitment hasn't been particularly healthy and we just haven't had the quantities or a good healthy scallop to replenish the Bay and we have not seen the Bay now being a commercial operation for at least the last three years. This year again looks to be impossible to fish so that would make four years without virtually any income by the scallop fishermen, the majority of which haven't any other licence other than to scallop. So they've virtually gone and sought an on-shore job or they've attempted to diversify.

JD Are the licences transferable in the scallop fisheries?

BUSHELL Yes the licences are transferable. They weren't originally in the early days and up to a couple of years ago they were transferable but they were cancelled on the sale of a vessel and then re-issued at the discretion of the Fisheries & Wildlife but it was virtually an automatic thing that they were transferable but now they are, by legislation, transferable.

JD What would the current price of a licence be?

BUSHELL Well in the peak when we were doing quite well, and that would have been '81 when the scallops were very prolific, they recovered again, I've got to think now, in '84 they weren't too bad. The value of an all Victorian licence probably went up to about the \$200,000 mark because it was felt even though there were down turns, the scalloping would recover again. Nobody expected the downturn we've got now. Currently [it is] very hard to say what the value of a scallop licence is. A large number of fishermen have gone to the wall. Their boats have been repossessed or taken off them or they've been forced to sell them and very little has been gained on the sale of a licence; probably \$20,000 - \$25,000 if somebody's prepared to take a gamble that the scallops will recover again. Those that are gambling are old fishermen who have seen them recover in the past and are prepared to take a gamble that they will come good again IF we look after it. These people are now saying that we must look after and conserve the stocks that we have there.

It was unfortunate that even though the research team at the Marine Science Laboratories were doing a good job and were very accurate with their assessment, they always held the view that there are X million number of scallops there, we only need a small quantity to replenish the Bay and you should take them, and take them as economically as possible which meant catching high limits for a short period. This was rammed down our throats at meeting after meeting that that is the way to go. It should be an economical exercise....

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

TAPE 2 SIDE A

Now the current situation with the industry is that there is a recognition now that even though we'd always been encouraged by the Fisheries & Wildlife to exploit to the maximum the scallops that were available, the recognition is there now that in doing so and trying to do it economically in as much as doubling the limit or trying to catch them in two months, we would normally take four. That does kill more than what we take. It does induce damage and the feeling is now that even though the Science Laboratory Research people have been spot on with their assessments, recruitment is not looking good, but that we have to get back to a situation where the fishermen should be recognised, it should be recognised that the fishermen are prepared to restrict their activities to enable the scallop population to increase and get back to a situation where the fishermen can get their catch fairly quickly and then move off the beds [and] tie their boats up so that the Bay is available for amateur fishermen and pleasure craft because there's been a terrific influx in the number of amateur fishermen and also pleasure craft.

I think we have to get back to that situation that we can quickly get that limit. To do that we will probably not fish this year I would say and we'll have to look very closely at fishing next year but the risk in doing that is that we will not have been active on the Bay then for some four to five years. The fishermen hold the view that if we don't do something in the fishery then it will be very easy for bureaucracy to say, "OK it's not worthwhile having a scallop fishery. Let the fellows go and find something else to do" and the scallop fishery will terminate. That's what we're concerned about. I think there is a feeling that even though it's not looking particularly good at the moment, the small stocks that are available are quite healthy. We should be allowed to restrain our fishing activity to allow them to grow, allow them to replenish the beds and then fish again.

It would be heart breaking to have gone through four to five years without any income to find [out] through the politicians or by Fisheries & Wildlife that they feel that the amateur should be heard and the Bay should be left for pleasure or amateur fishermen. It would be quite disappointing because it is a huge industry and a great export earner, the scallop industry. There are still some 90, 95 fishermen who have vessels that are tied to the pier who couldn't afford not to have those vessels working in the scallop industry. Again it's a huge amount of capital that has been tied up and the fishermen have seen to tie up in the hope that the industry will come good again. I think that has to be recognised.

JD Do you think the Department is taking more note now of the fishermen's organisations and their point of view?

BUSHELL No, I don't at all. Fisheries or Conservation Forest & Land officers, as they are now, were involved with Forests & Lands. We now have senior officers who know very little about the fishing industry. They come from forestry or some other facet and I think that is a trend that is always evidence with a labor government that they tend to pull down a recognised authority, mix them up or bring them in with some other authority and then bring people into that authority in a position of power that don't have the knowledge that is required. There is a lot of people with experience in the CF&L who are not given the opportunity to aspire to the higher positions because somebody else comes in from an area with absolutely no knowledge because he's a good administrator. They have no knowledge of the problems connected with fisheries

and they make a decision on the basis of political expediency and unfortunately I think that is the trend that even though there are current moves for the Government to inject some capital into fishermen's organisation, supposedly to give the industry a voice, I believe the situation is now that the Labor Party is obsessed with implementing their own ideas and are only giving lip service and want to be seen to be giving a hearing to fishermen by setting up these organisations.

They are encouraging discussion at grass roots. They're going out of their way to set up organisations. They're setting up committees and requesting information. They're requesting input but that is only on the basis that having requested it, we can now say that we have given you every opportunity to hear but we'll still make the same decision we decided to make in the first place. So unfortunately my personal opinion is that this socialist attitude of doing lip service to the grass roots level is only on the basis that they can't argue that we didn't hear them. Sure we made a decision they're not happy with but they can't argue we didn't hear them. Unfortunately I think that's the situation.

JD Is there in Victoria now a Director of Fisheries?

BUSHELL Yes. There's a Director of Fisheries. You've got Conservation, Forests & Lands and you've got a commercial fishery section and that is headed by a director, an assistant director.

JD Does he have background in fishing or fishing research?

BUSHELL No, no. I believe that he's there just to implement the political decisions of the day. We find it very, very hard and very frustrating to talk to the Assistant and the Director. They make a political decision and they stand by it. I can cover that perhaps with another industry that I've entered into such as mussel farming but I think there are people in the.... officers in the commercial fishing who have the knowledge and the intent to try and do something for the industry but up to date, all I can see is that a political decision is made and there is absolutely no thought given to the good or the ongoing future of the industry. It's the political decision of the day and unfortunately socialism says that the owner or the user must pay and they are more concerned with exploiting the user of that resource, supposedly to the benefit of the public, than they are to look at the long term future of the industry.

JD Could we turn to this new venture of yours - mussel farming? Could you fill us in a bit as to what happens, what sort of lease you have and so on?

BUSHELL Right well in 1981/82 quite a large sum of money was made available to the Marine Science Laboratories to do studies into the feasibility of growing mussels in Port Phillip Bay. There'd always been dredging of mussels in Port Phillip Bay and the mussels are quite prolific. They decided to see whether mussels could be commercially grown, cultivated, in the Bay such as they are in Spain and elsewhere around the world. To this end experimentation was done over a two year period to see if it was feasible and it was subsequently found that yes, mussels do grow extremely well in Port Phillip Bay. In 1982 interested parties were advised that they could submit [a] proposal to the Commercial Fisheries for the right to cultivate mussels in Port Phillip Bay.

Now I thought at that time that the scalloping wasn't looking particularly good even though I wasn't greatly concerned that it wouldn't recover. I felt that here was something to get into. It would be passively harvesting Port Phillip Bay instead of virtually fishing wild stocks. It held a great escape to use a bit of ingenuity and it was

something that my son who was coming on could get into and would be something the public, amateur fishermen and fisheries officers, would look at as being making a better use of the Bay than actually dredging over the beds and exploiting the wild stocks of scallops. I submitted a proposal. We had to outline the capital outlays, the experience we had, the type of apparatus we would develop. It was quite a lengthy submission. I think mine was about twenty to 30 pages. It took quite a lot of effort to put it in not knowing the criteria that would be used. I was fortunate enough to be selected to have a permit to experiment with mussel culture but unfortunately they saw fit to issue 22 permits; well above I believe what should have been [laughs] a number of farms that would be operating on an experimental basis.

We were asked to experiment over a three year period. We were given an experimental permit to conduct our operation over that period. At the end of that three year period we would be assessed and if it was felt that we had contributed sufficiently and we could economically proceed, then we would be given a licence to cultivate fish and molluscs in Port Phillip Bay. Now there was no limit on the type of activity. If we wanted to have a look at salmon farming, we could. If we wanted to go [and] have a look at abalone, we could. There were no restrictions and we would receive a licence. Now we experimented over that period. We found that the Fisheries officers couldn't really implement a show cause provision. As has always been the case in the past, you can't say what has been a fair and reasonable effort. So all those fishermen remained in and most of them had expended quite a substantial amount of money. I think myself at that time, I would have put in about \$150,000 over the three year period. I had sold my scallop boat and I was working seven days a week on the cultivation of mussels.

Now to give you an insight into what actually happens with mussel cultivation in the Bay, its a matter of laying heavy concrete mooring blocks either end of a hundred metre long line line as we call it which virtually sits on the surface suspended under flotation buoys. Now those buoys are just tied along that floatation line and they keep that long line just below the surface of the water. From that hundred metre long line we tie what we call drop lines which are usually five metre lengths of mussel growing ropes. Now initially you have to catch spat and the Bay has been quite a prolific provider of mussel spat as we found in the earlier days that our ropes were inundated with spat. We had no trouble catching spat. Once you catch that spat which is of a microscopic size, you find that you catch approximately 3,000 mussels per metre of rope. They grow to a size of about twelve to fifteen millimetre and then they start dropping off because its just a huge mass of mussels and they can't support themselves on the rope.

So at that stage we pull them out of the water, we separate them, we grade them into a size and then we hang them back on a growing rope. We have to hang them back in a density and this is where the experimentation has taken place, in a density that will give them the best growth rate and the best meat yield over a period. Initially [when] we started we didn't know how long they take to grow. In some parts of the world they take two years for a spat to grow to a marketable size but we found that we put our spat collectors out in June, they stayed there and they became [a] transferable size which is twelve to fifteen millimetre in about January of the following year which is only just over six months. Then once they're transferred onto growing ropes and thinned out, we harvest those about October which is about nine months. Now that is phenomenal growth and it does produce one of the best mussels I think of anywhere in the world. It's a fantastic product.

JD Is there any form of feeding them or fertilising them to make them grow quicker?

BUSHELL No, no. The Bay's full of nutrient. They filter food, plankton, they filter their food out of the water and all you have to do is to maintain your growing ropes which means maintaining your buoying on the long line and just basically keeping a good eye on the mussels as they're growing so that they sort of do maintain a good healthy rope without any gaps in it. If we do get gaps in those mussels there's not much you can do about it but that induces the rubbish to grow on them. You get cunje and weed growing on them and then your line deteriorates and you get a poor quality mussel because of that fouling that takes place. So there is a bit of husbandry that is required and you need to be prepared for the rough weather that we have in Port Phillip Bay. That's the problem we have with surface apparatus. We do get very rough water in the Bay and that makes it very hard to be sure that you're going to get a crop at the end of the year. The better the crop, the greater risk of having that crop shaken off the ropes. That's the risk we have. We can never be sure that we will exactly harvest that quantity which is on the ropes in good condition. So it is a fairly high risk venture.

We've got problems with algae bloom. We have [a] problem again with pollution in the Bay and one of the prime problems is the pumping out of ballast water out of ships that are entering the ports of Melbourne and Geelong. That is of course being looked at but at this stage there is not a great deal that's being done, I feel, to stop that pumping out of ballast water as vessels go up the channels in Port Phillip Bay. There is also the TBT anti-fouling which most of those larger vessels have on. There has been a restriction placed on commercial fishing vessels and amateur vessels under a certain size in Victoria but the biggest problem we've got is the amount of TBT that is being released by ships plying to the ports in the Port Phillip Bay. That's a problem that we think will be compounded as the years go on because it does greatly affect shellfish.

JD Do you grow anything else beside the mussels on the ropes or on the farm at all?

BUSHELL At this stage the total production of mussels which would be just a little less than a thousand tonnes, they're all being sold fresh. There is nobody at this stage prepared to invest money into processing to process that product, the mussels.

JD So you just take them from the ropes, take them ashore and, what are they auctioned or sent to a processor or a factory or how does it happen?

BUSHELL No. They're pulled off the ropes and then they are declumped with machinery and cleaned until they're separated. Then they're put into bins and taken to.... the majority going to Sydney but Melbourne sales are increasing and they are just distributed to middle men who then re-sort them and send them off to their particular markets which are usually restaurants or the fresh market sales. They just handle those and they know best where they would be placed. So some of the fishermen of course sell directly but with that sort of tonnage they have to be handled by somebody else. So we, at this stage, don't have distributors. The people involved with re-selling, retail wise, they come down and pick up from the jetty the catch that's processed for the day.

JD Bruce in the mussel farming, is the return that you as a producer get a reasonable return on the effort and capital that you've invested?

BUSHELL Well currently it would be considered reasonable taking in all the risks but only reasonable on the basis that they're only two or three farms that have gone into heavy production. They're find that they can probably handle their production with the outlets that are available at the moment. There has been a restriction on growers over the last few years induced again by Government so that we haven't really got up to the production we would have expected. So you would say, yes it is a reasonable

return but it is a very labour intensive industry and it is a high risk industry. You can never be sure that you will be able to harvest that crop. We have had, two years ago, an algae bloom that rendered the total crop unharvestable. It wasn't poisonous but it gave a bitter taste to the product and it was just not edible. So there was a total loss of a good crop.

There would be, I suppose, 70-75% of those people in mussel culture at the moment who have not had a reasonable return or any return since they started. There has been a huge outlay. It's a very expensive business to be in. We find that cost of chain, blocks, the handling and laying of all that mooring equipment, it's quite heavy. We're looking at heavy chain. We now import chain because we've gobbled up all the available cheap chain that's been around. Rope is not cheap. We use heavy horse rope. We use a lot of drop lines. We use tie ropes to tie these drop lines on. We use skewers that we put through the drop lines to try and stop the mussels sliding off. We use a socking apparatus when we thin out the growing mussel onto the rope. We use that to envelope the rope so that the mussel doesn't fall off and that socking then dissolves and leaves the mussel attached to the rope. That's how we do the thinning so that we get the required density.

As I say, you've got crew. Most of the work is done by hand. We're only just becoming a little bit mechanised but at this stage it's all experimental so we don't know exactly which direction we should go but there is not a great deal of enthusiasm at the moment and there hasn't been for a few years to allow you to take a chance on the capital outlay that is required so that you could harvest that crop mechanically and easily and be prepared to put in the type of volume to induce a processor to become involved in the industry. So it's a catch 22. We sort of lack confidence, processors are not prepared to move because of that confidence we lack and we find that a couple of farmers can do fairly well but 22 mussel culturalists are just not going to survive at this stage as far as I am concerned, anyway.

JD Bruce before we finish, is there anything else that you'd like to have recorded on this tape?

BUSHELL Well I seem to dwell on the Fisheries officers or the political, I should say, the political aspects of trying to fish in Victoria. As I said before, I went into mussel farming because I thought that would be recognised as a passive way of harvesting the fruits from Port Phillip Bay but I found, particularly since the Labor Party came into office, that we have virtually lost most of everything we started with as experimenters and having outlaid considerable amounts of capital and a lot of hard work to get us to the situation where we proved we could commercially grow and that mussel cultivation was viable, we found that we've seen the Government back pedal on every promise that was made to us in as much as we were told that if we got out there and pioneered the industry, we would receive a licence to fish.

That licence was not forthcoming. We now operate under a permit. We lost the right to cultivate any species. We now can only cultivate mussels with a special endorsement to cultivate oysters only in specific areas and we've found that that which we thought we had which was a permit by the Conservation Forest & Lands Commercial Fishery Section to cultivate mussels under the guidance or under the jurisdiction of the Port Authority, we now find that the Commercial Fishery Section have seen fit to say that they will control the whole industry, they will lease the area of water from the Port Authorities and they will administer the whole thing. What has happened is that they've said now that particular parcel of water that we administer, that we have control of, belongs to the public and the public must be compensated for that water that you're using as a culturalist and to that end we should set up a lease agreement.

That lease agreement should say what your permit entitles you to. We felt that we had a permit, or in fact we were told we'd have a licence that would be ours in perpetuity.

We now find in actual fact that we are faced with a lease agreement that says, or originally it said that our leases would be tendered off after fifteen years, we could occupy that water if we paid a commercial value for that water and at the end of fifteen years the actual lease would be terminated and it would then be tendered off to the public. We fought that tooth and nail and we find now that even though we haven't signed the final lease agreement, it's a very binding contract that says in part that we will pay any fee that's levied by any government instrumentality, we will do anything the Minister requests. We cannot use any port facility unless we build our own. We must pay a commercial value for that water which will be assessed by the tendering off of leases for new people to come into the industry.

So in effect, if we build up the industry and it becomes viable and we get processing going which will only happen if we put in more money and get everything mobile, then we'll be faced then with a number of new people coming in being successful tenderers for new leases. So we'll be faced then with a greater number of fishermen vying for those markets which we'd finally hoped that we'd got. We'd be in a situation where we could be played off again by processors and we would be faced with the reality that if an incoming culturalist is prepared to pay the Government X amount of money for a lease because we're doing well, then our commercial value will be that figure. So in other words it was exactly the same, or it is exactly the same as tendering. If I don't pay that figure that is regarded as commercial value then I must walk away from that lease [and] my permit will be terminated. Now the Fisheries still haven't presented a final copy of the lease agreement but they are saying that perhaps we could have a fixed rental for a period now which is something we said we have been quite prepared to pay a fair and reasonable fee but the Victorian Government is obsessed with economics and they're advised by economists who say the public must be compensated [for] the use of that water irrespective of what the people do but if they do well, we want more. We find that it's very hard to put a value on a piece of water when you're still pioneering and trying to experiment with that water, when we have competition now from New Zealand who are our main competitor and Tasmania, who are able to get approximately eight to twelve hectares of water for some \$200 per annum without any other strings attached wherein we have to pay.... the figure will be in excess of \$5,000 for the services for using [the] six hectares we have, that we will have to pay that fee and we will have to probably pay....

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

TAPE 2 SIDE B

BUSHELL Right now as I said before, our main competitors have a very large monetary advantage above Victorian culturalists now and we will never really be sure of that fee which we will have to pay anyway. We will never be sure of what fees might be levied on us. We find that we can't use the local jetty to handle our product, that we have to pay for what we use and in fact we can't really use the areas to wash and clean our mussels. We will have to do that elsewhere. [we] All have to pay for our own jetty so we're being hit with fees that our competitors don't have at all.

Another effect of this intrusion, I put it, by the politicians through the Directors and Assistant Directors of the Commercial Fisheries Branch is to stop us having the confidence to put the money that is required to get the whole thing moving. Processors know the situation we're in. Processors cannot be sure that we'll be there

tomorrow so they don't gear up to handle our product so at the moment we're still selling all our product as a fresh product. That restricts the number of tonnes that can be produced and handled because the competition for that.... a relatively small market. It's not a great market.

Also tied up in this lease agreement that we're expected to sign are.... In fact my permit has been withheld from me because I objected that when I paid my permit fee I was duty bound to sign the lease agreement even though I hadn't read the final agreement and I objected to that and my permit has been withheld so I currently cannot grow a crop this year because of that objection.

I believe it to be a valid objection and I think you should be allowed to object without having your livelihood just terminated and held like that.

Also in that lease agreement is a very fundamental problem and a floor that the economist has included, we operated originally on three hectares and it was agreed by everybody concerned that three hectares was not a viable proposition because of the capital outlay required for gear and equipment and also the restriction on the density that you could have on these hectare leases that we should have six hectares. It was agreed by all parties, commercial fisheries as well, but in their wisdom they have insisted that in the lease agreement a farm of three hectares should be saleable. Now this gives them the right to tender off three hectares instead of six even though they had agreed you needed six to be viable. That puts us in a situation currently very, very similar to the scallop situation where we have multiple licences. It has created a lot of bitterness, a lot of problems and has put the scallop industry in the situation it now faces because of over exploitation.

We now find that the culture industry is faced with having a multi-permit structure. We will have farmers supposedly being given a permit for six hectares gratis We will have farmers who will purchase three hectares off some of those farmers who are not doing particularly well at the moment, who will have to purchase those and they will come in on the basis that they've had to pay for their three hectares. They will also say in a very short time three hectares are not viable and they'll be screaming to the Government to increase the acreage. They will also be saying to the Fisheries, "Why did you knowing that three hectares is not viable. Sell us or tender off three hectares"; but it also gives the Fisheries the ability to exploit the highest possible price. You will get a higher tendered price for three hectares than you will for six. It will also bring in a greater number of operators which will put additional strains on the marketing. There will be more people clamouring for that market. There will be less, or there will be more people and it will not exercise restraint. They won't look ahead and say, "OK I've got six hectares, I'll just farm three and try and see how the markets go". You'll have more people on three hectares saying "I'd better go for it".

It will create turmoil for years to come. Those people that have tendered in for three will find that they can't compete with those people that are geared up for six hectares and you will find the people that purchase three hectares will be in a different situation again from those that tendered a high price or whatever price to get into the industry. I believe it's a recipe for disaster. Fisheries say that we must pay for the resource because we will be the users of that resource and setting up a situation where they can exploit that resource and exploit that pioneering and the proving of a culture industry exploiting that. If we do well they can tender off leases and that money goes into their coffers. It puts the farmer in a situation where he really can't sell his lease because if he has somebody offering \$150,000 for his lease, then the Fisheries will say, "Oh well there's some buyers out there. We'll tender off another couple" and they

receive that money rather than the fishermen. So it really puts a damper on the whole industry.

I believe that when those leases are signed a number of fishermen will sell immediately three hectares and you will fragment the industry and I don't think it will ever recover. I think it will mean that we'll get back to hobby farming and we will not get back to farmers growing a maximum potential crop on six hectares which would encourage processing to take place because there would be an abundance of mussels and we will just have hobby farmers selling for cash. I believe that that will be the situation where you have this user pay syndrome and the Fisheries tying us down with lease agreements and expecting us to still outlay that capital for our sons.

JD Is it the case Bruce that six hectares is the upper limit that anyone can hold?

BUSHELL Six hectares is the maximum you can receive for a permit but if you wish to purchase somebody else's holding, of course you can increase but six hectares is the maximum on a commercial permit.

JD The permits or the licences probably more so, have a commercial value then for sale to outside people say or to another licence holder?

BUSHELL Yes it is a permit only and a permit of course is subject to the discretion of the Minister and therein lays a lot of problems as well. The Fisheries have sought to do that by saying, "Well this is why we'll give you a lease agreement. A permit is issued annually at the discretion of the Minister but we will give you this lease agreement that says that you will have a permit for 21 years" but tied up in that we've got all these other problems which induces a lack of confidence in the industry. They are definitely not a licence. It is a permit only which in our case, we will have a lease agreement to say it is valid for 21 years and not twelve months only and that is supposed to give us confidence.

JD Anything else then that you'd like to say?

BUSHELL No. I think I've winged enough [laughs].

JD Thank you very much Bruce. It's been very, very interesting your talk.

BUSHELL Thank you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Bruce Bushell, scallop fisherman and mussel farmer of Portarlington, Victoria.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Edited transcript of an interview with **GEORGE CASEMENT**

INTRODUCTION

This interview with Mr George Casement of Mallacoota is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry. The interview was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Casement's home in Mallacoota on the 15th March, 1990.

Mr Casement is a third generation fisherman. His son too is a fisherman and his grandson appears likely to be the fifth generation of the family in the industry. The Casements have engaged in many forms of fishing including prawn trawling, beach fishing, sharking and netting in the lakes and estuaries. George Casement is a concerned fisherman and in this interview voices many of the concerns he and his fellow fisherman here have for the industry.

He comments on the need for research and good management and enforcement, environmental problems and the rights of tourists and anglers. In all this he adopts a balanced viewpoint which adds value to what he has to say.

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

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD George could you record your full name please?

CASEMENT George Phillip Casement. I was born at Bairnsdale on 19th February, 1927.

JD And were you brought up in that part of the world?

CASEMENT I lived at Metung which is about twenty miles out of Bairnsdale and spent my early life there until about the age of seven or eight. Then we started coming to Mallacoota for the season here. The Lake was open for five and a half months a year and closed for six. We came down and stayed at Mallacoota from then on because we had the lake open to netting over the winter. We used to work the fishing in winter and through the summer my father used to rig the gear and I'd run a few parties and do hooking (fishing) trips and carry on over the year. That's the way it eventuated, how we were.... how I got to Mallacoota in the long run.

JD George, obviously your father was a fisherman, and was his father a fisherman as well?

CASEMENT Yes. My father fished here before the First World War in about 1910 and he came down and fished here with a chap by the name of George Croft. Then when the First World War opened up, they both went to the War and he never came back to Mallacoota until, as I say, we started when I was about seven or eight coming to Mallacoota and started fishing again. His mate, George Croft, was killed in the War. Then as dad fished right through and more or less taught me all he knew, and as he got older and we got in our teens, early teens more or less, (my brother and myself), we sort of branched out on our own and started doing a bit of outside fishing. We used to have little twenty odd footers open boats, 21 I think was the main one we had and we used to go down to Wingan and all those places and to little ports along the coast. There was very little restrictions (fishing regulations) on it then so you used to take [a] net and sort of get a bit of beach fishing and that eventually led into all beach fishing. We fished the beach for years.

Then as it declined we went into craying, little bit of sharking. There was no restrictions on licences in those days so you could diversify from one thing to the other. We used to work right from Mallacoota to, mainly to Eden and work our way back again. Occasionally we went to Lakes but Lakes was a bit too far for the small boats and we very rarely got down that end towards the west. Wingan was about as far as we went more or less which is about 25 mile down the coast. Eden's about 40 mile away to the east. Then around about 1949 to '50, after salmon fishing along the coast, we got to know the boys at Eden very well and my brother and myself, he bought into one trawler and my father and myself bought into another trawler at Eden and we worked for two years at Eden trawling and we were battling to pay off the boat and everything.

Eventually it had a breakdown. I came home to fish the lake with dad and we chartered the boat out until things got going right financially and this chap took it through to Lakes Entrance. I went through with him and he kicked off from Lakes Entrance sharking, then took it to San Remo and it was lost 70 miles to sea from San Remo. That was rather a bad blow to us. We lost all our money on that and had to sort of start off again [laughs] more or less.

JD When you were fishing these other ports (from these other ports), you always still had your headquarters here in Mallacoota however?

CASEMENT Home was always at Mallacoota, yes. We never ever owned a home the two years we were at Eden. We camped the first six months or nine months (I think it was) in tents and then rented a little house and stayed there but we always had our home base [which] was Mallacoota. Mallacoota has been our home right through.

JD And after you lost the trawler, you've concentrated ever since on the lakes, have you?

CASEMENT Yeah.... No we have crayed since we lost the trawler. We took up craying afterwards. My son, as he grew up, he decided to go to New Zealand and he was going to get on fishing boats over there and he went over and he couldn't get on fishing boats. He did a couple of trips and couldn't get on as permanent crew, so he went on a scaffolding job in building and constructing and while he was away I decided as all our gear had been rigged up for two handed and I was left by myself, I decided to give the craying a go. I went back craying again. We had crayed before but I got the gear out and went back craying again and did reasonably well. Then we've crayed ever since then. This was in 1975.

JD Say, early 1950s or thereabouts; the exact date need not concern us too much just now. Are you still craying?

CASEMENT My son is still craying now. I've gradually passed the boat over to him and the cray gear and he's working. Every year he works. The season is getting a little bit shorter because there's more pressure on it and the crayfish are dropping away, but he still crays at least two months every year over the season, from when it opens in November.

JD Is the bar here difficult to negotiate?

CASEMENT The bar is very difficult. When we first started off the craying, we had a little old 29 footer boat and I completely rebuilt that from an old boat and we put that onto the craying. We worked that right through and eventually it was too slow to get the extra distance, as we had to work further away, so we decided to build a new boat suited for the bar. We got a Barron 10 boat built in fibreglass sandwich balsacore. In 1980 we got it built. It's a semi-planing hull with a V8 Cat in and it allows us to get to the grounds in half the time and home in half the time. So therefore you can beat weather and get a lot more working time in.

JD It's an out and back in the one day operation?

CASEMENT Yeah. It's solely for outside fishing. We'd worked what they call a chaser boat which is daily, out and in more or less every day and we have a little tank that we keep the crays in and bring them in more or less alive and cook them here and sold mostly locally; cook them and send a few to as far as.... Oh we have sent to Sydney and to [the] Melbourne market but we've tried to use local markets more than anything, if we can.

JD How many pots do you run George?

CASEMENT We started off with 30, which was the legal limit at the time and the year before last the son brought in another nine pots (I think it was) and made eight pots, it'd come down to and made it up to 38 pots that he works now. On the scale of pots, one in every five is lost. Thus, you have to buy ten to be able to work eight.

JD So you do a bit of craying, you and your son still, but also your main emphasis was on the fishing in the lake?

CASEMENT At present the main emphasis is on the lake. We have so much trouble working the bar. Even with the new boat we still have lots of trouble working the bar and lots and lots of times it's got to be left outside the bar and we run out in a little sixteen foot aluminium boat with a 50 horsepower outboard motor because it's too shallow to get in. Other times you can get in the bar but you can't get up the channel, so we anchor our little tin boat down the channel and use it as a tender boat to run the crays up and shift it up.

JD It'd still be quite difficult to get through the bar?

CASEMENT It is, yes, yes.

JD Is the bar dredged at all?

CASEMENT They tried dredging it, not actually the bar but the channel. It worked while it was being dredged but it was a full time operation and for the amount of boats that are working here they soon scrapped the idea. Now two years ago the bar closed up altogether, which we missed out on the cray season that year altogether. The ab divers which work from here, they used the little harbour outside and put their boats in on trailers and tractors and they kept on operating from there but with our boat we never had a hope to utilise that.

JD How many people would be professional fishermen from Mallacoota, about?

CASEMENT There's, I'm not sure how many divers. I think there's somewhere round about 26 ab divers. Then there's eight professional fishermen and there's two outside boats, that's Bill Brown and our own.

JD George, what sort of fish do you catch in the lake?

CASEMENT It's a real mixture of fish. It's skipjack, luderick, bream, trevally, whiting, garfish. Nearly every estuary fish that can be caught in an estuary is caught here. You have a big variation in years but statistics have proved up until recent times that its pretty stable. It goes up and then goes down. Lots of times you think it's really going down hill badly and then all of a sudden you'll get a couple of good years and it'll come right back up to standard again. Flathead, there's a lot of flathead here but we don't catch much of that. That's mostly an angling fish.

There's a lot of pressure on us more or less to try and get more restrictions on us from the angling side. They (naturally I suppose) think that we're exterminating the fish, where a lot of it I think is, well more of it is concerned with environment than anything else. The rivers are sanding up very badly, filling up and what with pesticides and leaching out with the timber and that, I think that's got more to do with it than the actual catch rate because it's been proved over the years that any fishery, if it gets the right environment, the right amount of spawn and everything to go right, that half a dozen fish can re-populate the whole area more or less in the five, six years that it takes them to grow up again.

JD Yours would be a netting operation of course, wouldn't it?

CASEMENT Yeah. It's not open to what they call gill netting (that's set netting). It's only open to haul nets. You must haul your net. You must keep both ends of your net moving at all times. Gill netting is banned more or less altogether.

JD Does that mean you fish from dinghys?

CASEMENT Yeah we use a motor boat to tow the dinghys and we have two dinghys with little power winches in and we shoot off the shore or off a shallow bank more or less. You can work out as deep as you can stand waist deep and you shoot round in a semicircle close together and then haul the net in and you have a bag at the finish and you put your foot on the lead line and keep it on the lead line while hauling all the time and force it in together and just keep forcing your fish down till they go in the bag and tie the bag up. Then you sort through them, in the water as a rule; stand in the water and sort through them and small fish go over the side and the big fish go into your boat.

JD So you'd need at least two people to handle it?

CASEMENT They do work single handed now more because it's more profit to you if you can work single handed. You don't have to catch as many fish when you're single handed but it's much easier two handed. I've got to the stage now that I'll only work one shot myself or will work with someone more or less. I've eased off a lot now. I'd be lucky if I do two shots a week and if there's not much round, well I just don't go out and work. I only work when there's a bit of fish round and lay off the rest of the time, when the young ones have got to work more or less all the time.

JD You find a couple of shots a week's enough to provide you with a livelihood?

CASEMENT Yes it keeps us going, the wife and myself, no worries.

JD Your wife fished with you for some time, didn't she?

CASEMENT Yeah, Jessie.... Different times when things have been a bit quiet and everything and it's got harder, my wife has come out with me and worked for, oh, months on end sometimes and she's always home here to give us a lift or anything when I come home with the boxes and that.

JD What do you do with the catch, George?

CASEMENT Well when we come in with the fish, we bring them up in bins actually, plastic bins, and they come up.... We've got our own cool room now which we didn't originally have and we put them in our cool room, ice them down. We've got our own little ice making plant. We ice them down, put them in the room and we make arrangements to Eden for the truck there and we meet them at Genoa. It's either six, seven o'clock at night. We've got to run them fifteen miles to Genoa. They pick it up from there and they go on to Melbourne and they're sold in the Melbourne markets. Any time we've got fish in the room, we sell to local tourists or business houses or anything, anyone that wants fish but we refuse to hold fish back for anyone. If they're there, they buy them. We won't hold fish back to sell locally unless there's an order on the [unclear].

JD Is that just your own catch or is that all the fishermen in the bay?

CASEMENT That is our own catch. Nearly every fisherman in Mallacoota, there's one, two, three, there's four got freezers and they're the only ones that are actually working in the area.

JD And they all operate in the same way?

CASEMENT They all operate exactly the same way, yes.

JD Are you restricted as to the length of net that you can use or the number of nets?

CASEMENT Yes. With 300 fathom approximately, is the length that we've got to work. We're not restricted in depths or size of mesh, only on the actual length of the net.

JD But there is a restriction presumably on the size of fish that you can take?

CASEMENT That's right, yeah. They've all got their sizes, special sizes more or less that they're only allowed to take.

JD Is it closely policed?

CASEMENT Well it is to a point but no professional takes underweight fish because there's no way he can get rid of it. Even apart from his own, what would you say, knowing that it's not good for the industry, they'd get picked up in the market. They'd get picked up either at the wharf or when you come in or somewhere along the line before they got to market they'd be picked up so there's just no, there's no point in keeping under weight fish, none at all and we try every way we can to make sure that the fish goes over the side alive. It's something that.... it's our own livelihood. We've been in it for, well three generations anyway and looks like my grandson will be going into it. He's got three boys (my son) and one of them for sure is going into the fishery so....

JD He'll be a fifth generation?

CASEMENT Yeah. That'll be a fifth generation, yes.

JD There aren't too many families in Australia with five generations fishing.

CASEMENT It's a way of life, I think, more than anything. I've found more or less with sun and nature. We hold the licence and we take out a licence for crew members, one two or three crew members. Well they only ever work one crew member here but you can pick up anyone you want to to work with you in the time. You find that unless the person has been involved in fishing for many, many years, he is never as good a mate as the one that isn't, if you understand what I mean. It is a way of life. What you make individually per hour doesn't come into it. You go out and you do your day's work and you've got to accept what you get and you might work on, say to starvation point, for a month, two months, and then all of a sudden you'll get a bit of a boom and that'll make up the extra wages that you missed for the two months that you worked beforehand. When you've grown up that way through it you accept that, whereas the man that comes into it that expects his \$20 an hour and he goes out and he works all day and he might come in and he's only got \$20 for the day's work, he says, "This is no good for me", so he moves on [laughs].

JD Are crew on a share basis, are they?

CASEMENT They're all on [a] share basis, yes.

JD George, are the licences transferable?

CASEMENT Yes they are transferable. They've made them saleable now but it's on a two for one basis. Anyone that wants to buy in and go fishing has got to buy two licences, that's from two separate fishermen. That makes a whole licence and they've got to have two out of three years (I think it is) or three out of five, experience. So it's very hard for anyone to get in more or less. They've got to work round the crews and get that, at least two years' experience before they can buy in.

JD There wouldn't be very many licences change hands I would think?

CASEMENT As yet, there's been none in this lake. They're still being held. There's my brother holds a licence, he doesn't work it. My nephew holds a licence at Lakes Entrance. He's worked it in the early piece but he's never worked it of late years. As I say, I'm slowing down a little bit. I will eventually go out. Kitch (short for Kitchiner) Alan is another old fishermen. He's in his seventies. He'll eventually go out which will

automatically cut it down, whether they're sold or not. Those licences will just sit there more or less but they have made licences, where one time they were a way of life and everything, they've made them that they're property value now. You can sell them on a transfer basis more or less.

JD Since none have been sold, there wouldn't be a market, you wouldn't know what the market value is yet?

CASEMENT It's reasonably low at present because I think more for the reason they've got to have the two years' experience more or less to get into it. It's banded round a bit that if you could get \$15,000 for your licence at present that would be it, but it's never been proved more or less what it's worth. It's like the ab diving business. To sell their licences now, well it's a million dollars to sell it. The first year [it] went for twenty grand or something like that. Now [unclear] they just climb and climb and climb. It could be the same with ordinary fishing.

In the case of my grandson, who wants to go into fishing, I think he's only thirteen at present, well when he goes in, I'll hand my licence over to him and he'll have to buy another licence from someone else and have his two or three years' experience more or less to get in but he'll go in reasonably early because he is working with us all the time and it's all extra time being added on. He's got the knowledge and everything to go into the fishing straight away.

JD George, are there any other types of fishing done in this area?

CASEMENT Yes. Going back about, I think about eight years ago, we first got.... My son applied for an experimental licence to prawn fish. He used what they call a set state net in the entrance when the prawns run on the tide, on the dark side of it. They had to have a special licence (experimental permit) for it because the lake then closed for set netting, mesh netting or gill netting (whichever you might like to call it). You had to have a special permit to operate there and they issued an experimental permit. Well we worked about three years and didn't do much good, just got more or less a little bit of bait and that sort of thing. Then we started to get a few prawns on it and the last four years, five years, it's been reasonably good. Now they've cancelled out all experimental licences and they're going to, I think, put an endorsement on our other licences so that anyone that wants to work it, can work it, which in a way is going to cause quite a bit of chaos. There's very little room down there, down the channel more or less and if there's five fishermen working here and they all try to work five nets there, well [laughs] it's going to be drastic, especially with the amount of tourists that get down there dipping as well.

We must give way to tourists. It's something that we've got to do. There's more numbers than us and we've got to more or less let them have their go, keep away from them. There's no doubt about that. You've got to sort of be lenient and understand their position just the same as ours.

JD Do you think there's any possibility of trawling for prawns in this area?

CASEMENT We've tried out here for three years running. Not only have we tried, but Lakes boats have tried; Eden boats have tried and they haven't been able to find any prawns at all outside. It's something that really wants researched to see if it can be found in other ways but my idea is what they do is when they leave the lake here, that as they leave the lake they string through, they go north or east and as they string through they don't collect and don't stop until they reach Disaster Bay or Eden because they've been caught in vast numbers there when we've had a good prawn

year here in the estuary but there's never been anything caught outside the estuary here.

JD It looks as though the estuary might be a nursery?

CASEMENT A nursery more or less for Eden and Disaster Bay, which is round the corner in New South Wales. I'm positive that's what's happened because, put it this way. We didn't know a lot about the actual outside trawling of prawns the year before last we went to Lakes and we did fairly well there. That's the first year we ever worked but the other boats had worked out here from Lakes Entrance and Eden. They were professional prawn trawlers and they couldn't find any prawns here.

JD Do you think it points out the need for more research?

CASEMENT I think there is a lot of research needed in the lake, outside, everything. I think the whole secret is research on all these things so we can get down to it. It's like in the lake, we have big influxes at times of jellyfish and one of the worst catastrophes of the whole lot is that we get a slime, an algae which grows in the water. It grows mid-water, this one, rises right to the top and down to the bottom. Some years that top lake in the river, it kills little fish up to four, five inches long in thousands.

JD This interview continues on side B of this tape.

TAPE 1 SIDE B

CASEMENT The worst year we had on the slime, it was three years running more or less we got it, going back about eight years ago. We got people down to do research on it. I can't remember what body it was, I think some university or something on it and they came up with it, it was an algae caused through the heating up of the water and everything but that was it. Whether anything can be done about it or not is something that I don't know. It is out of my hands but it really did cause havoc the one year especially that it was here.

JD It just disappeared again, did it?

CASEMENT Yeah, it's disappeared. It's coming back again this year. How bad it will get.... How it reacts, it even stops us seineing at times, lake netting, because it's a little sediment in the water. It runs in streams and anything that goes in the water, it builds up to it and the actual hauling of the net through the water doesn't wash it out but the moment you shake your net, it falls off your net but it builds up to the strand, it locks a whole mesh off altogether in the finish. All your net does is just lift and flows like a blanket pulling through the water. At times it just stop us working altogether. We've got to try and find little corners out of the road and shoot where there's no slime.

JD It's a fairly new thing, then?

CASEMENT Not really. It has been here.... I can remember as a kid it was here. When I first started fishing it was very bad but then we had years and years when it didn't show up and if we have wet winters, it seems to flush it out. It's only in dry years more or less where it seems to come back and it gets bad. Well we do have a lot of worries in the estuaries now with algae. Lakes Entrance had a big trouble with algae but at Lakes Entrance it doesn't seem to kill the fish there. They seem to thrive on it.

They grow in vast numbers more when the algae's there than when it's not there. The garfish feed on it, bream, it doesn't affect. I think it's because they've got a big area and they can get away from it, whereas this is such a small estuary more or less that they get trapped in arms and corners where they can't get away from it.

JD And it actually kills the fish?

CASEMENT It does actually.... Where it gets in shallow water, when I say shallow water, in seven eight foot of water, and all the arms and that it actually kills the fish. It smothers them.

JD Is there any other form of pollution in the estuary?

CASEMENT In 1971 we had a very big flood, one of the biggest floods we've ever had here and flooding as a rule is an asset to the environment. It's a natural thing that you've got to have for the whole ecology of it, but that big and quicker flood, it brought down so much silt and everything it washed fish up, right up to Howe, right up to Gabo inside the thing there and there was fish died, just dried off in hundreds and hundreds. Every species you could name you could go up and find in some of those little billabongs that eventually just dried out and they died there. The flathead, it really knocked the flathead badly. They gradually climbed again. Lake weed grass never grew for eight years. It killed all the grass, the natural grass and everything. Now the grass is thicker than it ever was again and while there's grass there we've got protection for small fish. It's really good at present.

JD That's the sort of grass in the water, you're talking about?

CASEMENT The grass growing off the bottom. When the grass got killed all the swans left. We never saw a swan here for years more or less. Four years they just disappeared and as the grass started to grow, back comes the swans again [laughs] which proves that the environment looks after itself. If the environment's there, well everything will look after itself more or less. That's what I meant to say.

JD Is weather a problem here for fishermen?

CASEMENT Not in the lake so much, it doesn't affect you, but outside, yes it really does affect you outside. Easterlies is what makes the bar bad, shallows it up. When you get easterlies... We might have a reasonably good bar that you can get in and out the entrance no worries at all over the winter and then as soon as your easterlies start in what, October, November coming on Christmas, the bar deteriorates straight away as soon as you get your easterlies coming in. It does affect your working because if we have a deep entrance here, well you could rely on every year that you'd have the same season. You never know what it's going to be more or less.

Plus also another thing that affects it is, we could diversify and go to Eden and work salmon fishing. We could go out the front and work shark fishing. We could work any type of fishing you wanted one time. Now everything is.... You've got to hold a special licence for everything and it's big money now. If you didn't hang on to that licence as they came in, and you didn't keep working, ended up you can't afford to buy into them, if you know what I mean. You can't jump from one to the other unless you actually hold the licence.

JD You mentioned the recreational fishermen and the need to give them a fair go. Is there conflict between the recreational fishermen, or the amateur, and the professional fisherman?

CASEMENT There is big conflict between a small group but over the years I think its.... The local tourist that comes here year after year gradually realises the position and everything and he's.... It is a big number but it's a small percentage of the angler which is really against the professional, I think.

JD Are the anglers allowed to use nets at all?

CASEMENT No. It's about four years ago I think that they cut out the amateur net. They're allowed to use the bait net now I think which is 50 feet (six metres) or something. It's very small but they catch a lot of live bait and use a lot of live bait which once was a marketable fish to us and that's something that we haven't got now.

JD How do you see the prospects for the future fishing in this area, George?

CASEMENT I think controlled, I think it will be there forever but I think it's got to have control. It's got to have research and it's got to be looked after more or less, more than it has been looked after in the past for sure.

JD Is it being well managed now, do you think?

CASEMENT They're starting to really get in there and manage it as well as they can, more or less, but I think there should be more.... I still think there should be more inspectors sort of round the lake and looking into it, like checking up all the time more or less because it would be so easy for the law to be broken more or less and they wouldn't know anything about it until it was too late. It's no use catching them after it's done. They've got to be caught while they're doing it or before to actually stop it.

JD Is there any evidence that the recreational fishermen sell their catch in competition with the professional?

CASEMENT It does go on quite a bit, yes. We have an incident at present that's going on in the town at present.

JD Does the Government listen to the fishermen, the professional fishermen?

CASEMENT Yes they do. We get a reasonably good hearing, for sure. We're quite happy with the way.... There's a big move on at present, a lot of pressure, but it's a big enquiry which I think only good can come out of it and the truth will come out one way or the other and let's face it, we can't dodge the truth. If the industry's going down hill, something's got to be done about it. We're not here to exterminate fish, that's the last thing that.... you're wiping out something altogether. We're just here to make a living out of it.

JD That enquiry's under way, is it?

CASEMENT Yes. There's an enquiry under way at present, yeah between the estuary and bays and estuary; big enquiry that's going on. I think it'll do more good than anything really.

JD You really do need to know what's happening.

CASEMENT You want to know what's going on, yeah. There's a few fanatical men on it but I think they're found out very quickly and the truth is the main thing that you want to know and the truth's got to come out in the finish; whatever is going on, whether it want's more research, what can be done to correct it, silting up the rivers, anything that's going in off farming, the catch rate, whether we're fishing too hard, the anglers [are] fishing too hard. It's not just one body, it's the whole lot all put together which is going to affect it more or less. Our world is changing [from] what it used to be and if we can trace down any poisons or anything that's going in there, well it's all for the good if you can stop it; for sure.

JD George, just before we finish, is there anything else you'd like to record on this tape?

CASEMENT I can't think of anything just at present. I suppose after you're gone and that I'll think of lots of things, but just at present I can't think of anything. It's been very pleasant to have a bit of a natter about things that concern us all.

JD Thank you George. It's been great to talk to you and get so much information from you too. Thank you.

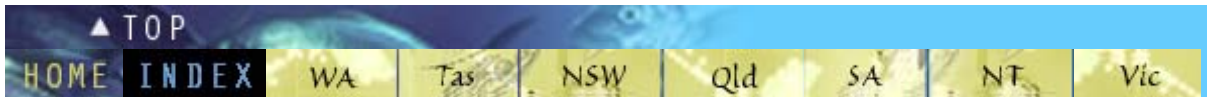
CASEMENT Thank you.

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr George Casement of Mallacoota.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





Verbatim transcript of an interview with DR WAYNE CHAMLEY

INTRODUCTION

This interview with Dr Wayne Chamley, Director of the Fisheries Division of the Victorian Department of Conservation, Forests & Land Management, was conducted by Jack Darcey in the Directors' office on the 19th February, 1990 for Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry.

Dr Chamley brought to his directorship a wealth of experience in research and planning both in Australia and overseas. In this interview he discusses many aspects of the policies it is his responsibility to administer, control techniques, the owner/operator policy in the catching sector, marketing problems including the need for an improved product presentation, as well as the apparent de-skilling of the Fisheries agencies. Pollution and the changing function and training of Departmental officers are among the many important topics he discusses. Dr Chamley's comments are both thoughtful and thought provoking. They are a valuable contribution to this project and warrant close attention.

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

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Mr Chamley would you record your full name and date and place of birth please.

CHAMLEY My name is Wayne Alfred Chamley. I was born on the 14th February, 1944 in Sydney, Australia.

JD And you are now the Director of Fisheries in Victoria?

CHAMLEY Yes. I'm the Director of Fisheries in Victoria. The Division is called the Fisheries Division and that's within the Department of Conservation, Forests & Lands.

JD How did it come about that a Sydneysider became the Director of Fisheries in Victoria? Did you join the public service here or....?

CHAMLEY Yes. I suppose I've had a fairly chequered career. I was educated in Sydney at high school in Lewisham and then went to the University of New South Wales [and] did a part time degree in science with majors in physiology and zoology. Then [on] that course I actually did a fair slice of marine biology and during those years as a tertiary student I was employed by the CSIRO in the Division of Animal Production,

later, with the New South Wales Public Health Department and eventually at the School of Wool & Pastoral Sciences at the University of New South Wales.

So having finished that I'd sort of worked with the sheep industry for several years and I came to Melbourne to work with a project team that was being set up here largely funded from the Wool Corporation. The plan was to do a master's degree and then look at changing fields or going on. At that time I actually started thinking about moving into marine biology and I wrote to places like the Scripps Institute and the Woods Hole and these sort of institutes. A number of people said, well you know, why go overseas and do the post graduate work? Stay in Australia where you've got a full time job and full salary rather than go on a stipend. So after a year with the masters I thought well I might as well do a Ph.D. rather than fiddle with a masters so I just changed candidature which meant another year of work. Then I did a post-doc with the Wool Corporation again.

By that time the chap I worked with, who was actually a medico who had got out of practice and his real strength was experimental surgery, so I started doing a whole lot of experimental surgery and got into isolating hormones and purifying hormones. We began some work with a group in Hawaii on some peptides and they suggested I should go to work with them. So in 1975 I went over there for a period of time on a Harkness Travelling Fellowship and then I came back here and Jim Goding, this surgeon, developed cancer and died within a few months. He actually went to France on a sabbatical and hardly stepped off the plane and was rushed back home and died. So I reactivated the option of going to the US. I actually immigrated to the US and went and worked in a contract research company that the State ran there.

So for two and a half years I was an American civil servant. I was planning to go to Boston and work in Boston and the Department of Agriculture here took over the laboratory where I had worked at Werribee. I came back to Australia on a visit and sounded them out about what was going to happen with this lab. They said, "Well we plan to get someone in to run it" and I said, "Well I'm interested in coming back". So I sort of had decided really that I was not going to live in the US forever and I felt well, you know, this chance is not going to come again. So I came back and joined the Department of Agriculture [and] worked there from '79 (I think it was) to about '82.

Then I came and worked in Conservation, Forests & Lands in what was the Fisheries & Wildlife Division then and I was manager of the Wildlife Branch. I was there for about two years and then I went through two other senior jobs here running corporate services for about a year and a half and did a lot of work on reorganising the Department's finances and that sort of thing. Then I set up a unit which services the office of the Minister and the Director General. I set that up over about fifteen months and the position as Director of Fisheries became vacant so I applied for that and here I am.

JD When did you actually adopt that role?

CHAMLEY I started in May of 1988.

JD What's your function as the Director?

CHAMLEY Yes well the Director in Fisheries in the State of Victoria is a position in the Act.... The various Acts in Victoria, Fisheries Act, National Parks Act etc., are subordinate to the Conservation Forests & Lands Act. So we have these Directors who are directors in name but not directors in law. The Director General of the Department is really the director of all these things in law. The Director of Fisheries, on a day-to-

day basis, is really responsible for the administration of the area and for developing the Departmental side of policy and implementation of government policy and strategies but in litigation and those sort of areas, that really becomes a contest or a litigation between a party and the Director General.

JD So you don't report direct to the Minister?

CHAMLEY No. I report to the Director General.

JD But you are still responsible for the general administration and policy within the Department as it affects the Fisheries?

CHAMLEY Yes. The brief of the Division and its Director is the general administration [and] licensing of the commercial fisheries and recreational fisheries, the development or the translation of government policy and implementation of that through Departmental policy and the general sort of well-being of the marine environment, marine ecosystems. We have a brief for that and fresh water environment, fresh water ecosystems but we don't have the licensing powers in terms of regulation of factories and discharges. That's done by the EPA (Environment Protection Agency). Our function in relation to that is to do the work on their behalf in terms of monitoring of marine environment, monitoring of water quality, sedimentation etc., providing the data to the EPA and then they set licensing criteria or revise them or prosecute or whatever.

JD Do such things as the research part of the Fisheries Division come into your.... ?

CHAMLEY Yes. Research in both marine and fresh water; the research programmes in the fresh water area at the moment are largely focused on the propagation or developing techniques for the propagation, of native fish. There's a major Government programme to re-introduce native fish into former areas of habitat and range in Victoria. Apart from the research side there's what I call monitoring which is monitoring of water quality, heavy metals, residues etc., rates of contamination and the third area is establishing the minimum flow requirements for rivers and streams. Largely this is contract work done for the Department of Water Resources and/or the Rural Water Commission where we look at an area of pristine or near pristine habitat, know what fish species are there, determine what their habitat requirements are and calculate what sort of volumes of water and what seasonal patterns of water should be maintained to let the species survive. Now that data's used by them in deciding on future impoundments and how the water from the dams should be managed etc. In the marine area, we have a brief really to do R&D related to commercial fishing, aquaculture and this monitoring of the marine environment and the contract work to the EPA.

JD How do you dovetail that marine research into the work that's being done by other bodies such as CSIRO for example?

CHAMLEY Well I'd say the only area where there is an inter-action at the moment is in the South east Trawl and there's this historical division of fisheries in Australia based on Commonwealth and States territorial responsibilities so that for any fishery occurring within three miles, the State agency has been (since Statehood) responsible for fishery. From three miles to two hundred miles they've been a Commonwealth responsibility and the Commonwealth has chosen either to adopt a State to carry out the work for it or to request a national research organisation to do the work.

Now there is a new category which has emerged in the last few years and that's fisheries managed under what are called Off-Shore Constitutional Settlement

Agreements where the species that are occurring in what is or was Commonwealth territory or waters, that the Commonwealth and the States agree on a prescribed zone and the Commonwealth assigns over the management and enforcement, licensing and research responsibilities to the State. We have that in Victoria for rock lobster, abalone and scallops. So it's only in the area of South East Trawl which is the large trawling operation, where the CSIRO and the State Agency interact to any degree.

JD Your function as Director is to ensure that the policy as laid down by Government is adhered to. What is that policy?

CHAMLEY Well the policy of the Government at the moment is really to manage the fish resources of the State for the benefit of all Victorians and to manage them on the basis of an optimum sustainable yield and to monitor the quality of the marine environment where there's clear signs of that being disturbed or the quality of the fresh water environment and there's clear signs of that being disturbed, and to advise the Government on what should be done about it. Usually the regulation of that will be assigned to an organisation like the EPA or the Board of Works because of sewerage discharge or whatever. In the Fisheries Act we don't have a lot of powers to step in there, nor do we really need them. These other agencies are quite capable of doing it but they've chosen not to duplicate marine chemistry and marine surveillance and whatever and fresh water chemistry surveillance etc. They simply contract the work to us.

Now at the moment the sort of.... when you look in the commercial area the fisheries being managed by the State are all limited entry virtually. The only one that's not would be squid which is occurring in Commonwealth waters but it's State based boats that are interested in doing it. All of the others are limited entry fisheries and I [would] say the philosophical basis at present and I don't see it changing in any great way, is to focus on owner/operator type fishing as distinct from large company fishing. So I don't see that we would ever move to a situation as you've seen in New Zealand with a small number of very big operators and really the whole of the industry being focused through the.... I'm not making any judgement on whether one's better than the other but there would be numbers of Victorians whose livelihood would be upset markedly if you had that big shift towards a company operation.

JD The desire then and the policy is owner/operated?

CHAMLEY Yes it's largely owner operated. So the boats are individually licensed or the divers are individually licensed and the transfers that take place have largely taken place between individuals.

JD Is the increase in technology and therefore costs putting pressure on that policy?

CHAMLEY Yes I suppose another element of the policy to date has been to manage fisheries by input controls. That is by regulating seasons or the size of the net or the type of pump or speed of the winch and the size of the motor. It seems to me and Australia, Governments have been largely doing that and the problem arises that the rate at which technology evolves, or develops, or improves, outstrips the speed at which the regulators can assess it and if necessary, correct it. I think we will see over successive Governments in the future a move away from input controls and a move towards output controls where fishing will move to quota type considerations. Now it won't happen within the fisheries managed by the State in the first instance. I think it will first happen in the fisheries managed by the Commonwealth but maybe into the future the States will decide to run with it.

JD It's already happening in the tuna industry.

CHAMLEY It's happening in the tuna industry. We've got it in the abalone industry here. Where we've got essentially a limited entry fishery with 71 divers and each one with a ten unit quota (one unit approximating to two tonnes). It's being sort of talked about seriously in the south east trawl. The Australian Bureau of Resource Agriculture Economics is making a big play about moving to quotas and I can see that's going to unfold.

JD One of the pressures on the policy of owner/operator is perhaps the cost of licences which for most part seem to be sold on the open market. Is that your experience?

CHAMLEY Yes but not all licences in Victoria are transferable. There are some areas of the State where the entry is limited and the licence is not transferable. There are others. A case in point would be say the Mallacoota Inlet [which] I understand is [a] limited entry fishery [with] non-transferable licences. Whereas say, in Port Phillip Bay and the scale fish area there, it's a limited entry fishery and it's actually being managed with a view to reducing licences by a two for one reduction where a new party's got to buy two existing licences but in that case transferability exists. So you're in a dilemma there with recognising the need to take effort out of the fishery and working out some system by which you can encourage the effort not to go out. To date the major fix that's been sort of jumped at by managers has been to sort of offer transferability. The trade-off has been reduce the effort which means you, you and you must leave but him and him are going to stay but the carrot for those three to leave is the transferability package so that they can capitalise on their licence.

Another aspect is that because of the high cost of the licence, the actual size of fishing boats in the all Victorian fleet go from average 40 up to about 60 feet per vessel. That meant they put on bigger dredges. In fact they changed the style of dredge from what we used to know [as] a bay dredge into a different dredge that had teeth and everything to make it hang on to the bottom; a heavier dredge; bigger teeth that would literally scour the bottom and hang on with the swell and the rough waters. By moving to quotas I think that removes a bit of that situation and it depends on how the quota is decided but you can have situations where [a] quota is decided on the catch history. In that situation the person's either got the history of having caught the fish or they haven't and if they haven't got the history they don't get a quota. So there's no incentive to increase fishing pressure there.

JD There's probably a point however, is there not, where an individual is unlikely to be able to raise the amount of capital that's necessary and therefore of necessity will become a company operation?

CHAMLEY Yes, well that is a strong possibility in some fisheries where the amount of money involved will preclude an individual from getting in. I think it's something that governments are going to have to address and I think that they're certainly going to need to have some clear thinking done on the subject because I remain to be convinced that company operations in some fisheries are going to be in the interests of the fishery. The question there would be that the whole of the sort of catch is concentrated into a small number of operators and in fact the catching sector really moves to a position where it's actually working for wages and with leasing and that sort of arrangement that goes on, who's to say who really owns the catch? I think the southern blue fin tuna's the first into that sort of thing where it doesn't affect Victoria because we don't have any quota. I've heard it said that foreign countries would be interested in buying the whole quota.

JD Is it the case that where it becomes a company operation, that is very difficult to keep out overseas ownership?

CHAMLEY That's one of the doors that open when Governments go down that road and a point can be reached where nobody really knows who owns the whole thing.

JD Does the Victorian Government have a policy in regard to overseas ownership of fisheries?

CHAMLEY None that I'm aware of, no. The fisheries are sufficiently small in scale that it's hard to see a sovereign government outside of Australia would be interested in them but in the big Commonwealth fisheries like northern prawn and south east trawl, southern blue fin tuna, there, those considerations could emerge.

JD What are some of the other areas that are prominent in your Department at the moment?

CHAMLEY Well I think a major problem sort of creeping up in the fisheries area, not only in Victoria, I think it's happening around the country, is the rate at which the agency side of fisheries management's being de-skilled. It's coming about because of low recruitment rates, an ageing group of senior experienced people and they're retiring and there aren't any careers seen by the new graduates in the fisheries area. So they're just not turning up and we see it....

Well to give you an example, at the moment I think there are five fairly senior fisheries jobs going for grabs in South Australia at this very point in time. There's a plan to move the New South Wales Fisheries Agency out of the city and I hear that there's going to be a number of vacancies [as a] result because some people just aren't planning to go. We're about to recruit two Assistant Directors under me here and based on past attempts, we will get a very poor response to that advertisement. If the country doesn't address it soon, then I think it'll just be too late. The sort of era of a sort of technocracy appears to me to be finishing and we run the risk of having an imbalance between the economic and the pragmatic manager and the technocrat who has got, I think, a better level of judgement of what's feasible and what's not feasible. So that's really something that does need to be sorted out.

The other area I think [which] needs to be looked at across the country, in Victoria but in other parts of the country also, is the whole area of fish marketing because the studies I'm aware of, the national study on dietary preferences done last year by the Institute for Early Childhood Studies is showing that girls and boys in Victoria (and I suspect it's happening in other States) in that fourteen to seventeen year group have zero seafood consumption in their diet. Now in ten years' time they'll be parents. They're not eating any themselves; they're certainly not going to introduce it to their children. So in less than half a generation you go to a zero seafood consumption. We're beginning to see the same break-out in one of our major foreign trader in seafoods, Japan. If you look at the study presented at the Rural Outlook Conference, when they look at the consumption of seafood by different aged Japanese in the 40 to 49 year old group, their consumption has remained steady between say '79 and '89 at about twelve kilograms a person. In the 55 plus, their consumptions remained steady at about sixteen kilograms per person but when you look at the 24 year olds, their consumption's dropped from about ten to six in less than ten years. They are, I suspect, going through the same pattern of dietary preference we're seeing in western countries now but we actually have got to the end of it in western countries. They're going down the road and if the seafood industry doesn't latch on to that and turn it around inside of ten or fifteen years, they're not going to see these markets. They're

just not going to be there. They're the sort of things I want to start to get on the agenda 'cause they don't have a lot of time to wait. They've got to nail it.

JD Would it be a fair comment that perhaps the prices have something to do with this preference?

CHAMLEY [pause] No I don't think it is. I think.... You go to say the Victoria Food Market [and] you can see a range of fish there which varies from \$2 to \$3 a kilo for flathead and now and then a rush of brim and that sort of thing, up to crayfish at \$20 and \$25 a kilo so there's a range of quality and there's a range of prices but the presentation has got a lot to be desired. You move up the alleyways away from the fishmongers to the chicken shop and they're selling theirs at \$2.90 a kilo to say \$5.00 a kilo but it's all white, it's clean, they're all in white coats. There's not blood and slush in the trays and it just seems to me the selling side of the industry has got to step back and look at what it's doing and present a better image of its product.

At the moment they seem to start off each morning with all the prices and the buying's not happening. Then there's this sort of almost a Dutch auction in the last half hour of the trading to clear the stuff out. Whereas it may be that better presentation and organisation of what they're doing would actually result in a steady stream of purchase for the whole period of selling. That's not happening in a lot of areas and yet I think it's fair to say the quality of the seafoods in Australia is second to none. I was in California in November/December and....

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

CHAMLEY The thing that struck me in the US was the sort of fairly heavy fishing pressure that existed there but more importantly the number of fish that were now not being consumed because of contamination by pollutants and we don't, I believe, have those problems for the bulk of seafoods in Australia. The bulk of seafoods in Australia are high quality and not affected in that way. That doesn't mean to say the public's aware of it. I don't think they're aware of the quality of the seafoods. They're certainly aware of what pollution can do and you saw the instance with the Sydney Fish Market last year where because of the problems of the pollution in Sydney Harbour, the word got around and fish sales through the Fish Marketing Authority I understand just dropped to zero for weeks. So I think the industry's really got to begin to push its image and certainly push a higher profile and a better image of the products that it's putting into the market.

JD Some time ago there was a bit of a scare about mercury in shark, was there not, in Victoria? Has that been put to rest?

CHAMLEY Yes well mercury.... There were two things running at the same time, both related to mercury contamination. One was the question of what the mercury levels were in shark and the other was the question of mercury levels in bay fish here in Victoria. In the shark situation we sample fish and run heavy metals and we make that data available to the Health Department and to the EPA. The Health Department independent of us also does what it calls the 100 fish shop survey. So about every third or fourth year they survey on a random basis of fish shops [and] run the mercuries. It looks as though the mercury levels are coming down in shark being consumed. We now know that the shark being imported from New Zealand etc. comes in having been certified that its mercury content is below the health standards. With

the bay fish, we're just right now doing another sampling but certainly since about 1978 the mercury levels in flathead (which is used as the monitor species) have been coming down. They've actually dropped by about half. So that whereas in '78 in some parts of Port Phillip Bay mercury was above the health standard, there is no location now where the mercury's above the health standard. What I hope will happen, if we can demonstrate another set of data showing it's come down even further, that the Health Department will actually remove the health warning that exists for Port Phillip Bay flathead as regards mercury.

JD Was the source of mercury ever identified?

CHAMLEY Well I suspect it's different for the different species. Where you've got bottom dwelling animals resident in a large bay area like Port Phillip Bay, which 100 years ago was used as a dumping ground for every factory in the area, paint plants and chromium plants and wool scouring and also tailings from gold mining and whatever. You had these dumps of heavy metal and it's just going to take tens and tens of years for that stuff to be moved out by tidal movement. In the case of shark it may well be that they're [a] wide ranging animal swimming into quite deep water, that they're picking it up out anywhere. It's this level of mercury in very deep water sediments that gets into the food chain and they eventually show it up. It appears to us that the mercury levels are in fact coming down.

JD Could I ask you, how do you see the prospects for the future in fishing?

CHAMLEY The prospects for the future in fishing.... I think they will be determined largely by the sort of work that's done by the industry on its own image and the way it markets its product. If the industry doesn't really recognise these dietary trends then it's threatened by a replacement, you know, red meats and chicken and pork and that sort of thing. If it does the right sort of work in marketing, then I think it will hold its own niche. So that will be one issue. The other issue will be the emergence of bigger company operations and the conflict between the company operation and the individual owner/operator. That will I think come down essentially to a question of government policy.

Another area will be the increased conflict that is likely to happen between recreational and commercial interests, particularly in bays and inlets. The forces there are things like early retirement, part-time work etc. where people have more leisure time. They are more affluent. They're able to buy an aluminium boat and outboard motor and whatever. As an activity, fishing is a very popular activity and more of them are going to be on the water. They and the commercial interests are essentially competing for the same species of fish. In Victoria and Port Phillip Bay it's snapper, whiting, flathead [and] to some extent flounder. They're both after those same species of fish. It's got to the point in Victoria where the Parliament now has a joint Parliamentary Committee which has just started a major inquiry. [the] First time ever in Victoria, a major inquiry into the management of bays and inlets. High on the agenda is that sort of a question: In what way should these areas be managed taking into account the livelihood of the commercial fishing industry and the interests of the recreational fishing fraternity.

JD What's the avenue by which the recreational fishermen on the one hand and the commercial people on the other communicate with your Division?

CHAMLEY Well it's done at three levels. In the legislation in Victoria you have a statutory committee called the Fisheries Management Committee which has commercial sector representatives. It doesn't have a recreational representative.

JD Is that purely an advisory function or does it have executive status?

CHAMLEY No it's an advisory function. It advises the Minister and the Director of Fisheries but there are a number of formal procedures which the Director or Minister's must use. These procedures can't be by-passed on a number of issues. Then under that we have sector advisory committees. So we have an advisory committee on the scallop fishery, on the abalone fishery and we are working to set one up on the rock lobster fishery. Then on the recreational side, the Minister has a Recreational Fishing Advisory Council. They give their advice to the Minister direct. They don't come to me at all. I sort of work with the organised anglers through a consultative committee below them.

JD In regard to the commercial people, are they elected representatives of the fishermen or are they appointed?

CHAMLEY Well they're in a state of flux at the moment. They have been appointed but it's about to change, or the process is about to change. The change comes about because a new commercial organisation was set up in Victoria on December 1 last year called the Victorian Fishing Industry Federation. It will hold its first general meeting around about March I believe. It will receive nominations for these positions on these various Management Committees [and] Advisory Committees. So they will be voted in. I think that will be a good thing to see.

JD Would you expect strong competition for those positions?

CHAMLEY Yes I think there's sufficient interest by the various commercial people. It won't be a cast of thousands but I would expect those things would go to the vote. It won't be a matter of just sort of trying to strong arm somebody into the position.

JD One of your responsibilities of course is to enforce the regulations. Could you comment on that?

CHAMLEY Yes well I think enforcement's another area of activity where the name of the game is going to change. It seems to me historically you've had the old fisheries inspectors and now enforcement officers. The general approach has been to carry out surveillance and in the event of someone carrying out a misdemeanour, to apprehend the person, take them to court and get a prosecution. I'd say that has worked but as we move to a more cosmopolitan society we've got various ethnic groups who don't have the same morays as people did 50 years. They've come from countries with a different attitude to natural resources and their use and whatever. Maybe the approach has got to change a bit. I think there's a need to get into the next generation by getting into the school system, getting into education and targeting their children to begin to adopt the morays of the country. It's not to say that their parents' values are defect but in the long term, they won't be accepted in this country.

I think the other area that's gonna change is that enforcement operations will move away from a 100% surveillance type activity to almost a taxation/audit type activity in some sectors; that some of the illegal operations are becoming so sophisticated that there's no way you're going to them with the current approach. Auditing and reconciliation between State, Fisheries' data and Commonwealth data is the way that we will uncover these things. The sophistication is being driven by the value of the fish product. We've got say a species like abalone commanding \$20 a kilo. A poacher in one day may harvest \$10,000 - \$15,000 worth of product. Well he or she is going to run a fairly sophisticated operation and they can afford to because of the profit they're making out of their poaching. So we have to have just as sophisticated an operation.

We've begun to do it here in Victoria. In the abalone fishery we've got a task force which is an under cover group who are constantly looking for these patterns trying to match up drivers with car number plates, police records and whatever. They don't say what they're doing but they set up situations and then bang there's a bust. I can see that unfolding into other fisheries as the word gets around. This actually results in a much better level of prosecution of the major offenders, not just grabbing the young kid on the beach but the major offenders will end up in court if they just keep going the way they believe they can.

JD This is going to put more demands on your officers is it not and require a more sophisticated approach on their part? Are they adequately trained for that increase in the sophisticated role?

CHAMLEY Well there certainly will be a requirement for more training in this audit area and the Department has a recruitment and training programme that it's beginning to work through. The way I would see it unfolding is that the enforcement officers have a few years on their belt but just [for] the day to day operations they know, they've got a feel for what goes on in the community. Then they come into the audit role for a period of time. I wouldn't throw the new starters straight into audit. I'd let them gain experience of the degree of sophistication that appears to go on in some of these poaching operations but then say well you can only go so far with that type of approach, now look at this other matter. Maybe bring the two of them together [and] you will actually end up with a better history of picking up offenders.

JD Well thank you very much and I wish you well for the future.

CHAMLEY Thank you, good.

JD That is the end of this interview with Dr Wayne Chamley, Director of the Fisheries Division of the Victorian Department of Conservation, Forests & Land Management.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with **RICHARD DAVIDSON**

INTRODUCTION

Richard Davidson is a shark fisherman out at Lakes Entrance in Victoria. He was the industry representative earlier in his career. He also fished for crayfish off Flinders Island. He's built several wooden vessels of which he is justly proud and one of which he now works himself.

In addition to recording an outline of his own career, Mr Davidson discusses the problems facing the whole shark fishing industry in Victoria, and the techniques being employed in its management. He gives an insight into the various licences and their transferability, the proposed quota system and the operation of the "user pays" principle. He also comments on pressure on the industry from overseas interests. Towards the end of the interview, he recounts some of the hazards that confront fishermen in these waters, and finally he returns to the satisfaction of creative boat-building.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry and was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Davidson's home in Lakes Entrance on 13th of March, 1990. There is one side of one tape. The interview starts at 0.20 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Richard, would you record your full name, please?

DAVIDSON Ian Richard Davidson.

JD And what was your date of birth?

DAVIDSON 29.12.1948.

JD And where were you born?

DAVIDSON Ferntree Gully, Victoria.

JD And did you grow up in Ferntree Gully?

DAVIDSON No, I was there for very few years, and then moved to Genoa in east Gippsland, and then to Gypsy Point on the water, and from there I was sent to boarding school in Melbourne, at Caulfield Grammar, for six years of boarding school. After I left boarding school, I decided that I wanted to go farming, so I went

jackarooing up in New South Wales, first in New South Wales, and rode bullocks and carried on like any kid with a bit of go, I guess, and after that I gave that away because I wasn't making any money.

I did my apprenticeship as a motor mechanic. I started with my father in Genoa, and from there I went to Melbourne, and I worked on Jaguars for some years, and finished my apprenticeship at Brierson Industries in Richmond. I couldn't handle working for a boss so I started my own place near Nelson, and I was there for a couple of years, and then I went back to Mallacoota where I had grown up in that area, and had a garage there until I got sick of people owing me money, and I decided to go fishing, with a friend, Rodney Casement which is an old fishing family in Mallacoota. He was fishing in the lake and I decided to buy myself a boat, a little old crayfishing boat from Lakes Entrance, where I live now, and we went into partnership and fished for crayfish for two years until he could afford his own boat. Then I started on my own after I had my Master Fisherman's licence, and I fished for another three years before I went broke again, and I bought a larger boat - a very old Tasmanian fishing boat - which was 60 foot long and very run down.

Things were pretty tough then and we didn't have any money, and the boat's machinery was absolutely RS, so we had to replace just about everything on the boat. But then we got a little kick along. We got our gear a bit better and we actually started to make a few dollars, so we then kicked on from there, and decided to build another wooden boat - a 62 foot wooden boat - which we built ourselves, with the help of an old fellow from Mallacoota, Cec Wilson, who was one of the early salmon fishermen, and he'd built a couple of boats.

So we battled on and we built that boat in... Well, actually we built two boats. We built two 62 foot boats, one myself, and one Rodney Casement. They were exact sister ships: one the **Gaylow Bay** and the other one the **Maralinga**, which are still tied up together down here at Lakes Entrance, and our boats have been in the water for two and a half years now, fishing. Rod's has been fishing for five years, and they're going exceptionally well, and probably will be the last of the good traditional type wooden boats ever built in Lakes Entrance, I would say.

I'm also the Victorian shark representative - industry representative - I'm on a couple of different councils and a director of the Lakes Entrance Fishery Co-op, which takes a considerable amount of time, and not a lot of pay, but we do it to keep the industry running. Apart from that we're sort of still fishing consistently.

JD Are you still crayfishing?

DAVIDSON Well, we haven't crayfished for some years. I've had a Tasmanian cray licence with the **Gaylow** which was built in 1964 in Smithton, a very traditional Tasmanian boat, gaffe-rigged, and I only had the cray licence for a couple of years and got a little bit in financial difficulties, and I ended up selling the cray licence, but I did cray in Tasmania for one season, you know from Flinders Island. Then I sold the cray licence after that and since then I've sharked, that's all I've done. So I'm just a full time shark fisherman, consolidated "A" licence holder, which is another side of the story to shark fishing at this stage with licences being restricted, and a lot of people gone out of the industry because they can't afford to stay in the industry.

The Government have decided that conservation comes first and they really think the shark stocks are in danger. Fishermen are against this idea at this stage, because we haven't got any late realistic data on the fishery. They've taken it from early times, and they've cut us back to two groups of fishermen, actually three groups of

fishermen. We have an "A" fisherman who is entitled to six nets. He can sell to another "A" fisherman so he could consolidate but he then loses two nets, which brings him back to ten nets. That's probably like losing \$25000 every time you consolidate, but that's sort of par for the course.

Then you have a "B" fisherman who has from three to five nets and cannot transfer, and it can only be sold or handed down in the family, in their family grouping. You have the consolidated "A"s, the ten netters, which I am one of, and we can't sell either. We're locked into the industry. No transferability at this stage until it's reviewed in 1991, but at this stage there's not even a hint of us being able to sell so it's one fishery we're locked into, you know we can't go anywhere at this stage, and they're still talking about taking more nets off us and restricting us more, which you know really proves us to be nearly unviable. So the conservation side of the industry is getting pretty tough and very unrealistic in a lot of ways.

JD It's a Commonwealth controlled industry is it?

DAVIDSON It is a Commonwealth controlled industry, yes. We've only just had the States starting to fall in line after three years, three years of battling with them, because we've had to take a lot of restrictions being Commonwealth shark fishermen, and it's been hard to get the States to fall into line, you know with our groupings, and the guys that have taken the knocks have had enough, and they want everybody to take a knock on the nose as well as us. That's what's happening at the moment, they're trying to make the States fall into line. We've recommended that four month closure in State waters, and at this stage of the game in 1990, from now on, it will be.... we've got a fisheries notice out to say that there will be no fishing in State waters until legislation goes through, so we can keep a check on the guys that don't fish in Commonwealth waters.

JD Does a fisherman have enough input into these management decisions?

DAVIDSON I really don't think they do. They had a few chances, but what happened was, when the task-force got going, we had probably the wrong blokes on there. Not that it's for me to judge, but a lot of the decisions were made outside, and you have a day of talk and then you probably go to the pub and have a few beers, and the next day it's all decided. But it's usually decided in camera before they go to a meeting. So they try and talk the fishermen around to their way of thinking - this is the way I look at it - and you know probably over a few beers they can talk us round, but then the decisions are made and a lot of times they're very, very hard ones. Not only in shark, in trawl. Trawl's been particularly hard and not a particularly well managed fishery as far as I'm concerned. A lot of their mistakes they've tried to make up with in shark, which you know is just not on as far as I'm concerned, this being a citizen of Australia. If you go back through the trawl management plan, there were supposed to be 50 boats and there were 150 - 150 big boats - so there's some sort of a muck-up in their management plans somewhere along the line.

JD You don't trawl?

DAVIDSON No, I'm not a trawler. I have been trawling. I've trawled with one of the bigger trawler operators in the port for six or eight months without.... in 1979, and we went to Hobart on surveys, and around Tasmania, and that was quite an interesting lesson. But I'm not a keen trawl fisherman.

JD Do you know how many shark boats there are operating in these waters?

DAVIDSON Well, it all depends on what areas you're talking about. Whether you're talking about the southeast shark fishery itself, or you're talking about east of Wilson's Promontory.

Well, the shark management plan wanted to come down to 1200 units maximum by the end of the plan - which is net units - and we're down to about 940, and they still think we need restrictions. But our levy's due. This year we've got to pay \$570 a net which works out to \$5700 for a consolidated licence holder before he goes fishing. A lot of guys aren't going to pay. If you're a "B" fisherman, they are still going to have to pay \$570 for their net entitlement, each net. So there's more units on the way out, and I think the Commonwealth should be reasonably happy with their success rate, and hopefully they'll leave us alone. But we have a push from South Australia at the moment to.... they're catching in excess of 120 tons of shark a year, and you know they want restrictions. They want more nets taken off and my argument is that our fishery over here is still in good condition and why should we suffer for them. With their big [unclear] where before there were any restrictions brought in, although they weren't catching so much fish, they weren't concentrating on it. Now you've got levies, you've got more push to catch your fish to make the profit, and then the snowball goes on, and then you pay tax on the whole deal.

You know a lot of management plans, I think, make you work harder than you've ever worked in your life, because you've got so many more expenses, having to pay for them. You know "user pays". Every resource is having to pay to use it, to catch the fish such as gem fish, you pay a quota and you have ITQs which is going to go right through the industry, probably by next year. Last year they paid thirteen cents a kilogramme before they caught the fish. This year it looks like being double that and the quota's gone down to half. Not for any big reason, only because there weren't a lot of big female fish caught. The reason I could see why they weren't caught, there was no-one concentrating on gem fish, they were all down on the orange ruffie on the fuel in Tasmania, and a lot of effort was put into a different area.

But that doesn't make any difference to the fisheries management. The AFS they say, "All right, no fish being caught. No fish there," and so it goes on, and they slowly get strangled. I don't know where it's all going to end up but you know, it's one of those things where you.... it goes to the logging or anything. They're just trying to squeeze us to death. East Gippsland probably depends on primary industry from one end to the other - [unclear] included - and I think the socialist government's got to go at this stage.

JD There's no actual quota for shark, is there?

DAVIDSON Not at this stage, no, but there is talk about it. Actually I was talking to Campbell Macgregor the other day, and that's his next idea. But in our area I'm not convinced that's the answer because since restrictions came in in Lakes Entrance - or on the eastern side of the promontory - for our south east shark fishing, a lot of our guys, over half of them catch Tasmanian trevally for a living. If a quota was brought in, they would go and catch their shark, and target shark until they got their quota and then they'd worry about something else. Whereas at this stage where there's no quota, you're going to have a split in the fishery. You've got half the mesh netters catching scale fish and half catching shark - or less than half out of this port - and it works quite well and I'm sure it's not killing the shark. Whereas the other way round you've got fourteen boats that are going to go and catch as much shark as they're allowed straight off.

JD With the present arrangements you haven't noticed any - you personally - you haven't noticed any decrease among the shark?

DAVIDSON Most definitely not. No, most definitely not. I'd say - you know this is one of my points that I really push - there's cycles in fish and last year was another excellent year for shark, and '81/'82 were good years. Not that I've been.... I've only been in the fishery for twelve years but you know, the cycle's there, and it is in trawl fish as well. Crayfish the same. Every seven years they have a bumper season, whereas it's about eight years for shark. We've got to try and get it into their heads that there are other ways of measuring quantities of fish rather than dating them and ages, and you know, you've got to talk to the guys in the industry for a long time to get more information.

JD Where is the idea then that the stocks have been depleted coming from? Is it from the scientific research?

DAVIDSON Yes, scientific research. That was the whole idea of the southern task-force - the Southern Shark Fishery Task-force - because they were worried about stocks. There is one scientist that does most of the collection of information, who's in Melbourne, and he is quite a learned person obviously, but he's going back on information that's very old. Terry Walker is the fellow's name, and there's Meryl Williams in Canberra, who does a fair bit of research too, but you know, you only have indicators and signs and there's no actual positive to say, "Well this is on the way out or that's on the way out." You've only got indicators and they'll never commit themselves to any positive solution to the whole deal.

I think the only positive solution is less boats and then we're getting pressure from overseas' fisheries. They let the Russians into the 200 mile limit, the Japanese, the Koreans, the Taiwanese are drift netting in our waters, and there are bigger boats here, Norwegian trawlers, all factory ships, unloading in Australia, unloading orange ruffie, supposedly fishing in isolated waters that we don't use. But a lot of the snouts, that's contrary to the truth. But the Australian fisherman has been for a long time starting to explore his own waters, and slowly just expanding all the time, which I think is a lot better than bringing in overseas' interests and sort of killing us in our own market and dropping the price of our fish. A lot of it comes under our fresh fish market and even into our supermarkets. They don't pay any duty on it. New Zealand fish comes in duty free. Taiwanese fish. There's black tiger prawns coming in from Thailand which is an aquaculture fish. You know in our little town here, and they're catching prawns out the front, can't sell them.

So I don't know where the world ends up with the fishery, but there's a hell of a lot of pressure on the Australian fishermen. A lot of it comes from Canberra, you know, you've got trade-offs all the time with your beef and your mutton and wheat. You know Bob Hawke said that. That that was a "go", that was a "trade-off". The Russian trawlers came in for the mutton, so you know, it's not very good to our way of thinking anyway. But yes, I don't know, I don't know what the answer is.

JD Richard, the water in these areas are notorious as being exceedingly dangerous for shipping of all sorts. Have you had any problems with the waters and the weather?

DAVIDSON Yes, well I have actually. I've had a couple of bad experiences myself, but yes, I guess we've laid behind Gabo there for ten days, and we were getting considerably out of tucker, and a bit short-tempered and hadn't been fishing, and so we came home in a big south east roll of maiden. We came up to the back of the bar and it was a full moon and we laid out there trying to pick the roller. Anyway we were

just right on the leads on the green light on the flagstaff, and the next minute the fellow with me said, "You do it, Davo," so I gave it to her all right, but it was too late and this big black sea came over the back of us and smashed the bulwarks off the back of the boat and down one side, and he said, "Well, you'd better keep it going because it looks like we haven't got a transom in it," and I said, "Well, I'll just run it straight up on the beach." He said, "Oh hang on a minute, I'll just have a look," and we took a bit of water, but it wasn't that bad, it was only the bulwarks, and we got in quite safely, but you know, it was one of those times where we could have lost lives, just through probably being a bit late after dark. The sea always has the last answer. If you don't keep your respect for the sea, you're in a fair bit of trouble at any time.

JD That is the notorious bar at the Lakes Entrance?

DAVIDSON Yes, that's right. That's been particularly bad the last twelve months really. I guess we've got deeper boats now.

We had the big problem last year with the **Lady Cheryl**. She came home and a big south easter came up and she had a full load of fish - probably over 100 tons - and came in and worked slightly off the leads, and when she came down it smashed the propellor into the nozzle, and bent the skeg on the boat and, of course, it stopped the main engine, and they ran hard aground, and there was quite an amount of trouble there. They couldn't get off and they tried to be towed off by the **James Curlin** and the **Lakes Tide** to no avail. That day and into the next day they thought they had her off and she still wouldn't come off because the sea hadn't gone down that much, and in actual fact, the boat ended up nearly on the beach, probably 50 yards from the western pier, and a lot of us tried to get this boat off in various ways that we could and everybody in the port helped out, and we ended up getting some loggers from Orbest to come down and give us a hand, with their machines, with big machinery....

JD Bulldozers?

DAVIDSON Bulldozers and skidders, and hooked them all up in tandem, and put an inch and an eighth cable on them, and we towed - actually towed it off bodily - to the east across into the deep water, after the **Lakes Tide** had pulled it out backward a little bit off the beach, we got it going sideways and fortunately saved the boat and no lives were lost. But you know, any of the history books you'll read of the old sailors going up on the beach here, and particularly in south east weather, which we haven't got any shelter from at all, and that's where we get our big roll from, and it's not particularly nice to come home in the middle of the night when it's blowing 35/40 knots of south east, and you have to front up to the bar. But you usually go across because by the time the morning comes it's bigger, so you make the decision on that particular time.

Apart from that, Bass Strait's fairly notorious generally, particularly with the tides running, and the tide runs very hard in the middle out here. There are other spots that are bad: Pot Boil, around Flinders Island, between the Sisters and places like that, when there's a big sea and a heavy breeze. We have overfalls of water and it can be particularly dangerous if you run out of power and broach and you're in all sorts of trouble. It just sort of goes with your workplace I guess. You have the utmost respect for the sea.

JD In some parts they get what in the west are called "king waves" that come up out of a calm sea sometimes, enormous waves. Do they....?

DAVIDSON Yes, you do get them, you do actually get them. We've had them coming across the Straits and you know, we've knocked a couple of bulwarks planks out. One particular wave filled the wheelhouse and knocked two bulwarks planks out while I was asleep, just broke right over the top of the wheelhouse, and filled the boat on the topsides. Luckily we didn't get any water in down below, but those things are always there to throw you out, and if you're unlucky you've gone. I suppose when your number comes up you're history.

JD You've built your own boat, haven't you, or boats? That must have been a great experience.

DAVIDSON Yes, it was a big experience. I guess we created something. A big thrill. A lot of blood, sweat and tears went into it and well, we started in '82, we got local timber - blue gum - from Den River mill. A fellow called Des Brunt owned a sawmill there. He hand-picked all our timber for two boats, the **Gaylow Bay** and the **Maralinga**, and we air-dried our timber for five years, and it was all built in Lakes Entrance, done by a fellow from Mallacoota who was the instigator behind the woodwork, Cec Wilson, and his off-sider, David Sivvers. He's a direct relation of the whalers in Eden, a young bloke, so he had a history in boating. Myself and a young fellow and the family, and we steamed every plank and hammered every nail, and made every bolt, and did all the engineering ourselves. The only outside work we had was.... we built an aluminium wheelhouse for it which was done by a local contractor, and the fibre-glassing in the fish rooms which was done by a local contractor as well.

That took us twelve months but you know, we've probably got one of the best wooden boats ever built, and very proud of it. It was launched in 1987, which was a big day.

JD Has it all been worthwhile?

DAVIDSON I think it's fabulous, yes. Yes, nice and comfortable and you know, we've got toilets and showers, and things we've never ever dreamt we'd ever have a few years ago. Clean and nice hot food, no wet bunks which makes a hell of a difference on your outlook on life, and yes, it has, it's all been very well worth it.

JD Thank you, Dick. Thank you for this interview, it's been great to talk you and may I wish you all success for the future. Thank you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Richard Davidson, shark fisherman, boat builder and industry representative of Lakes Entrance, Victoria.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B UNRECORDED

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Edited transcript of an interview with FRANK FERRIER

INTRODUCTION

Frank Ferrier is the oldest surviving member of a family of ten sons all of whom were fishermen in this part of Victoria. His father was a fisherman also and figured in a dramatic rescue at sea, a feat for which he was awarded a Royal Humane Society Medal. (He received both a silver and a gold medal). In his turn, Frank too was similarly acknowledged for his part in a very similar rescue. On side B of this tape he reads his report of that rescue and also an extract from an address to his father from Western Australia.

The Ferrier family have been prominent in the Queenscliff area in both fishing and in the lifeboat service. On this tape Frank Ferrier records something of the family history in both endeavours and of the vessels they used and the hazards they faced. The Ferrier story is an important part of the history of fishing in Australia. The interview was recorded by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian Fishing Industry at Mr Ferrier's home in Queenscliff, Victoria on the 15th February, 1990.

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

TAPE 1 SIDE A

FERRIER Frank Bernard Ferrier, 34 Beach Street, Queenscliff is my present address. Born at Rosebud on 21st February, 1911.

JD Where's Rosebud?

FERRIER Just across the Bay, Port Phillip Bay just across from Queenscliff.

JD And have you lived in this area all your life?

FERRIER No we came over here in 1916. After dad rescued the men at Warrnambool in 1905, November the 11th, we believe he was given a State job in some way of honour of his heroism. Dad worked on the light houses at Cape Schanck and MacRae light house at Rosebud and also he and mother lived out on the South Channel Pile Light which is a light constructed on piles in the sea (of course) some several kilometres off Rosebud. Dad was there for several years and then we shifted after here to Queenscliff in 1916. I have lived at Queenscliff for 46 years, Lorne for ten and Apollo Bay for 23 years. These ports face directly out to Bass Strait.

Well some of us went to school immediately and then later on I commenced fishing with dad in 1926 and other different fishermen at odd times. Then in 1932 I went down to Apollo Bay outside in the Bass Strait to an open fishing port where there was no harbour in those days, just a long pier heading out into the Straits. Well I fished

there for about twenty years and also later I shifted up to Lorne and I fished there for ten years. Finally we came back home here in 1960 and [I've] been here ever since.

JD When you were at Apollo Bay and Lorne, what sort of fish were you fishing for Frank?

FERRIER Barracouta, flathead and crayfish.

JD And here in the bay, what were you fishing for?

FERRIER Mainly barracouta, king george whiting and schnapper.

JD You belong to a very famous family in both the fishing and in the sea rescue areas.

FERRIER Yes. We're the largest family to operate in Queenscliff and as far as the lifeboat crew men, when the lifeboat bell would be rung up here in the park, in the present lifeboats, the motor one, the first fourteen men to run down the pier, the door would be locked from inside so as not to have any delays in launching the boat. The first fourteen in there, the door was locked as I say and the boat would be off in twelve minutes. One day we went to sea and out of the crew of twelve there were seven Ferrier brothers in the crew. Just simply that they were, perhaps on that day, the fastest to the shed.

JD Yes and you yourself won a silver medal on one occasion didn't you?

FERRIER Yes the 16th January 1949 in a 60 miler south west gale there was a little yacht which had been an entry in the Sydney [to] Hobart Yacht Race. She was thrown practically high and dry on the Lonsdale Reef. Our present motor life boat went down [and] it was unable to assist for fear of getting in danger itself and endangering the life boat crew. I missed the life boat that day so I got a lift to Point Lonsdale on the back of a motor bike, a ride I'll never forget. We saw this little yacht crew launch their dinghy and they were washed out through the notorious heads [with] the rip, and all scattered in the sea. After fighting for their lives for nearly an hour, one by one they reached another portion of the reef safely. We fishermen on the Point of Lonsdale Pier saw that there was nothing [which] could be done but on the Point Lonsdale Pier there was a small wooden dinghy kept for onshore rescue work. We took that with myself at the stern skulling and two of my mates rowing with one oar and the fourth man bailing continuously to keep our dinghy afloat which was wooden and she had a lot of split planks and she was leaking like a sieve. However we got to a safe portion of the inner reef where the yacht was and after a while we found the four men and with eight of us in a dinghy which you'll see up there later in the Ozone Hotel, we made straight for the life boat and they bought us all back to Queenscliff.

Then later on the Royal Humane Society sent us a note saying the four of us: Ron Shapter, Tom Warren and Tony Jurgens were each to be awarded the Royal Humane Society Silver Medal. Then a few weeks later we visited the Government House as desired and the then Sir Dallas Brooks presented us with the Royal Humane Society Silver Medal.

JD Congratulations.

FERRIER Thank you.

JD I notice on the wall of your home where we are, other certificates.

FERRIER Yes. One's my father's from the 1905, the wreck of this little ship **La Bella** (Italian for "beautiful lady"). He rescued the captain and two seamen. In addition to dad receiving the Royal Humane Society Silver Medal, he also received the Gold Medal from the Glenelg Dinghy Club (SA) and a wonderful letter of address from the Royal Life Saving Society of Western Australia. Mother and father also received many monetary gifts.

JD That's great. What about the other ones? They're to you are they?

FERRIER This one over here was awarded to me from the Minister of Public Works, Ports & Harbours, Victoria for 29 years' service as a crewman on the lifeboat **Queenscliffe** which operated here for 50 years and is now retired from service. Those other two are mine from the Royal Humane Society of Australasia and the one on the right is dad's from the Royal Humane Society for the La Bella rescue at Warrnambool on 10 November 1905.

JD That's a great collection Frank.

FERRIER Yes it is. It's lovely.

JD You're very much involved in the history and the maritime museum here, aren't you?

FERRIER Yes. I'm the only Queenscliff fisherman ever to make cassette tape recordings. The fishermen have been fading away and leaving us as life gives us so I thought to myself, "I think I'll leave something behind" so I've made about 100 cassettes now. Some are in America. Some are in England, New Zealand and several parts of Australia.

JD Great idea. That's good Frank. Frank, to come back to fishing, you'd have seen a lot of changes in your career in fishing. How long have you been retired now?

FERRIER Six years.

JD Only six years?

FERRIER Yes.

JD You must have fished for a long, long time because you went straight into it, didn't you, after you left school?

FERRIER Yes. In those days all fishermen's sons followed their fathers in their occupations but they don't now. I was a fisherman for 58 years.

JD So you'd have seen lots and lots of changes?

FERRIER Yes, yes. For instance Lorne and Apollo Bay being open ports into Bass Strait. Apollo Bay now has a harbour and before they got the harbour we had to hand winch our boats up on the pier with a crane used when the little cargo vessels would go in there unloading their cargo; but at Lorne we had to man the boats for the crane by manhandling and then later they gave us a motorised crane.

JD So the boats were lifted out of the water?

FERRIER Yes but they were smaller boats than what we normally use here at Queenscliff. See in that little photo up there there's fourteen boats. Now five of those were built specifically for Lorne or Apollo Bay and only being 21 feet so as to be easy to handle. The normal type of fishing boat used at Queenscliff generally was 26 feet long.

JD You'd have been in the days of sail, would you, when you started?

FERRIER Yes. Sail was used most of the times. It was a very uncommon thing to have to put your engine on because the petrol used to come from America. Petrol for fishing boats was sold to fishermen and others from the local grocer stores. In those days the fuel used for motors was called Benzine. American companies that sent the fuel were Texaco and Plume.

JD They were wooden boats of course?

FERRIER Yes all wooden boats, yes. Generally clinker built or carvel built. Clinker built boats are built with the planking edges overlapping. Are you conversant with clinker? Right.

JD And were they built locally?

FERRIER Well they were built at Rosebud mainly by Mitch Lacco & Sonken. He built a lot of boats for Victoria and Mr Hansen, a Norwegian builder, he built here in 1900. He also built a lot of boats and Blunts of Geelong, Blunts of Melbourne, Peel brothers of Melbourne, Jones of Melbourne, McKenzie, McWilliams, Mordealic. Yes there were a lot of boat builders about in those days.

JD Yes. What timber did they use mostly?

FERRIER They preferred the New Zealand karri but later on, same as Tassie, [they] used to let us have huon pine but both of those countries stopped exporting those timbers. So a boat builder's recently been going north to Queensland and getting beech timber and some Malay timbers for planks.

JD They're still building wooden boats in this area?

FERRIER Yes but not along the fishing lines like we used to have.

JD Frank you fished for barracouta, didn't you?

FERRIER Mainly, yes, yes.

JD Did you have one of these vessels that they call couta boats?

FERRIER Oh yes. I had several, yes.

JD Could you describe a couta boat?

FERRIER Well a couta boat was generally 26 feet long, about ten feet of beam and about three feet of draft and a bit of deck from the stem back to the mast of about

seven feet and then she was all open with round combings and about eighteen inches of deck [unclear] and all the hand lines. We trolled to catch the barracouta You sailed mainly and then in the latter few years they've left their sails on the decks and they've used the motors for many years now.

JD When they were sailing vessels, did they have a centre board?

FERRIER Yes. All our couta boats had centre boards, yes.

JD Why was it decked in forward?

FERRIER Well boats are decked forwarded generally seven feet according to the length of the boat which provides a cargo room to hold catches of fish. We wanted an open boat so we threw our fish into the open area and then we had different portions of the boat. We could tell just by looking if we thought we had our quota. Lots of times there'd be a quota put on the fish you were allowed to catch so as not to force an over glut in the Melbourne fish market where they were auctioned.

JD Why the rounded coaming?

FERRIER Well a boat decked in level for the top was useless to us, no good whatsoever. We'd had no where to put the fish.

JD Yeah but why the round coaming?

FERRIER It gives you more room. Rounded coamings were generally safer also. As waves crashed onto the deck the rounded effect allowed the wash to run off and return mostly to the sea.

JD Right. Simple as that?

FERRIER Yes.

JD They were a great vessel, weren't they?

FERRIER Yes they were a great vessel. I take my hat off now to these people who are here at Sorrento and Portsea. They've been going round Australia or several States and they buy any old Queenscliff fishing boat they can see at a reasonable price. They bring it back home to Sorrento and they rebuild it perfectly the same as what it was the day it was launched.

JD Yeah? It's a club, is it?

FERRIER Yes it's a club. Some of the money people have got, [they] use they couta boats now as pleasure [boats]. They're due over here this month. They have a race here every February at some date.

JD It must be quite a scene to....

FERRIER Yes. Well I always go down because I send them some correspondence at times and photos and do all I can to assist them.

JD They must have been good sea boats?

FERRIER Yes they were good sea boats, yes.

JD The hazards of Bass Straits are notorious.

FERRIER Yes well, see Port Phillip heads (the rip) it's one of the worst places in the world. Now for [unclear], when I started fishing in 1926, if they went down to the heads and decided it looked too bad, they'd all turn round and we'd come home. Bass Strait is often called the mystery triangle.

JD Yes but this was probably in the days before you had ship to shore radio?

FERRIER Yes. Well to a fisherman a radio is no good whatsoever. We've got all our explorers and all the sailing ships that come out here for years and years and years. They didn't have any blinking instruments like that. They had the log over stern and they look at the stars and the moon. They piloted their vessels themselves. They brought them out. We didn't need any.... Oh we appreciate the light houses but when we operated we used to go very close to either side of the heads. We'd go within 25 or 30 feet of the reef to keep away from the middle of the reef where it was real bad. Even a compass in a fog.... Very few of our little boats carried a compass. Radios are useful now that they let the authorities at Canberra listen to vessels at sea and they, when necessary, direct rescue operations. Also radio advises families of their movements at sea.

Now we were fishing one day at Apollo Bay. We'd just lifted our cray pots and it was [a] north east wind and the thick fog came down. So we finished lifting our cray pots and we headed for home. I had the tiller (I was the senior hand) but the owner of the boat, he says I was going the wrong way. So I says, "Right O, you take the tiller". He was going round and round and round. He was lost. He says, "Come on, come on. You take the bloody tiller". So all I did, with the north east wind, I kept it on our starboard quarter, I steamed for three-quarters of an hour and here's the big Apollo Bay jetty looming up out of the fog. We were homeward bound!

JD That's experience isn't it?

FERRIER That's what our dad taught us. Now about 1927 we were up the south channel catching schapper near the south channel pile light and the fog came down. Now that day there was a light northerly and [we had the] mainsail and big jib. We had everything on it but a light wind. Dad turned round to me and he says, "You take the tiller". So I thought, gee what am I gonna do? So I took the tiller and I knew it was northerly and the fog was thick but I looked up on my right hand shoulder and I could just see a faint glimmer of the sun. Now I steered her for an hour and a half, came into Queenscliff and there loomed up the pier again. No compass, no echo sounder, no siren, just what dad had taught us.

JD It's a bit safer though now isn't it with all the navigational aids and compasses and radio?

FERRIER It is in a way but they still cause a lot of losses. Men leave their boats on auto pilot and quite often they get wrecked.

JD Do they?

FERRIER Yes.

JD It's always been a pretty dangerous sort of an occupation, hasn't it?

FERRIER Yes it is but we've always treated it with a lot of respect. There's lots of times we have taken a bit of a chance but of course [unclear] our mind that the conditions might improve which quite often they did, we were alright.

JD Yes. You had ten brothers, didn't you?

FERRIER Nine.

JD Nine, of course. Ten boys altogether. They were all fishermen?

FERRIER Yes all fishermen.

JD Were any lost at sea? That's a remarkable record isn't it?

FERRIER Ah yes. I had three uncles drown here in this area.

JD They were your father's brothers?

FERRIER No, mother's brothers. Even with the life boat, when they had the old rowing life boats from 1856 to 1926 I don't think there was ever anybody lost in any of the life boats. In the 50 years that this present (retired) life boat operated, there was never an accident but as they say, when this life boat went or any life boat went out, there was always a fisherman in charge. Even though the superintendent with his collar and tie on was there, the fisherman did what he wanted but he'd tell the superintendent what he intended to do.

JD Yes. To come back to the commercial part of fishing, you've seen a lot of changes in prices I presume?

FERRIER Ah yes. In the last Depression we were only getting two shillings for an 80 pound box of barracouta and sometimes three shillings for a box of flathead of similar weight. In those depression years we'd look up sometimes coming from Sydney way [and] there would be one of the little old English steam trawlers coming in with a load of flathead. Of course he'd flood our Melbourne fish market and any fish not sold in Melbourne, the health inspector condemned them and the poultry farmers from around about Melbourne would come to the market and pay the freight on the fish, take the fish home and feed their poultry.

JD Frank, where did the barracouta go? Why did they suddenly disappear?

FERRIER They never disappeared. That's only a fallacy.

JD Is it?

FERRIER Yes.

JD Are they still there?

FERRIER Yes they're still there, yeah. No one's interested in them now. Oh they catch them for a few weeks of the year. Sometimes they go as pet food but they're very hard to sell against the little trawlers we've got operating here of 100 feet long. We've got about six here in Port Phillip Bay and they go down the west coast of Tasmania and they bring home good hauls of assorted types of fish so the barracouta is not sought after so much now but they haven't gone. Over the years that I fished (for the 58 years) there were lots of weeks that we never ever caught any barracouta but then they come right out of the blue and we'd have a good time for a few weeks. Barracouta are not popular as they have a lot of bones.

JD What about other scale fish? Have they gone down in terms of the size of catch?

FERRIER No.

JD Still the same amount of fish being caught you feel?

FERRIER Oh not the same amount because in 1926 we had 120 fishermen here and there was two men to a boat. Sometimes there'd be a third person such as a young lad learning the occupation but now we've only got twenty professional fishermen here with bigger boats and they work them single handed mainly catching crayfish. They've got a winch to lift their pots. In the days of the open boats we hauled our crayfish pots hand over hand.

JD Yes. They're not getting anything like the number of crayfish that they used to get are they?

FERRIER Oh yes they are. They're having a record year now.

JD Are they?

FERRIER Yes.

JD What other changes have you seen that have stuck in your memory?

FERRIER Well apart from fishermen's sons not following in their dad's footsteps, there's been a few new comers come into the game. They really don't make a living out of [it]. Some of them are spoilt sons and the mother gives them a boat or gives them something but as for making a living, they would have had to scratch their head years ago and make up and learn it the proper way.

JD Is pollution a problem in the fisheries here?

FERRIER No, not here. No. Down here at Queenscliff this end of Port Phillip Bay the only dirty water we get here is the heavy rains but that clears in a matter of a few days. See we've only got the Yarra River just nine miles away. Well that makes the water very discoloured but oh there's still fish about.

JD Frank there are a lot of regulations and rules now [which] apply to fishing, don't they?

FERRIER Yes they're shocking regulations now. My fishing licence cost me just a few pounds years ago and then suddenly it went up to \$30 or \$40 but now that licence....

People in Melbourne now, if you want a fishing licence to go fishing now just for hooking and some netting it costs \$70,000.

JD Goodness me. That makes it very hard to get started doesn't it?

FERRIER Yes. Oh well you couldn't do it really.

JD Frank what do you do with yourself now you're retired?

FERRIER Well I go up in the front room and I perhaps do an hour and a half of historical. I've made about 120 cassette tape recordings of general history and events of interests of course that's happened years ago.

JD You're very involved with the maritime museum aren't you?

FERRIER Yes well I was but I think I've got to ease up on that a little bit and spend more time home to keep my health in order.

JD Right. Anything else you'd like to talk about on this tape?

FERRIER No. It's a bit hard to think of things at the present. [pause]

JD Would you go back into fishing again if you were starting off?

FERRIER If I had to make a living yes. The fishing days and when we were brought up we were like lots of people all round Australia, we never even had shoes. Never had shoes.... we could always find shoes [when] mum would send us to Sunday School but we'd go to the pictures bare footed. Course lots of families were bare footed. Oh no, well you think of it, 120 fishermen and some of those families of thirteen or fourteen, how they all lived. They had their hard times, but still we had good times.

JD Frank would you like to mention some of the people, the fishermen, that were notable sort of fishermen?

FERRIER Well they've passed on really.

JD But it would be nice to have their names recorded, wouldn't it?

FERRIER Yes, yes it would. [pause] Right well there's Joseph Wells senior, Joseph Wells junior and several other Wells; Yanoni Salvadore who was an Italian fisherman who came from Genoa, Italy in 1854 and was an early fisherman at Queenscliff; the Shapter were great fishermen.

JD Are any Shapters still around Queenscliff?

FERRIER No, not fishing. No they're gone, no. Sanones; the Sanone name, they started here in Queenscliff in 1856.

JD It was a Sanone that did those wonderful paintings of ships?

FERRIER Yes, yes. It was a son of the above mentioned Yanoni Christain Salvadore. His son's name was Henry who also had another hobby. He made about 60 model sailing boats for lads of Queenscliff. For one family four boats were made. There is one

son still on hand. Their names are **Swan, Swallow Clyde, Countess of Hopetown**. In 1856 the first fishermen to operate here were Chinese, Italian and Englishmen and then very quickly the Australians got into it.

JD There's a considerable Greek community in fishing in Port Phillip Bay, isn't there?

FERRIER Yes. They do a lot of long lining mainly over the other side of Port Phillip Bay. We haven't any Greek fishermen here.

JD No. Is there an ethnic community here, like Greek or Italian?

FERRIER They've recently just purchased some of these old fishermen's residences. These four streets here, for many, many years only fishermen were permitted to live here. So we used to live close to our boats and remove them from moorings in bad weather. We were permitted to take them to the Swan Island Naval Docks for shelter. The land the fishermen lived on was crown land and two pounds per annum was paid by fisherman. In 1948 the land became freehold. Some blocks were owned by the Victorian Railways and some fishermen paid rent.

JD That doesn't apply now?

FERRIER No, no. Of course they've got the new safe harbour now and the old fishermen's pier is demolished. See we had two piers and then that little part with this little shed on, that was a little breakwater.

JD Is that the shed that houses the paintings?

FERRIER No you'll see one over there [on] the diagram on your left hand side. If you go over you'll see the old fishermen's pier. It's not quite correct but still it's [a] good handy thing to have there.

JD Right. Well thank you very much for talking to us Frank.

FERRIER You're quite welcome.

JD It's been nice to have this yarn.

FERRIER Good.

JD Thank you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Frank Ferrier of Queenscliff, Victoria. On side B of this tape Mr Ferrier reads his account of the **Merlan** rescue, a rescue in which he played a very prominent part and for which he was awarded the Royal Humane Society Silver Medal.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD On this side B of this tape Frank Ferrier reads his report of the rescue of the yacht **Merlan**. At the end of the report he also reads from an address to his father following a very similar rescue. The report starts at 020 on the revolution counter.

This is Frank Ferrier of Queenscliff, Victoria telling the story of his involvement in the rescue of the crew of the yacht, **Merlan**.

FERRIER Sunday 16 January 1949, Queenscliff Victoria. The wreck and rescue of the crew of the yacht **Merlan**. The Queenscliff fishing fleet early a.m. was sailing about catching barracouta some four miles west of the heads, the rip. Shortly after the fishermen saw massive storm clouds coming towards them from the Cape Ottway area. The fleet was soon scouting towards the heads, all boats later being placed on their moorings.

I lived almost opposite the alarm wreck bell which was ringing out the call for the life boat crew men to assemble at the life boat station. The bell was being rung just as my wife placed my dinner on the table. I was told that there was a yacht on the Point Lonsdale reef. The south west storm was gusting up to 60 miles per hour. I got a lift to Point Lonsdale on the back of a motor bike with Will Withers, a ride I will never forget. Crowds of people were at the Point Lonsdale and also the pier was crowded.

We saw the crew of the yacht **Merlan** launch their dinghy and board it and the massive waves and strong current swept the dinghy out through the heads, the crew being scattered into the heavy seas and the Point Lonsdale jetty. There was a groan from the crowd. Also on the Point Lonsdale jetty hanging in davits was a little wooden dinghy kept for onshore rescue work. I was assisted to launch the dinghy. Tom Warren got oars and rollicks from the rocket rescue gear shed on land end of jetty. While being held to the pier in the dinghy I called out for volunteers to go with me to the wreck. Many men volunteered and with four men on board, Ron Shapter, Tom Warren [and] Tony Jurgens I skulled with one oar at the stern. Tom Warren and Ron Shapter each rode with one oar. Tony Jurgens had to bail continuously with a five pound jam tin. The little dinghy had a lot of split planks after hanging in the davits for many years in the sun. Tony kept our dinghy afloat and for him doing that we were able to carry out the rescue.

We reached the reef and were looking for a safe spot to land and Tony jumped overboard at the bow. Tony could not touch bottom and jumped back on board. All four of us saw massive waves crashing just astern of us. We knew we had to make another effort to reach the reef. As we did I stowed my skulling oar, jumped over the top of Ron, Tom and Tony and jumped into the sea. Luckily I held the dinghy safe. Later Tony then took the dinghy over from me while Tom, Ron and I searched for the yacht crew. After some time struggling in the heavy seas Keith Young, Eric Walker [and] Brian Shaw had reached safety at another portion of the reef. We walked with them and left them with Tony at the dinghy.

Skipper Lance Curtis has been washed further out to sea. He said he saw visions of his wife and son in the waves which gave him the inspiration to try and reach another portion of the reef. After nearly an hour in the sea he reached safety. We walked with him back to our dinghy. The motor life boat was standing by close inside the massive waves and the strong outgoing ebb tide. The rocket crew were at the ready on the inner reef. The rocket crew were at the ready if the yacht crew or dinghy rescue crew got into difficulties. However with all eight men in the dinghy we now had to stem the strong outgoing tide and head for the lifeboat which was awaiting our safe return. The life boat edged closer to us and the eight men all climbing aboard the life boat and

taking our dinghy in tow, headed for the Queenscliff jetty. The yacht crew shortly after boarding the life boat were given a tot of rum.

On arrival at Queenscliff the rescue dinghy sank. The yacht **Merlan** of 43 feet was returning home to Geelong after being an entrant in the 1948 yacht race from Sydney to Hobart. Ron Shapter, Frank Ferrier, Tom Warren and Tony Jurgens were each awarded the Royal Humane Society Silver Medal presented to them at Government House early 1950 by the Governor Sir Dallas Brooks. The rescue dinghy crew were grateful for the rocket rescue crew; also the life boat crew for their assistance at the rescue of the ill-fated crew of the yacht **Merlan**.

JD Great story Frank. Thanks for that.

FERRIER Thank you.

JD Frank in that rescue of **the Merlan** and indeed in your family's involvement with the Queenscliff Life Boat Service, you're carrying on the tradition established by your father. Could you comment on that?

FERRIER These few lines are from the letter of address sent to William Ferrier of Warrnambool, Australia 1905 from the Western Australian Life Saving Society. It came as a scroll address drawn up by Mr F. Lyon-Rees, President of the Life Saving Society of Western Australia and signed by 60 dignatories.

"We have very great pleasure and pride in sending you this addressed letter in appreciation and testimony to the admiration felt for you by the people of West Australia. When in our own or other lands there might be dire danger by wreck or otherwise may God and once again give the guidance of a Ferrier. We have the honour to remain sir, yours for ourselves and others. Very sincerely, F. Lyon-Rees, President, Life Saving Society, Western Australia".

"And how shall our heroes rare
when heaven's recording angels writes his shining sacred souls
He gives their glorious guerdon
due to earth's herore souls
and deathless deeds of those that yield their lives the doomed to save
shall stand in song and story long, oer land and world wild wave
so each great deed shall have great meed"

In 1965 the four rescuers of the yacht crew received from a Melbourne television compare, Tommy Hanlon, a handsome silver tray. Frank Ferrier's tray read "For Courage, ICBY" (It Could Be You, which was the name of the television show).

JD Thank you Frank. That's one prayer that's been answered.

It is interesting to note that Frank Ferrier followed in his father's footsteps both as a fisherman and as members of life boat crews. Both were involved in very similar rescues, each in his own generation and both were awarded the Royal Humane Society's medals for their efforts.

That is the end of Frank Ferrier's report.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with LEWIS FERRIER

INTRODUCTION

The Ferrier family of Queenscliff, Victoria are a very widely known family of fishermen. Lewis Ferrier is the second youngest of ten brother, all of whom were fishermen as was their father, grandfather and great grandfather.

In addition to their fishing, the family have a long and honourable history in the lifeboat service. Generations of Ferriers have played leading roles in notable rescues at sea and at one time, out of a crew of ten men in the Queenscliff lifeboat, nine were Ferriers.

Over three generations their courage and seamanship has been recognised in a series of medals and awards.

Lewis Ferrier sustained a broken neck in an accident at sea and was severely paralysed but after five years of effort he made a complete recovery. (He became a Presbyterian minister and served full time in that capacity for some years. He then returned to fishing, an occupation he still follows).

The Ferrier story is an inspiration and is well told here.

The interview was recorded at Mr Ferrier's home in Queenscliff by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian Fishing Industry on the 14th February, 1990.

There is one side of one tape.

The interview starts at 025 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Lewis, would you record your full name please?

FERRIER Lewis Douglas Ferrier.

JD And where were you born?

FERRIER In this home in Queenscliff, Victoria.

JD This very house?

FERRIER Yes. On the 1st December, 1924.

JD Your family is widely known in the fishing industry and the lifeboat service around Australia or many parts of Australia really. Could you tell us a bit about the family background.

FERRIER Yes. I'm trying not to be too egotistical here and I'm trying to be the type of person I was brought up to be and that is a person of a great sense of humility. And yet I can't help but feel very proud when I'm conscious of the fact that I am one of nine brothers, my late father having had ten fishermen sons, and that is close to our knowledge of being the largest fishing family, if not in Victoria, could possibly be, well throughout Australia, having ten fishermen sons.

My father was a good fishermen, a good seaman. His father at Warnambool was a good fisherman and a great seaman and his father, my great grandfather was a fisherman from the west coast of Scotland [Arbroath] and going back before well you'll have to delve into the archives, but we have got proof of our existence going back to the eleventh century and that was found out from one of my nephews who was at one stage, the youngest [commissioned officer in the RAN, Stephen Wilfred Ferrier].... well he was a lieutenant. He was one of the youngest commissioned officers in the Royal Australian Navy and when he was over in the old country, doing his training, he went to London and he went through the archives there and was able to find that the family had a crest of a crown, an anchor and they went over and fought in the French Revolution so we might be pirates for all I know!

But I was born in Queenscliff in 1924. I'm the second youngest of the ten sons. It's rather strange today being Valentine's Day because it is the first day without my eldest brother who would have been 87 today. He passed away nine months ago so this is the first Valentines Day in my memory that I haven't got my elder brother with me. But still, we've all got an allotted time and span to live and that's beyond now, so whatever I can tell you I'd be only too pleased to, but it's with a sense that whatever I've sought to accomplish in my life as a fisherman and as an individual, I've got to pay respect to my parents for guiding me in the way in which has lead me to be what I am today.

I like fishing. I think the day that comes that I don't enjoy what I'm doing, well I think that's when [I would retire] and if my health fails me it'll be when I want to give it away. I'm in my 66th year and I'm operating a small 25 foot 'couta¹ boat here at Queenscliff and I follow up in the seasonal trade, the 'couta along the coast operating within three miles of the heads of Port Phillip Bay here at Queenscliff. And I go down at certain times of the year as far down the coast as 55 miles away to Apollo Bay and to Lorne 35 miles to the westward and I follow the fish around the coast as often as I'm able to. Then the seasonable type of fish such as the schnapper, the whiting and the salmon and various other species as the season brings the different varieties of fish. Well I try to follow them up.

At the present time I'm trapping fish. The only professional fishermen in the Bay with the permit to trap for leatherjackets and parrot fish and I work the tides. I have an echo sounder now. It just helps me to well, vindicate what I've been trained [to know] and already have the knowledge of where the deep water is and where the reefs are, but it does show me the bottom where a particular reef is, a few fathom higher than the rest of the ground and I'll try and put my trap at the base of that pinnacle.

It's all experience of having fished the area for over 40 years here in the Heads,² you get to know something and it takes a bit to try to remember, but people talk about computers and how great an instrument it is. I'm not decrying that it's not a great instrument, but how far greater is our brain? when all the knowledge that we have, because we go back in time and I know a computer can't. As for anything in the future, well I've got no faith in the future because that's got to reveal itself in its time.²

I started fishing when I was fourteen and a half with the late Albert Johnson and his son Murray, and that was in a 34 foot boat and it was prior to the war, 1939-1945. Used to go up to 75 miles off to sea. The only instruments that we had in those days, was a compass and a log that was thrown over the stern of the boat. We used to have to look at it every hour so that it wasn't fouled by any seaweed or any kelp and that used to revolve on the end of a long line about 30 fathoms astern of us and when it revolved in the water, it would wind a little clock arrangement on the transom of the boat and record the speed and the distance that we'd travelled.

Why I mentioned that, is that we look at the boats that's operating from the port of Queenscliff today as well as most other places around the coast line. They've got radar, they've got automatic pilots, they've got microwave ovens, they've got heating instruments [for warmth in the cabins], they've got every known technological advancement as far as equipment is concerned that is possible to put their hand on today. And I think most of the young lads in their 20s, if you took them away from their navigation equipment in the wheelhouse and put them in the fog and 50 mile off to sea, I doubt if they'd ever get home. But I was brought up to realise that if you put your transom to whichever way the wave was coming from, providing you took into account there'd been no changes in the weather pattern since you'd left the port, it's got to bring you to the coastline sooner or later.

And I was brought up [as a fisherman] in the time of hoisting with a sail without the aid of [engines]. The first boat I worked in didn't have an engine. And that's well after the time when the likes of my father, they didn't have an engine. They fished under the days of sail and if there was no wind well they used to have to row! I'd like to think my eldest brother Frank will give a little bit more on his adventures of a young fisherman because I can just explain to you [the stories] that [are] handed down, such as when Dad would come home from fishing and the wind was adverse, and they would row whether it was five minutes late or two hours late [hoping to catch the small ship that took the fish to Melbourne]. If they missed the old steamer conveying the fish to the market in Melbourne, well they had no option but to literally row 30 odd miles up Port Phillip Bay in the hope the wind would freshen in the right direction and they would sail up there, off load their fish early in the morning, and come straight down again and go out fishing without a stop. [They were iron men in wooden boats, not like many of today's wooden men in steel boats.]

Those days seem to have gone because even though I've been up since quarter to five [a.m.] this morning and came in at twenty five to three [p.m.], and I'm tired, that's nowhere near what the old timers used to have. I just turn a key now in the ignition and my diesel throbs away and I flick a switch and I've got an echo sounder, I've got a winch puller. I just think, well gee five years ago what I'm doing now of course I'm a little older, and a little bit wiser, but how much easier it is to when I started fishing. And I just think, oh well, that's progress and it makes it easier and it makes us cover much more ground as far as fishing is concerned.

I can remember at one stage when there was 55 fishing boats in the fleet here. Now we'd be lucky if we had 25, but by the same token when I started fishing it was one boat for one man, or one man to each boat. Now there's one boat and it has a crew of

about five so there's just as many fishermen involved in the industry, within the port, as there was 40 years ago and they're going as far off to sea as the west coast of Tasmania and away five days at a time. There's a boat expected in tonight and he'll have anything from five to fifteen tonne of trawl fish. Unbelievable the species they get. Something that we never dreamed of, but this is the educational and different types of boat and progress and technology advancements of building bigger boats and having them freezer equipped [to fish waters far out to sea].

I can remember we used to have to come home and go to the ice works and pick up the frozen block [of ice] and put it in a big container and crush it up with a big hammer and throw shovels of ice over our boxes of fish. This was the common practice from San Remo and Port Fairy and right around the coast of Victoria to convey the fish to market. Now the hygiene and health authority says nothing less than an approved health surveyed food vehicle is allowed to convey fish from port to the market now. And that's all under refrigeration and I don't think it's much better than it was 50 years ago. I don't remember anybody dying of food poisoning.

So the progress that I've seen in the fishing industry it's been rapid and it's been very wide in its range. As I say, we used to go fishing just within two mile of the Queenscliff Heads and catch crayfish. Now there is one or two fishermen still doing that on a minor scale although it's sufficient to give him a reasonable income for his wife and family. But some of the other fishermen are involved or going as far as Wilsons Promontory nearly 100 miles to the eastward. I've got a couple of nephews operating out of Apollo Bay and they crayfish as far to King Island and right around the Victorian coastline and they're away for two to ten days at a time. Things are just so much better for the organisation and they have a wet well [keeping the crayfish alive until off-loaded at a port].

I can remember the longest I was away fishing would be three weeks. No radio contact like they've got today. They can just flick a switch and talk to mum at home in the kitchen and let the Co-op know what time they'd be home and what they require in the way of replenishment stores, and the fuel and things like that. But we were away without anybody knowing whether we were dead or alive until we arrived back.

I can remember at one stage, the propellor fell off our [20 miles south of Cape Otway] boat and after two days of drifting in adverse weather conditions, we had to dump our catch of fish of two days previously. We were five days lost at sea. Given up all hope and it was during the war time years. They were perilous times for the likes of my mum, a widow at the time, and you know, not having at their means and disposal of a radio or saying, "We're all right mum" because it was not until she saw me walking down the pier. She'd say, "Thank God, he's home. That's one home at least."

And things have changed, but I still love the sea. I respect it and I get frightened many times. I think if I didn't get frightened I'd be foolish and pay the penalty. I am very rich in experience indeed. I'm often asked on numerous occasions to officiate at the funeral service of some of my fellow fishermen. And I pay great tribute to men of many old time friends who have passed away and fished for over 60 years and I just say, publicly, that it's something to their credit and achievement as a fisherman, and as a man of the sea who seeks to understand the elements that we are able to bury him today. That he hasn't been lost at sea or drowned. Not taking away from some people that I know who have been good fishermen and have drowned and we've not recovered their bodies. But it does say a lot for them when in their little small crafts they've gone off to sea and then come back again and I hope that's the way it will be

with me. I don't want to be drowned. I have no memories of our family drowned and I don't want to be the first.

I was in the lifeboat service for 37 years as the second in charge. Bowman. I can recall many occasions when the crew used to number ten to man the Queenscliff lifeboat and it was not unusual to have eight of my brothers aboard the boat. Nine of us being aboard. I have a brother Frank, who was the recipient of the Royal Humane Society medallion going to rescue with three other fishermen, to the wreck of the Merlin in 1949.

And it's rather strange because I'm very proud of the feat of my late father in 1905 that was awarded at then, the only award that's been offered to my knowledge, any man in Australasia who's given the Royal Humane Society Silver Medal and the Bronze Medallion and I'm looking at an illuminated address given to him from the peoples of Western Australia and I have photographs upstairs of him being given the Freedom of the City of Melbourne and walking through the Guard of Honour of the Aldermen from the City of Collingwood from the Town Hall. But he was a very private man, a very humble man, not like me in any respect. He didn't talk [as much] his actions more than anything, spoke louder than words, and without taking anything from the achievement of the brave men who manned the lifeboat at Warnambool on that fateful night, but my father went and offered his services, but he was told that they wanted men not boys. He was only 21 and he did have his right arm in a sling at the time. And he went in a fourteen foot dinghy and with one oar he sculled out past the lifeboat and we've got to bear in mind that this big specially built, well equipped lifeboat was presenting much more of itself against the elements and when it would rise to the peak of the wave, the force (the wind) would push it backwards when Dad in the little dinghy it offered no resistance whatsoever. And he was able to scull past the boat and recover three men out off the wreck and the last man that he achieved by saving his life, he actually got aboard the ill fated La Bella and cut the man in question, from the main mast (he had tied himself to the main mast) and Dad half carried him and loaded him over the side into the little frail dinghy and then pushed it away moments before the La Bella went to her watery grave.

When I look back and think of the skills that I've acquired over the years, surely something of the in-bred qualities must have come from my father and listening to my older brothers and other fishermen to whom I owe so much to what's brought me to this day from a young lad of sixteen or seventeen and watching the skipper and his son doing to work. And I think to myself, "Gee will ever I be able to do that?" When I look back and say, "Yes I've done it, I'm still doing it," I feel proud, but I owe it to somebody else that's brought me to this point in time and has enabled me to do this.

My grandfather, that's my father's father, he was awarded the Royal Humane Society medal way back in about 1890 I think it was. He went single handed from Warnambool around to a little town called Port Campbell, that's recently been in the limelight a couple of months of go when a formation of the twelve apostles, the London Bridge, had fallen down. And it was in that area that a fisherman had got wrecked and he'd climbed up on a cliff face and hanging perilously to his life on that cliff face and my grandfather, in an eight hour trip, sailed a boat with no engine whatsoever and was able to find this man, take him off the ledge and convey him back safely to Warnambool. So that right through the line, the Ferrier family have been men of the sea. I'm just one of the last of the generation.

I have nephews and they are fishing quite successfully. Have well equipped boats, one of them built one of the largest boats built at Apollo Bay. A 59 footer called Putty's Pride and he operates it out from Apollo Bay and he's fishing in Bass Strait with that.

And so I think by the time I'm well and truly out of this world, I hope not to be forgotten for a while after that. But the tradition of the Ferriers will continue around the coast as fishermen of high principles and ever ready to help those in time of need.

If I've been talking too much and you want to ask me any questions I'll just stop for a moment now and leave it to you.

JD Lew, I'm reluctant to ask you a question I wouldn't want to break into that story for anything. It's a great story!

Thanks for sharing it with us.

One thing I would however like to ask you, what about that accident that you had. You've had a serious accident?

FERRIER Oh gee, the great find has surely is long and covers a great distance. Yes, I was fishing at the time in a 21 foot 'couta boat and my younger brother, his skipper had suffered a serious back injury and he hadn't been fishing for a couple of weeks and my youngest brother was married and mum said to me, "Lewis, I think you ought to get your brother to go out with you in the morning and just give him a help along." I said, "Well, all right, then." So I contacted my younger brother and told him to be down at quarter to three the next morning and he came down at about ten past three and I growled at him for being late and so it wasn't a very good beginning for the day to be in a bit of an angry mood. I was a bit sharp and rebuked him and told him what to do [in my boat] because he was not as familiar of the set up on a small 21 foot fishing boat because he was working in much larger boat (a 34 foot fishing boat) in totally different circumstances. He was a cray fisherman and I was a hook and line fisherman - a barracouta fisherman.

I had my boat moored in what we call the Queenscliff cut and it necessitated in the early hours of the morning, just using a bit of common sense, and biding the time, by watching the sea breaking on the bar, and when there was a little bit of a lull, when there was no sea breaking on the bar, you just went round and round a couple of times [waiting for the time to cross the shallow bar entrance]. I had an old eighteen horsepower Rugby 4 cylinder petrol engine in it, no gear box in those days and if you wanted to stay in the one place, the only way to do that, was to go round and round in a circle, and you never approached [the bar] without first having a good look at it and just saying, "Now is it right to go out or not?" So I, with other fishermen, would go round and round in a circle until some waves came in. They broke on the bar and then immediately after a succession of say three, four or five waves breaking across the bar, you'd got straight out after the last one and I said to my younger brother at the time, "Now look, take that rope off the deck in case the sea breaks on the bow of the boat," and I said, "the rope won't go over the side and foul the propeller." And he went forward in the dark, it would be about half past three in the morning and he undid the wrong rope and the forestay of the mast just came away and hit me on top of the head. [The mast of the fishing boats of that period were able to be lowered up or down, by means of one bolt through the base of the mast and through two supporting timbers. Since the accident two bolts now support the mast, not enabling the mast to fall down]. It didn't knock me unconscious, but I honestly did see stars, and it meant that we got stuck [on the bar] and I was able to identify [the engines of] a couple of other fishermen who were coming past and I said to my younger brother at the time, "Don't try to signal them because one man has got a cataract on his eye and he wouldn't be able to see us, and another man would be loathe to come in because his boat is a little deeper than our boat." Already we'd touched the side of the channel and we were bumping heavily and in half an hour or so, although I'm laying on the stern in

the platform of my boat helpless, with just my head rolling round. I thought I'd broken my back, but I'd broke my neck. I couldn't use my hands or my feet and it was a strange feeling.

But the incoming tide lifted the boat clear and the engine was still going and Geoff was able to bring the boat back into port and I told him to go up and tell the doctor that Lewis is in the boat, he thinks he's broken his back. And when they came down, the doctor came down and he gave me a local anaesthetic and explained to me that I'd broken my neck and they lifted me out of the boat in a straight jacket and I went to Geelong, to the Geelong Hospital. That was on February 8th, 1952. I shared the headlines with the late George V who'd passed away the day previously. So it necessitated just on five years of being hospitalised, a couple of years in Geelong Hospital unable to walk and then another twelve months over at Frankston Orthopaedic Hospital learning to get the movement into my feet and I have a lot to be thankful for and some might just think I'm a bit of an eccentric sort of a person but I do count my blessing and there's very little in life that I take for granted because I know what it's like to suffer and I just get up out of bed and I just thank God at being able to do that. And I praise Him that I'm able to go out fishing and I'm thankful when I'm able to come home again. And I take each day as it comes and I look forward that tomorrow will be just as fruitful as what today was.

So I'm this type of person that seeks to get the maximum out of life and to share it with as many people as I possibly can. That's just the little story of what happened to me when I broke my neck in the fishing boat.

JD And it's a great story. Thank you very much.

FERRIER You've got me at a time that if I was to keep going on and on you'd say, "Well I wonder if Lewis is going to stop," because there's little facets of my fishing industry that I could talk about because I was a well known local shark fishermen. Many times if there was a shark on the Victorian coast, the old D 24 would get in contact with me and the last couple of years, send me from place to place in a helicopter seek to catch the shark in the vicinity. But as I say, when one starts talking about themselves you don't like to be too forward and like to take a back seat and just think after being in the limelight for over 50 years, I just want to try if I can, to retire into the background a little bit, I do hope you can contact my elder brother and as you've already been able to see the lifeboat I just hope that you'll be able to get something that will be of a contribution to what it is that you're trying to compile together. And so if I've been of any help to you, it's in a modest way that I say thanks for the opportunity to be in touch with me.

JD And thank you, Lewis Ferrier.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Lewis Ferrier, fisherman of Queenscliff, Victoria.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

¹Couta" is short for a popular seasonal fish Barracouta, all around Tasmania, Flinders and King Island and the coasts of Victoria and South Australia.

In the boat I have, I have fished from most parts in St Vincent's Gulf based from Whyalla, catching schnapper. 1957 my boat was chartered for the film by Neville Shute, "On the Beach," and I conveyed the leading actors, e.g. Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Tony Perkins, Fred Astaire.

²The Heads I refer to as Port Phillip Heads entrance to Port Phillip Bay and the area known world wide as the dangerous waterway "The Rip."

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with **BOB FISK**

INTRODUCTION

Bob Fisk of Apollo Bay retired from fishing due to ill health four years ago after some 50 years of fishing, mainly for shark and cray fish out of Apollo Bay. His father was an engineer, fisherman and boat builder at Apollo Bay and was the first to transport his catch by motor vehicle to market over the difficult roads of the Otway Ranges.

Bob fished in partnership with his brother for many years. His son now carries on the family tradition as a professional fisherman.

Both Bob and his father built their own fishing vessels. In Bob's case largely from the local timber. The vessels proved to be well built, suitable for the difficult conditions they operated in. They are still in use.

In this tape Bob Fisk outlines some of the changes he has seen during his fishing career and points to some of the problems confronting present day fishermen and their industry.

The interview was conducted at Mr Fisk's home in Apollo Bay, Victoria on the 10th February, 1990. It is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian Fishing Industry.

The interviewer is Jack Darcey. There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Would you like to record your full name first of all?

FISK My name's Robert Thomas Fisk, Nelson Street, Apollo Bay. I was born on the 19th February, 1924. I've lived in Apollo Bay since then and I'm at the age now of 66.

JD And were your parents involved in fishing, or your father?

FISK Yes, my parents.... my father was actually an engineer. They called him an engineer. He was the workman around Apollo Bay to be called on for any job at all to be done. He took on fishing as a spare time, in netting fish mainly and in a small way, cray fishing. This is going back to 1919 until approximately 1945.

JD He would have been one of the very early fishermen in Apollo Bay.

FISK He was one of the earliest fishermen in Apollo Bay. The first fish that ever went to the Melbourne Fish Market was sent by my father in a T-model Ford to Forrest Railway Station and from there to Melbourne by railway. Consisting of 22 banana cases of salmon.

JD Salmon? Was that caught off the beach?

FISK That was netted alongside the Apollo Bay wharf.

At the present time, salmon do come through but not in the quantities they used to fifteen, twenty or thirty, forty years ago. For some reason, whether it is the temperature of the water, I would not know, but there is very few shoals of salmon on the coast at the present time.

JD To come back to your father's transportation of the fish to the rail. Even when driven up that road up through the Ranges?

FISK Yes, they left Apollo Bay here approximately ten o'clock at night and they got to Forrest at daylight the next morning. Actually, he was walking in front of the old T-model Ford with a hurricane light to show the way.

JD It's a pretty windy steep track, even now isn't it?

FISK Yes, and the first ten miles I think there was just on 400 turns and at that the road was only a light covering of scree and some gravel.

JD Yes. Then you've lived all your life you said in Apollo Bay. You were educated here?

FISK Yes, I went to the State School until I was thirteen and a half. I left school then and then from that time, I started working with my father and part time fishing with him mainly on the netting. Sometimes I'd go out fishing with my brother who has passed away since then and I've actually fished with him for 25 years. Since then, Leo my brother, gave up through being ill, I took on another deck hand name of Kevin Gill. I had him as my only deck hand for 21 years. At that time his family was grown up and he thought it was time he got out of the game so then I brought my son out from Melbourne which was going through some marine engineer. He is carrying on fishing in the boat that I built 22 years ago.

JD You served in the Army during the war Bob?

FISK Yes, from 1942 until 1946 I was in the AIF Australian Forces. My job there was on land and barge of small craft anything up to 350 ton which was quite enjoyable but finished the war years.

JD That was up in the islands?

FISK Yes, New Guinea, New Britain and Solomon Islands.

JD So when you came back from the war you went straight back into fishing?

FISK When I returned from the war years my father had built a boat by then for me (28 foot boat) and at that time it was the biggest boat we had at this port on account of you couldn't use any larger because they had to be lifted out of the water by a crane. This boat was built to carry water ballast which we could have it four or five feet

longer than most of them and go a bit further, being able to pump the water out of it before we lifted it onto the wharf.

JD And he built it with his own hands did he?

FISK Yes he built it by himself. He used to do all the repairs to all boats along this coast here, yes.

JD And was it a good boat?

FISK It was built out of New Zealand Kauri. All full length New Zealand Kauri and Red Gum keel.... I'm sorry Jarrah keel from Western Australia and Red Gum stem and stern. The timbers in it being Oregon and Kauri.

JD A good boat?

FISK Beautiful boat. Yes it's still in the harbour at Apollo Bay and there is not one plank moved on that vessel. The marine surveyors have come down and they look at it and they say, "We haven't seen a boat like that before."

JD Is she still fishing?

FISK She's still fishing, she's still in the fishing game.

JD And what's it powered by?

FISK First of all it was powered by a Rugby 4 cylinder petrol motor. The old Rugby car and then it had a 6 cylinder Rugby and that didn't last so long. Too much trouble as usual with petrol motors. And we put in a 14 horse power Lister diesel which was the first diesel installed in this port in Apollo Bay. On that boat that motor ran 22 years. It was repaired occasionally but not very often. It was well looked after but it was extra good service.

JD It would have been a decked boat with a wheelhouse was it?

FISK To start it was an open boat with just a deck. Once the harbour was built, the breakwater, we put a crayfish well in it that would carry fourteen to sixteen bags of crayfish and put a small wheelhouse on it and it was suited for this coast at that time.

JD When you came back from the war and you took this new boat that your father had built, what sort of fish were you fishing?

FISK Actually we fished for barracuda only. We'd be hooking quite a few schnappers through the season, long lining shark and catching a few salmon.

JD Yes. This would have been in the days before there was restricted entry into various fisheries?

FISK That is correct. There was.... you could use any amount of pots you could handle. You wasn't paying any levy on a pot at all, it was just a fishing licence and your registration of boats.

At the present time, well, you have to pay whatever you use you pay money on so much a pot and you're restricted to so many pots. If you're a newcomer you are restricted to the pots you buy out of the boat that you've bought or the gentlemen you've bought him off has sold the pots without the boat.

JD What happened to the 'cuda industry?

FISK The 'cuda industry failed on account outside fish. People went off barracuda on account of bones, the length of the bones in the flesh of the fish. They went in for flake. Flake was the thing to take over from the 'cuda.

JD There was still plenty of 'cuda around then?

FISK No. 'cuda disappeared off the coast, off this portion of the coast, Apollo Bay, Lorne and Queenscliff for the last fifteen to twenty years. Temperature of the water rose half a degree or close to half a degree and the fish seemed to move out. The 'cuda moved further south, they were still catching them down in King Island, Tasmania but that time, when the 'cuda moved out, there was whiting coming out of the Bay. There's more whiting caught on this coast just now since the change of temperature of the water.

JD Did you go for other scale fish besides the salmon and barracuda?

FISK Not really because there was no scale fish here actually in any quantities. At times you'd only have 'cuda for three to four months of the year but it would be spread through the year. Salmon would be spread through the year too and we would have to wait for these fish to come in. In between we would have out cray pots fishing for crayfish.

JD Did you go for shark as well?

FISK Yes we used to go sharking. Not in a big way, we'd shoot four to five hundred or sometimes eight hundred and the boats weren't big enough to carry or go to any great distances for shark.

JD So you really concentrated more on the crayfish?

FISK Crayfish mainly but just after the war years, 'cuda was our main object on account of they were the quantity was here. At that time we were getting, we were getting fourpence three farthings a pound and Kraft Walker was in production in canning these fish for overseas and local markets.

JD So when you went into the crayfishing was it about the time when crayfishing prices went through the export to America, was that right?

FISK No that's not right. The crayfish market just after the war years was possibly ninepence to one and three [shillings] a pound. They carried on at that price until about the 50s, 55s and that and then they suddenly went up. Then the price kept moving up until approximately four or five years ago and they started to sky rocket on account of the amount of crayfish wasn't getting to the market and they had these overseas markets to China and wherever they went, Japan and Singapore and the price from them. That has only been for the last four or five years.

JD And it's because of the much smaller catches is that right?

FISK Yes, the catches are smaller, but the catches being so small was brought on by the Fisheries and Wildlife. This should have never happened. When you [unclear] in the fishery return [?] no matter what sort, barracuda, schnapper, crays there's always a question, 'Fill in here for what you think is right or wrong or what goes on'.

Well quite often, I have filled in returns and said, "This industry, the crayfish industry is being overfished." Nothing was ever done about this whatsoever until a few years ago, when they put a pot limit on. But before this, there was no worry about these fish returns. These fish returns would go in once a month. I can remember taking them down to a police station. Once a month my father would give me the returns as a kid, before I started, and these returns were supposed to be gone over and they know what has been sent to these markets and what has been caught. But last year there was a meeting called at Queenscliff for fishermen and the Fisheries and Wildlife. These returns had never been looked at since they've been sent in! That is what has happened to the industry!

JD Did they admit that they....

FISK They have admitted this in front of fishermen there! So there must be a room full of returns. With wasted time turns you off the Fisheries and Wildlife.

JD To come back to your own career Bob, you would have seen many changes in the industry in the 50 years that you've been involved. Take boats, have they altered much?

FISK Yes, boats have altered altogether. The game at the present time, what I call the game is the fisherman, boats and this, and the boats that they have to have at these present times to make a living. Years ago a 21 foot boat you could make a living out of. Now in a port like Apollo Bay there is no hope of making a living because the fish are not there to catch to make a living because your barracuda has moved, your salmon has moved and where we used to catch crays it is fished out. So therefore you had to go into bigger boats.

Now this was expensive.... [unclear] was getting into this bigger boats you'd have to have the money or you had to borrow money from the Rural Finance which was quite a good idea for the interest was low and if you had the experience they would lend you the money. But at the present time, for a young chap to go into fishing he hasn't a hope of going into the industry without he has got someone to lend him the money, because the present time to go shark fishing, or crayfishing in the right type of boat, you need a quarter of a million dollars. And that puts the young man out of a job and as being a deckhand, by the time that man has got enough money he's just about old enough to retire. So he's had it more or less.

It's only the people that can hand down their boats or start their sons off or lucky enough to get the money (borrow the money) at the right interest can carry on in the game.

JD You, yourself built a boat as well?

FISK Yes well, when my brother passed away.... before he passed away I should say, he got sick to start off.... I was half shares with my brother in a boat that I'd had built in Mordialloc by Hunter. This boat was a 44 foot cray boat and shark boat. We fished in it for approximately 20 years round the Victorian coast and the Tasmanian waters. We

did quite well out of it because the game at that time wasn't pressed so hard with the amount of boats, so everything went well. When my brother wished to get out of it he said, "Well, you can either buy my part of the boat or sell it." I said, "I would prefer to build a boat myself to what I want, so we'll sell the boat." So I built this 42 foot boat which suited the harbour of Apollo Bay on account of this harbour at Apollo Bay was silting up and the depth of anything of over five feet was no good, it couldn't get in and out of the harbour.

This was a more suitable boat and I fished in that until four years ago and at the present time, my son's fishing in it. But it was quite an experience building your first boat.

JD I'll bet. What.... it's timber built?

FISK Yes. I built this boat out of timber. As a matter of fact it's all local timber, was sawn out at the mill at Apollo Bay. All out of Blue Gum. Blue Gum planking, Blue Gum keel, stem and stern and Blackwood deck. Oh, I made a mistake, Jarrah for a well from Western Australia.

This boat was actually when built, was designed for shark fishing and the crayfishing. It was wider, it gave me more.... and ice box and refrigeration which gave me an up to date boat it did.

JD And good sea boat?

FISK Very good sea boat. It is down there at the present time, it's been through some of the biggest seas that's ever come into this port. So yes, it's a very good sea boat it is.

JD How far afield does she go?

FISK Well you usually go seven or eight hours off over the shelf fishing. That's far enough for us.

JD What about the other gear, what about the pots you use?

FISK Well, pots at the present time there's a problem. The problem being that the grounds are overfished and therefore to make a living you have to use 50 pots or more, which cost the fisherman more expense, more boat, further travelling he has to go to catch fish. At the present time there's no such thing as further travel because the grounds are fished out more or less. And the time. You have no more.... no time at all at home if you wished to make a good living out of this. There's too much time spent off to sea. It's not a job which you can say, oh I'm going for a holiday, I'm going to have so much time off. No it's a twelve months a year job more or less.

JD Bob your costs would have gone up a great deal too. Things like the electronic gear and the insurance and so on and licence fees. They're all expensive I understand.

FISK Yes, gear has gone up terrifically but at the same time the price of fish has gone up. Because the price of fish going up hasn't compensated for the low catches we're getting. Our catches have dropped so we gain one way and we lose the other way. So we're down. The fisherman is no where near as well off as he was after 1945 to 1965 - 70.

JD Where does the catch end up? When you land it what happens to it?

FISK Our catch at Apollo Bay ends up going through our Apollo Bay Fishermens Co-operative or 90% of it would. Shark fish, the shark bodies mainly go to Melbourne. I would say 10% of it's processed into fillets at Apollo Bay, but Apollo Bay being mainly a crayfish port most of the catch at the present time is sent overseas and what is left over is cooked and sold locally to visitors or to the Melbourne market.

JD Have the number of boats fishing out of Apollo Bay changed much?

FISK No, they haven't changed much over the last fifteen years. No, more or less still the same quantity. Boats went down for quite a while and I would say fifteen, twenty years ago things got a bit grim in the industry and then when things came good again, more boats came to the port. But that only lasted so long because we had too many boats fishing the grounds which thinned the crayfish out and wouldn't stand the fishing.

JD Do you think that the way the industry is managed through the Department, is it well done, or is it poorly done?

FISK I would say they would be the worst run of any rural work in Australia. We call ourselves rural we do, the fishermen. Nothing has ever seemed to be right in it. Everything is done when it's too late. It's fished out. It's too late. They didn't stop licences. They could have seen if they'd read these reports the fish were getting thinned out, but no, the reports were never looked at so the fishermen are caught with their boats and no fish to catch!

JD Do the fishermen belong to organisations, fishermens organisation?

FISK At Apollo Bay yes, they are all members of the Fishermens Co-operative here or with a couple of boats from Portland and they can be members too, but some don't wish to be members and some of them, if they wished to be members they wouldn't be allowed into the Co-op because they do the wrong thing.

JD And is there a State organisation that the Apollo Bay fishermen also are represented on?

FISK Yes, we're represented on a committee to.... we have more or less league (a fishermens league and all that) and each port has representatives on it, yes.

JD And then is there a national body that they all belong to?

FISK All together yes. More or less national body yes.

JD Do you think it's an effective organisation overall?

FISK Not really because fishermen seem to be getting more hungry they are. They're only looking at money, they're not looking to preserve the grounds to keep the fish there. They're only worried about catching them and getting out of the game. A short sighted policy by most fishermen at the present time.

JD Is there a difference between the attitude of the old fishermen, such as yourself and the younger fellows now in the business?

FISK Yes, much different. Now they're just in it to (I'm talking on deckhands now) they're just in it, to get enough money and when they've got their money they just shoot through, spend it and come back. And there is quite a few of the old fishermens sons and that which are carrying on keeping the boats and that going. As far as deckhands and that they have no interest at all in it actually.

JD What are some of the other problems that face the industry? Is pollution a problem?

FISK No I don't think so. Not down in this area.

JD Did you catch many crays that had injuries?

FISK No, I can't say we've ever caught crays that have injuries. The only injury to crayfish would be by leather jacks or octopus. Well it's still the same today, it's no better, it's no worse.

FISK What about litter in the ocean, does that....

JD Litter in the ocean, never affected this part of the Otways.

JD The question of transferability of licences, is that contentious issue in Apollo Bay?

FISK Well at one time you sold your boat, well the licence went with it. Now, you sell your boat and the licence can go with it. You're selling the boat and the pot licence. There was no pot licence before. Now you have a pot licence and that's worth quite a bit of money at the present time. I think about \$1,500 a pot for the western zone, but in between this, you are paying for pots too to a registration of gear and before there was nothing. Prior to this pot licence there was no cost whatsoever.

JD So it's becoming quite an expensive industry to get into?

FISK Yes, it is expensive to get into. The fish licence which is making it really expensive and the bigger type of boat.

JD And is that altering the character of the industry in terms of the people that are involved in it? There wouldn't be too many young blokes could raise the sort of capital that would be required?

FISK No, as I said before, the capital that's required is too much for an ordinary lad to be deckhand for four or five years without he gets a loan at the right interest to go into the industry.

JD And then if he goes in with a big debt, he's got to overfish really to beat the debt?

FISK Yes, this is where the problem has started. A lot have gone in, they've bought these boats and they cannot pay for the boat and therefore, they have to keep fish, fish, fish.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD We were talking about the need that some of the people coming into the industry have to fish, fish, fish as you put it which is causing a depletion of stock among other things. Would the inroads of the recreational fishermen be affecting the total catch?

FISK It would be affecting the fishermen's catch, but only slightly. In this, especially the crayfish industry which I have been mainly in the fishing game. Yes, there's quite a few crayfish speared around the rocks especially small crayfish but as far as what they catch out in boats, very small. I would like to see the crayfish where they're being speared stopped, because these spear fishermen they are killing crayfish down the size of a matchbox which is no good for nothing. It's no good to them. All they are doing is killing the industry and there's quite a lot of this goes on. Though it's being policed fairly well in our area, they are still getting away with quite a lot of it. As far as abalone, yes, they are still taking abalone but not at the quantity they used to. Off to sea, fishing off to sea, well they don't worry us because there's no of them using craypots which would worry the fishermen so I would say no. As far as catching 'cuda, they don't worry us. Salmon no, we've got no worries otherwise.

JD Did you enjoy your years in fishing?

FISK Yes, especially after the war years. I really enjoyed it. Life was hard, but it is a good clean living. We didn't make big money, but we made better than what the average worker did and we used to have our holidays through the winter. Different to what you do now, we have to more or less keep plodding along to keep up with the cost of living.

JD Your health failed ultimately didn't it?

FISK Yes, the only reason I give up fishing when I was 62 years of age (four years ago) was account of a heart attack and I've never been back to it since. Even though I have a small boat and I go and catch a few fish, I still enjoy the game. If I had my life over again and I would go through it again the same.

JD Did it have any harmful effect on your family?

FISK No, no harmful effect on my family because we live in the town. There's school and they had their schooling here and when they got up to.... in later years, they went to higher schools so it had no effect actually on our family, no.

JD It's a pretty rugged industry really isn't it. There's an element of danger in it and always has been.

FISK There's always an element of danger, but the danger mainly is up to the fisherman himself whether he keeps his boat in good repair, where he's got everything there and he don't take risk and he's been in the game long enough to know what he's doing.

JD Was it a worry to your wife do you think?

FISK No I don't think so because she wasn't born in Apollo Bay and knew what fishermen went through. She thought it was easy, was nothing to do; just went in and you come home and you went back to work again.

JD Which was not quite the picture was it?

FISK No, not quite!

JD Anything else that you'd like to mention on this tape?

FISK No I think I've covered most that I've done in life on the tape.

JD Right. Well, thank you very much for this interview and all the best for the future.

FISK Thank you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Bob Fisk, retired fisherman of Apollo Bay, Victoria.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with DON GILSENAN

INTRODUCTION

Don Gilsenan was 87 years old when this interview was recorded in his home in Paynesville, Victoria, on 12th March, 1990.

The Gilsenans have been well known in Paynesville for three generations. Don's father established an ice-works and fish agency business in the town in the early years of the century, a business Don eventually took over. Don's son, Ross, who was present during the interview, is a professional fisherman in the area.

Don is a raconteur with a fund of stories and an impish sense of humour. The latter part of the interview was replete with yarns which may, or may not, always be strictly according to the facts, but which captured the spirit of the time and place, and which made Don Gilsenan a delight to record.

The interviewer is Jack Darcey and the record is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry. There is one tape and the interview starts at .021 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Mr Gilsenan, could you record your full name, please?

GILSENAN Donald Alfred Gilsenan.

JD And what was your date of birth?

GILSENAN 22nd of March, 1903.

JD So that makes you 87, almost?

GILSENAN Next week [laughs].

JD Next week.

GILSENAN Yes [laughs] not far!

JD And where were you born?

GILSENAN East Bairnsdale.

JD And were you brought up in this Gippsland area?

GILSENAN East Bairnsdale. I came to Paynesville when I was two, and I've been here ever since.

JD Your father was involved in the fishing industry, wasn't he?

GILSENAN Yes, yes.

JD Was his father a fisherman?

GILSENAN No, no. Father was the ice-works, my father, and he was the fish agent, and we'll say from Paynesville right through to Sale.

JD Does that mean he bought the catch from the fishermen?

GILSENAN No, he used to send the fish to the market, and they'd send the returns back to Father to pay the fishermen.

JD How was the ice-works powered in those days? There wouldn't have been electricity, would there? How was it powered, you know, what did they use as a source of power?

GILSENAN Well, we used to use the suction gas. That was charcoal, to drive her for years and years, until Paynesville got electricity and then we changed over to electricity. Ammonia was the plant for freezing.

JD And you joined your father in the business, did you, when you left school?

GILSENAN Yes, I worked for my father when I left school. He used to supply and load ice on to the steamers which took it to other ports for packing fish, which he got me to take over [laughs] his place, and I worked for four days a week for years.

JD And the fishermen would land their catch and you'd pack them in ice, would you, the fish?

GILSENAN Yes.

JD And then load them on your steamer?

GILSENAN Yes, the steamer would leave Lakes Entrance at eight o'clock in the morning, and pick up the fish, the ice and myself and then we'd go to Hollands Landing and pick up the fish, the ice, and between Hollands Landing and Seacombe we had dinner. The Captain, the First Mate, the engineer and myself sat at the table there, and then after going to Seacombe, we'd drop the ice there, and pick up the fish, and the rest of the crew would have their meal going across (that's the fireman and the deckhand and the girls) would have their meal going across Lake Wellington. When we got to the mouth of the Latrobe River, we'd pick up all the fish there, drop the ice, and then I would get the letters, the consignment for the fishing, and the Captain would post that in Sale. They'd drop me at the Heart Landing about four miles up the river, and they'd go on to Sale, load the fish at Sale wharf. There'd be a railway truck there. The other boat would pass and pick up the passengers from the train, and

there'd be two boats, one going up and one coming down, and the one coming down would pick me up and bring me home. We'd have our tea on the way home.

JD And you did that four times a week?

GILSENAN Yes, for years.

JD When the fish were consigned on the rail, they went to Melbourne market, did they?

GILSENAN Yes, Melbourne fish market.

JD What sort of fish were you sending?

GILSENAN Oh there were mullet, bream, garfish, oh all sorts of fish, like in Lakes fish.... skipjacks, what else, Ross? And flounders.

JD Were there big quantities of fish?

GILSENAN Big quantities of mullet, yes.

JD Were the fishermen netting or line fishing?

GILSENAN Netting, yes, netting.

JD Was there salmon in this area?

GILSENAN No, not many salmon, salmon trout. At certain times of the year, we'd get salmon trout in.

JD About how many fishermen would have....?

GILSENAN Oh [laughs] we had in those days, about nearly 40, I suppose. Would that be right, Ross? Yes, 40.

JD Mr Gilsenan, could you tell us about your father's involvement with the ice-works? Did he build them or did he buy them or how did he acquire them?

GILSENAN He bought them in about 1904.

JD 1904?

GILSENAN Yes, and he bought them off Chris Grounite. Chris Grounite lived just across the road from the ice-works, and he also built Father a boat. He said.... Father helped him build some boats, and he said, "If you like to get the timber - New Zealand karri - I'll build you a boat." So they built one, the **Jeanara**.

JD Was it a fishing boat?

GILSENAN No, it was a pleasure boat. The ice-works were shifted down to the wharf when I was about sixteen.

JD That would have been about the era of the First World War, would it?

GILSENAN During the War, yes, that's right.

JD And you helped to move it?

GILSENAN [Laughs] I took some of the weatherboards down with the horse and cart, yes.

JD Your father was on the Council here, wasn't he?

GILSENAN Yes, the Council for many, many years right up until he passed away. He was still on the Council, and he was President three years running, and then later on he was President again several times.

JD And he was a Justice of the Peace?

GILSENAN Yes, Justice of the Peace.

JD He was involved in the Professional Fishermen's Association also, wasn't he?

GILSENAN Yes, yes.

JD What role did he have in those?

GILSENAN He was President, wasn't he, Ross, in the Association? And he was also President in the Victorian Fishermen's Association.

JD For the whole of the State of Victoria? In your day, when you used to take the fish by steamer, what sort of prices were the fishermen getting for those fish?

GILSENAN Terrible prices sometimes, and it all depended on rough weather. Rough weather when they couldn't get out in some other ports, they'd get better prices here, and today the prices are terrific now. Beautiful! Wonderful!

JD Better prices?

GILSENAN Much better prices, yes.

JD But not catching as many fish?

GILSENAN Oh no, not so many fish, no.

JD Do they still catch the same kind of fish?

GILSENAN I think so, don't they, Ross? Yes, yes.

JD To talk about yourself a little, how many children did you have?

GILSENAN Four.

JD All boys or....?

GILSENAN No, three.... three I'm sorry [laughs]. Three, two boys and a girl.

JD Did the boys go fishing at all?

GILSENAN Yes, Ross is a professional fisherman.

JD And what did the other boy do?

GILSENAN He's working up in Horsham for the Council up there.

JD How did Ross come to go fishing?

GILSENAN Well, I'm not too sure [laughs]. He just drifted in to it. He's been fishing for quite a few years now.

JD And how many grandchildren have you got?

GILSENAN Two, four, seven.

JD Seven?

GILSENAN Yes.

JD Right. You've been retired for a while, of course, haven't you?

GILSENAN Yes.

JD When did you retire?

GILSENAN I drove trucks for years, many, many, many years, and took the fish to Bairnsdale and carted the goods from the shops down to Paynesville, and timber for houses and so forth for many years.

JD So you had a carrying business as well as the fishing.

GILSENAN Yes, Father had the carrying and I worked for him. Then later on, Father passed away and I took it over myself.

JD And when did you give up work then about? How many years?

GILSENAN Ross and others took over the business from me.

JD I see.

GILSENAN Then they said, "We've taken the business over. We want you to work for us." [laughs] I worked for them until they looked after the business [laughs].

JD So you really haven't been fully retired for all that long?

GILSENAN No, it's a few years now [laughs].

JD What do you do with yourself nowadays then?

GILSENAN Very little [laughs].

JD Do you play bowls?

GILSENAN Yes, I did play bowls, I haven't bowled for some time now. I go round visiting people.

JD And you're still in good health?

GILSENAN Not too bad, yes. 87 next week.

JD Great.

GILSENAN Yes, yes. A fisherman used to collect some of his returns off Father before the returns were paid out. He used to do a bit of drinking, and one time he borrowed quite a few pounds off Father. He said to me, "I don't know how I'm going to get home this next week." He said to me, "I don't know what the wife will say about me borrowing...." No, "...getting money." He said, "Your father is a trick of a man. He's very funny." The fisherman had an engine, an old Regal engine on his boat and anyhow he said, "The wife got the returns and opened them up and the father's got "lubrication" [laughs] so many pounds," and she thought it was for the lubrication for the engines, not himself [laughter].

JD Did you ever have anything to do with a horse named Bell?

GILSENAN Yes. When the ice-works were up near the hall, the ice was taken down to the wharf by horse and cart. Bell was the horse's name.

JD And you used to drive it, did you?

GILSENAN No, I didn't drive it so much. I used to use it for riding about and so forth, but another chap used to do the driving. I did it several times, but one time I went down to the wharf. Rode the horse down and two fishermen said, "Oh," they said, "will you take some fish up to your father on the horse?" I said, "Yes." So they gave me a basket of fish, put a lot of paper in. It was blowing a gale and the horse took fright, and went past the ferryman, and he was standing up in the boat and he said, "You're going too fast, you're going too fast!" I had no brakes to put on. I landed up near the corner store [laughs]. The fish went everywhere, I got a gravel rash and the horse stood there and snorted at me! [Laughter]

JD You must have known some interesting people all your years living in Paynesville?

GILSENAN Yes, I did.

JD Do you remember any of their names?

GILSENAN No, I can't.... I remember a schoolteacher. Now I'll tell you something. The schoolteacher who had been here for many, many years, and there used to be some apple trees up in the paddock. There was a little hut up there, and my eldest sister was several years older than me, and some of the other ones in the school, all went up there getting apples. They got back late to the school, and the teacher said, "Where have you been? Up the hut?" Nobody would answer, so he'd go on teaching

and come back and have another go at all the pupils. Anyhow one time, when the girl's.... he was asking a question, and the girl had a blouse on and had all the apples up the blouse, and the elastic broke [laughs] and all the apples were in front of the blackboard! [Laughs] [unclear] I don't think you'll get that.

JD Did you all get the stick?

GILSENAN No, we were a lot smaller than the others, we were all right. My mate and I were all right.

Well, Father and Mr Fleischer, and myself, went over Mr Whelpton's on the south shore (Mr Whelpton lived there) and there was also a teacher from the School of Mines, came across with father. Mr Whelpton rowed out to the boat (out to the launch) and he said, "[unclear] the rowing boat (my rowing boat) if you're going away in the launch, you pick us up when they come back in the rowing boat." He said, "You can go down towards Bartons in the rowing boat, you might get a shot down there." He gave me a gun for my birthday and anyhow, he went away and I went down towards Bartons, and I could hear ducks back near the jetty. So I went back and crawled along, and waited until they got in a heap and I let drive, and I got several. They seemed quite heavy and well-fed, well anyhow [laughs] I got them and put them behind the tussock until my father came back. I went up to the house where Mrs Whelpton, my sister, was visiting, and I said, "Have the Wotny's got any tame ducks?" And my sister said, "Yes, why?" And I said, "Oh I've shot several. I'm not too sure what sort they are." So Father and them came back, I rowed out and I said, "How did you get on?" They said, "We did no good. How did you go?" I said, "I've got several but I'm not sure what sort they are." Mr Fleischer came out and said, "They're Whelpman's tame ducks." So [laughs] anyhow Mr Whelpman came ashore afterwards and he said, "Very tough when a fellow gives you a gun and they come and shoot his tame ducks!" He said, "You take the ducks home. You get a feed, but we won't get a feed." [laughs] He reckons after that every time the launch came across (our launch) to their place, the rest of the ducks, those that were still going, used to go across to get out of the road. [laughter] That's it! That's a bit like a fisherman's tale.

JD You had a mate that.... a friend who was the Mate on the **Dogo** was it?

GILSENAN Mate on the boat? Yes, the First Mate and I were very friendly.

JD A good navigator was he? He was a very good navigator.

GILSENAN Oh yes, he happened to be Captain afterwards.

JD How did he navigate?

GILSENAN How do you mean?

JD How did he find his way?

GILSENAN Oh on the steamer? He had a compass which we didn't bother using on a fine day.

JD So what did he steer by?

GILSENAN Well [laughs], well, he knew exactly where to go. There was a circle of trees and so forth that we could steer by.

JD Is that the guy that used to steer by the flagpole on the front of the boat, is he?

GILSENAN [Laughs] No, that's what he said he steered by [laughs]. My mate said to me.... a chap from our.... he was a grocer and he said, "I want to take me mate out flounder spearing. I know you don't like taking strangers out because," he said, "they tell everybody where you get the flounder." He said, "He'll be all right," so I said, "All right, let him down." So he brought him down and we took him to Lake Victoria, and I said, "Well, I'll lend you one of my flounder boats, and a spear, and a battery, but we're going up to Lake Victoria in the launch, and we'll pick you up when we're coming back."

So we went up the Lake, the mate and I, and coming back my mate said, "Well, I'll get supper ready in the boat," he said, "you go and pick this gang up." So I went in to pick him up and I said, "How did you get on, Cam?" "Oh lovely lot of flounders." I said, "Well, we got a lot of flounders too." I said, "Your foot's bleeding, Cam." "Yes," he said. I said, "What happened?" He said, "I speared it," he said, "I thought it was a flounder. I didn't know until I went to put it in the bag." [Laughter]

JD Righto. Well, thanks very much for talking to us. It's been good fun. Thank you.

GILSENAN Father was travelling on the steamer like I was afterwards, fish agent, and he used to have to get off at Heart Landing. A big flood came down, and steamers weren't allowed to come down and Father couldn't get ashore anywhere because the flood was right across, we'll say a mile or so, before they could get near the wharf. Anyhow he stopped there all night in the shed, and took the sea lap in the shed and made a raft, and he stopped there all night. Well, of course, the boats couldn't come down on account of the flood, so he had company all night. He had two snakes on the same seat, so he had company all night [laughs]. Then next day, they came down.... got a private boat and came down to see if Father was still alive or not, and they picked him up, and the Captain put his arm around him and kissed him. And Dad was all right. So he said, "Never get off at the Heart Landing if there's a flood coming down!" [Laughter]

JD Right. I think we'd better knock off now.

GILSENAN Yes.

JD Good. Thanks. Righto.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Don Gilsenan of Paynesville, Victoria.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B UNRECORDED

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Edited transcript of an interview with CHARLES W. HILL

INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr Charles William Hill, commonly known as Bill Hill, fish merchant of Melbourne. The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry and was conducted in Melbourne by Jack Darcey on the 20th February 1990.

Immediately upon leaving school, Bill Hill joined his father in the latter's fish merchant business at the Old Melbourne Fish Markets which was at the corner of Flinders and Spencer Streets. On this tape he relies on a very retentive memory to provide a fascinating account of the marketing of fish over half a century and more. His story graphically illustrates some of the difficulties confronting the industry in earlier days and the remarkable measures adopted towards overcoming them.

The interview covers many facets of the industry and the people who were in it including topics such as ports and prices, transport and imports. It is a significant contribution to the history of the Australian fishing industry, in Victoria and South Australia particularly.

There are three sides on two tapes. The interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

HILL My name is Charles William Hill, known as Bill and one of the, well the last remaining Hill in the wholesale fish business commenced by my great grandfather in 1864. When I finally left the business in 1962 my family name was still carried on in the business under the title of J. Hill & Sons but that business had been acquired by Irving & Johnson of South Africa and is still operative today. The family as it started was Joseph Hill & Sons and they originally started, as I believe, in the first wholesale fish market in Melbourne which was located on the Swanston Street frontage of what is today the Flinders Street Station.

My great grandfather had two sons, John and Arthur. I am derived from the Arthur side of the family and my father had two brothers, Bill and Baden. Bill also came into the fish business with my family in, I'm not sure in terms of dates but certainly in the early 1900s. My father continued with the firm of J. Hill until the early '20s when, after some family difficulties, he broke out and started on his own originally in the name of J.D. Box but this was quickly changed to Chas A. Hill. This business under the Chas A. Hill title carried on until 1959 when the second fish market which was located on the corner of Flinders and Spencer Street, [which] was under pressure from development

of that area of the city [and] was relocated to where it is today at what is known as New Footscray Road, West Melbourne.

My introduction to the business was in the early '30s when I was perhaps about sixteen and a half. The end of the Depression when my father found great difficulty in employing labour that you could rely on and he was desperately dependent on somebody like myself to come into the business and, where possible, keep an eye on things, but basically to have a backup that he could rely on in terms of his labour content. My father had had numerous difficulties. The fish market was one of those places where you couldn't afford to have too many doors. There was always slight pillage problems. You had to keep your eye on things [to] put it mildly.

So that was my introduction to the fish market. My younger brother was a more studious type than myself [and] he went on to become a doctor and was through in the medical profession before he was 21 and quite brilliant in his field. The fish market in those days constituted five wholesale agents known as VFA which was the Victorian Fishermen's Association and which was the earliest form of a co-operative society, J. Hill & Sons (the original J. Hill which as I say is still operative today), a firm known as H. Dusting & Son which was a personal family name. The next biggest firm to VFA and J. Hill who were substantial firms and occupied three stalls in the market, was J.R. Borrett, also [a] three stall holder. I'm not sure of the derivation of the Borrett name but in all of my lifetime, and that I knew of, J.R. Borrett was controlled by a Mr Brown but he was never a person that took his coat off. He was manager and owner in title but with no operative participation. He didn't work in the business. He wasn't a clerk, he wasn't an auctioneer. He was a personality, just a roving owner if we could put it that way.

JD What was your own function in the enterprise?

HILL Well when I first came in at sixteen and a half I was sort of a backup labourer when it came to selling but certainly a person that my father could turn to if he wanted something specific. When the sales were finished I was in the office. My sister who was two years older than myself, she had also come into the office. To enter into your office structure you came through a ground floor street entrance. We only occupied one single stall tenancy in that building so that the entrance to our office was at the back of our selling area. Our office staff approaching that building would have to walk through whatever, bags, aprons, anything or other to go upstairs into what we made an office as presentable as we could; but looking back it would not be operative today. No way in the world. (In the mid '40s we opened a city office at 55 William Street and our office staff had no contact with the market building).

JD Health grounds?

HILL On health grounds. It was fairly close to the bone and I have some records here of what we were paying in rent when I tell you that for our single store [rustle of papers in the background] our rental.... I quote from a letter of the 19th June 1950 which of course had been the after the War period when we had price control and the business certainly was just recovering from the effects of War, as I say price fixing which was very, very detrimental to the market because if snapper had for instance a fixed price of two shillings or two and six [pence] a pound wholesale at the market and Joe Blow down at Rosebud or at Queenscliff caught some beautiful snapper, any shop keeper in Melbourne who was worth his salt had an arrangement for that fisherman to ring him and he'd pay him the fixed price without the fish coming to market. Market sales during the late War period to an adjusting period, perhaps we'll say towards the '50s, sales fell off dramatically because of the very fact that prices were fixed. So that

if a person had, you know, ten bags of crayfish and somebody of note, some big provedore or anyone wanted ten bags of crayfish, if Joe Blow from San Remo [rang] Joe [and said], "Joe, do you want ten bags of crays", he'd send his own truck down and pick them up so as to avoid the 10% commission and the market dues which were negligible in today's terms. To avoid that margin they would sell direct and market sales fell off dramatically during that period.

I quote here from a fair rent's determination that the Metropolitan Fair Rents Board has already consented [to] namely to a figure of 107 pounds (\$204) per annum as our rental at the wholesale fish market for one stall. So the bigger firms, say like VFA and Borretts and J. Hill would have been paying only about three times that figure for their accommodation ([at] the corner of Flinders and Spencer Street) where today opposite we have the most magnificent hotel project just opened, adjoining the World Trade Centre.

JD Bill during the War then and immediately after, the fish weren't sold on an auction system?

HILL Oh, yes they were. Oh yes there was always the auction system.

JD I understood that the prices were controlled.

HILL Well yes but I mean if, as I can remember it, there was so much.... Well we got down to sales of only a few hundred pounds a week (volume sales). Well now whether that involved a raffle or an auction sale, I'm just [not sure] but there was always some sort of thought of an auction sale, as I can remember it. Often it was distributed rather than auctioned, but at the legal fixed price.

JD Could you outline what happened. The fisherman would consign his catch to your firm say, and what would you do with it?

HILL Well it starts really with the fact that every agent supplied boxes to a port. Now it was the most costly and disastrous side of the business. We would supply boxes and I can remember a local fish box would have been about, oh perhaps 30 inches long, twenty wide, eight, nine inches deep with hoop iron bind bands at either end and a loose lid. Now to be competitive you had to have boxes at a port because a fisherman coming in would select a box of the agent to whom he wished to forward his fish. Barracouta (couta) was the greatest volume fish in Victoria in those '30s, '40s and '50s. Later on trawlers came along and operated from Lakes Entrance. If you didn't have boxes at the ports, well there was no chance of the fisherman putting fish in your boxes even if he wanted to. He had the fish, he had to get them to market within a few hours of reaching port. Often he used the boxes nearest, but most fishermen sent [them to] their preferred agent.

Basically he may have a preference for an agent but he was dependent on getting his fish to market. So perhaps in many cases the nearest box or the available box was the only means of getting that fish to market. Now what it cost us in lost boxes over the years, we could have retired on. It was quite vicious the losses that we had in boxes. I've known of cases where we have sent to a port, say like San Remo, where the pier would be very subject to prevailing winds. So that if a stiff southerly or westerly got up, (it was in the throat of Western Port Bay) the seas were breaking at high levels, a load of boxes dumped on that pier today in anticipation of requirements for tomorrow and the next few days, they could have been all washed off that pier over night. Every picnicker, every camper, every angler had access to those boxes. One of the greatest failings was that we often sent them down new. So that I know of cases where people

were using those boxes in their homes as brand new boxes suitable for any sort of storage and provisions. The local garage man kept his spare parts in them. Everybody used fish boxes at every port in the Victorian coast line and they were available to anybody with basically no policing.

That was the point at which we were competitive. We were competitive in supplying boxes to a given port. Then you had your strong affinities. Certain fishermen, and again I revert to VFA... Queenscliff was the strongest port supplying VFA. They had a Queenscliff Fishermen's Cooperative [which] would have been the first. Later on there were co-operatives formed at Apollo Bay, Lorne [and] San Remo. They were of minimal support to VFA but certainly not 100%. There was a time when anybody catching fish in Queenscliff was almost duty bound to send that fish to VFA. We had one noticeable fisherman, a fellow named Roy Johnson, he just stood on his dig and we had a very, very strong affinity with him but he was not a couta fisherman. He was a small boat fisherman and he would catch his small snapper in season and certain other mixed fish but he would have a few of our boxes even in his back yard because had they been on the wharf, they'd have been tipped off the wharf very quickly. So we'd make a special consignment of boxes to Roy Johnson at Queenscliff and we would get his one or two boxes delivered to Melbourne in a mixed consignment because they had one contract carrier and the same carrier is still operative in Queenscliff today but in a different capacity because there's no volume of fish today from Queenscliff. So those boxes were our first point of competitive contact with the fishermen.

JD These boxes, were they iced?

HILL There again, basically no, because well when it gets to couta, couta were packed mid to late of an afternoon and they were in the market the following morning. It would not have been beyond the capacity of Queenscliff to send five or six hundred boxes in any one day so that they'd fill that box. At couta [they] had such a minimal value at certain stages. I can remember a 100 pound box of couta being sold for five shillings which is today 50 cents. They regularly sold for ten shillings to one pound ie \$1.00 to \$2.00 for 90 to 100 pounds of fish.

JD It would hardly pay the transport.

HILL It would not pay the transport. Well it was quite often so. A person sending ten [to] fifteen boxes might have got a cheque for three, four, five pound but when you consider that that was a week's wages and we were paying [a] driver operating from 4.00 in the morning till any time in the afternoon when you knocked off, he was getting four pound ten a week. So a fisherman, if he fluked twenty pound, he'd think he was doing nicely. He had a month's money and a lot of it went to the nearest hotel anyway. That was their movements and their lifestyle was so much wasted time. It was dependent on weather. If they had a cheque for \$20 and it was blowing a gale and you couldn't get out from Queenscliff and Queenscliff being in the throat of the Bay, was subject to severe weather conditions. Again your other couta port as I mentioned San Remo, they had to go through their various channels there to get out and fish. Your other ports were ocean ports like Apollo Bay; well even Port Fairy, they had a river harbour, but they were fishing in the ocean. Portland was fishing in the ocean. So that they were absolutely subject to weather condition and it was nothing unusual if there may not be any fish for a week but then the weather would break and all hands to the pumps and so you created that volume. It wasn't a regulated market. You caught what you caught when you could catch it and it's not a regulated market anyway.

JD When the fish arrived in Melbourne, you would take delivery of it if it was consigned to you and would you then auction it?

HILL Yes.

JD Did you personally do the auction?

HILL Oh yes, say from the time I was nineteen until I retired in '62 when I was what, 45 was I?

JD I suppose, like most auctioneers you developed a patter?

HILL Oh yes, oh yes and you knew your customers. You had your pet sort of customers, people that would frequent you. Again we gave credit; again a very necessary part of the business. To be competitive you had to give credit to your local suburban shop keepers. We then had our share of bad debts.

JD They were the people who would bid for your fish?

HILL Oh yes, the various buyers.

JD The shop keepers?

HILL Yes. See your shop keepers were fairly mixed race really. You had a lot of English people amongst them. You had a lot of Spaniards. The Spaniards were undoubtedly most reliable and there are still branches of the families still around today. The Spaniards were absolutely spot on. Then you had always a certain number of Greek, a lot of Greeks in the fish business and then your Italians but not so much the Italians then as perhaps even today. I don't know who's in the business today, but then you had the Greeks at two levels. You had the Greeks at suburban shop levels and then you had your Greeks, we'll call them at city level, with prime restaurants. A prime restaurateur in those days did not buy from a proveedor as he would today and buy a five pound block of whiting, two and a half kilos I suppose it is today.

The whole pattern altered. In those days the Greek shop keeper or cafe proprietor in the City of Melbourne and we had, oh you could say we had ten or twelve magnificent Greek restaurants where you could go and everything was absolutely spot on. That fellow would come to markets dressed as though he was set to go to the Regent and he would have a carrier who would then come along and pick up his purchase. That carrier would deliver it to his place of business and his back room boys would do their fresh fish filleting, processing and presentation as it ultimately reached the customer. Today that's non-existent. Everything is pre-paced, frozen and there's none of that sort of presentation today.

JD Does the auction system still operate?

HILL Oh yes.

JD But it's with frozen and....

HILL No. Well you don't auction frozen fish, you buy it from a supplier so that you've got your various merchants, whether if it's a local product, it's processed sometimes

now at the ports. Did you see anything at Queenscliff of them processing anything in their own title at all?

JD No.

HILL Well the ports have degenerated really down to such a state that our local fish content is so minimal but Lakes Entrance, I believe still do a certain amount of processing. Any volume of whiting would still come from South Australia in its various forms.

JD Is it headed and gutted?

HILL Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes. You couldn't retain the gut in a processed fish and certain fish come in the round but even barramundi which of course is so sought after but is so disguised. I mean there's been cases quoted where the Opera House Restaurant and the chefs, I think they were almost going to have litigation because they were putting fish on the menu as barramundi and it turned out to be packed in Singapore and labelled barramundi. So you could imagine there's a limit on what you can catch from Queensland and the Northern Territory but if you went to a restaurant today and it's got barramundi on the menu, it would be very, very doubtful that it was barramundi. It would be some big fish or any type that would cut a big fillet across the body; not a fillet but more of a cutlet. If it's filleted well then what you're eating today really, with the greatest respect to the trade, there are names today which we wouldn't know. As an old timer, what is a pearl perch, you know? What is barramundi? What is ling, see.

JD King clip.

HILL You know, fish to day in title is very, very doubtful.

JD I was talking to a man yesterday who quoted a study that's been done that indicates that both here and overseas the public is not consuming anything like the quantity of fish that they used to. Now what would be the explanation for that change in taste?

HILL [pause] Well affordability would be one [reason]. See I just can't quote you what whiting would be in fillets per kilo but in my mind it's astronomical. See I'm going back to a time... When whiting first were processed they were, oh I've got to think in terms of three shillings to ten shillings per dozen in the round. We weren't brought up on couta or red fin or nannygai or some other nondescript fish. Once it got beyond snapper and whiting, that was all that really was in our vocabulary but for me to go and buy a five pound block of whiting and pay, well in today's currency, \$10 would have been quite substantial. Today I wouldn't doubt that it's not \$40 for a five pound block of whiting or even more but it's monetary values which have altered so. It's also demand and I'd still feel that your prime restaurants and hotels, if they're going to sell a prime portion of fish to a client, they're really looking for a whiting fillet and it's so limited in it's production.

JD So that the quantity of the fish coming through the markets has declined?

HILL Oh yes. I would say so. I don't think the volume's there. See as I mentioned to you before, most of the whiting that came to Melbourne came from South Australia. The whiting we caught in Victoria was usually net, suspended nets, gill nets.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

So that a net hanging over night, if you had a sea lice problem, many of those fish came to the market with slight eaten marks where they'd been attacked by the sea lice. Again those fish were full of food. Now they would arrive in what we would have termed a soft condition. Certainly they were alright for a shop presentation but they weren't good enough for a provedore's presentation because the flesh was too soft for him to handle, pack and distribute in a commercial basis. The difference between that and a South Australian whiting [is that] all South Australian.... When I say all, all but a very, very minimal quantity, were all wet welled fish. By wet well I mean they were hand lined fish. They were caught alive and dropped into a wet well in the base of the boat. Now those fish were quite often kept alive but starved for two, three, four days. In some excessive periods perhaps so as to get sufficient to make up a box to consign to Melbourne, those fish may have been nearly a week alive in that well. So they had no food content. They had tightened up bodily and when they came to market those fish were quite hard bodily. Now they were really magnificent conditioned fish for a person to do anything with. He could put them in his window for even two or three days, where a local whiting would have burst from the very gases that were contained in that body. That fish was something that had to be used immediately.

A South Australian welled whiting was a marketable commodity that you could stock and do something with. So the demand for the best fish to sell, whether it was at catering level through the provedores who would buy that fish, process it and deliver to their various restaurants and cafes and things like that, it was a marketable fish if it came from South Australia. No provedor worth his name would have bought a box of whiting from Geelong or anything like that to use in a commercial situation. That was the big difference between whiting coming from South Australia and they came from as far away as Thevenard. Now Thevenard as you would know is at least, just in my memory, at least 300 miles from Port Lincoln into the Great Australian Bight.

Now the method of sending those fish to market was twice a week. They would naturally catch their fish; they would well them; they would pack them many years ago in baskets. My father was the first one to go there.... When you packed a whiting in a basket the pressure would give you an indentation of the cane in your bottom fish and would disfigure them. So he brought in boxes with drilled holes in the base; a wooden box with drilled holes in the base and that started the first whiting to be packed in boxes coming from as far away as Thevenard. (Later boards with quarter inch gaps [were used]). They were iced in Thevenard [and] they went to Port Lincoln. Port Lincoln had a twice weekly shipping service to Port Adelaide. They were shipped.... Thursday was one day ex-Lincoln so that the fish that left by rail from Ceduna on Wednesday were at Lincoln on Wednesday night, they arrived in Port Adelaide Thursday morning, we had a man and he became a common person icing for all agents ultimately but originally started by my father. A fellow named Stan Moyers at what was known as Port Ice Works, he would re-ice those fish, put them on the rail and we would be selling those by auction [with a] 9.30 start on Friday morning.

It would be nothing to have, oh 100 - 150 packages added to by your over night fish from places like Wallaroo, Moonta, Port Broughton, Pirie, Cowell and within the Gulf. Those fish would be sent down on the early trains Thursday. They used to send every day. They had a daily train service but to match up with your Friday sale those fish came down by rail, they were re-iced by one H. Seekamp at the Adelaide Railway Station and the Railways provided him with an icing room, almost in a shaded area of

what would be the casino today but he had that icing room with every facility given to him and with help from the railway truck drivers (the fellow that was driving his little mobile trolley). That fish would come from the various trains into Seekamp's work. He became a common operator for all agents. A most reliable man; absolutely reliable to the enth degree. That fish was re-iced and put on the train leaving over night and it would be nothing to have a full guard's van full, a big double guard's van full of fish on, particularly Fridays, where it coincided with the volume of fish coming from the west coast.

The other side of the west coast was that we used to get it early in the week but then in later times they had a system whereby that fish would arrive in Adelaide. It would be re-iced. It would be put on a weekend steamer from Adelaide to Melbourne. It would arrive late on Monday or during Monday and it was in the time when all the Holden car bodies used to come over from Adelaide. They used to come over as empty shells and they had almost a weekend service. That fish would be unloaded in Melbourne from great big boxes and they used to have a container that would pack so many of those boxes into an outside container. They would be unloaded on Monday and that fish would be sold by auction on Tuesday but again with that reservation that that fish was not normally sold at 6.30 in the morning, it would become part of your 9.30, 10.00 o'clock sale. When that was the time demand for your prime buyers wanting prime fish, you sold your prime fish at the 10.30 sale.

It just comes to my mind that flounder was another [one] sold at late auction. See flounder in a restaurant was again a prime fish so that most of our flounders came from beyond Western Port Bay. We'll say places like [pause], oh I'm stuck for a name.... Welshpool and those places down that way but again terminology was another thing that reflected on flounders. A prime flounder was always known as a bay flounder so that when you looked in a window it was a bay flounder but the bay terminology was that the bay had a sand base. Once you got down to Welshpool and those places it had a mud base. In terms of size, if they had a box of flounders from Jack Smith at Welshpool, they would keep the big ones and a certain number of your mediums, sell off your small ones at the first sale. The medium and large would be presented on lids, twelve flounders on a lid, and they would become part of your prime second market sale because that big flounder was the pride of any restaurateur in those days. So you didn't sell you prime at the early morning suburban market, you were keeping your prime for the latter market where you had your city prime restaurateurs. Many, many restaurateurs took a delight. It was their pride in coming to market and buying that produce in the same way as certain of the restaurants do even today I believe, go to the wholesale fruit market to buy their particular piece of fruit. They want something special, they just don't want the ordinary run of the mill.

That would give you some insight into the volume of fish that was coming from South Australia in those days and they were fishing at all those ports from all within the Gulf ports which most of you would know, your Moontas and your Port Broughtons and your Piries and thing. Pirie was a different type of fishing because they were all Italians and they did a certain amount of net fishing. At times they caught big volumes of garfish with net fishing. I went to Pirie once and that man was was only a dinghy fisherman. Solomontown was the sea port of Pirie and he would be putting to sea and I can still see it to this day. His food supply was based around a watermelon, a loaf of bread, some cheese, naturally I suppose he had some water or some drinking materials but he was putting to sea [and] that was his basic equipment. Every now and then, seasonably, they would catch garfish. They'd catch a lot of pike whether they were shoaling in some way, but the Port Pirie fisherman was technically a slightly different fisherman we'll say to the person at Moonta, Broughton and those ports.

JD You mentioned ethnic groups, at Pirie the Italians and you also mentioned that there were ethnic groups in the retail trade. Were there other ports that seemed to have groups of people with a common ethnic background?

HILL No. When I look back on it, it was a very English or Australian content but of course in certain ports.... Thevenard was born, I would say, of the Australian plaster industries because they had gypsum mines backup. They needed a labour content. A lot of that labour content became Greek and I'm assuming that that was part of the backup, that they went fishing perhaps in conjunction with working in a labouring content at Australian gypsum or once they went fishing and found there was a living in it, they stayed to the fishing. Coming down, Streaky Bay had a slightly mixed.... We'll say an Australian content with a certain amount of Greeks.

Coming down the coast, I went to a place called Port Kenny which was land-locked basically. The throat of Port Kenny was Venus Bay. Now that was your entrance to the sea. There was also quite a deal of fishing done at Venus Bay but it depended on the person's address, but you could say they were both fishing in the same water. Now I went there and actually went out fishing with a family by the name of Tyrells. Now they were a father and mother with a big family of boys; I would think at least three sons. Now all those fish peculiarly were small whiting. They would have weighed about four and a half pound or four pound to the dozen. They were fish all of one size peculiarly. You didn't get a one pound whiting there or anything or a four pound whiting and I have seen a four pound whiting in the shops, particularly in Adelaide. One Mick Capo.... Now I've seen that four pound whiting on a butcher's hook. Now you could imagine that was quite a substantial fish and they used to catch a few of those very big whiting in the Moonta area but never we'll say at Port Kenny [or] Venus Bay. They were a small run of fish only.

Again, I would say, they'd have ended up 30 dozen to a box. That was roughly their count of a box of fish, was 30 dozen. Quite often I can remember in my mind, the net return to that fisherman would be three pound for 30 dozen fish. That's when things were a bit tough but that would give you some idea of a fellow handling [and] marketing 30 dozen fish and getting three pound. There again they were living very close to the ground and if three sons and dad all caught a box, they had twelve pound in the house and Weaten's local store who was the post office [and] every other type of office. Very likely any insurance was done by Weaten's store. There was only one there. He would very likely be the garage too. I just can't bring to memory but that's how they lived and they were quite happy. We've had complimentary letters sent to us thanking us for what we'd done when they were getting a net three pound for a box of 30 dozen whiting. That's how those fish varied up that coast line.

The next port down was Eliston; not a lot caught at Eliston. Then you moved into Port Lincoln. Again Port Lincoln became quite a Greek content again. What brought them there I just don't know but naturally you'd have had your Greek cafes. You'd have had that Greek fruit shop and a Greek content. I'm just trying to think of the name. Oh I have heard of them in recent times but Port Lincoln as a port was, you know, quite a mixed port. (Economics was one). Again that brought in that foreign content again, whereas you might say it had an English content at perhaps even Eliston and Port Kenny and Venus Bay. Those other ports had that mixed race content.

Again, once you got into.... or going up the Gulf, we had a fisherman there from Tumby Bay and Arno Bay. I think he was the lighthouse keeper but he did some fishing in his spare time. Those other ports then contained the old mining content who were the Welsh people. See Moonta, Broughton, those [ports] had that Welsh mining content and from there I believe they deviated into fishing. That gave you that, we'll

call it an English content which I suppose (I don't know) but even perhaps to this day, has still got that local content. Of course they were also wheat ports too. There was a lot of wheat shipped from those ports but that was the content of that area. It is likely that many fishermen worked on the wharf seasonably.

JD What about the Victorian ports? Was there an ethnic flavour to particular ports?

HILL Not really, no. Thinking back of the names, as I've said to you, [there's the] Shapters, the Warrens, the Johnsons, and the Burnhams at Rosebud. Ken Lako of Rosebud was a great boat building family and a very, very fine fellow, Ken Lako. I think he still lives at Newhaven which is the throat of San Remo as you come into Phillip Island. Newhaven is the Phillip Island end of the bridge and San Remo is the land end of the bridge. Where you go through New Haven you go on round into Cowes. So they're the two principals townships of Phillip Island, Cowes and Newhaven; but no I'd say a very English content as I look back on it.

Even the fishermen at Lakes Entrance, there was a strong English content. I can think of names like Warne. We used to get his fish. The boats had a mixture of names but in the early days of course Lakes Entrance was a great salmon port and that was the first paddocking of fish that I know of. Just how they got them there in the first place or whether they used to enter there.... they would come into the Lakes to feed but then they would net and pen those salmon and that was the first netting and controlled dispatch of fish to market, was from Lakes Entrance. That was the big ocean salmon, four pound fish. They would then market them, again very strongly marketed through VFA. That was that cooperative thinking about it. Just how many people were involved in the catching and penning.... I think it was beyond more than one family, put it that way but that was a controlled marketing process of those big salmon to market. I mean if you were going to send a thousand cases of salmon, you'd just end up giving them away. There was no market for those beyond a certain number. It was a course fish and it was on the cheap end of the market if you were going to think of fish.

Most of the other name content that I can think of, we had names like French and as I say Warne. The carriers (local carriers) were people by the name of Handcocks but, no a very strong English and Australian flavour right through a lot of those ports. It has altered I'd say in latter years, once you got your scallop boats coming into it. What that content was, I just don't know or whether the locals sold out or leased their boats; leasing came into it I think. Today there'd be a more foreign content than there was in those early days.

JD Did you handle other sort of fish besides scale fish, crayfish for example [or] scallops?

HILL Oh yes. Everybody.... See your common product was any fish you got from any port and certainly crayfish was prime amongst them. You know, you had your pet operatives. See when I first came into the market there was people by the name of Burgess. Now they were fishing and there was reference made only recently to a vessel called **the Myrtle Burgess**. The fellow came over from Tasmania I believe and he is still a Burgess family man. Those vessels operated on a very lengthy schedule. They fished from ports like Welshpool which was half way to Tasmania anyway when you looked at it. I mean if you had a safe port at Welshpool there wasn't much to be gained by coming around and parking in the bay but they fished between there and King Island in the early days. Some came into Western Port Bay and forwarded the crays from there. If the craft put out to sea again they penned the crayfish in floating coffs and regulated their consignments to market to help maintain a price structure.

They were big craft vessels. In my mind they could have been 60, 80 foot long with two, three masts and I'm no sailor but they were big vessels. I can remember my father taking me down and they were (as I say again), they were big vessels but they had big wet wells. I wouldn't think it would be beyond imagination [that] they would carry 100 or a couple of hundred dozen crayfish. As I say, it was a big volume, and fish were so plentiful and it was nothing for them to go for a week or so. I feel that they used King Island as a sheltering point. Curry was the port of King Island as I know it but they could shelter there. Naturally they had to market their fish from terra firma and whilst in latter years they used to send a few crays over by small vessels such as **the Tambar** that used to operate. They used to bring over cattle and market sheep and cattle from those islands so that they had these small vessels.

I can remember unloading bags of crayfish and they would use bags which were from India and (I'm trying to think of the.... what we did get from India in great whacking big bags.... but you could get, oh 140, 160 pound as distinct from a potato bag) it was the husks and the shells of your coco beans, I think, came over in a very big bags, I'd say sort of three foot across the thing [width] and certainly three foot six perhaps deep. To get those off you just walked a plank, they came over as deck cargo, and again if that vessel was delayed a bit I believe they could hose those bags down with salt water. Although again that was a dangerous thing to do. They wanted them kept dry because the wind going through a wet bag killed the crays so they'd normally be tarped down and kept dry because the trip from there was a wet trip in my case. They basically would be looking to keep those crays dry and they'd come over like that.

Volume in those days, as I've intimated to you, was enormous. It would be nothing for a transport.... Originally Portland and Port Fairy were serviced by what was known as the Belfast and Koroit Steam Navigation, a small coastal vessel. That was quickly done away with, again in my early times, substituted by road transport under the same title. So the Belfast and Koroit Steam Navigation was driving a truck up the highway. Thursday was a prime selling day. (Certain days were prime. Monday was almost a half holiday. Basically nothing [was] done much of a Monday but Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday.... Thursday was really prime because of your weekend content) but for 100, perhaps even 200 packages of crayfish, we'll say given the quantities of perhaps varying sizes, but well beyond 100 pound weight of package each, those packages arriving at the market, now that was from one port. That's without taking the odds on somebody, Ken Laco, coming in at San Remo and sending up 30 or 40 bags because there would be no thought of cooperative marketing.

If you caught them and you came home, you sent them to market because once you hit San Remo your water wouldn't be as good. You could keep them in salt water but there was always the chance of some foreign matter or coastal waters, I believe, could come in. If you were at Queenscliff and it was heavy rain, well your crays could be affected by their fresh water content and you close proximity to the shore. That's my thought but basically once they hit port they marketed their produce but there was certainly no controlled marketing that I know of. Keeping them alive in coffs at the ports seemed to go out of fashion after the War years. I don't think they.... Well if a man caught the fish he had to sell it. As [for] couta, there was certainly never ever any icing of couta. Other prime fish.... a person may have had ice if he had access to ice. I mean ice wasn't as readily available at a lot of these ports as there would be today.

JD In your enterprise did you export at all?

HILL Oh no, no.

JD This was in the days before the freezing of cray tails and that sort of thing?

HILL Oh no thought of export. No, no see imports.... They always imported blue cod from New Zealand. They always imported your English fillets, your cod from England which was primarily under the brand name of National and you had Irving & Johnsons from South Africa. Now again your shetland cod as it was known by name. It became shetland because it came from England as distinct from South African cod, they preferred and it was more expensive to have English cod. It had a higher price ratio than... or a higher price rating than South African. Whether they said it was in the salting or [unclear] like that in the smoking and the processing, it was a better product from England than it was from South Africa. Whether there was any truth in it, I would never know but again your blue cod came from....

JD New Zealand?

HILL New Zealand but it came from an island west of that again. It came from Chatham Island, I think it was called, but blue cod came over as frozen deck cargo in the same way as Stewart Island oysters came over from the Bluff as deck cargo.

JD In a frozen condition?

HILL Oh no, no, fresh. Your fish was frozen. Your oysters naturally were fresh deck cargo. They used to come over in special.... about 80 pound fish in a big crate with one centre-piece and they'd come over into blocks. That was headed and gutted fish and it was packed, tightly packed and severely frozen then tarped down because those boats operating I believe between New Zealand and Melbourne didn't have any frozen cargo space so it came deck cargo. I can remember that being sold in that state which would subsequently go into a retail shop as cod fillets, being sold over the stalls at eight pence a pound as a finished product with all the costs that had gone into getting it to Melbourne, handling, marketing, catching it.

At a latter stage we were the first ones to import shark (the gummy shark) and snapper from New Zealand. Now we were flying that over because we had a preferred flying freight rate. The shark was two pence a pound out of the water.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

TAPE 2 SIDE A

HILL It was from Auckland and two Yugoslav families were involved. They were also in the poultry industry in a local content but they started buying fish, processing it and flying to Melbourne. Now the sharks were sent, they were headed of course and shouldered. They were packed in export mutton cloths just as you would do with your sheep carcass. The snapper were packed in cardboard boxes of about 50 pound content. I believe.... I went and saw that fish coming out of the water. Reputedly shark [sold for] at two pence a pound, snapper, mostly small at four pence a pound. It was rare to get a snapper beyond seven or eight pound but most of them were in the one, one and a half to three pound ratio.

Because of freighting between New Zealand (they had no back loading), we used to get these over at a very preferred freight rate; I would say something in the pence per pound price and we'd go to Essendon [with] me living at Strathmore it was convenient. Again, this was the sort of thing that your drivers would do. We'd be

advised of flight arrivals [and] it was nothing for us to go out at two, three in the morning and unload two, three tonne, up to five tonne of fish depending on what space was available in your aircraft but it was interesting and part of the economy was that New Zealand was going through a stage then of development where they could not afford the cost of dies and things themselves and many Melbourne companies would send over manufacturing dies for the engineering industry and when we'd go to unload the plane, there'd be a half tonne die fair in the throat of the cabin door which we'd have to get the fork lifts out to take that die that was coming back from New Zealand for one of the developing industrial concerns there. We would have the whole luggage content of that plane with very, basically limited passenger content, coming back. We started that and it still carries on today, I believe, but we were the first ones to do that and that started in the late '50s, about '59, '60. That was an interesting sidelight into fish and pricing.

Getting back to your blue cod, it was Chatham Island I believe which is quite a.... couple of hundred miles east of Christchurch and that was a South Island import. Oysters used to come over [in] hundreds of bags; a bag of roughly a hundred dozen oysters. It was a smaller bag to Sydney rock oysters (which used to come.... when they were full in those days was 160 dozen in quite a big bag) but these oysters would come over. I can remember them arriving even before Princess Bridge, as it is today, was built. There was a roadway [which] ran between the market and what was the north boundary of the north wharf where that almost went up to Queens Street Bridge as it is today where they've got the heliport. That wharf was an operative wharf right up to Queens Street and small vessels from Tasmania and reasonable size vessels could come and unload right at that area of Melbourne. [I] Can remember them arriving late on a Saturday; Sunday of course no market. What are they going to do with them? Ten shillings a bag of roughly a hundred dozen oysters and they would sell them from, (again we haven't got them today) the barrow men of Melbourne.

We had many barrow men selling fish from open barrows particularly around Collingwood, Fitzroy. Certain barrow men [were] limited in the city proper in a fresh fish content. There were.... I just can't say exactly what they did if they were selling fresh fish but certainly crayfish. Boiled crayfish was sold from barrows in Melbourne but those oysters would be sold outside of Young & Jacksons or something into paper bags at six pence a dozen because a hundred dozen, the fellow was getting a 500% mark up between his ten shillings or a dollar for a bag and if he sold them at six pence a dozen he was getting \$5.00 which, as I say it was a week's wages out of one bag of oyster. That was the extremes of things in those times.

JD Times have changed Bill, haven't they?

HILL Oh well it bears no relationship today. We can't even sort of think prices as they are today as to what they were. Now another sideline to all this fish business was the fresh water fish. Your prime fish in fresh water of course was Murray cod, then Murray perch known as yellow belly or golden perch. Now they were caught from, oh as high up the river as.... They would have been in the river I suppose almost from Albury down but they were certainly marketed as far as we were concerned from just east of Echuca and Kerang and in quite volume.

Again, we've got to pay a compliment to those days, our rail service. Now all manner of produce was marketed from those places where there's no rail today. They've done away with the rail but I can remember a 110 pound Murray cod packed into what was known then as just a chaff bag. It was a very big loose.... [it] was a bag that stood four foot six high almost and you wouldn't get your arms around it. Now that cod would have been, we'll say caught in the early mornings of say today. The fellow

would have taken it to the rail [with] no ice or any thought of it. He'd have hung it up perhaps and he may have even hung it up over night or hung it up until pretty close to the departure time which would have allowed that fish at least to have cooled in some way under a shady tree and bodily set. He would then put that on a train.

Now that train would have had all manner of dairy produce, milks and creams and other produce going to market. That would have centred on Bendigo. That would have got to Bendigo late at night and met up with trains from Swan Hill, Kerang and those river ports as we would call them and get to Bendigo. It would come down over night. We would be able to pick that up at 4.30 in the morning at Spencer Street Inwards Parcels Office and that would be getting sold, we'll say from 6.30 onwards. So within less than a 24 hour limit from point of catch to point of marketing was a great compliment in those days. Within reason you'd be battling to get it today by road transport in the same condition.

Now as we went along the river, you'd go from say the Echuca, Kerang, your next ports were (we'll call them ports) Lake Charm which was an inland fresh water lake [and] Lake Boga which again was on the other side of the road. Then you would come to Swan Hill. Moving along you'd go to places like Nyah from where we could get quite a volume of fish to a place called Boundary Bend. From there you'd move along to Robinvale which was quite a good fishing area. From there you'd move west again to Mildura. From Mildura going down the river you had your lochs of course interspersed which had a great influence on your fishing of course, the various lochs. You'd go from there to Wentworth. Now Wentworth is the junction of the Darling and the Murray and quite a big loch there. That was quite a prolific fishing spot. From there you went down [to] Renmark; from Renmark down to such places as Loxton and further down the river of course until you got right down to the mouth of the river at Lake Alexandrina.

Now in those times all your fishermen had to be licensed in New South Wales because New South Wales controls the river and your southern boundary of the river is New South Wales' jurisdiction. So that any fishermen fishing in the Murray commercially had to have a New South Wales licence. We used to get enormous volumes of fish but there again the difficulties of sending that fish to market in a marketable condition depended on availability of ice. Again those fishermen were fishing on a limited boundary frontage at which any of the big land owners would have a wire fence. I was going to say not at high tide but at flood level, he'd have his boundary fence. No good having your cattle down on the waters' front where they're gonna get bogged in the thing. So he would fence an area which quite often was many hundreds of yards from the water level and they would grant those fishermen the right to build [their] humpy [and] live on the river. Each fisherman was granted a three mile lease so he had three miles of water and it would be relatively marked out but they were all gentlemen at heart, as I believe them, and they kept within their three mile limit. So that as they went right down the river and a fishermen we'll say beyond Mildura and round the Wentworth area, if he was fishing on Sir Sidney Kidman's Lake Victoria Station and I wanted to see him, I would go in over the road grid where his mail box was stuck on a tin on the fence, drive right up round to the homestead and make myself known. They'd point out where Steve Jensen and Billy the Black was camped down the river and you could go down and he'd have his humpy and he'd be living off the land. He might buy some meat from the land owner. If the land owner was really stuck for labour, that fisherman having set his drum nets (as it was all drum nets) he'd perhaps even do a bit of work on the station property that was his fishing reach, thus supplementing his income.

Again much depended on that man getting ice, so you might have a fellow, if he was related to a town and was fishing at the Edwards, out from Deniliquin, well he could

bring his fish in and he could get some ice in Deniliquin. If he was fishing at some outlandish spot along the river and he couldn't, he'd still catch his fish he'd put it in a box, as we were supplying boxes to them. If he didn't have a box he'd wack it in a bag and he'd get it to the rail head in some way and again, if he put it on the rail some time this afternoon, it would be in Bendigo that night to make up that train to Melbourne and we'd be selling it the following morning (sometimes a little doubtful in condition).

One of the first things my father did was.... We had a great habit of acknowledging the person's fish on his account sale, the condition in which his fish arrived and we knew a lot of them by name and we'd write on, "Well Bill the condition was a bit poor" and if that fellow had have taken exception to it, he could have written back and said, "Well what the devil do you think I'm doing. I mean there's no ice within 50 miles of me. What do you think I'm gonna do with it"? So one of my earliest jobs and I give my father great credit for it.... He said, "Now away you go. You know the track. Go along the track and you meet all those fellows. Find out the conditions under which they're working. Then you won't insult the fellow by telling him to wear a collar and tie when he hasn't got a collar and tie". It was a waste of time and it was aggravating to that man to be told, "use ice" when he had no hope in the wide world of doing so, but he would take his fish from the water, he might even string them, as I say to get them a body coolness, pack them in a box. Then if it was 110 degrees over night and everything like that and it arrived the following morning and we sold his Murray cod for six pence and his perch for a penny and two pence which was quite regular in the early days of my marketing, that was it, but if you could go to Robinvale and the fellow's got a cool store round the street, again you knew what his problems were and you could address them.

Again the same thing. I went to Adelaide; I went over the Port Lincoln; went up to all those ports and that's whereas I said earlier, I went fishing with the Tyrells at Port Kenny to find out how they marketed their fish and what was their requirement. From then you had a natural rapport with your client. It was a wonderful rapport in many, many respects. I can look back with some very, very happy memories of people, even the Tyrells, coming to Melbourne for the Melbourne Cup and mum was dressed [to go] out. She had her new outfit which she wouldn't have worn at Port Kenny and they were all going to the Melbourne Cup and different ones like that. [a] Young fellow by the name of Connors is still alive and well and [has] a lovely property at Boundary Bend but we had the rapport with those people which was [of] enormous value when you're selling their product. We were their communication almost with the outside world because, as I say, they lived in very primitive conditions, a lot of those people.

Many of them branched out later on into getting small land holding or things like that but a few of them naturally went to the War and came back and got citrus leases in places like Buronga which is immediately across the river from Mildura. They opened that up in soldier settlement again. See, early after the First World War, much of Victoria was developed even in the Mildura area, your grapes, was all soldier settlement blocks. A lot of them succumbed. They couldn't stand the hard work and it must have been hard work when they were getting penny, two pence for grapes; not like today. Then you had your falling crops. I visited Wentworth when on the way back one of my contacts said "Call into Murray Jolly and pick up some grapefruit and tell him I sent you". Grapefruit were four shillings a bushel case; packed ready to go to Melbourne for four shillings. Certain of those land owners, they pulled out their grapefruit and lemon crops. You couldn't sell them and you couldn't give them away. Oranges were ten shillings; one dollar for a bushel case of oranges. Now they had to market them, pick them up, freight them to Melbourne less commission and get a return and put up with the hot weather. Plenty of hundred degrees up there and it was a very close to the earth existence for a lot of those fishermen in those conditions.

Murray fish was one of our pets. We predominated in the handling of Murray cod and perch through those areas.

JD Bill how long is it now since you've been out of the business?

HILL '62.

JD Since 1962, right.

HILL That was 98 years for the Hill family as a live content in the market.

JD And you sold it to overseas interests?

HILL No. When we left the old markets, and I can show you in a moment our notice of termination of occupancy at Flinders Street, but I'll show you those in detail in a minute; but three of us amalgamated. We were looking... We thought (and we got together the whole lot of us) we thought of building our own market, rather than council property. We were subject to market dues of course. We were subject to all manner of controls, fishing inspection and everything like that was all done by the Melbourne City Council and their offices. We looked at going just across the river into South Melbourne just near where Dunlops are and the Port Melbourne Football ground is in that area [which] was where we were looking. Then again the council decided in their wisdom that they would build the market down at Footscray Road as it's known, but they built, unbelievably, they built a glass house. If you visit the market and see it, it is completely.... It's a concrete building but a complete glass roofed frame and everything like that. I can still remember the opening. One of the councillors said to one of his friends "Where are your orchids" because he was talking to the parks & Gardens Chairman as distinct from the Fish Market Chairman. The council was made up into various committees with their appropriate Chairman and a committee, we'll say four or five were on the market committee. Some would be duplicated but they could be on the Parks & Gardens. They could be on the traffic; the various committees of the City Council but they even built steps from the front from our working area to get down to the floor area. If a person was loading a hand truck they had to go down stairs to get to the floor area.

Now in these enlightened days, it is hard to believe but I can distinctly remember one councillor, I suppose best that he [remains] nameless, but he said, "Oh these agents, they're a tricky mob". That was if we complained about anything but they have in fact, under pressure from people since and since my demise, they've reorganised the market and they've built in ramps but you could imagine a fellow with five or six hundred weight of boxes and things with a hand truck and he's got to go down concrete stairs and things like that. In the midsummer the place was a beehive and blow flies and every other conglomerate of course that was available and attracted to the light but it was later than that that they re-located the wholesale fruit market within a few years of the market opening. The market opened down there in 1959 and it was oh a slightly failing economy then plus the fact that I had some other interests and I just.... it didn't hold the charm that it used to for me.

I retired and sold my interests to my other two partners who were an amalgamation of VFA and another company that had come into it. They had a Sydney connotation [and] was W. King & Company. They had started a small business, oh I would say perhaps in the mid '30s. They'd been there some time. They came down from Sydney. They had a Sydney market and it was about the time that the Government took over the selling of fish in New South Wales that they came down and opened; they got permission and they built them some accommodation in the market to enable them to open. So we

then traded as AFA which was Amalgamated Fish Agents. It is still an operative company in the market but I withdrew [in] '62 and I would say within, oh within five years, my original partners had sold out as well. As I say, it still operates today down there.

JD Well we must stop. Thank you very much for that. It's been most interesting to talk to you Bill.

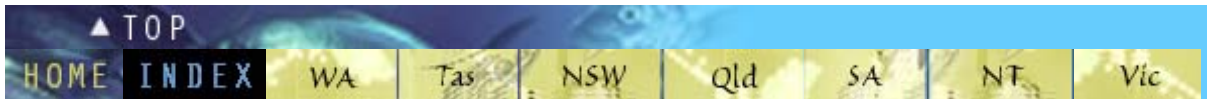
HILL It's a pleasure.

That's the end of this interview with Mr Bill Hill, one time fish merchant of Melbourne.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with KEN JOHNSON

INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr Ken Johnson, Abalone diver of Apollo Bay, Victoria. The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian Fishing Industry and was conducted in Mr Johnson's home in Apollo Bay on the 11th February, 1990 by Jack Darcey.

Ken Johnson is one of Victoria's most experienced Abalone divers, having worked the full length of that State's coastline for a quarter of a century. In this interview he tells us the story of his own involvement in the industry and in doing so gives details of the history of the fishery as well as the methods employed and the hazards and some of the rewards of his occupation. His account is wide ranging, at times amusing and always of absorbing interest.

He speaks with an enthusiasm and clarity that greatly enhances this comprehensive and detailed record of one of Australia's most productive fisheries.

There are four sides on two tapes. The interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Could you record your full name and date and place of birth please?

JOHNSON Kenneth Frederick Johnson. I was born on the 11th September, 1940 in Brisbane.

JD Did you grow up in Brisbane?

JOHNSON Yes, I spent a lot of my life in Brisbane until I was about 26 years old. I went to the New Farm State School. After my primary education I went on to Brisbane State High. I did two years - I did Sub Junior and Junior. And then I left and went into the workforce at the age, I think I was about 16 then.

JD What sort of work did you go into Ken?

JOHNSON Oh I started off as an office boy for the Queensland Primary Producers. After a few months in the office I realised I wasn't cut out to be an office boy. I asked to be transferred to the store and they did, but they put me in the office in the store so of course I lasted another five months there and I decided to quit, but while I was in these wool stores, I thought I'll go back to school (night school) and become a wool classer. Well after a year of that, especially at the age of 17 you got a lot of things to

do and places to go, I gave up my thought about being a wool classer and quit that too.

In the next year, from say 17 to 18, I had a variety of jobs. Work at the time was very easy to get. I tried everything! I even lasted 20 minutes in one job in a cold store at the Brisbane Abattoirs! Unbelievably cold! That was like I say, between 17 and 18 then I took off and I went to Townsville and you have to be 18 years old to get a man's job in Townsville. I arrived up there, lets say, still as a boy, I started work in the bag room but within about two or three weeks I got a job in the kitchen. Now they had barracks at Alligator Creek in Townsville and about 300 odd men were living in the these Barracks and they would be fed, breakfast, dinner and tea and it would come out of their wages. So at the age of 17 I was working seven days a week. I'd be getting up at 5.30 and start work at about 6.00; work till about 9.30; have a couple of hours off, start again about 11.30 and go until 3.00, have another couple of hours off and then work until about 7 o'clock that night. That job I was getting paid a man's wages, so even though it was hard work and long hours I quite enjoyed it. I lasted for about a year and a half in Townsville and I left Townsville and came back to Brisbane looking round for work. Being in the meat trade in Townsville I started work in the meatworks in Brisbane, both at Bothwicks and Brisbane Abattoirs. I was there for a couple of years or so, then I went out to Roma in south west Queensland and there I learnt how to slice and bone. I became what I would call a fully qualified boner in Roma. From there (I was there a couple of years) I started travelling because as a qualified boner the work was fairly easy to get, but they're seasonal. You do beef up in Queensland in the summer and mutton in Victoria in the winter. I started travelling from Queensland to here (to Victoria) and doing the mutton here, we were on a quota system where you do either 80 or 100 sheep per day. Well you're starting at 7.30 in the morning and we used to finish around about 1.00 p.m. so you'd have quite a bit of time on your hands in the afternoon and lets say, late summer early winter, the days we still fairly long so for something to do, we'd go down the beach. There used to be four of us and I would go swimming and one day somebody brought a mask and snorkel and a pair of flippers. I put these on and had a look what was on the bottom and I thought, wow! it was another world to me. It was incredible! So the following week the four of us all had masks and snorkels and flippers and this was in Port Phillip Bay.

Well, the water was a little bit too cold to stay in the water for any length of time, so a couple of weeks later the four of us went in and bought wet suits. So you mucked around with wet suits and you're snorkelling here and diving there and looking at the fish and of course, we were spearing a few fish too, like the big white hunter. Then next problem was we couldn't stay under long enough. So there again the four of us went in and bought four sets of aqualungs. [chuckles] Nobody ever had a lesson, anybody could walk into a sports store if they had the money in those days and I'm talking around about 1963, yes '63 or '64, and you could buy all the gear that you want. Well, then the next year, between the four of us [chuckles] we came so close to drowning (all of us). There was Barry, Dougie, Regie and I and lets say that two of us would pull Regie out one weekend and the following weekend Barry and Doug would pull me out, or they would salvage some of my gear because I might get into some sort of difficulty and drop the lot. You drop your weight belt, you drop your aqualung and head for the surface.

The first time I came close to drowning was in San Remo, where the old bridge used to be between San Remo and Phillip Island. Down the bottom there it's about 95 foot of water and I had a set of what I call, twin 44s. Two sets of tanks with a T-piece and the regulator I had was an old twin hose Nemrod (Spanish make - I think they're Spanish) and when the tanks were on my back there are two valves; one for each tank. Now I didn't have a gauge so how you would tell how much air you had left, you'd have one tank on and one tank off and when you started to suck on your mouth piece you knew

that one tank was nearly empty so you opened up the other one. The air pressure would equalise between the two of them and you would close it off, so you knew you had half a tank left in the second tank. This went on until you had about an eighth left and you'd swim back to shore.

What I did this day, I had the two tanks in front of me and I turned the wrong tank on. When I say turned the wrong tank on, I'm right handed and I turned the left tank on instead of the right because the tanks were facing me and when I put them on my back and jumped in and went down to the bottom and everything was quite OK, when I started to suck air I reached over with my right hand and kept undoing my right hand tank which was empty. Now Dougie was down there with me, Barry and Reg were sort of somewhere else (the water wasn't very clear). I tried to reach behind me with my left hand and cold water, winter time, I couldn't quite grasp the screw to open the tank with so I pulled my mouth piece out and I swam over to Doug to try and get a breath of air off him. He, in turn, saw my eyes bulging and I'm pointing at my mouth saying I want air and he sort of back peddled a bit and I'm still 95 feet down, so you go for the top!

I dropped my weight belt and started heading for the surface and as I'm going up I felt virtually like a frog. I was.... my lungs were in convulsions, wanting breath so badly and I was getting mouthfulls of water and I was spitting it out as I'm going to the surface. I'm looking for the top and still can't see it because of the murky water. About say 20 feet from the surface, everything started to go black and the thought that went through my mind was this is how you drown. By this time I'd got over the panic stage and sort of a nice feeling started to come over me. If you talk to people that have drowned and been resuscitated, they say it's not as bad as you think. Next thing I know I've hit the surface. I must have come out up to my waist out of the water the speed I was going. I took this huge breath of air and landed back in the water. Eventually I swam back to the shore. I realised the mistake that I made and if I hadn't gone back into that water the same day, I don't think I would have kept on diving, but I realised I still had one full tank, so I opened that up and jumped in and continued with it. And that was the start of my diving experience lets say.

Every weekend, rain, shine. Didn't matter what the weather was like, we'd find a spot to dive. We travelled from Mallacoota to Portland - the four of us.

Then one day, while I was still working at the meatworks (I was working for Andersons at the time, boning calves - I remember that) I saw an ad in the paper: "Skin Divers wanted - hookah and scuba." So I applied for the job. After a lot of persistence I got it. I got a job of diving and the man who formed the, lets say, the whole boat - the name of the boat was the "Mintak". 42 foot steel boat an ex (I think) scallop boat from Tasmania. There were four divers on board, myself included, Freddie Glassbrenner, Ken Kiddle and Billy (I forget Billy's second name). Our skipper was Bob Bush and our intentions were (the boat belonged to Les Tuckey, Melbourne Seafoods) and Harry Humphrey was the guy who organised it for Smorgons [sp]. Ray Orloff was the guy in charge of the fishery section at Smorgons. So the four of us: four divers and the skipper, we got on board the boat at Melbourne Seafoods up at the Yarra River and our intention was to go round to Mallacoota because we heard this is where the Abalone are.

Up to that stage I'd never brought an Abalone up in my life. I'd seen them on the bottom and I didn't know what they were. The year was 1966, November no late October that's right because on the first Tuesday of November 1966 I pulled up my first Ab (it was Melbourne Cup day) and so we took off from the Yarra River and we got as far as the Prom (Wilsons Promitory) and Freddie who became my partner

eventually (we worked together for eight years after that) he'd done a little bit of diving at Marlow and Cape Everard and he sort of said, "Look lets have a look what's down here at the Prom." This was at the Glenny Island. We jumped over the side and we couldn't believe it, there was Abalone everywhere. I think we were the first divers there to fish commercially for Abalone. What was the use of going further, all the way to Mallacoota. We started work there and four divers out of this one boat, the well was divided into sections with a pump that would circulate fresh [sea] water all the time and we'd keep them alive in the wells until we came into port and then we'd sit down and start shelling them out. This way you had a good product with no worries about refrigeration or anything like that and we'd shell them out. We might spend a couple of days in port: fuel up, get your food and all that sort of stuff and out you'd go again.

The Prom, furthest point south in the Australian mainland. Of course the weather is not the best down there, but being at Wilsons Promitory if you had a south westerly you'd go to the other side, round Refuge and a bit further the other way towards Port Welshpool and if you had easterlies or any other sort of wind you could go to one side of the Prom or the other.

Now in those days we spent a lot of time in the water. When I say a lot of time I've spent up to twelve hours in the water. Jump in at 7 or 8 o'clock in the morning and you wouldn't get out until nightfall. We were getting paid [chuckles] ten cents a pound for meat. We had some fabulous days, but see the average man's wages in those days was around about \$70 a week and we could make about \$35 to \$40, \$50 a day. It was fabulous money, but like I say, you had to put your time in the water. I used to smoke then too! I'd come up for lunch, when I say lunch you'd be up on top for maybe 20 minutes half an hour at the most. You wouldn't eat much because you didn't seem to get hungry and have a quick cigarette or maybe a little bit of coffee and back you go. You wouldn't take too much fluids in also, because once you've got a wet suit on there was no such thing as a fly in the wet suit! [laughs]

They were great days, but the next problem we had was the gearbox in the Mintak started to play up and we never had reverse gear. So to stop, we used to throw out a stern anchor and hope the thing gripped something on the bottom before we got too far. Getting back to port we would sit around and the gearbox would go back to Melbourne and it was backwards and forwards - never seemed to get it right. Eventually they put twin motors with new gearboxes and that sort of cured the problem, but then Freddie (I mentioned Freddie before, Freddie Glasbrenner - still an Abalone diver) he said, "Look I've got a fourteen foot aluminium at home so what about you and I buy a little outboard and go into this business ourselves." I said, "Sure, try anything."

We took off, went home and on the very first day that we started to dive (we dived in Port Phillip Bay at Williamstown) we had a four horsepower Seagull and a fourteen foot Savage gannet, I think it was, aluminium boat. Well there was no size limits in the Abalone at the time. We started diving with a snorkel in about five or six feet of water and that day we made \$18 each, just with snorkels. The following day (and we sold our catch to Les Tuckey at Melbourne Seafoods) and I took out four sets of aqualungs and Freddie was still with a snorkel and we made \$36 each! I could stay down longer and I could pick Abs off much faster instead of duck diving.

When we took our catch in that evening into Melbourne Seafoods, Les Tuckey said, "Why don't you get yourself a compressor?" and we said we can't afford it. He wrote an order and said, "there you go boys, get yourself a compressor, we'll take it out of the catch that you bring in." So on the third day, we got a compressor together and on the fourth day we started diving with compressed air on a hookah system. Our hoses

were the green type garden hoses which were not designed for diving (for under pressure). They used to kink, they would cut your air off. The second time I came close to drowning was because of a kinked hose and we started diving with the hookah.

Abalone were everywhere! They used to be three high some of them. One Abalone on top of another and another one on top of that again. Not very often, but two high you'd see them quite often. There was not enough room for them. The (I call them Pigmy Abs) there was that many of them that they wouldn't get to a decent size until we started taking them off. Sort of farming them. Now we worked around Williamstown, the Rifle Range behind the Williamstown back beach, the Crystal Pool because that was about our limit to our fourteen footer with a four horsepower Seagull. A lot of the times too, the Seagull wouldn't start of an afternoon because the wind would spring and we'd have to swim it back. We used to launch straight off the beach in places so you wouldn't have to go so far with the boats.

Business seemed to be good at the time so we.... now I remember what happened after that. Yes, I was in a flat with Maurie Palmateer. He used to ask me all the time, how'd you go to day, and I say we had a good day, we got say 400 lbs (or 500 pounds) and to get a thousand pounds was a common occurrence in those days. You'd have ten or twelve potato bags full of Abalone by lunch time and take them up the Yarra River, unload and go back and dive in the afternoon and get another eight or so bags.

This Maurie Palmateer he could see the dollar signs in his eyes. He was that sort of a guy. So he said, "I'm going to go in the Abalone business." and anybody could get a licence. I think the licences in those days were \$5 a year. So he got himself a licence and he went out and bought this seventeen foot timber boat (if you want to call it that) with a 40 horsepower outboard on the back. He hired three divers and he was the fourth one and out he goes the first day and between the four of them I think they got about one thousand pound of Abalone the first day. And he said, "Oh this is all right."

The following day his outboard wouldn't start, (sorry I'm telling lies) his outboard started in the morning. In the afternoon to come home it wouldn't start and he had to get towed in by the Harbour Trust. Got him in, hit him with a bill for a couple of hundred dollars so his profit went into paying the bill. Well, he persisted diving for about a couple of weeks and the guys who were working for them, he was only paying them two cents a pound [chuckles] and he was getting ten! So they'd sort of look at him and say, "we can do this" and they'd leave him. He brought a lot of divers into the industry but after about a month or so, he got tired of his 40 horsepower outboard not starting (he'd been towed in three times by now). He bought himself a brand new 100 horsepower Johnson outboard and put it on the back of his boat and go out of the Yarra River and he tore across the Bay to Point Cook and the boat was doing about 35 mile an hour.

He thought this was great, he had a fairly good day that day. Came back and the boat that he had was a heavy timber type of a boat and it was pretty hard to get it out on the trailer because we used to launch at Gem Pier in Williamstown. Gem Pier was a wooden ramp and at low tide it was slippery and wet and you needed ropes and winches and all sorts of stuff to get your boats in and out of there. So he used to tie his boat up to the wharf. Well, he tied his boat up that night after unloading, he came back the following morning and his boat had sunk.

What had happened, there was too much power on the back and as he tore across the bay and then back again, it was choppy that afternoon and of course, the banging of the boat coming back, must have opened a couple of planks so a brand new 100 horsepower Johnson was sitting on the bottom and he came to Freddie and said, "Come on fellers, give us a hand, my boat's sunk". We got the boat up for him, got it on the trailer, got it out up on to dry land, drained it all out. So Maurie went back.... he bought the outboard from McEwans in Dandenong and he went back to McEwans and sort of said, "Look, look what I've done" and they said, "All right, we'll do your motor for you if you'll buy a boat off us." So he bought himself a seventeen foot Savage Riviera through McEwans. They put a new motor on for him and he took it over time payment.

To make a long story shorter, eventually he just couldn't get the divers, couldn't get the.... fell behind in his payments and he said to me "Would you like to buy the boat?" and I said, "Well, how much do you want?" and he said "Well, give me my first two payments and another two are due now and you can take over the payments, and you can have it." He'd put a fairly substantial deposit on it and I couldn't refuse an offer like that.

So Freddie and I bought the Savage Riviera. It was a flat bottomed fibre glass, seventeen foot. At the time, we thought wow! When I think about it now, it was a shocking craft - too flat. It used to pound, it was, it was..... But there was nothing better available in those days so we worked that and after a year of working in the Riviera we traded it on an eighteen foot Savage Ensign.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JOHNSON Like I was saying, we got into a Savage Ensign. Eighteen foot, orange and white it was with black gunnels. It was a beautiful looking craft and we started work in that. Now Freddie and I were partners for eight years. It was the longest partnership amongst any divers. Even the Espie brothers, two brothers Clark and (what's his second name). They lasted for about five years.

Now Freddie's German, so he'd go to Germany (his parents were over there) and I'd work the boat on my own and then when he came back I might go on holiday. And we worked in well together, really well together. Still do, still the best of friends. But then as time goes on you realise that if you had your own boat, just working one out, you could make, not only more money, but you wouldn't have to shift as often. We had a system going where we'd both swim to the front of the craft to the anchor virtually, and then fan out. I'd go left and he'd go right. We'd do a full half circle each and in Port Phillip Bay, you can do this, but when you try to dive ocean, it's a bit harder. The Abs don't seem to be spread out as much, it's a little bit different.

So after eight years of diving. By this time it'd be '74, we decided to venture out on our own. So we traded in the Ensign and we both bought Escorts - Savage Escorts. We knew the people at Savage and we watched our boats being built right from the word go, when they first sprayed the first coat of Gelco into the mould. We got identical boats, identical colours except for the numbers on them and we put them into the water the first day and we said we're going to work Point Cook. We put the boats in at Altona, we took off. We were both doing about 40 miles an hour and we were sitting side by side. The following day, I'm still doing 40 miles an hour, but Freddie dropped down to 37 and about a week later we tried them out again and I'm still doing 40 and

he's down to 35 [laughter] and Howard Roberts was the guy we used to deal with in buying our craft. So he takes his back to Howard Roberts and says "Look, how come Ken's boat is faster than mine, as everything is identical?"

It's the sort of thing that I don't know why, but Freddie would be the sort of guy that would look after things, he'd wash them down and grease them up and I think the more you played around with outboard motors, the worse they got. I never used to touch mine, except for the regular service that the manual stipulated. So Freddie ended up selling his craft because he was so disappointed in it and buying something else. He bought a Miranda craft.

This is where we started to go our own way a little bit. Freddie was living in North Altona and I was living in Footscray at the time. Then I ended up buying a house in Altona. Now we're still fairly close at the moment. Freddie at the moment is living in Williamstown. Owns the Williamstown Driving School and also Australian Abalone Exports.

Now lets go from there.

For the next two years or so, I dived Port Phillip Bay, shallow water and I think this is one of the reasons I didn't suffer from bends as much as say, other divers. Because you were restricted to the depth of water in the Bay. The problem with the Bay was cold water in the winter time. It was so cold I'd get hypothermia up to say, the bottom of my calves. I'd come into the boat and I'd stamp my feet around, sort of dance in the one spot to get circulation going again. The wet suits in those days, were nowhere near as good as they are now. The technology in wet suit material from say, 1966 to now has been incredible. Now you can stay in the water for the whole day and come out as warm as you were when you went in.

JD Is that with hot water?

JOHNSON No, we tried the hot water suits in the old days. See, you can get wet suits now from say, 4 ml to 12 ml and with the pants being long johns and then the coat going over the top of that again, with the hood attached, you're covered by nearly three quarters of an inch of neoprene around your chest, from your neck down to your thighs virtually. Sometimes it's a bit uncomfortable because of thickness of the suit and the amount of weight you've got to wear to get down there, but you're not cold. Like I say, in the old days the first wet suit that I had was a pair of short pants and a coat with a zipper in the front. Then the hood you'd put over the top of your head and sort of not attach it to your coat, but shove it underneath your coat. There were zippers on the arms, there were zippers on the legs. Wet suit boots, thin. You could feel the water flowing through your suit and it was very very cold in Port Phillip Bay in the winter. Like I said, they were the old days, but being young and fit, we put up with it. Shower of a night time, hot shower of a night time and you seemed to be able to get over it.

Now we don't spend as much time in the water or underwater. The average day now goes, say about four to five, maybe six hours in the water. Five hours is about the average.

We've got a quota system now and every diver gets 20 tonne for the year. Now, that makes it so much easier. I think it protects the resource because before the quotas came in two years ago, we were bringing out in the Central Zone, like 1,200 tonnes of Abalone per year. Well, the Fisheries stepped in and said, OK, with 20 tonnes each you're going to bring out 700 tonnes a year. Now that's a big drop. I agree with it. It

might make it a bit hard on divers who've bought licences because of their commitments to pay back their loans, but some of these new divers were bringing out up to 60 tonne a year. I think it's great diving and they're working fairly hard, but they were putting too much pressure on the resource.

Since this quota system has come in, I think (this is my personal opinion) the regrowth is pretty good and it seems to be able to cope with the amount of divers that are in it.

With regard to let's say the hazards of diving, only another Ab diver knows how hard it is; what sort of work you're doing and how hard it is to do it. All people see from up top, is a diving going over the side bringing up bags of Abalone and coming back into the harbour. They know that each bin is worth a certain amount of dollars and they look inside your boat and say, "Wow you must have it easy." But it's not as easy as it sounds.

I've been in the business for 24 years now. I've swam a lot of miles under that water. I'm getting to know this area fairly well. When I say fairly well, I can jump over the side in some areas and I'll recognise rocks, I'll recognise the features. I'll know exactly that there's a run of Abs around the next corner. Also after 24 years diving, you get to know how to follow a run of Abs.

It's hard to visualise to somebody who hasn't done it before, but the Abs aren't just everywhere down there. They sit in what I call prime eating spots. They don't like to find food, they like to have the food brought to them. So where there's current, where's there say turbulent water, where there's activity within that water, you'll find Abalone and to be able to follow a run of Abs, it takes quite a bit of skill and experience to be able to do this. It's very easy to lose them and it's very easy to go over the same ground and that's a waste of time. I know within five minutes whether there's Abalone down there or not. Very rarely do I spend too much time under water in what I call an unproductive area. Time is important, especially if you're diving fairly deep.

I refuse to go any deeper now than 60 feet. In the old days, when I say the old days, we knew very little about decompression tables and we used to exceed them by about 300% and get away with it a lot of the time. Over the 24 years of diving, I've been bent twice. The first time I got it in my left shoulder (left arm) I knew I was bent. I stayed out of the water for a couple of days, I was taking pain killing pills. I didn't go to the hospital or anything like that and after two days it seemed to come good.

The second time I got bent severely. I got it in both legs, both arms and the bottom of my spine. I'd been diving in about 80 feet of water for about five hours. I'd decompressed on the way up. I spent forty, fortyfive minutes decompressing which I thought was long enough. I came up and I jumped in the boat and (I was diving at Cape Otway) when I got back as far as Point Franklin, which is a distance of about five miles, I could feel pain in my knees. I put it down to the amount of swimming I'd done and I continued on to Apollo Bay. When I got back into the Bay, the pain had left me and I was staying behind the pub at the time. We used to hire rooms there and I went and had my shower, I changed, I went to the dining room with some other divers that were down at the time. I ordered my meal and I went across from the pub to the Post Office to make a phone call to Melbourne.

Well in the space of three minutes as I was making that phone call, I couldn't hold the handpiece anymore. The pain seemed to hit me very hard. I hung up, I walked back to

the pub. I said to the boys, "Look I want to lie down for a while I think I've got a touch of the bends, I should be all right fairly soon."

I went back into my room and it's the worst pain I've had in my life. It felt as if somebody had shoved a knife into every joint in your body and every now and again twisted it. I couldn't stay still for any more than 20 seconds. The best position I found to be in was like a foetal position: head down. I was in terrible pain.

Freddie (he was down here at the time) came back to my room, looked in and he could see me in pain. I couldn't even walk, so they carried me out into the panel van and they took me into the local hospital. Dr Jim (he's still here) put me on oxygen. He gave me a one injection for pain and that's really all I wanted and I was going to get Freddie to drive me back to Melbourne to a recompression chamber. I knew there was one at Prince Henry's Hospital and another one at the Board of Works, but Dr Jim said, "Look I can't let you go. If anything happens to you on the way back to Melbourne, the onus would be on [me]," if I passed out or fell unconscious. So he said "You'd better stay here and we'll see what you're like in the morning. If you're still in pain, we'll either get an ambulance or we'll fly you back."

Anyway about twenty minutes later he came back to say "How do you feel?" and I was still in horrible pain so he gave me another injection. Half an hour later he came back again "How do you feel now?" Still no good. He said, "Well I can't give you anymore." He gave me some sort of sleeping pill and with the combination of the pain killers and the sleeping pills and the oxygen, the pain eased. He left me there. By this time it was about nine o'clock at night and of course there's nurses there and everything like that. I think I went to sleep for a while. I woke up at four o'clock in the morning, I managed to drag myself into the showers. Got into a very hot shower, ran that for half an hour or so. That seemed to help and the following morning, when Dr Jim came he said "How do you feel now?" and I said, "Oh I feel great". Of course I was lying, I was thinking about the, not the dramas, but the problems of going back to Melbourne in an Ambulance or getting flown out. He let me go.

I walked out of the hospital. I went back to the pub, got into my wet suit. I got Freddie to come out with me and we took the boat out and we went out about three quarters of a mile on the Big Henty there, about 100 feet of water. I jumped over the side and as I started to go towards the bottom, it was as if somebody had opened up the tap and let all the pain out. It was a great feeling to get rid of the pain.

That was virtually like recompressing the nitrogen bubbles that were in my blood stream and I spent the rest of the day coming to the surface. When I got up to, lets say 20 feet from the surface, I jumped into the boat and we raced in closer in shallower water and here at the Bunbury and I jumped, like I say, 25 feet of water, 30 feet of water and worked myself up to about ten feet of water for the rest of the day and when I came out I felt pretty good. After that I stayed out of the water for a week, week and a half and that was the last time I've been bent. I refused to be bent again.

What I've done now, I've set my blow off valve on my compressor that if I go below 60 feet, I can't get enough air and I'm forced to come up. It's like a safety factor with me. Because with diving for Abalone, you see Abalone heading down into the distance, you say to yourself, it's just a few minutes. Those few minutes turn into half an hour and before you know it you're in trouble with recompression times, or decompression times. After 24 years of diving I don't need to go that deep anymore.

With our compressors now, technology is also improved a heck of a lot from the early days. In the early days, your compressors were oil filled. After a while the rings used

to leak and your air used to be mixed with oil and [chuckles]. Our first compressor: our first or second compressor with Freddie and I.

We said, "Look if we don't use motor oil and if we went into vegetable oil, it should be better for [us]," because the amount of fumes you used to get through this compressor we'd get headaches after a full day's diving. Our air intake and also the exhaust manifold were fairly close together. We didn't realise the benefits of having the air intake at the bow of the boat and carbon monoxide of course, you didn't realise how bad that can be.

So we emptied the compressor of oil and we refilled it with peanut oil that you cook with [chuckles]. This is how we used to experiment in those days. Now what happened was, when the compressor built up a lot of heat the peanut oil crystallised and the fumes we got off that - we were lucky not to kill ourselves. Both of us had incredible headaches that afternoon. So that was the end of that compressor. We virtually wrecked it because the crystallisation went right through this compressor. You just couldn't clean it, the valves, everything was gone.

Now, these days, you've got Teflon on Teflon all three compressors reliable - the motors that we use. At the moment I'm using a five horsepower Nakamichi motor, made in Japan, but it's a reliable petrol driven motor. It seems to start easy and getting back to the old days, you'd be pulling and pulling and pulling on the starter cord trying to get your compressor going and if the thing hadn't been bolted on to the boat I would have thrown it over the side I don't know how many times. You'd get so frustrated at it. Now she virtually starts first pull and like I say, in the old days too, motors used to cut out and when Freddie and I first started diving we used to dive without a deckie and our hoses were about 100 metres long and 100 metres is a lot of hose. So from the front of the boat to say, all the way round in a half circle to the back, you're covering a big area.

What was so frustrating with the old compressors, you might be right at the end of your hose and the motor stops. So you've got no air and your bag might be half full of Abalone. We didn't have parachutes in those days either. I'll explain what a parachute is later. So you'd have to drop your bag. You'd swim on the surface to the boat, get into the boat, start the thing up again and then you'd have to swim all the way back and try and find your bag which sounds easy but it isn't.

So these days, of course, I employ a deckie. They used to be known as shellers, because we used to shell out at sea. My sheller has been with me for fourteen years. There is no problem getting a sheller, but to break in a new man to get him to understand what you want by hand signals and lets say, a bit of waving here and there. My sheller Peter, who's been with me for fourteen years knows exactly what I'm going to do and I know exactly what he's going to do. We've got a great working relationship. He's reliable, he's great. Like I wouldn't have him this long if he wasn't.

Now, when you get a good team things are easy. Came close to losing a boat (only once) and it wasn't the fault of the boat, it was.... We had a hard easterly blowing here and the outboard that I was using at the time. The outboards are supposed to be four times more reliable than a new car motor and they're designed in such a way that you might have three - you've got three carbies and a V6 motor. You've got three carbies and you've got three coils. So if two pots give out, you've still got four left and if four give out you've still got two left.

This one day, we had a gentle easterly blowing when I took off. I went past Cape Otway from Apollo Bay, a distance of seventeen miles or so, eighteen miles, and on

the other side of the Otway it was as flat as a pancake. We had a good day. I had about 700 kgs on board.

When I turned the corner to come home at the light, there was a real savage sloppy easterly - a bad sea for here. As I'm heading back one coil gave out. I found out later the salt had built up between the coil and the block. I still had four cylinders, but with four cylinders I didn't have the power in the boat to get up on the plane. You virtually couldn't get up on the plane because of the condition of the water. So I thought to myself, OK I'll go as far as Blanket Bay, I might be able to get a bit of shelter there.

When we got near Blanket Bay another two cylinders gave out so I've only got two left. Blanket Bay was out of the question. Even trying to get in there was hazardous so I decided to head for home. Full throttle doing maybe five knots, maybe six knots. Of course the fuel was being used up as if you are on full throttle. The fuel is being pumped into the four cylinders and going straight out the exhaust without being used. Winter time or.... yes, pretty close to winter. I remember it was cold. My deckie, Peter he was huddled in underneath the windscreen because virtually every wave that we hit the spray was coming over the top. I ended up putting my diving mask on to try and keep the water out of my eyes because everything.... I had that much water in my eyes that everything was starting to go foggy. Ever been in a swimming pool for so long, things are foggy, that's how I got.

By this time, nightfall had come. Lights came on. We got as far as Merengo and the main tank had run out of fuel. The bilge pump, the electric bilge pump wasn't working and with 700 kgs (fourteen or fifteen bins of Abalone in a nineteen foot boat takes up quite a bit of room) but like I was saying before, the electric bilge pump wasn't working, but the best bilge pump you can have is a scared deckie with a two gallon bucket. Surprising how much water you can throw over the side in a short period of time! So we changed over the fuel and started heading for the harbour.

Now Joel Shannon, another Abalone diver here in Apollo Bay, knew there was something wrong so he went down and saw the Harbour Trust and the Harbour Trust started up the "Plover" which is their boat here and the "Plover" came out looking for me. And to this day, I'm so grateful for all they did because the worse part was from Merengo back to Apollo Bay. I spotted the "Plover" a few hundred yards away from me and they had their spotlight out.

Another thing went wrong my navigation lights didn't work. The torch didn't work. Everything that could have gone wrong that day, did! Flares! Got the flare out, the thing was waterlogged! But the "Plover" came so close to us that I whistled at it and they heard me, so they stayed out in front of me and sort of.... I was in behind them and they sort of flattened the water out a bit and we got into the harbour all right. I put the boat on the trailer, emptied it out of water and the following day I checked the fuel and I had about a litre left.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

TAPE 2 SIDE A

JOHNSON One of them. That was on the surface. Other hazards of diving. Now when you're diving for Abalone, of course you're diving in amongst weed. Now some of the weed in the ocean here is fifteen; ten, fifteen, twenty feet long - thirty foot long. Very easy to get caught up in the weed. The more gear you wear on you, the more chance there is of weed catching on it. So the average diver now has got a weight belt, mask,

pair of flippers, a bag and their line. The less gear you have on you the better it seems to be. Being caught up in the weed you don't struggle against it. You let the weed disengage itself. The one and only time when somebody had to come and help me out of the weed, was at Queenscliff.

There's a kelp forest and this weed grows to 50, 60 foot and at low tide it seems to lie on the top. And when you're working with a hose and you're weaving in and out of this weed, sometimes the hose gets caught in amongst the weed too and at like I say, Queenscliff, I got so tangled up in this weed that I didn't want to lose the bag (I hate losing gear - I think every diver hates losing gear, especially a bag of Abs which is half full or three quarter full) and I was so tangled up in the weed that I said to Freddie, come on out, take everything off, swim out just a mask and a snorkel and a pair of flippers. Bring a knife and he virtually had to cut the weed away from around me that caught up on my regulator, the weight belt.

We didn't have parachutes in those days. Now a parachute is an inverted type of plastic bag that you fill up with air to bring your Abalone back to the surface. The bag that I use if I really fill it up to its limit, it holds about 100 kgs of fish. To try and swim that to the surface is a bit hard so, like I said before, you fill up your parachute and that takes not only the bag to the surface, it also takes you up. When you do get to the surface you can use the parachute to support you too. You virtually lie on top of it until the deckie either pulls you in on the hose or brings the boat around to you. Working at the Otway, there's a lot of current there. I think the current runs at about, at its fiercest, three or four knots. You can't swim against it and you can use the current to your advantage by letting it take you back and as you're drifting along with the current, you're picking off Abs too.

Now the system that I work in the current with, is if I throw the anchor over the side I've got a buoy on the end of the anchor and I'll jump over the side with the anchor. The anchor rope is about 90 metres long which is 10 metres shorter than my hose and I'll start at the anchor and let the current take me slowly along the bottom and I'll pick off the Abs as I go to the very end of my hose to the back of the boat. I'll come to the surface, my deckie will start up the motor (the outboard motor) and let the anchor line go. There's a buoy on the anchor line so that stays on the surface and he comes round and picks me up in the boat. I in turn hand him the bag and he pulls the bag into the boat, I jump in and we motor back to the buoy. Now we either retrieve the anchor or keep on working that same area until I say, lets move.

The other way of doing it is to work live, but with working live your outboard motor is going all the time. The deckie keeps the boat virtually on top of you or slightly behind you. He watches your bubbles, he sees which way you're going and he follows you. The advantage with that is you can cover a lot more area, you can let yourself go with the current and you might go a kilometre or more, until lets say the reef changes or you run out of reef and get on to sand and back you go again and start all over again.

The beauty about what we call the current at the Otway, is because it's so hard to work, not many divers work it and with the current you can't go to the side of the boat because the current grabs your hose and your hose might be in a U shape. The force against the hose pulls you back too much so you can only work front or back and can only go out maybe five or ten metres either side of the boat so the strip that you're working might be fifteen to twenty metres wide and 200 metres long. Then you might only have to move over thirty or forty metres and you do it all over again.

The area isn't very big, but you can easily support the amount of divers that are here which at the moment, which is about seven.

JD You don't use cages in this....?

JOHNSON No. Here in Apollo Bay, the weed wouldn't allow you to use cages. In South Australia they do use cages, but the bottom is so much more open. It's sandstone, over here it's sort of a granite type of a bottom and to try and push a cage through this weed, no it just can't be done. Wouldn't be able to be done.

As far as sharks are concerned here, with 24 years of diving I've seen three what I call, maneaters. But, I'd like to know the amount of sharks that have seen me that I haven't seen! Because when you are working for Abalone you're not looking around, you're looking at the bottom. You're looking where your next Abalone is and the only time you do look around, is....

You seem to get a sixth sense sometimes and nine times out of ten there is something there. It might be a seal, it might be a school of fish, it might be a porpoise or school of porpoise, but if you worried about sharks you wouldn't be able to do it. I think it takes a certain type of person to be an Abalone diver. I also think that not anybody can just go out and dive and bring up (maybe I'm trying to sound a bit glorified about it) but the work's hard. With not the lonli.... you don't get lonely, you're working too hard. The beauty about it is you're working for yourself. You are your own boss, you set your own times; how hard you want to work or slowly you want to work. I even tried to go sleep under water once.

Freddie and I.... (this is going back to the old days). I had a real hard night the night before and when there's two of you working out of the one boat, if your partner says we're going to go to work, you go to work and it was a beautiful day, not a breath of wind and the sun was shining. This is at Williamstown. I'd come home at about 4 o'clock in the morning and 8 o'clock Freddie says, "Lets go to work." So out we go and I think I was still a little bit drunk because for the first bag I was superfish. Swimming around, everything was great, but after the first bag I started to get tired.

I came across a nice patch of sand and I picked up a rock for a pillow and I put this rock down and I have a bag of Abs and I laid down on my back and I put the Abs (about half a bag of Abs) on my chest and stomach area; I closed my eyes and I was so close to going to sleep (I was nearly asleep) but what happens is your mouth relaxes and the mouthpiece starts to drop out and that's the only thing that stopped me from going to sleep. I think I could very easily have done it!

JD Rocked in the cradle of the deep!

JOHNSON Virtually, yes! [laughter]. Well, the story just comes to mind.

Getting back to the hazards of diving. One diver there working on his own (most of us did). We used to use potato bags to bring our Abalone in and we used to walk on the bottom before parachutes. You can imagine how heavy even a potato bag full of Abalone is underwater and so we used to break flippers because the flippers you'd bend them over as you were walking on the bottom.

JD Walking forward?

JOHNSON Walking forward, yes. Back to the boat. Lets say your bag is full and you're walking back towards the boat and I came very close to getting an air embolism in my lungs from trying to get a bag to the surface. Only in about fifteen foot of water, I was directly under the boat. Full bag of Abalone.

When you're lifting something heavy you sort of take a deep breath and you [in take of breath] head for the surface and that's the one thing you should not do diving with compressed air is to hold your breath. About five foot from the surface I could feel my lungs not bursting, but it's pain, Wow! and I realised the thing I did wrong and I've never done it since. But they say you can kill yourself in six feet of water by holding your breath and coming to the surface. The air inside your lungs must expand and either burst through your lungs into your chest cavity and you've got a chance of surviving there. It can also burst into your neck and you will strangle or choke to death and there is another way.... or it can implode and your lungs collapse and you're dead.

But the other things (this is what you learn as things go along, like I said, I've never had a lesson in my life) and even last year going on holidays, I wanted to go diving on the Barrier Reef on one of these cruises and I had to do a course to get certified. After 24 years of commercial diving, I still had to do a course!

Talking about stories. At Point Cook one of the divers.... there was about 800 divers in the business at one stage when licences were about \$5 each. Students of a weekend used to go and dive for Abalone. There was seven or eight processors that would buy off you and it was so easy to go out in a boat, jump over the side and bring up Abalone.

Well what happened then we flooded the overseas market with a bad product. The processors had thought all you do is throw them into a can, put them in a pressure cooker and that was it. Then the Government stepped in and sort of said, "OK fellers your licences are going to go from \$5 to \$200 a year." Also at the same time nobody wanted Abs because of the flooded overseas market. We were getting round about 35 cents a pound for them then and the best we could find was 22 or 23. Like I say the processors didn't want the Abalone and the Government sort of said, "OK your licence is going up to \$200." Well out of the 800 odd divers, 132 of us bought licences and the only reason I bought a licence was I got out of Port Phillip Bay. Blackneys from Geelong were buying greenlip and I knew there was greenlip Abalone at Torquay so Freddie and I went and worked Torquay. Travelling from Melbourne and back every day, not knowing what the swell was doing, how clear the water was and for a period of maybe four months, five months, we kept on working in the Ab business.

I went back to the meat trade that's right. I went back to the meat trade twice because I couldn't afford to.... I wasn't making any money. Couldn't sell the Abalone. You had to feed yourself. I was married by then, kids at the time, but there was rent payments and everybody thought that the Ab business was finished.

Like I say, 132 of us bought the licences and what the Government didn't tell us, was that if you don't buy your licences within about a three month period, they will not issue you any more. They closed the fishery and I think there's only been one more licence issued and that was to Gary Brade and Gary Brade spent years trying to get a licence. He went to the Supreme Courts, he did everything and he was the only guy that managed to get one (he had an entitlement and I think he went over to Vietnam with the Australian soldiers from conscription).

Now they were the early days. Talking about the early days and hazards. One of the divers at Point Cook he was diving away and he looks through the water and he could see.... he said, "Ooh there's a wreck over there" and he swam over to the wreck and he found out it's his own boat. What happens is you've got a reserve tank and you've also got the air in your hoses and diving shallow water the air would last for about say five minutes, maybe longer and so he swam over and he realised it's his own boat [chuckles] (I'd love to know what he thought). That's one of the funniest stories.

With the 132 divers after the new licence fees came in, things started to pick up and it's only been in the last, lets say seven years, eight years out of the 24 where, well lets say the cream has started to come. There was always Abalone there and you could always make a living, but the prices in those days weren't very good, but like I said before, you were your own boss and even today I don't own an alarm clock. I get up when I feel like getting up. I know I can only spend, say five hours in the water so if I jump in the water at ten o'clock in the morning and get out at three or if I jump in the water at twelve o'clock and get out at five it makes very little difference. Depends on weather conditions. Sometimes you don't get out there until the afternoon because it's too rough in the morning and vice versa. It might come up rough in the afternoon and head home early.

Like I said, these were the old days. Now at the moment.... see we're a group of divers (the 132 of us - I think it's down to about 99 now or less). We don't know the long term repercussions of what this is going to do to our bodies. There hasn't been a group of men that have dived for as often, as long as anybody else. So we're setting a precedent in not only diving but what it'll do to us. Now the cases of bonenecrosis there's quite a few of those from diving too deep too often - nitrogen build up in your bone marrow. Brain damage [chuckles] (there's some weird divers around!). By the time I've.... see I'll be 50 this year, by the time I reach 60 or 70 I don't know....

JD Has it been researched?

JOHNSON Yes there has been a bit of research done on it. What I have found, there's a book called "The Abalone Divers" by Carl Edmonds. Dr Carl Edmonds did a bit of research in Tasmania I think. I was looking for it before. I've got one but I can't find it and it gives you the medical aspect of Abalone diving. What I find you might get a song into your head or it could be an advertisement jingle and it'll go over and over and over as you're working down there because there's virtually no other sound except the sound of your bubbles. You, like I said, you're own your own down there. There's always something to see.

24 years of diving and in the early days you'd look for the big things. You look for the big fish and after seeing these big fish you start noticing small things and you might come across the fish that's no longer than about an inch or could be half an inch long. Beautiful iridescent blue on it and transparent in the gut. You could see its intestine and I might spend 20 minutes with it, just looking at it and following what it does. You might see a different type of kelp, you notice little tiny seaweed, starfish there's so many things down there that you lets say, notice eventually.

To me, if I go on holidays what do I do? I go diving! Different areas different fish, different weed, different coral. We haven't got coral down.... yes we do have a coralline type of growth but not the same sort of corals as on the Barrier Reef because of the colder water, but it's beautiful down here in its own way because of the seaweeds. There's no weed up north. There are soft weeds, but its different to what we've got here. We've got the best crayfish in the world - the Southern Rock Lobster. We haven't got any prawns or not in commercial quantities. Our King Crabs are good. I still enjoy

eating Abalone. I've got a way of cooking Abalone that you can cut with a fork, they're so tender. The secret to cooking Abalone is the longer you cook it the tougher it gets.

I've even dried out Abalone, like Abalone jerky [chuckles]. That was a failure, but Abalone soup. I put one dish together and that was.... I minced some Abalone, some craytail and I minced some Bluenose and I combined the three meats together and put it into a very thin Chinese (like they use for dim sims) and deep fried it. I thought this should be good and it was bland, it was disappointing! But Abalone by itself, Crayfish by itself and the Bluenose are good eating product, good eating fish.

Processing the catch. Like I say you can eat it, you can fry it and dry it and the industry has tried it all. In the old days most of it was canned. The greenlip that we used to catch in Torquay would be individually frozen and sent to America and made into Abalone steaks. Japan, South East Asia, China take the bulk of our product. I'd say 99% of our product is exported. The other 1% is sold locally lets say, through Chinese restaurants and local super markets and things like that, but like I say, South East Asia takes the bulk. America takes some. See there's also Abalone in South Africa, New Zealand, they've found a fish called Loco in South America. How the Abalone business in Australia started about was America and Japan ran out of.... over-fished their resources. They started looking round the world for places where you could get Abalone and Australia especially Victoria and Tasmania. The Abalone here are a beautiful product, there not the biggest Abalone in the world. I think the biggest Abalone is the California Red and I've got shells from America that are ten and a half inches to twelve inches wide and nearly four pound of meat came out of one Abalone, but they're few and far between now.

The Abalone here are.... our size limit in Apollo Bay is 120 ml or four and three quarter inches. From Lorne all the way through to Lakes Entrance it's four and a quarter inches. In Port Phillip Bay it's four inches or 100 ml. Four and a quarter is 110 ml. Why our size limit here is bigger, it's a prime growing area. They seem to put on weight quicker. An Abalone from spat to size, and I'm talking about four and three quarter inches takes about five to six years. They start breeding round about the three and a half year mark so by having the size limit of 120 ml you've gone through two or three breeding cycles before they're big enough to be able to take commercial.

Back pre 1980, this is when our shell law came in. Before that we used to be able to shell out at sea. The deckies were called shellers, and every Ab that you brought over the side it would be taken out of the shell and the shell and the gut thrown back to the ocean. There was no value in the shell at the time and to my way of thinking you carried a lot less weight and if an Abalone was ready to spawn at least you threw the spawn and the sperm back over the side. Fish would probably tear it apart and the two would mix and you'd have reproduction. Now I could be wrong on this, but I still think so.

We also found when the shell law came in for some reason... for a while there didn't seem to be the same sort of say reproduction or you didn't see as many small Abs as in the older days. But now, like I say with the quota system in, it's sustaining the divers. I think that the resource is not under used, I think it's used to its full potential. We have got problems with poachers at the moment. The price of Abalone until a month ago was \$20 a kilo. This is shell, gut and everything. It's dropped back down to \$16 now.

Poaching is fairly prevalent. Like I was saying before, the local market can't afford or doesn't like to pay that sort of money for legal Abalone so poachers are selling their product for about half the price. We've got a docket system now, where every Ab that

I bring up is accounted for in quadruplicate. One copy goes to the fisheries, two copies go to the processor and I keep the fourth and if there's any sale of Abalone from the processor to another person, the processor supplies one of the dockets, but like I say, there are the poachers.

We bring out 700 tonne a year. The poachers nearly double that amount. If you look at your export figures the amount of weight that goes out. With the poacher, the poacher doesn't care whether it's size or not. I've noticed that around Williamstown when the ethnic (I was going to say Vietnamese) but when they came over, the boat people at Wiltona (that area there), they would take Abalone that was as big as a five cent piece. There'd be six or eight kids, one man supervising them and anything above the six foot mark, was completely stripped off. They were even turning over rocks and catching the crabs that were underneath them. Anything that had nutrient value was taken with no regard for anything except on a day to day basis. The Fisheries tried to say to them you can't do this and they'd turn around and say we don't understand the language. But they were getting caught not only once or twice, they were getting caught over and over.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

TAPE 2 SIDE B

With poachers I don't know what to do about them. The Fisheries at the moment have asked us to send in good information. When they say good information, like car numbers, boat numbers, not just ring in and say "Look, I think there's a poacher in the water" and give a vague description of where and how, but the poachers at the moment are getting very well organised with paging systems, beepers with lookouts. Not only are they hard to catch, but they're coming up with new systems all the time.

I don't think the fines are stiff enough and when they do front Court, the judges don't seem to realise what sort of damage they're doing to the industry. The judges that they do front, most of them don't even know what an Abalone is. The coastline that we've got here, not just along Apollo Bay but all up and down the coast there's not enough enforcement officers to cover it all. I've even heard of poachers starting bush fires because they know once a bush fire gets going the Fisheries Officers have got to fight it and out they go poaching and that'll keep the officers off their back. They've stooped to those sort of tactics.

I sometimes even think they get information from the Fisheries Division to know when certain inspectors are in Court and when they won't be patrolling the coastline.

Our licence fees last year were \$10,300 something and there's talk of this year of \$28,000. When you think of 70 odd divers paying that amount of money, even at \$20,000 there's 1.4 million dollars a year that goes in licence fee and we see very little in return for it. I would like to see more enforcement officers. I'd like to see the poaching cut down.

One good thing they did not very long ago, they hit all the restaurants and the restaurants that didn't have dockets for where they got their Abs from were prosecuted and the only way you're going to stop poaching is to stop it at the outlet. This restaurant owner will not buy off the poacher again if he gets his fish confiscated and gets hit with a big fine. So next time he'll want some sort of a docket. You will not catch every poacher but if you could reduce the poaching effort by even 20%, 30% it would help this resource incredibly. Because, like I say, they've got no regard for size

and it's so frustrating and.... you feel like smashing somebody's head in when you jump into a spot and the bottom is just littered with shell and the shell is way, way below legal size and you know they're juvenile Abs that could grow into lets say.... They can put on in the first three or four years they can double their weight nearly every year until they reach maturity. They don't even give them a chance to breed and the poachers seem to.... most of them don't use boats any more they work off the shoreline and your breeding area is in the shallow type water. There's a lot more small Abs in the shallow areas.

Now research has been done of movement of Abalone, how far they move how the spawn and spat get moved around. Aquaculture, the Queenscliff laboratory (the Institute at Queenscliff run by the Government) they've managed to spawn Abalone. They've looked into aquaculture in Tasmania but its access to salt water and there's got to be volumes of salt water. Recirculating water all the time and I know in Portland they've applied for a bit of land, or a bit of ocean frontage to try and not only seed these reefs, but to raise Abalone. Once you grant that sort of permit to anybody, there's nothing to stop them from going beyond their boundaries. They want to take Abalone from one spot and replace it in another. I agree with aquaculture but done under controlled areas on lets say, private land or let the Government do it, where you can control the growth and control the amount.

At this moment there's been very little done as far as aquaculture is concerned and lets say they can come with 100 tonne a year it wouldn't affect us. Let them get 200 tonne a year, it still, I don't think, would affect us as much. Like I said before, we were bringing up 1,200 tonne a year and we dropped down to 700 so it's a 500 tonne per year. Let them get 500 tonne a year!

The way I look at it is this. If the population of China, if 1% of the population of China buy one can of Abalone, once a year, we couldn't meet the demand and to the Asians and the Chinese and Japanese Abalone is a traditional dish like we might have plum pudding for Christmas. At the Chinese New Year they'll have one dish of Abalone so the demand is there. Price fluctuations as the value of our dollar against the Yen or the American dollar. The bad times of the year is usually January and February because they've already stocked up for the New Year and demand for Abalone seems to diminish. They would like to see more Abs coming in in September, October, March and April. Like I say, the demand for Abalone is dictated by the consumer.

The processor. Our best diving times are usually over the Christmas/New Year period. It's warm, sun shining, long hours, the days are long. But that's not the good time for the consumer. Now the processor not refuses, but the value of the Abalone, once it's canned and put in the can and it's put into their warehouses, they could be sitting on two or three million dollars worth of product and if there's any sort of fluctuation in the money market, they're only guessing at what sort of profit or if any profit.... they'll make any profit.

Like I say, at the moment we are getting \$20 a kilo for our Abalone and I know one of the canneries in Melbourne had about two or three million dollars of Abs just sitting there and the price dropped down to \$16. Now I don't think they'll make any profit on that amount of Abalone because they've got to sell it for what the going price is like overseas which the other processors are selling for.

JD It's all canned is it?

JOHNSON No, no. It's not all canned. There are four different ways they're doing it now. Canning is one, but I'm only guessing at the figures, but I'd say about 50% to

60% is canned. 30% would be frozen. Now they're trying a process of individually par boiling and then freezing the Abalone in the shell and sending it overseas to the Japanese market. This was the nitrogen freezing process - I think it's still going on now where they freeze each Abalone individually and send them in the shell, like that and they've tried drying them.

They tried drying them here in Apollo Bay and the Abalone should have a certain content of moisture after it has been dried and whether the climate here wasn't conducive to the process, but they started getting a mould on them and that's not permissible to the Singapore and Hong Kong market. They seem to use the dried Abalone in their chemist shops. Well it's not a chemist shop, they sell all sorts of stuff, not Rhino horn, but deer horn and a real paraphernalia type of stuff including dried Abalone.

The beauty about canning them is once they're in the can they can stay there for quite a while without any cost to the cannery. So with aquaculture maybe that's a thing of the future. I don't think the Abalone diver will ever go. I don't think they'll be able to invent a machine that could swim in amongst the weed and pick off the Abalone, one after the other. With aquaculture sure but the connoisseur's going to be able to tell the difference between an Ab that's been fed by hand and an Ab that's growing wild. I could be wrong but like I say, I've been doing it for 24 years now and I'll be 50 this year: how much longer I can dive I don't know.

I'll probably go to 55 and think about retiring then. The oldest diver that was in the industry was old man Middlecoat. He got two kids out of school: he'd pick them up after school and he would supply the boat the compressor and the car: the whole lot and these two kids would go diving for him and they used to split it 50 - 50. He'd make a good living and the kids were the two richest school kids in the suburb. But of course the kids grew up and they in turn, went and got their own licences so old man Middlecoat he was 62 years old when he started diving. He'd been in the fishing business for 40 years, couldn't swim, but when you've got a pair of flippers on and a wet suit and you drop your weight belt you float like a cork. He used to carry three weight belts with him, one round his body and two spare ones in the boat in case [chuckles]. Another thing about him he didn't have a set of top teeth so it was very hard for him to seal the face mask on and keep it from leaking because he had no support on his bottom lip. And it used to flood on him all the time. So of course when it flooded he wouldn't panic, but he'd drop the lot and he'd drop his weight belt and he'd come to the surface spluttering away.

JD Is he still in the industry?

JOHNSON No he died about four or five years ago now. But he worked right up to.... he was nearly 70 I think and he was still diving for Abalone. That's Port Phillip Bay and Port Phillip Bay is not like diving in the ocean especially around the Williamstown, Altona, Point Cook area, Campbell's Cove it's like say, diving in a bath tub. There's no swell, very little current but also it gets boring in Port Phillip Bay because there's not enough life. It.... I don't know if you need a bit of a challenge or.... there's more to see in the ocean and the Port Phillip Bay Abs are both smaller and not quite as healthy (that's the way I'm going to put it). The meat is, lets say darker, but the Japanese seem to like the Bay Abs. They seem to have a bit more flavour.

The ocean Abs along here are beautiful white meat, they're a firm fish, they're a really good product. Areas in Port Phillip Bay are, I call the pigmy Abs, too many Abalone for one area and not enough food for the lot of them and maybe some pollution gets to them and you'll find a big shell with very little meat or the meat is skinny and looks

undernourished and it looks sick. Whether the Ab is ready to die I don't know. The life cycle of an Ab, they grow up to twelve, fourteen, fifteen years and they die. So these Abalone that I've seen in Port Phillip Bay which I call undernourished are towards the end of their life cycle or not, I don't know. Whether there is some pollution that's affecting them it's a question to be answered by people who study this sort of thing.

Pollution here in Apollo Bay is virtually non-existent, but the town is getting bigger by the year. There's talk already about shifting the outlet for our sewerage further down the coast and if you do go further down the coast, where do you stop. They might go all the way to Cape Otway and the amount of sewerage that goes in the ocean will increase as time goes on. Pollution might take over and aquaculture might be the thing of the future.

The management of the fisheries by the government. I think that there is some good people, but some of the fisheries and wildlife people they should go and play with their platypus and their koala bears and leave the commercial side of the fisheries to the professionals. From my attitude I'm not happy with what they're doing. They don't seem to be doing enough. Maybe I don't see all of it. There was a time when we felt as if we were being persecuted. I sometimes think they might be jealous of the sort of work we do. And as soon as things start to come good the Government steps in and they virtually try to cut the tall poppy down or like I say, our licence fees last year were \$10,000: this year they wanted \$28,000. They're trying to get \$28,500 off us. That's an increase of 180%, now where's this price parity of 6% maximum and all that? Airlines were out for months and months because they wanted a 30% increase, well look what the government did and when the government turns round and wants 180% increase, what do you do? Like I say, if we pay that sort of money and we see very little in return that's my personal opinion and I'd like to see more specially the stopping of poaching.

But like I say, I'll probably dive for another five years. I dive on an average of 50 no a bit more than that about 80 days a year - 80 to 90 days a year. I enjoy what I do. If I'm out of the water for too long I'm looking forward to getting back into it. It's not all as good as I say it is because you do work: physically you work hard down there. You put up with cold, your out of your own environment. One of the worst thoughts that might go through your brain is being eaten alive by a fish. You're allowed to make one mistake out there and that's your last one.

After 24 years of diving, I've been very lucky. I've come close to drowning two or three times: had the bends twice. Bugged a ute at Torquay once and used the trailer winch to try and get it out and as I was winding the winch the S hook straightened out and hit me in the skull. I had a fractured skull. If it had hit me another two or three inches lower I would have lost an eye. Instead of the cable breaking the hook straightened out and the whip in the cable was really powerful.

We used to be sort of nomads for a while. I'm going back to the early 70s. We travelled up and down the coast. I've worked from Welshpool around the Prom, Walkerville, Sandy Point, Phillip Island, San Remo, Torquay, Port Phillip Bay, Warnambool, you name it, I've gone up and down the coast. We used to live in tents, in caravans, in back of utes. We used to work hard and we used to play hard too because after a good days work, you'd get in the pub and you'd be in a new town, new people and say, here comes the Abalone boys. You worked the summer in the ocean and the winter in the Bay.

Future, don't know! With the sale of licences now it's only been three or four, no four years since we've been able to transfer licences. That's like a retirement thing for me.

The last licence changed hands for, I think, about \$1.3 million. You can work it out mathematically yourself, I said our quotas are 20 tonnes a year at \$20 kg: an average diver can turn over \$400,000 a year. So if you buy a licence for \$1.3 million, you can virtually earn that money in less than three years, but out of that \$400,000 you are paying \$200,000 in tax and, this is what's so disappointing, not only the licence fees that we pay for our licence, but the tax that we pay too and there's so little done for us! And all I'm asking is to stop poaching.

And I think that's all I've got to say for the timebeing and if there's anything else I'll come back to you.

JD Thank you very much, that's a great run down on the industry Ken, thank you.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





Verbatim transcript of an interview with GARRY KERR

INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr Garry Kerr, fisherman, author and historian, of Portland, Victoria. The interview was conducted on the 8th February 1990 in Mr Kerr's home. The interviewer is Jack Darcey for Murdoch University and the Australian Fisheries Research Council.

Mr Kerr is a highly experienced fisherman, particularly in the rock lobster industry in Victoria, and on this tape gives a comprehensive overview of many aspects of a variety of fisheries in his State, these include barracouta, shark, trevally, tuna, orange ruffly and scallop in addition to rock lobster.

His wide ranging talk covers boats and gear, personalities and processing, management and marketing, as well as many other aspects of the fishing industry.

Garry Kerr has a long and abiding interest in the fishing and trading vessels of the region and in those who sail in them. He has researched and published a series of fascinating accounts with the titles **Australian and New Zealand Sail Traders**, **Crafts and Craftsmen of Australian Fishing - 1870-1970**, and the **Tasmanian Trading Ketch** published by Mainsail Books in 1987, Post Office Box 316, Portland, Victoria 3305. Currently he has in process a history of Portland.

Mr Kerr is widely known and highly respected in the Australian fishing industry. His very comprehensive, perceptive contribution to this history of the Australian fishing industry is valuable indeed.

The interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter. There are two tapes.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Have you lived in Portland all your life?

KERR Originally I came from a farming family, we lived 12 miles out of Portland until I was 8 when we moved into town.

JD You run a farm now, not a family farm?

KERR Well that's right. We lived in town for many years and my wife and I were both off farms and we had a hankering to get a bit of land so we ended up with 67 acres just out of town to bring the kids up on, and it has been OK - it's nice and quiet out here.

JD Do you work it as a farm?

KERR We run a few head of beef cattle just to eat the grass mainly. We are not conscientious farmers by any means.

JD So how did you come to get into fishing?

KERR Well I left school at an early age, I left school as soon as I could at 14, I didn't enjoy it at all, I thought there was too much to do to be bothered with school. My father had a bit of a bush block at Heywood and I did a bit of work up there, I worked for other farmers. I did a few weeks at the meatworks in the season, but fishing always appealed to me. I remember as a kid I had a bit of a canvas canoe we used to drag down to the beach and row around in. We were always rowing dinghies around, fishing and so on. So I used to look out in the bay and see the fishermen going out in the morning or coming in on a nice calm day and I thought well, that looked a pretty good lifestyle to me.

But I got a rude awakening when I went fishing because it was far from calm, once you got outside the bay you were in rough water and I suffered from seasickness, and it was a bit of a rude awakening the first few weeks of fishing, I can tell you. But actually I stuck at it with the idea - with the hope, I could see money in the game - of eventually earning enough to buy a farm. But you get into a rut I suppose, and fishing gets into your blood. You seem to get accustomed to the discomforts, and so 28 years on I am still fishing.

JD Did you start as a deckhand?

KERR Yes, I started as a deckhand. I worked on about three different boats over about 18 months I think. I was pretty ambitious. I think I'd just turned 16 when I started and could see the money some of these guys were making. I was pretty ambitious and came from a fairly ambitious family, and as soon as I could I got my own boat. I was 17 and a half when I got my own boat. I paid 700 pounds deposit on a boat worth 2,000 pounds. No licence costs or anything those days, of course.

I soon outgrew the little boat and was looking for a bigger boat so I went to Hobart and bought a big old 55 footer - I thought this would be the bees knees and carry plenty of crays in this, the little boat didn't have enough capacity. But boy she was old, and boy did she break my heart. She leaked; she was actually an old trading ketch that had been converted to fishing, not designed for punching to windward with an engine in it. And pound! God she'd pound, heading into weather. And leak! I used to get a bloke down to caulk her underneath while she was still in the water, get a diver down to try and keep some caulk in the seams.

I remember one day I was looking in the bilge while he was caulking outside and the bubbles from his oxygen tank were coming up through the seams - up through the bilge water. This was how much she leaked.

JD You must have had the pumps going all the time pretty well?

KERR Well she had to be pumped out every three hours at times, so I'd have to either wake up out of bed and go down and pump her out if I was home, and if I was at sea you'd sleep with one foot out of the bunk on the floor, barefoot, and when it got up over the floor of the fo'c's'le you got up and pumped her out. [Laughs]. I was lucky I didn't drown in the damned thing. But one season and that was enough. So I tried to sell it and I couldn't get a satisfactory price for it. I had to get out of it, so I sold it for

very little actually and I virtually had to start again. But I was still only about 20 or 21, so I still had plenty of time.

I then had a 36 footer built by the boatshed locally (Stankeys owned it at the time) the agreement being they would build a boat for me and in the meantime I leased one of their boats and skippered it, and when my boat was ready I would work it on a lease basis and pay it off in a share of the catch.

JD Was that the Stankeys from....?

KERR Carpenter's Rocks? Yes. But in the meantime Stankeys went into receivership so I had to finance the boat myself. I'd had a couple of reasonable years working their boat so that was OK, we financed the little **Linda K** and got into that for three years. Did alright; outgrew that; got a 45 footer.

JD Did you keep the **Linda K**?

KERR No, I sold the **Linda K** to buy the 45 footer. I've had a number of boats ever since, I've been a bit of a boat lover and sort of the grass is always greener - you think of another boat you'd like to have, but as someone put it, they are bits of romances that don't work out at times, they are not the boat you think they are. I ended up, I thought, well if I want the boat I REALLY want - being a bit of a boat lover - I eventually got one built by the best boat builder in the State, a 50 footer called the **Jane Kerr**. I got her built in '81, built out of Tasmanian huon pine with a Gardiner engine, ketch rigged, with the idea of doing a bit of cruising. I always enjoyed cruising. A combined cruising/fishing boat. And we did very well with her. I've still got it as a matter of fact.

But again I outgrew that and we got fishing further and further afield down to the border of the Tasmanian waters and Victorian waters and it was getting a bit far away - 115 miles away - and the Bass Strait type weather was punching home into hard weather was a bit much, so 18 months ago I went and bought a 60 foot steel boat with a Tassy licence and we now work Tasmanian waters with that, fishing back to Portland; and Victorian waters with the **Jane Kerr** with a skipper on it.

JD So you would be employing one skipper and how many deckhands?

KERR On the **Jane Kerr** there's one skipper and two deckhands, and on the steel one there's a skipper and two deckhands, but I do every second trip as skipper; the skipper then goes as leading deckhand on the steel one.

JD Do you find the crew stay with you for long or is there a big turnover?

KERR No, I've had a pretty good run with crew. There's the odd one that doesn't fit in, you usually end up with a mutual agreement to part the ways. But, no, I've got some very good crew now and they get well paid for it.

JD They are on a share, of course?

KERR They are on a share basis, which gives them a lot of incentive, and we do reasonably well so they are reasonably happy.

JD Are they the type of chaps that want to get their own skipper's tickets?

KERR Well yes and no. There are one or two that will eventually own their own boats and have their own skipper's tickets, and there are one or two that just don't have that type of ambition, they are quite happy to let someone else have the worries. But we work a situation where there are seven of us for six vacancies, for six jobs, so there is always one that has a trip off, so there's no great pressure for anyone to keep working full time throughout a season. They can have a trip off now and then and it helps everyone.

JD Where do they get their training to get their tickets?

KERR Well for tickets, in recent years.... When skippers' tickets first came in here in the 70's, there was what they called the Service Ticket, which was only a week's course and they virtually gave it to you if you could demonstrate that you weren't a complete fool, because they couldn't kick out a lot of people that had been in the industry 20, 30 or 40 years. In recent years you have had to do a 6 weeks course at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, and that's a bit of an imposition for country lads going to Melbourne for 6 weeks and having to sit a course down there. I don't think it's necessary really, I think something more streamlined could be done with the same result.

In fact TAFE College in Warrnambool, with a campus in Portland, look like taking up a Master Class V. They've already done a deckhand's course here last year, the first deckhand's course done in Victoria, and that has met with some success. Possibly they will be doing more. It was just more or less to sort out the people who think they can fish and can't, from the people that turn out to be alright. The criteria for entering the course was that you had to do a day or two at sea to make sure that you could firstly hack sea conditions and not be terribly seasick, before they bothered putting you through the course.

JD Was it people who were hoping to enter the industry or people who were already employed?

KERR The deckhand's course was mainly for unemployed people that hadn't been able to achieve employment anywhere else.

JD Yes! Just a side issue, did you overcome your seasickness?

KERR Not completely. I'll still get seasick now if I've been home two or three weeks and go out when it's a bit rough. It's not that long since I've had a chunder or two.

JD Do any or your crew attend, or have attended, the Maritime College in Launceston?

KERR No, in fact I don't know anyone in the town that has. Possibly some have, off the trawlers, but I haven't come in contact with anyone who has been to Launceston. It's mostly blokes off the street that come down looking for a job deckying that work their way up to skippers and leading hands, and if they want a Master V or Coxswain's they have to go and do one of these courses in Melbourne.

JD Could we have a look now at the books that you have published?

KERR Well, how I got started on that I suppose - well I was always a boat lover I think, and I was saying before about this old trading ketch that I'd bought when I was 20, and you could see... you know, she'd been converted to fishing but she obviously had those bits and pieces about her that she'd been a trading ketch. I remember

buying a book in Hobart called **Hobart River Craft and Sealers of Bass Strait**, and it had some lovely little stories in that about the early ketchmen, the bargemen of Hobart. At the same time, the old fishermen around the wharf would tell yarns about the old days and the way things were, and you could see that none of it was being recorded - not around here.

Also, there was a fellow here by the name of Jack Arkell who owned a 'couta boat - a 'couta boat being about a 26 foot open boat which we used widely on the Victorian coast in the early days. And Jack had never moved with the times, he fished in 1960 the way he'd fished in 1925, he had his dozen stick pot, as we call them. He fished under sail whenever he could, he had a little bit of a petrol motor which he used in the calm, hand hauled his pots. And he retired and I bought that boat to save it going somewhere else out of the town, it was about 40-odd years old at the time. I bought it and restored it to what it would have been when it was built in 1927 by Jones in Melbourne. And that was the forerunner of the 'couta boat club that we have now down in Port Phillip.

A friend of mine, Tim Phillips, came up from Port Phillip and saw the **Ariel**, this 26 footer, and was very interested. He went back and bought one, restored it and sailed it. Friends of his enjoyed it, saw it. He came from the Portsea area where there's a fair bit of money, and it grew from that. And now we've got the Victorian 'couta boat club and there are a lot of 'couta boats that have been restored. They've gone right along the coast and found all the 'couta boats they could find - different people, different times - up as far as Kingston and even Adelaide. They've bought these Victorian 'couta boats that had been taken away and converted into launches and whatever. And back in Port Phillip now, 99% of them are restored and sailing regularly.

And Tim's also building new 'couta boats on the old style, they've got certain rules that keep them within certain limits to keep their tradition, and he's not the only one building new boats either.

JD And do you have races?

KERR The 'couta boat club in Melbourne hold regular races, yes. I think I got off the track here.... how I got started on books?

JD Book, yes.

KERR Anyway, I got interested in ship types; the different types of ships that evolved to suit certain conditions in certain areas, and there were still a few of them about. The old **May Queen** in Hobart was still trading with timber down to Dover or Port Esperance. She traded there for 100 years. She was retired when she was 106 years old.

Then you had the 'couta boats in Victoria that evolved to suit a certain purpose. You obviously had the pearling luggers in northern Australia which evolved to suit a certain set of conditions. So I had an idea that I'd do a book on this. But when I got started I found the task was a lot bigger than I anticipated, so while I did some of the sections of the book dealing with some ship types, I got people to help me in other areas to do ship types that were familiar to their area, including New Zealand. The New Zealand scows, big trading scows; the mullet boats of New Zealand; the cray boats of Tasmania and Bass Strait; the gulf ketches that worked out of Adelaide to the Gulf ports around Adelaide and brought the grain back to load on overseas ships and what have you.

So that book was called **The Australian and New Zealand Sail Traders** but it was a joint effort with myself and other people, but that is no longer in print.

JD Who published it, Garry?

KERR It was published by Linton Publications in Adelaide.

JD And what was the year of publication?

KERR Oh, just from memory, about 1974.

JD It's now out of print you mentioned?

KERR Yes. But the years went by and I was still interested in boats and boat types, fishing boat types in particular. Boat builders have their own designs and have their own style of boat. Different areas have their own style of boat and those boats change too, over the years, obviously. So I had the idea that I'd do a sort of picture type book of different types of boats and with a short caption explaining where they fitted in.

Well I started off on this, collecting photos of boats of different eras, of different areas. While I was doing that I read a book called **The Drifterman** by David Butcher, he was a chap at Lowestoft in England. Now he'd gone around Lowestoft and interviewed by tape old fishermen, engineers off the drifters, sail makers, deck hands; and he'd scripted that straight off the tapes into the book, with all their slang, all their colourful speech. And I thought, what a wonderful idea! So from then on, while I went around collecting these photos I took my tape recorder with me and taped a lot of these people that I was speaking to.

Now some of those interviews, those transcripts, are a bit rough - some are better than others, and I like to think that I learn as I go along. But anyway, the result of that was a book called **Craft and Craftsmen of Australian Fishing**, sub-titled and illustrated oral history, published by Mainsail Books, Post Office Box 316, Portland - which is me. I self published. I'd sent it to a couple of publishers who weren't interested. Also from my experience with the first book, I found that publishers want to put limitations on you, want to do it their way, want to cut some of the material out to keep it at a certain price. So I thought, blow it! I want to use the material I've collected, I'll publish it myself and use what I want. Which I did.

JD When was that?

KERR That book was published, from memory, it must have been about 1984/85 - I should know, but I can't tell you the exact date.

JD Did you handle the distribution yourself?

KERR To an extent, but mainly I put it with Book Chain; they supposedly have a representative in each State. But I found the Book Chain representative in Victoria was very good, and Tasmania; but much poorer results in the other States. It just seems hard - there are so many books on the market obviously, it's hard to get them all on bookshelves in book shops. But anyway, we printed 1,500 and they sold out within 18 months, so I printed another 1,000 and they are just dribbling out slowly, as they will continue to do over the years.

JD And they are still available?

KERR They're still available. Getting back to books. From doing that **Crafts and Craftsmen** I came across a lot of old blokes that had been in both trading ketches, schooners and in fishing - been in one and the other - and a lot of the boat builders too had, of course, built trading vessels and fishing vessels. And these blokes were fast dying out, especially blokes connected with building frame built vessels. This is vessels built out of solid timber as against steam bent ribs. Some of these vessels were built from natural crooks - they went out in the bush and selected the limbs off trees to suit the shape of the vessel being built. And some were cut out of flitches in a saw pit to the shape of the bilge lines of the vessel.

So soon after I finished **Craft and Craftsmen** I went and interviewed as many of these people that were connected with building, sail making and working on these trading vessels out of Hobart. And it's an illustrated oral history too, it's illustrated with period photos and transcripts of what these old blokes had to say. And the name of that book is **The Tasmanian Trading Ketch**, an illustrated oral history, also published by Mainsail Books. And I'd like to think that that's the best effort yet, and of course hopefully we'll improve as time goes on.

JD Is that the latest one?

KERR That's the latest one, yes.

JD And what about in the future, have you got anything in the pipeline in the publishing sphere?

KERR Well yes, I have really; it's something I've been wanting to do for years, and that is do a bit of a history on the Portland fishing industry right from the earliest days right through. It's been a pretty colourful place over the years, going back to the last century, and I think there is an interesting story to be told to anyone, of course, interested in boats, or fishing, or local history. It won't be a general interest book by any means. It won't be a very big book. But I hope to go back through all the old newspapers because Portland's the oldest settlement in Victoria and fishing was one of its early industries.... earliest, very earliest, industries, and quite a large industry here at times. And it was well recorded in the local newspapers because the newspaper offices are right on the seafront, everything happened along the foreshore and anything to do with the fishing industry - almost - has been recorded in the local papers. But it will be somewhat of a chore to go back through all those papers to glean the information I want.

I've interviewed a few of the older fisherman in recent years and put those interviews away with the intention of eventually using them to mix in with this other information I glean out of the papers.

JD Are the back numbers available?

KERR Yes they go well back - back to the 1840's anyway, from when the **Guardian** newspaper first started, I can't tell you exactly what year off the top of my head - it might have been 1842 or something.

JD That's very early days, isn't it?

KERR Yes.

JD That is a great project, I wish you all success with it.

KERR Thanks, Jack.

JD Talking about fishing in Portland in general terms. It started off as a whaling and sealing place didn't it, really before settlement?

KERR Well that's right. It started off as a whaling and sealing place where they used to come to seasonally for a start to take seals, and then William Dutton established a hut here and a garden in 1828, and was here off and on for the rest of his life. The Henty's came here, they were farmers/graziers, they came here in 1834 and settled and they generally take the credit for being the first settlers here, but it was really William Dutton - and that's fairly well accepted as well.

Now whaling - shore based whaling - was a big industry here, there was something like 8 whaling stations, I think, here at one stage on various parts of the shore. And over the years the whaling declined and no doubt those whale boats, 28 feet or 30 feet or whatever they were, would have been our first fishing boats because naturally there were not whales all the time. There were boats there, people needed to eat, so I think there's little doubt that those whale boats would have been used part time as fishing boats.

I don't know a lot about the fishing industry through those years up until the 1860's or '70's. Certainly the Dusting family came here in 1858 I think, and they were I think fishermen from Cornwall in England. They came out and they would have brought a lot of their ideas with them. I think Portland was one of the very early places to use cray pots, and they were Cornish cray pots. You can see old photos of them now, and they are exactly the same as the photos you see of Cornish cray pots in Cornwall. The Cornish cray pots have only changed in the last 20 or 30 years whereas the Portland cray pots changed in the 1920's away from the Cornish type.

But no doubt there was a fishing industry here through the '50's and '60's but it gained great impetus (impetus is the word, is it?) when the railway came through to Portland in the 1870's - late '70's I think - it greatly expanded the market potential for the fishermen. They could send fish away to the inland towns on the rail route to Melbourne and there was even a fish market in Ballarat at one stage. And boxes of fish, (you can see through the old newspaper columns), there were boxes of fish consigned to little places like Condah, Henty, Colleraine, Casterton.... now I might be wrong, there mightn't have been a railway through to Casterton. But certainly all the little sidings on the way, there were boxes of fish consigned to [them]. And I think the local fishing industry gained a great boost as a result of the railway, naturally.

Now the types of boats used were limited. There was no sheltered port here then, open to easterly weather. They were mostly small boats, not much over 20 feet maybe up to 25 feet, which could be hauled ashore when a blow came on from the south-east. But a fishermen's breakwater was built about 1890. Now I stand correcting on this. I think there were bigger boats used also prior to 1890 but very, very few; maybe one or two, plus lighters of course, used for lightering cargo from the ships into the small piers. I have a feeling that these lighters were also used at times for fishing when there was no lightering to be done.

Anyway up until 1890 the boats were smallish and shallow, rather flat on the floor, the easier to pull them out on the beach. With the advent of the breakwater the type of

boat changed. I don't have documentary evidence of this but just from summing up from the evidence available, they were allowed then to have a deeper boat which was better for sailing, better for windward work. This was what has become known as the 'couta boat, fairly sharp on the floor with a centreplate as well, so with a deep heel and the centreplate they were quite good to windward under sail, very smart fishing vessels and sailing vessels. The difference being that now they had shelter they didn't have to pull them up on the beach, and to do any maintenance, painting or whatever, they could haul them out by crane on to the breakwater. There were two cranes there for the purpose - hand operated, of course.

So that was the type of boat used in Portland (with two or three exceptions) right up until the big harbour was built in the '50's. It started to become effective in the '50's even though it wasn't opened until 1960 or whatever.

1925 some people here bought a boat called the **Bluenose**, she was a 45 footer, she was one of the few bigger boats at that stage but she wasn't here long. It went away again until another fisherman here who was connected with the Bluenose, a man by the name of Charlie Fredericks, he and his brother went to Hobart and bought a 40 footer called the **Rachael Irene** in 1928. Theo Jarrett was a young fellow here, he went with them to bring the boat back. Theo was impressed with what they were doing with the **Rachael Irene**, a bigger boat able to go further afield, and he went to Hobart in 1930 and bought a boat called the **Nilippa**, also a 40 footer. And those two boats were the only bigger boats here through the '30's until Theo Jarrett and his partners, in 194....

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

KERR Yes, Theo Jarrett was very impressed with what the Fredericks were doing with the **Rachael Irene** and he saw the potential, and although Theo had been a mechanic and wheelwright he thought that he'd give the fishing a go, it being a better cash flow, a more positive way of making a living than what he was doing. So he, with some partners - silent partners, financial partners - went to Hobart in 1930 and bought a 40 footer by the name of **Nilippa**, and the **Nilippa** and the **Rachael Irene** were the only larger boats here through the 1930's in a fleet of about 30 boats, the rest being 'couta boats between 20 and 30 feet, open boats.

In 1940 Jarrett and partners had the 40 foot **William Dutton** built by Blunts in Williamstown to add to the fleet, so through the '40's, the 1940's, we had then the **Rachael Irene**, the **Nilippa**, and the **William Dutton** as the three larger boats until the cray fishing industry started to take off with the advent of the American market - better prices and what have you - in the early '50's. A number of larger vessels began to come into the port. Until the '60's we might have had 15 or 20 boats in excess of, say, 35 feet.

But going back to the '30's and the shark fishery. The shark fishery started off in Victoria about 1927 in a very small way. In a very tough period of the year one or two Port Fairy or Port Albert (or possibly both about the same time it seems) fishermen sent to the markets some gummy shark and they were found to be quite suitable for the fish and chip trade. No bones. And an increasing demand came about for school and gummy shark. Now in 1933 Theo tells me that they could see that there was this demand for gummy shark, so they made 7 shark lines for a start. Shark lines with 50 hooks on, spaced about 3 fathoms apart, and set these in the wintertime with good

results. They were getting about 2 pound a box (an 80 pound (lb) fish box) for these school and gummy sharks - which was very good money, because sharks were very plentiful. So they sold those on the Melbourne fish market and they increased their interest in shark fishing until they did nothing else in the winter months except shark fishing, and cray fishing in the summer. The **Rachael Irene** was also on the job about the same time, working the same pattern - cray fishing in the summer, sharking in the winter. The success of the shark fishing led to Jarrett and partners building the **William Dutton** in 1940.

And of course through the war years there was a great demand for shark livers as an alternative to the livers of the North Sea cod in the making of certain oils. Now I stand correcting on this, I think it's a Vitamin A that comes out of it; it's used in aspirin. At one stage, in ports further away from the Melbourne fish market than Portland was, even going to Port Lincoln and those places; in Tasmania they were catching sharks solely for the livers. They used to catch the shark, cut the liver out and throw the body away, because livers were worth money. And, of course, after the war the shark fishery expanded, expanded; bigger and bigger boats were built. I'm talking now about generally along the Victorian coast, and it's still quite a successful fishery today, although at a very critical stage in its biology in as much as it's suffering from over fishing. Steps are being taken to limit the effort, seemingly with some results at this stage. But it will be a long time down the track to really see what the results will be.

JD Another industry that is very prominent along this coast is the barracouta fishery, which seems to have disappeared now. Would you like to comment on that?

KERR Yes, well the barracouta fishery and the cray fishery here, hand in hand, were the two main fisheries here for almost 100 years. 'couta are plentiful here at certain times of the year. They used to be plentiful in the springtime and again in the autumn, there would be two main runs, although you could get bits of runs in between. And to a large extent the cray fishery was dependent on the 'couta fishery for bait many years before the days of freezers and frozen bait. But 'couta was sold to the Melbourne fish market of course, locally, and to a lot of other inland towns. It was also dried in a small way, some people dried 'couta so that it could be preserved. Thomas Borthwick & Sons here, the meatworks, even experimented with canning 'couta back in about 1920. I don't know how long that went on for.

The 'couta fishery was still a very strong fishery when I started fishing 28 years ago. I know it was quite common to go out and hand line a ton of 'couta a day. Funnily enough before that they didn't catch as big quantities because of the problem of selling them. When 'couta were plentiful there would be a limit put on the number of boxes any boat could catch so as not to depress the prices to a drastic level, to keep prices at something a bit realistic. But Safcol, the South Australian Fishermen's Co-Operative started up here in about 1960/62 and they built a cannery to can 'couta, tuna, salmon and stuff. This meant that the Portland 'couta fishermen could go out and catch as many 'couta as they wanted to and get fourpence-halfpenny a pound for them. It wasn't a big price but if you could go out and catch a ton it was still well worth it; or half a ton, or whatever.

And the 'couta fishery, they were as thick as ever here up until say, from memory, 1974 and then suddenly - no more 'couta. And this happened right along the Victorian coast and Tasmania. Now up until now.... In recent years, I'm talking about the 1980's, there has been odd times when you can go out and hand line reasonable quantities of 'couta, but nowhere near the quantities or on the regular basis that you could years ago. But the fishery is not dead, the trawlermen here still go out and catch large quantities of 'couta in their trawl nets, mainly in the winter months. So the fish

are there but they don't come in close to be hand lined any more. My only opinion of that is they school up in an area that suits them and that seems to be out in the continental shelf area in deeper water. They don't come into the bays as much as they used to.

An example of that is the haddock fishery from Bridgewater Bay, 12 miles along the coast. There used to be a haddock fishery there years ago. Now haddocks are small trevally, an immature trevally, as far as I know - I stand correcting on this. But they don't get the quantities... or haven't for 70 or 80 years had the quantities of haddock in Bridgewater Bay that they used to last century, but they still catch quantities of mature trevally in the trawl nets off on the shelf. So the biology of the fishery is not dead, it's just that they don't come into the bays like they used to.

JD Is there any other species that has been fished from the Portland area and is no longer fished? What about tuna for instance?

KERR No, the tuna fishery here has not been a significant fishery at all at any time. There have been a few people handline tuna back in the sixties and seventies, might go out and handline a ton on very rare occasions, or a few hundred kilo, but very spasmodic - very rare.

JD Is there a beach fishery here, for salmon say?

KERR There has been over the years, they used to beach seine salmon on the main beach in front of the town here, but of course with the breakwater now it's all weeded up and they can't do that any more. They used to beach seine on the Dutton Way, it's been eroded away largely. They used to beach seine on Bridgewater Bay. The numbers of salmon are not what they were, they don't seem to be as big schools now but we still get a few schools of salmon at times, but not to the extent that gives anyone incentive to invest any great quantity of money in a big beach seine any more.

JD What about other scale fish, are they holding up?

KERR The 'couta fishermen here, or crayfishermen in their 'couta boats - open boats - used to, when things were tough or when the 'couta weren't about, fish for what we call pike here (I think it's called snook in South Australia), also a fish called lithe, which is called skipjack in other ports; also flathead, snapper, and even rock cod. When things were tough they used to go out to the cod splats and catch a dozen cod and sell them at the fish shop, it might give them enough for a meal.

They were not significant fisheries overall but they were significant to the people at the time to have some sort of cash flow when the 'couta weren't about or it was the wrong time of the year for cray fishing.

JD It's not a major industry, though, the scale fishing here in Portland?

KERR It's not today, except of course for the deep water trawlers. About 1973/74 the **Zeehan** owned by Dirk Tober did a survey for the Fisheries Departments in this area, found trawlable bottom, found good quantities of mirror dory, hake or gemfish, blue grenadier and gradually a trawl fishery built up here through the late seventies and eighties, until we've got quite a substantial trawl, or deepwater trawl, fishery here today - based in deep water. When I say deep water, in excess of 100 fathoms.

In the early days they trawled in the shallow grounds, 80 fathoms/70 fathoms, but I don't think they do much of that today. And in fact, the dory fishery is about non-existent, I think, today. It has been wiped out in those few years. Blue grenadier - they don't seem to get any quantity of those any more. The hake run is getting much shorter and much smaller than it used to. But they still fish for ling.

I'm not a trawlerman so I'm not a real authority on the subject, only through seeing what I see on the wharf. Of course the orange ruffly fishery is the big boom of the late eighties, and a lot of these boats are geared up (and are gearing up) for orange ruffly fishing.

JD Off Tasmania?

KERR Off Tasmania and even closer to home, even as much as 30 miles from home here they have had reasonable catches of orange ruffly. And another hot spot, about 100 miles away - there's odd hot spots that come to life now and then when they get good catches of ruffly.

JD Could we turn now to the cray fishing industry in which you are very, very intimately involved?

KERR Well, the history of cray fishing in Portland goes back a long way. As I said earlier, I think probably Portland was one of the earliest ports in Australia to use a cray pot. I mean Tasmania didn't start using cray pots - or didn't LEGALISE cray pots - until about 1928. I don't know about New South Wales. But certainly South Australia, certainly the western areas of South Australia, and I think all South Australians didn't use cray pots before 1870 in the south-eastern part of the State, and something like the turn of the century in the western part of the State. They were all caught with kips or dip nets or whatever.

But anyway, crayfish has always been a very important fishery in Portland along with the 'couta fishery. One of the reasons being marketing. There was a problem marketing quantities of 'couta in the summertime here or in warm weather, because they had to be railed to Melbourne. The train left at, say, 9 o'clock in the morning which was fine if you could catch your fish and be in by 9 o'clock and put them on the train. They'd be in the market for the next day's market, so they would have been dead 24 hours in the summertime, which isn't good. No icing facilities; no freezing facilities. And sometimes if the train timetable was not 9 o'clock in the morning but 3 o'clock in the afternoon - well, it's still the same difference I suppose, they'd be there in 24 hours.

Anyway, that's why a lot of the fishermen here relied on cray fishing more than some of the other ports did that were nearer to the fish market, because crayfish will live better out of water than what 'couta will. So the cray fishery has always been a strong fishery. Fishing out of small boats, hand hauling pots of course, not big numbers of pots - twenty, thirty at the outside. And market forces and the availability of bait governed the cray fishing to a large extent. There were plenty of fishing grounds here, they were never ever over exploited before the days of freezing facilities.

The opening of the American cray tail market in the late forties, early fifties, which meant that no matter how many crays you could catch you could then sell them, also meant that you weren't restricted by bait, there were freezers here by then. You could buy bait or hold bait over so you could work increasing numbers of pots on an increasing regular basis, so through the fifties and that there was starting to be a slight downturn in crayfish catches per effort, for a given effort, and through the

sixties, of course, there was a build up of boats. More and more people were getting into it. People could see there was money in it, until....

One of the influences was the scallop fishery in Port Phillip Bay opened up in the sixties - it was very over fished, there were no restrictions on it at all, and by the late sixties ('67) it was almost on its knees. People were leaving and talking of leaving Port Phillip - and WERE leaving Port Phillip. They had 100 boats down there. The fear was that they would go into the cray fishery, and I think Victoria (along with Tasmania) were the first (or among the first) States to.... (what's the word I'm looking for?).... to introduce licence limitation. Supposingly the number of licences were frozen at that date, but if you could demonstrate that you had a commitment to the fishery in as much as you had a boat partly built, or even a keel laid and were going to enter that industry, then you were granted a cray licence, which built numbers up to some extent from when the cut-off point was.

When they froze licences they didn't freeze the number of pots for some reason, although they did put a pot limit on the number of pots any boat could work, and it was worked out on this formula where you had a pot a foot the length of your boat, 20 for the skipper, and 20 for the first crewman; and that formula, obviously, for a 40 footer, could work 80 pots, which was somewhere around the number of pots a lot of them were using at that time.

Now I'm talking about the western zone of Victoria from Cape Otway to the South Australian border. Now at that time when licence limitation came in you also had men with 'couta boats who would work a dozen pots when the 'couta weren't in - 20 pots perhaps - who were granted cray licences but there was no restriction on the number of pots, only up to the formula. So alright! You had a 26 foot boat working 14 pots originally when licence limitation came in, the formula allowed him to work 66 pots - so those licences over the years, they were sold and re-sold, and ended up in bigger and bigger boats, and all those pot numbers were built up to the maximum formula. Even if that 26 foot boat's licence was sold to a 40 footer, he could then apply the formula for a 40 foot boat, which allowed him 80 pots. So instead of working 14 pots it ended up that licence was working 80 pots. So there wasn't much restriction in effort really.

Also through the seventies and eighties, you've had greater sophistication in electronics (mainly in the colour sounder) which means that you can set your pots on productive bottom - a lot of the bottom is what we call flat bottom or very hard to pick with the old black and white sounder. You might set 80 pots but you might only get half of them to fish. With the colour sounder you could set your pots better and get perhaps 70 of them to fish instead of 40.

Now in the statistics that are sent into the Fisheries this effort didn't show up, this effectiveness didn't show up and doesn't show up today. So the biology or the stock of the fishery can be down by half on what it had been and still wouldn't show up in the effort statistics that are sent in. Fishermen knew this and a lot of the fisheries officers knew this, but who did anything about it? No one! Now, fisheries management is a very contentious issue. If there's anything done or suggested that might hit someone's hip pocket nerve you have problems, arguments, differences of opinion. So we had a situation where certain moves had been made to reduce pot numbers, reduce the number of months fished per year, a winter closure for example (as South Australia and Western Australia have), but getting a consensus was very, very difficult because a lot of fishermen....

I look on cray fishery as being a big farm, where you've got a stock out there which you must manage to the maximum yield. Now there's no way if that farm out there - that little crayfish farm off the coast - if that was owned by one person, there's no way in the world that if you wanted to get the maximum economic result out of that, that it would be worked the way it's worked now, or in the past. You would work it to its greatest economic yield. But not all fishermen see it that way, and I can't blame them. They see it as a fishery they fish weekly or monthly, and go out there and catch their few fish all the time and that's their weekly income. Fair enough! But at the same time that fishery has to be managed. So I was, you know, being one of the - now getting on to being one of the more experienced or older generation fishermen, people say to me, "well, what shall we do about it?" and I was sort of keen on closures rather than reducing pot numbers.

I would sooner go out there for six months and work a reasonable number of pots and be finished with it for six months of the year, have your boat and gear home all laid up, rather than fish continuously throughout the year with a lesser number of pots. So my opinion was that there should be longer closures, especially when the females are spawning. Because we fished here through the winter spawning females are hungry, they crawl in the pots, they have to be thrown over the side. If they haven't already been killed by octopus or leatherjackets, and if they find their way back to shelter in a protective hole when they get to the bottom, who knows where they'll land - they could land on sand, or flat rocky bottom, or could be taken by a stingray or a shark, or whatever. I thought it was a dreadful waste, so I wrote to the Fisheries with my opinion of what should be done and that the Fisheries should take a lead to try and sell the idea. I likened it to a forest of trees, too, where our fishery was based on larger type crayfish which, some of them, are 10 to 15 years, 20 years old, and they were only there because there was less fishing pressure 15 or 20 years ago than what there was today. It was like a forest of trees - if you take out all the big trees and just rely on the regrowth, that forest is never ever going to be as productive again, you can't expect it to be.

Anyhow, I didn't get anywhere with the Fisheries, so I took a lead and I wrote out what I thought should be done and sent it to all the fishermen in the zone along with a voting form as to whether they wanted a winter closure phased in over three years, plus a reduction in pots at the same time. Well the upshot of it was that the majority of fishermen were in favour of it, but there was a minority who were very, very, very much against it. But there was a consensus that we needed more closures when the spawnies (the spawning females) were at their busiest - were at their most vulnerable, with the result that we ended up with an extra six weeks closure. We already had October closed, so now we've got end of August through to mid-November closed.

But that has directed a great deal of animosity towards me personally, which I don't enjoy. If I had my time over again I wouldn't have done it. It might have been better if one of the battlers had done it. But someone who is seen as successful, who can afford to take the down time, shouldn't have done it. So personalities come into it - not everyone is objective. I mean the fishery would still be on its knees if I'd been fishing, or if I hadn't been fishing - the same issues would still be there. But because Garry Kerr introduced it, Garry Kerr cops the flack. But, you know, time will heal that.

But the funny thing about it is looking back over the years I was one of the persons in favour of licence limitation when it came in. We weren't looking forward to increase and increased competition, more and more boats coming into the industry. I think there's ample demonstration of other fisheries in Australia and overseas that have just been completely fished out through over exploitation. Anyway, we have this situation now where we've got these number of licences in the industry, the fishery is very sick

here at the moment - this year not quite so bad as the last couple - but because people have invested money in licences - say \$100,000 - you have a situation where that licence keeps working. Years ago if you only had your investment in a boat or whatever, you could sell the boat somewhere else and go and buy a shop or a farm, but you can't sell your licence outside the zone, it's not worth anything anywhere else. So you have 100 licences locked in, and even though the fishery might be over exploited, getting past its maximum economic yield by a long way, getting uneconomical for a lot of people, those licences don't get pensioned off, they are still active, because there has still got to be interest paid on them. So one of the things we thought would be beneficial to the industry 20 odd years ago, I think now is working to the industry's detriment.

JD Garry, presumably there's a professional fishermen's organization in the area, is it an effective one?

KERR Reasonably effective, I think. It depends largely, of course, on the leadership of an association at a given time as to how effective they are. I was involved in it at one stage, only as Secretary. But yes, it's a difficult question to answer. Perhaps it could be more effective than what it is, but what we have is certainly better than having no association at all.

JD Are all the fishermen members?

KERR No, no. This is one of the pities. You might have 30 fishermen in the port and unless there is a very contentious issue comes up, you might only get 5 or 6 along to a meeting (sometimes you can't get a quorum), until someone tries to introduce a winter closure or something, and you get everybody there. [Laughs]. So that's one of the pities of it. Of course, there are always factions in a port - one person won't go because somebody else goes, and what have you.

JD There's a statewide organization as well, is there?

KERR There is a statewide organization, I think it was called the Victorian Professional Fishermen's Association. It has been restructured recently and off the top of my head I can't tell you the new name of it, but the Victorian Professional Fishermen's Association had all the ports in Victoria as members and a delegate would go - in theory a delegate would go - from each port to certain important meetings in Melbourne.

JD And that state organization would also have representatives on the national body, I presume?

KERR Yes, presumably. I can't tell you how often the Victorian Association was represented on national bodies, I don't know.

JD The fisheries, or the control of fisheries, comes under the Department of Conservation and Land Management?

KERR Forests and Lands. Conservation, Forests and Lands.

JD So it's not a separate department in its own right?

KERR No, but it should be, I think.

JD Has it ever been a separate department?

KERR No, for years it was the Fisheries and Games Department, then the Fisheries and Wildlife. So our fisheries officers here have a number of duties to perform; policing the freshwater rivers and lakes, wildlife, koalas, habitat, National Parks, all this type of thing comes under their jurisdiction, or still does with the Conservation, Forests and Lands Department as we have it today.

JD Are there enough people, inspectors I suppose you could call them, or fisheries officers anyway, to supervise the industry adequately? The fishing industry?

KERR I can't really say that it is supervised adequately. It's a very hard thing to do to supervise an industry adequately. If a person really wants to work more pots than what his licence tells him he can work, there's not a great deal to stop him. They do have patrols at times but their effectiveness is limited, and I don't entirely blame the fisheries officers altogether either, although at times I think they could do a better job. At times they are restricted by budget and all sorts of things, even to the extent of getting fuel for their boats. But I know if... I have trouble finding all my own pots some days, let alone someone else trying to find them all, so it's not an easy thing to do to go out and check pot numbers.

JD The fisheries officers would also be responsible for supervising recreational fishing, wouldn't they?

KERR That's correct, in fresh water anyway.

JD Is there tension between the recreational fishermen and the professionals?

KERR There has been some tension here, mainly through netting; some of the smaller fishermen netting in the bay, Portland Bay, Bridgewater Bay, in around the harbour - very much frowned upon by the recreational fishermen. And looking at it objectively I would say that it would have to affect... the netting by professional fishermen, of course, would have to affect the amount of fish that any recreational fisherman can catch.

JD Are recreational fishermen allowed to use a net?

KERR They are allowed to use some sort of net, I think, but I've never... I'm not up in it, I don't know what type of net. They are not allowed to use cray pots in Victoria, only cray rings, and I think one or two licensed per person.

JD In the cray fishing industry, is there any evidence that the amateurs sell their catch?

KERR Not a great deal. No, there's not enough crayfish caught by amateurs for them to worry about selling them. A few divers catch good quantities of crayfish.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

TAPE 2 SIDE A

JD Would you say that the Department, when making policy, takes the fisherman's point of view into account?

KERR I think in the main it does. I think it likes to know that it's got a fair consensus of fishermen's opinion, although there have been decisions made by small lobby groups that were against the opinions of the majority of fishermen. In one case I can think of, anyway. But in the main I think they do. Nowadays, if there's any major alteration to be made to seasons or pot numbers or whatever, they send out a postal ballot to all licensed cray fishermen so that they can get a wider sample of opinion as they can, which is much better than holding meetings where you might get a vocal minority to sway the mood of a meeting.

JD And is the research effort adequate, would you say?

KERR I doubt that the research effort is adequate. We have had to send in fisheries statistics for years, stating the number of pots we've worked, the number of crays we've caught. I know at one stage they were two or three years behind in collating that information. I think there's more funds allocated to it in the last year or so and they are catching up. There was tagging done here back in the seventies; I don't think the information from that has been collated. Well, if it has been collated, it is only in very recent times. And really I don't think the Fisheries Department really know how the stock is faring on the sea bed, because the information between the sea bed and the offices in Melbourne - I mean, there's very little accuracy in.... what am I trying to say? I don't think the questions asked in fisheries statistics can adequately reflect the information that is needed.

JD Turning to some of the other problems facing the industry - the cray fishing industry - is there a problem of pollution in these waters?

KERR I don't consider there is, no. I haven't been aware of it.

JD What about litter in the ocean?

KERR There is a little bit of litter gets washed up on the beaches but it doesn't seem to me to be a problem.

JD Is the processing, transportation and marketing of the product satisfactory?

KERR I would say it is now in Portland. Portland is one of the luckier ports in this regard I suppose, as facilities have been improved - largely as a result of the advent of the deep water trawl fishery. We have a couple of transport operators, we have two or three places where we can sell our fish; availability of advice is good, and that type of thing.

JD It's mainly an export market, of course, isn't it?

KERR Cray fishery is, although there's a large domestic market in Melbourne and Sydney for cooked and live crayfish, but still the majority of crayfish caught in Australia of course are exported.

JD Is there a live crayfish export from Portland?

KERR Yes, there is. There are two people doing it at the moment - export live to Sydney, Brisbane, Gold Coast, Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan, Italy, whatever.

JD And the cooked crayfish export market?

KERR Yes, yes there is, not to the extent that the live one is, I suppose. We don't have a facility at the moment for doing large quantities of cooked or tailed crayfish. They go to Port MacDonnell where there are those types of facilities. If one of the buyers here is overstocked with crays that he can't sell on the live market, or they are not of a size suitable for the live market, they get trucked over the border 50 miles away to Port MacDonnell where they are tailed and processed.

JD The American market for frozen tails is still the cheap market, is it?

KERR Yes it is. Even though it doesn't offer the best price at times it's still the floor price if you will, for the crayfish price. If you can't sell a cray anywhere else it goes to the American tail market, so that's your floor price. If you can get a bit more for live ones in Japan or Hong Kong, well of course that's where they go.

JD The cray fishermen then have an incentive to look after their catch on board and in the process of landing it and sending it to the processors?

KERR Yes, that's largely true. Although it's not always reflected in the price the fisherman gets, mainly because of the difficulties of segregating catches for good fish and bad fish and all the bookwork entailed. We tend to just get a lump sum, or just a figure for all our fish and then they pick out what's good for export, live export, what has to be tailed, and they just base their price on the whole catch.

JD Garry, what are the prospects for the future in the cray fishing industry out of Portland?

KERR Well, there will always be a cray fishery here to a greater or lesser degree, but it has shrunk I think to what it was ten years ago, fifteen years ago; because we've taken off that backlog of large crays and the grounds don't seem to rejuvenate the way we'd like them to. So I would say the total overall catch coming to the port, fish that have been caught in local ground, has to be down on what it was in previous years. I can't see that trend altering actually. The only benefit we might get is if in some time in the future fishermen can agree on a measure that will increase individual viability. I'm talking now about a buy back scheme or something, to get more boats out of the fishery so that those that remain will have a larger share of the available catch.

JD Has that been mooted?

KERR It's being tossed around but it would have to cost fishermen money to finance the buy back scheme, and when you touch the hip pocket nerve you've got trouble, and you'd have problems with fishermen who are barely viable now forking out for a buy back scheme. And until a buy back scheme is introduced, or something that will have a similar effect, then it won't be viable. It's a catch 22 situation.

JD Are there new people coming in to the fishery?

KERR A few. You're talking about the cray fishery?

JD Yes.

KERR Not many. No. It's mainly deckhands that decide to have a go at a boat on their own. Not many outsiders coming into the fishery these days at all.

JD Is there anything else that you would like to comment on before we finish?

KERR Not that I can think of off the top of my head, Jack.

JD Well then, thank you very much for this interview, it has been really good stuff.

KERR You're welcome!

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr Garry Kerr of Portland, Victoria.

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with **BARRY MCKENZIE**

INTRODUCTION

This interview with Mr Barry McKenzie of Lakes Entrance, Victoria is recorded at Lakes Entrance on the 13th March, 1990 by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry.

Mr McKenzie is a third generation Australian fisherman. He started fishing in the shark and crayfish industry but for many years now has been a net fisherman in the Gippsland Lakes system. As do several others in this industry, he now fishes with his wife as crew.

The recording gives a valuable insight into the fishing methods employed in the Gippsland Lakes, both gill and seine netting, the target species, handling and transport methods, and the operations of the fishermen's co-operative at Lakes Entrance. Mr McKenzie also discusses pollution and litter, the strain on the resource, conservation techniques and the need for research. As chairman of the Fishermen's Association in his industry, he is well placed to comment knowledgeably on the problems and prospects he and his colleagues are facing and he does this clearly and well.

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

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Barry, would you record your full name please.

McKENZIE Barry McKenzie.

JD And your date of birth.

McKENZIE Oh, we're getting down to tin tacks! 13th of the twelfth, '39.

JD And where were you born?

McKENZIE I was born in Melbourne.

JD And were you brought up in Melbourne?

McKENZIE Ah, not really, no. My father was a fisherman at a little place called Corinella on Western Port Bay and I was only born in Melbourne and we actually lived at Corinella in my very early years.

JD Was your grandfather a fisherman?

McKENZIE My grandfather was a fisherman on the Gippsland Lakes around the turn of the century. Very early in the 20th century my grandfather and my father, who was the eldest son in the family, went to Fremantle to fish for a company over there that were canning salmon and were requiring net fishermen able to catch salmon for the cannery, I believe during the very early period of the First World War. Eventually they came back to Victoria and my dad fished on Port Phillip Bay from Altona for a number of years and then during the Depression shifted to Western Port Bay and lived at Corinella and fished as an inlet fisherman, as a net fisherman in Western Port Bay.

JD And you were brought up there more so than in Melbourne then of course.

McKENZIE Yes, yes. I never really lived in Melbourne. I was brought up, I think, until I was about four years of age. Dad fished at Corinella and then we shifted to San Remo where he fished both in Western Port Bay and was also a couta fisherman off shore until I was about ten years of age and then we shifted here to Lakes Entrance where I've lived ever since.

JD How did you come to go into fishing yourself?

McKENZIE Well actually when I left school I did my trade as a carpenter but fishing was always in my blood. I had my own little flat bottom dinghy before I had a pushbike sort of thing and had always loved boats and fishing was always in my blood. I don't know, I guess I just ambled my way back to fishing after getting tired of all the worries and so forth of being a contract builder and chasing people for materials and chasing people for money. Fishing is second nature to me and fishing's one of those things where the only worry is judging what the elements are going to be like and if you have a successful week's fishing, you know your pay cheque's going to be there at the end of the week. You don't have to chase people for money and all that sort of business. It's a pretty free and easy life as far as the worries of bookkeeping and that sort of thing are concerned, yeah.

JD About how old would you have been when you came into professional fishing?

McKENZIE Ah, about 25. I've been in lake fishing for 25 years so I must have been about 23. Actually I started fishing outside. My two elder brothers were both outside fishermen. My brother, Alan, now lives in Tasmania and has at long last retired from fishing; was a cray and shark fisherman from here at Lakes Entrance. When I first left school I worked for some time with my brother on the shark boat and crayfishing and then again, a bit over 25 years ago, I gave it away (the building game) and decided to get back to fishing.

I worked for a short time outside, twelve months, eighteen months or something, mostly crayfishing from Lakes Entrance to the border. I guess net fishing had always been my way of life and I got involved in net fishing and fished with an old chap who lived next door to us, was a net fisherman, and he'd had some 50 years experience fishing in the Lakes and was looking for an offsider and was prepared to teach me everything he could providing I'd do a bit extra work to carry him in his old age. We fished together for a number of years and I've been involved ever since.

JD And you acquired your own boat?

McKENZIE Yes. Actually I build my own boats now, fibreglass and net boats. My motor boat is a 22 footer with about nine foot six, nearly ten foot of beam on it. It was built specially for fishing in the Gippsland Lakes. It's a half cabin boat but it's a boat capable of carrying a lot of fish but is very shallow draughted, only draws about eighteen inches of water and maybe two foot loaded. It is especially suitable for working around the shallow sand banks etc on the Gippsland Lakes.

JD What sort of power do you have in it?

McKENZIE It's got a four cylinder BMC diesel, a 30 horsepower diesel in that one. We use it primarily for seine net fishing for carrying the fish. It's fitted with an ice box and a couple of bunks and a gas stove etc. We tow two net boats. One is eighteen feet long, seven foot of beam, a big fibreglass displacement boat; is a traditional old boat, a traditional type of shape and a very good sea boat. Will carry the 730 metre seine net without too much trouble. We also tow a fifteen foot fibreglass boat which is primarily just for winching one end of the net and if necessary carrying some extra fish and so forth.

JD Barry, would you describe your operation. How do you go about catching fish?

McKENZIE Well we have two methods of fishing in the Gippsland Lakes. In the top end of the Lakes, particularly in Lake Wellington which is a lake about fourteen mile long and eight mile wide and has a terrible amount of snags etc from rivers that feed into it, it's primarily a gill netting lake. Gill nets are basically a net with about six feet of drop which has got a larger co-efficient of lead than it has floats so that it actually lays along the bottom. The lead line of the net actually lays along the bottom of the lake. It's anchored in position and the cork line holds it up. It stands like an upright fence approximately six feet off the bottom of the lake, is set of an evening, normally round about sunset and hauled again at daylight next morning.

The method of fishing is that you set it in an area where you think the fish will be travelling and the fish actually swimming, run into the net and meshed by the gills in the actual netting material. The mesh size of the net is determined by the type of fish that you're wanting to fish for. In the Gippsland Lakes we use gill nets for catching fish like yellow eye mullet which are a long thin fish and we use a mesh of about two and a half inch knot to knot up to, for fishing for bream if bream are plentiful during flood seasons, and [for] a large size bream we could use anything up to four and a quarter inch mesh so that we only catch the large bream and all of the smaller stuff swims straight through. The gill nets are fairly selective by the mesh size that you choose to use in a particular area for the particular target species you're after.

JD You set the net in a straight line, do you?

McKENZIE Well mostly in a straight line, depending on where you're working. Sometimes if you're fishing for mullet around shoreline or something, you might follow a shoreline with it or set it out around a sand bank or whatever but fishing out in the open water you normally put a weight and a marker buoy over, tied to the end of the net and just run the net out in a straight line with another anchor and a marker buoy at the other end of it. The next just sits there like a fence standing up off the bottom of the ocean or off the bottom of the lake for the night.

JD And then you set that at sunset and go out and pull it in the morning?

McKENZIE Yeah, that's the most usual way, depending on what species of fish you're fishing for. Sometimes fishing for mullet, you'll set it just on dusk. If you see a patch of mullet on the shallows you might set the net around them virtually in a circle around them and let the fish mesh for an hour or so and then pick it back up so that you don't get too many fish meshed in it but most of our gill netting or most of the gill netting that I do is.... I'm primarily after bream which is our highest priced target species in the Gippsland Lakes so we use mostly a three and seven-eight or four inch mesh and bream are a fairly timid and quiet moving fish. They don't tear around like surface fish. They're primarily a bottom feeding fish so we leave the nets set mostly all night for bream, yeah.

JD And when you've done that you come home for the night and go out in the morning again, or do you stay out?

McKENZIE Yes. I've got an eighteen foot fibreglass boat, a planing hull type boat with a 40 horsepower outboard on it and most times we set the nets on sunset and then come back home and then go back at daylight in the morning and haul the nets, depending on where we're working and what the fish are doing etc, but sometimes we do take the motor boat which has bunks and so forth on it and we go and set the nets and virtually sleep on the end of the nets and then get up at daylight and haul them. With introduction of these fast planing hulls that we find are fairly satisfactory for working gill nets, it's much better to come home and sleep in your own bed at home at night rather than be camped out on the boat like you had to in the old days. Of course in the old days they used the traditional old motor boat. A lot of them were double ender boats that they used for gill netting and they used to virtually sleep on the end of the nets rather than travel a long way to get back home and then have a long steam back to their gear in the morning.

JD And the boats would be much slower, of course, wouldn't they?

McKENZIE Yeah well most of the old boats used to only do about six or seven knots and when we work in Lake Wellington, for example, we use our planing hull boat on a trailer on behind a four wheel drive and we'll drive up with the boat on the trailer with the nets in it, put the boat in the water, go and set the nets and leave the boat anchored on the shore or tied to a jetty and drive back home in the four wheel drive vehicle. Come home for tea and stay at home for the night and then go back in the vehicle next morning. So that instead of steaming for an hour or so in a motor boat in the cold, we now drive in a four wheel drive vehicle with a heater and the comforts.

JD You have another method of fishing too, don't you?

McKENZIE Yes. Probably one of the most popular methods, or has been over recent years is seine netting in the Gippsland Lakes. The seine net is, oh basically a netting panel of 730 metres in maximum length. Stands roughly eighteen to twenty feet in depth, or six metres drop (whichever you prefer). It's got a larger co-efficiency of lead like the gill net because most of our target species are bottom feeders such as bream etc. It's basically a beach seine but worked by a slightly different method. We run that net out in a half circle that has a bag, I guess like a windsock would be the easiest way to explain it roughly in the centre of the net. We run that out in a half circle, haul it back to the shore with winching boats with a line attached to each end of the net and then haul it in an ever decreasing semi-circle until we chase the fish down into the bag of the net where they're then sorted.

It's a very efficient method of fishing because it doesn't harm the underweight fish. We use anything from a two inch mesh which will catch King George whiting up to three

and a half, three and three quarter inch mesh, depending on the target species but most of the time we use a smaller mesh net which will catch everything from King George whiting and small fish up to the larger size. We now use three different size cod ends. Most of us use three different size cod ends on the end of the bag and the bag is tied off in a series like a sausage, starting off putting the fish into the two inch mesh until we see what type of fish are in there. If there are King George whiting in there that we want to keep, we then open the net up into that size so that we can hand sort the fish while the other fish are still swimming alive. We'll hand sort the King George whiting out and then we'll let them in to the next size mesh which is usually a three inch mesh which will let out all the little under weight bream and mullet and stuff that we don't want, we'll just let them automatically swim out through the net. It's a self-sieving method or self-sorting method. The under weight fish and unwanted fish swim off unharmed to grow for another day. Then we can go through the larger fish that are left in the net.

The three inch mesh holds good fish, good sized tailor etc, silver trevally and bream from about nine inch in length upwards. The commercial size limit on bream for the Gippsland Lakes is ten inch so that we've then got a three and a half inch cod end on the tail of the net and when we get through to sorting the bream we then let the bream, or the remainder of what fish are in the bag, into the three and a half inch mesh and that automatically sorts all the under weight bream out of the net and they swim off quite freely without being damaged. They don't have to be handled and it leaves us a lot less sorting then, just to pick out the weight fish that we want. A seine net will catch any species of fish that are in the lake system from King George whiting and bream etc down in this bottom end to limited areas where we can work in Lake Wellington where it's used mostly for catching European carp which have been introduced to this system but are mostly still just in the top end of this system.

JD So you'd have to know where the fish were likely to be with that method?

McKENZIE Yes. You need to know pretty well where the fish are at what time of year. It's mostly a summer time method of fishing. In the summer time the bream which are our main target species, feed along the shallow sand banks and by steaming your boat quietly over the shallow sand banks early in the morning around sunrise, you quite often see the bream running off the shallows. You know that they've been feeding there and the bream bore with their mouths into the sand to feed on sand worms etc and they leave little indentations in the sand banks where they've been feeding, like tiny little bomb craters, I guess, would be the easiest way of explaining them. By steaming quietly over the sand banks on a calm morning you can see those little indentations and you know that there's been fish feeding there. So it's a reasonable chance that if you have a haul with the net there, that you're going to get around some of the bream that have been feeding there through the night.

The other fish such as yellow eye mullet, tailor etc, they're a surface fish and you find them in schools. Particularly the yellow eye mullet, they quite often school up along the edge of the shallows and you see the school of fish by steaming quietly along standing up on the cabin of your boat and see the fish working and work out where they are to run the net around them. Most of our fishing is done by trial and error and educated guess work, I suppose would be the easiest way.

JD And experience I gather?

McKENZIE Experience, a long, long time of experience [laughs] and many, many fruitless shots; still learn the hard way, yes.

JD How many times a day would you shoot the net?

McKENZIE A seine net, normally only once. If you're not successful in your first shot you'll sometimes go looking and try and find fish somewhere else and have a second shot before you come home so that you don't come home empty handed but mostly only once a day, depending on your catch. Sometimes if we're chasing bream in particular, we'll sometimes do two shots a day and leave the mesh of the bag open into the biggest mesh so that all the other fish such as mullet and stuff that we encircle with the net, they just go straight out through the bags so that we only keep whatever bream we can get around and usually you catch a couple of boxes of bream a shot so you'll go and have a second shot rather than be sorting through a great heap of mullet and small fish and so forth. Most of the time we only shoot one shot a day, yes.

JD So you bring them back to the jetty?

McKENZIE Yes. We carry an ice box on the boat which will carry, oh roughly a quarter of a tonne of ice. As soon as we've finished sorting the fish out of the bag, while they're still kicking actually, we sort them out into bins ready to go to market and then put a couple of shovel fulls of ice on them and pack them away in the ice box of the boat. Quite often when we're seining in the summer time we could be anything up to two hours' steaming away from home so we ice the fish down so that they're in prime condition when we get back to Lakes Entrance.

The fish are then unloaded at the co-operative. The ice is taken off them. The weight of fish and the species of fish is recorded on a ticket on the end of the bin with the fishermen's name and the agent's name in the Melbourne Fish Market where they're to be consigned to. They're then re-iced, packed in a cool room here at the co-op and later that afternoon, loaded onto the truck and taken through to Melbourne, mostly in a refrigerated van, auctioned at the Melbourne Fish Market four or five o'clock next morning and are in the fish shops well within 24 hours of being taken from the water. Really now days they're in prime condition.

In the old days we used to bring the fish home with no ice on the boat and just keep them covered over with wet bags to try and keep them cool and moist. They were put into old pine boxes with a sprinkle of ice over the top of them and an old pine lid nailed onto the box and sat in a weatherboard shed that was no way fly proof, let alone refrigerated like we've got now and you just hoped that when the fish got to market by the next morning, that they still had some ice on them and that they were in good enough for someone to want to buy them. Now days all our fish are in prime condition when they get to Melbourne. It's a very good setup that we've got here really.

JD Barry, how many days a week would you fish?

McKENZIE Well we're not allowed to fish between the hours of midday Friday and sunset Sunday. So we're only allowed actually four and a half days a week to fish.

JD Why is that?

McKENZIE Well originally it was brought in by the fishermen because of our long distance from Melbourne. The fishermen used not to fish from 10.00 o'clock Friday morning until sunrise Sunday morning because there was no markets of a Sunday in Melbourne and most of the fish used to be taken by train. In the very early days they went by rail to Melbourne so that fish caught on a Friday would go to Saturday's

market in Melbourne but if any fish were caught too late on a Friday to catch the train, or were caught on a Saturday say, then they would have to be held over until Monday's market because of [there] being no Sunday fish market. It was a thing that was brought in by the fisherman, mainly to protect the quality of the fish going to the market.

Of course now days with the ever increasing number of recreational fishing, particularly angling etc on the Gippsland Lakes, and a, I guess, world wide anti-professional fishing lobby against fishing in estuaries etc. It's not unique to here or to Australia for that matter but recreational fishermen are wanting a bigger and bigger slice of the cake and putting more and more pressure on commercial fishermen who they see in an estuary or a bay or an inlet or wherever fishing at weekends. So we eventually extended our closure time from midday Friday until sunset Sunday so that we're not on the lake at the time when most of the recreational fishermen are on the lake and that in a way reduces a certain amount of the amateur versus the professional conflict.

JD Do you fish alone or do you have a crew?

McKENZIE No. In fact my crew now is my wife, Monica. I first of all started off with an older chap who taught me a lot about the game. When he retired, then I took on a younger fellow with me and he eventually got his own licence then I took another young chap with me and he worked with me for about six or eight years or something until he eventually got his own licence. Now we have a restricted licence system for the Gippsland Lakes. In fact our licences are now transferrable but on a two for one basis so anybody wanting to come into the fishery now has to buy out two other fishermen. So there's not a great number of young blokes wanting to come into the fishery and because of the problem of finding good, reliable crews, I finally altered my gear around so that my wife, Monica could work one end of the seine net or help me, for safety reasons more than anything when we're gill netting because at times you're working out in the middle of a pretty big and a pretty rough lake. You've only got to step on a rope or a fish on the bottom of the boat and slip and go over board and you could be left on your own with your boat drifting away.

So Monica fishes with me all the time now. We find it's a pretty good arrangement. What we catch we keep. We don't have to pay out a percentage to a crew and so forth. It's a good, happy way of working. If we feel like having a day off, then we have a day off. We're not obliged to work to suit anybody else. Likewise we can work hard during the summer time if we want to and in the winter time when it gets a bit cold we can afford to take a couple of weeks off usually and go to north Queensland or somewhere for a bit of a break. So it makes a pretty good independant life. In fact there are about four or five of the fishermen now working on the lake who take their wives with them. They seem to quite enjoy the open air and the life out on the water. It's not a bad life when it's a nice calm day.

JD What about some of the problems confronting the industry?

McKENZIE I guess our biggest problem now is the ever increasing pressure of pollution on the estuary. Once again this, of course, is not unique to the Gippsland Lakes. It's a world wide problem. The Gippsland Lakes haven't had much of a problem with pollution until recent years because of it being such a large system and not a very largely populated area. There's a lot of farming communities etc around the Gippsland Lakes' catchment area and of course east Gippsland is well known for its large stands of hard wood timber which takes up all the mountain areas and so forth. Until recently the population around our catchment area hasn't been very big but it's growing all the

time and more and more people [are] wanting to use the lake. Boating facilities are becoming more and more popular throughout the lake so there's an ever increasing pressure of pollution on the system. I think it's probably our greatest threat.

JD This interview continues on side B of this tape.

TAPE 1 SIDE B

McKENZIE The rivers that feed into the Gippsland Lakes, particularly the Tambo, Nicholson and Michell Rivers have for years been well known as bream fishing areas for the recreational fishermen. Commercial fishermen aren't allowed to fish any closer than a 400 metre radius of the mouth of any of the rivers and creeks. The growing number of recreational fishermen is now starting to put a bit of a strain on the resource. This is one of the reasons why we've accepted a two for one transferability on our licences, to eventually reduce the number of commercial fishermen on the system. A number of years ago we could see that there was a possibility of over-fishing the bream stocks in the lake and we asked for a size increase on the bream to protect our stocks a little bit. We met resistance from the recreational fishing lobby groups and eventually we got the size limit increased for commercial fishermen which still remains at 24 centimetres for recreational fishermen but our size limit now is 25.5 centimetres. So it gives the bream at least one more spawning season. It cut our commercial catch of bream to about a third of what we were actually catching before but it's given us a price increase of probably four or five hundred percent. So it's worked out as a very good conservation move as far as we were concerned and it's worked out a good economical move too because we're getting a lot more dollars for the fish that we're catching.

We're a bit concerned that the recreational fishermen are still fishing for that smaller size fish because what studies have been done on the bream in the Gippsland Lakes, mostly were done by Alf Donboven-Butcher, who was a chief biologist (marine biologist) with the Victorian Fisheries & Wildlife or Fisheries & Game Department, I think they were known, but it was around about the early 1940s. It's the only really comprehensive study that's been done into the bream into the Gippsland Lakes. Butcher's opinion was that a bream doesn't reach its spawning size, a female bream doesn't reach its spawning size until it's about nine and three quarter inches in length which is roughly 24 1/2 nearly 25 centimetres. So that being the case, the recreational fishermen are taking fish quite often that have never reached spawning size. If we all continued to do that we'd very soon wipe out, or could possibly wipe out the bream stocks in the Gippsland Lakes simply because we're catching them before they can reproduce and restock the estuary.

Also now, of course, our catch varies quite a bit and bream only makes up about 30% of the total commercial catch taken from the Gippsland Lakes. European carp now makes up about 30% of our catch. It is an introduced species, pretty worthless but sold mostly to South Australia and Tasmania for cray bait. The other 30% is made up by other species such as yellow eye mullet, tailor etc. Most recent studies done by Fisheries & Wildlife show that recreational fishermen are now taking more than 50% of the total catch from the Gippsland Lakes area and I'd say it would be fair to say that probably 70% of the recreational catch would be black bream. So we're hoping like mad that the recreational fishermen do something about increasing their size limit so that they take some of the strain off the resource because they're certainly taking now a far bigger share of the resource of the bream stocks, at any rate, out of the estuary than what the commercial fishermen are. We're a little bit concerned that an ever

increasing number of recreational fishermen is going to put even more and more pressure on the resource.

Added to that the effects of spawning etc on the bream stocks by increasing salinity and pollution and whatnot coming into the lake simply because of man populating the area much more than what it was and the diversification of water that used to flow through all the rivers and creeks into the lake is now being dammed by farmers and used for irrigation and used for town water supplies and even being diversified now to as far away as Melbourne from the Thompson dam system that we've probably reduced the inflow of fresh water which used to come into the lake. We've probably reduced it to about two-thirds of what it used to be and of course [with] an increasing inflow of dirty water, we don't really know now just what damage could be done and what it's going to do to the future resource.

JD Is the total catch down on what it used to be?

McKENZIE No. Surprisingly the catches are still holding up but of course the percentages have changed. I would say it would have been fair to say twenty years ago that probably 50, 60% of the commercial catch would have been black bream, because of the size increase that we instigated ourselves, that cut our catch of black bream, as I said to a third of what it was. The introduction of European carp to Australian waters and in particular to east Gippsland, has put a large amount of European carp which we were told would never come into the lake because they wouldn't go into saline water, it now makes up about a third of our total catch. It's taken mostly from the top end of the lake but there's a reasonable market for it as a cheap food for cray bait etc. So there's quite an amount of carp caught, in fact a large tonnage of carp caught which is used primarily for cray bait, some on the fresh fish market. Some of our new Australian friends like to eat it because they've been used to it in their own countries but a very limited market as a table food.

In this bottom end of the system, because of it becoming saltier and saltier all the time we find that the main catches of fish, say between Lakes Entrance and Metung area or Lakes Entrance and Paynesville, some fifteen mile up the lake, has now become mostly migratory fish from the ocean such as yellow eye mullet, tailor, silver trevally and bay trout and to a lesser extent, King George whiting. Most of the bream now are being caught further up the system. There's not near as much bream down the bottom end so consequently we get a larger percentage of salt water fish coming in to the catch now of commercial fishermen too.

JD Do you get much litter in the Lakes, Barry?

McKENZIE Oh quite a bit but it's a huge system the Gippsland Lakes. It's several hundred square kilometres of water. Yeah in the summer time we get quite a bit but most of it is floating stuff such as plastic bags and milk cartons and so forth. They seem to wash ashore, blow up onto the shore line and gradually rot away. It's becoming a bigger and bigger problem, that's for sure because of the ever increasing boat traffic, but I think the biggest litter problems that we see around this system are probably along the banks of the rivers where most of the anglers fish and where most of the tourist traffic gets. The Lakes system itself is a huge system and fortunately most people who are on boats on the lakes tend to take care of their rubbish and not just throw it over board.

JD Do you think that the noise of so many motors on the lake affect the fish at all?

McKENZIE Oh I think they would in some areas, particularly in shallow water or in confined areas such as in the rivers, etc. If there's a lot of boat traffic in the rivers the anglers seem to complain that the fish aren't biting as well as what they should. The lake system being so big and a fair depth of water throughout the main area which gets most of the boating traffic and the area from, sort of Lakes Entrance to Paynesville, it's fairly deep water and it's a big area of water. It'd be pretty hard to tell really. I guess it would have some effect. If you see a school of surface fish such as tailor feeding on the surface and somebody goes through the middle of them, particularly with a big outboard motor, even if it's only idling, fish go down and stop feeding very quickly but fish such as bream and that, they mostly come on to the shallows and into the shallow areas around the fringes of the lake of a night time to feed. At that time of day, of course, there's not too many tourist boats on the lake so so far they don't seem to be having all that much of an affect.

JD Does the weather affect you much?

McKENZIE Yes, very much. Because of it being such a big lake, we can get quite a big and quite a nasty sea in the lake. Lake Wellington, where we work gill netting, it's no trouble there to get a four foot high sea running and there's only about ten feet of water so it becomes a very short, sharp sea and things such as the Marley Point Yacht Race which sails down from Marley Point at the top end of the Lakes down to as far as Paynesville.... On Saturday night they had a wind of about 25 knots and there was something like 120 out of the 500 entries that never made the course. Yeah it can get pretty rough. It sorts the men out from the boys pretty quick [laughs].

JD Do you sell to the co-op you mentioned?

McKENZIE No. The co-op actually just handle our fish for a price per kilogramme. The co-op provides the facility for handling all fish now landed at Lakes, anything from the lake fishermen with our small catches through to the big deep sea trawlers that come in with hundreds of tonnes of orange roughy. The co-op handle the fish, ice them, have big storage and cool rooms. They arrange the trucks. They arrange to send the fish off to the various markets. A lot of fish are also marketed in Sydney from Lakes Entrance and a lot of the orange roughy and so forth that are landed by the big deep sea trawlers, they are sold straight to processors, particularly orange roughy and that type of fish. So the co-op arranges the markets for those boats.

They've got a radio system at the co-op and we can call the co-op if we want a particular market arranged for our fish, whether it's a few boxes of lake fish that we're catching each day or several tonnes of trawl fish or twenty or 30 tonne of orange roughy or whatever one of the big boats is coming home with. They just call the co-op by radio and say that they've got so many boxes or so many tonnes on board and that they want to consign them to a certain agent at the market or on a particular truck to Melbourne or Sydney or wherever, or the co-op will even contact some of the processors and tell them that the boat's due in at a certain time so that they can find out what quantity of fish the processor wants. They virtually arrange the markets for all of the fishermen right through, shark fishermen, the whole lot.

JD Is it a satisfactory system?

McKENZIE It's a wonderful system. In fact I would say that the Lakes Entrance Co-Op has got the best system in Australia. It's by far the best in Victoria, at any rate. It's a great system that they've got going now.

JD Barry, you have been involved with some of the professional fishermen's associations, haven't you?

McKENZIE Yes, for a number of years. In fact I'm now the President of a fairly recently formed east Gippsland Estuarine Fishermen's Association which takes in all licensed fishermen to fish in the estuaries from Sale to the border. It includes Gippsland Lakes, Lake Tyers, Tamboon Inlet and Malacoota. We've also extended our membership to encompass the eel fishermen who fish in the east Gippsland waters and most recently the bait fishermen who fish throughout east Gippsland waters to supply the tourist trade [and] the bait fish market. We have some 60 odd members. Almost every licensed fisherman from Sale to the Boarder now is a member of our association. We've developed a very good working relationship with our local region of CF&L who in turn put forward our ideas or changes to regulations etc on our behalf to the Director of Fisheries in Melbourne through to the Minister for Conservation, Forests & Lands. It's working out a very good system that we've got.

Most of our outside boats are covered by the co-operative and most of us here in Lakes, whether we're lake fishermen through [to] trawl fishermen etc, are all members of the co-op. The co-op looks after our interests fairly well but we found, particularly with lake fishermen because lake fishermen or estuarine fishermen from Sale to as far away as Malacoota who weren't being represented, that we decided to form our own association. The CF&L representatives came along to each of our meetings and we've got a very good working relationship now with management of our fishery.

JD What does CF&L mean?

McKENZIE Well that's Conservation, Forests & Lands in Victoria who are under the Ministry who is responsible for everything from Lands Department, Forestry Management, down to fishing, commercial and recreational. So why we're tied in with them, I don't know. It's one of the political things. One time our department used to be the Fisheries & Game department, then became Fisheries & Wildlife but now we've all been lumped in together so we're all under the one minister. If that minister sees fit to worry about the forestry management and not the fisheries, well then we're left on a limb. So we've got to make a pretty united voice now to get the sort of response through to the minister that we used to be able to get directly with our old Fisheries & Game Department through our local field officers out in each of the fishing ports. I guess that's a sign of the times.

JD Are there enough field officers?

McKENZIE Not really. We have two enforcement officers here in Lakes Entrance to cover one of the largest fishing ports, one of the largest offshore fishing ports in Australia with all manner of boats from prawn trawlers, scallop boats, shark, crayfish, Danish seine trawlers right through to the deep sea trawlers outside, plus they're also responsible for looking after the lake fishermen like us who fish in the estuaries and they're also responsible for keeping track of the anglers and their catches and all the rest in the rivers. So it's almost a physical impossibility for two guys to cover all that they're supposed to cover here but they seem to be doing the job fairly well but I think it's probably one of those situations where it probably requires five or six to really take the workload shared out properly. How the two of them managed to do it, I'm damned if I know. There are another two officers at Bairnsdale who cover an area of the lake as well and also do a fair bit of work looking after the rivers, the recreational fishermen through to the poachers who net the rivers of a night time and this sort of thing, but the work load is well beyond them realistically.

JD Barry, what else would you like to have recorded on this tape?

McKENZIE Gee I think we've just about covered everything, Jack. We've got a pretty broad spectrum in what we've talked about, haven't we? No I think we've probably covered everything pretty well.

JD Are you confident about the future of the industry?

McKENZIE The fishing industry as a whole, yes, very confident. I'm a little bit concerned about the future of our fishery, particularly the bream fishery, or I had been until fairly recently. We probably had a blessing in disguise two years ago. We had a large algae bloom in the Gippsland Lakes which all of a sudden made the people who don't normally get out on the water realise that we've got the beginning of a pollution problem. Fortunately it hit the pocket of the tourist industry and they've made a heck of a lot of noise. We've now got a couple of committees set up to look at possible pollution and the possible effects of pollution. Hopefully from that we'll get an ongoing study or a decent research grant to do a detailed study into the fish stocks and the water quality etc in the Gippsland Lakes. Maybe if we can hold it at what it is without letting it deteriorate any further, well then I think the future of fishing in the Gippsland Lakes will remain fairly stable.

I think we're probably going to see some changes and in fact until recently we were becoming worried about the bream fishery because of the interference with the water quality or salinity balance required for bream to spawn. However this summer we've seen probably the largest quantity of little bream out in the sand banks out in the lakes and around the weed fringes that we've seen for many years. In fact some of the guys who've fished in the lakes for more than 50 years say that it's by far the biggest amount of small bream that they've ever seen. So maybe the algae bloom was a blessing in disguise and maybe pollution wasn't quite as bad as what we thought it was getting to be because the bream have obviously had a couple of very good spawning seasons in recent years. Some five or six years ago there were a couple of very bad spawning seasons and we've got a definite age gap in the bream stocks. It's one of those fisheries where we can diversify onto other species and if the bream become a bit scarce for a couple of years, well we can still survive by catching the species that travel the ocean such as yellow eye mullet or up to the European carp which are in the top end of the lake and worth very little but still enough to keep you going, keep your head above water.

It certainly needs a lot of research done and I think this is probably part and parcel of the whole fishing industry for the whole of Australia. My son is a biologist now doing his Phd in marine biology and doing research work at Cairns because of being necessary to go to Townsville University to do his Degrees. So we go to Cairns each year to give him a visit in the middle of winter. Even up there we can see the huge problems that are coming there because of the increasing tourism and everything else and over-exploitation in some ways of some fisheries and just not enough research being done to set the proper management strategies in place to stop over fishing of some sections of the resource and so forth. So hopefully those sort of things are being taken under control by Government but I think it's only just the recent times that Governments have started to realise the importance of the fishing industry to Australia, particularly when you see the Japanese and the Russians and Taiwanese to a lesser extent wanting to come out here and plunder our waters. I think the people in Government are long last realising that we've got a resource here that can be damaged by pollution, can be over fished because these people have over fished them

in their own countries and maybe they're going to take a lot more interest and make a lot more study funding available so that we can really tell what's going on.

Australia's in a wonderful position. We've got a great fishing nation. We've got big coastal areas that have diversified from orange roughy and shark down here in the south to the prawn fisheries up in the north coast and so forth. It certainly warrants a lot of money being spent on research and looking after it. I guess the same applies to the recreational fisheries and it's becoming ever and ever increasing in numbers of recreational fishermen throughout the whole of Australia and more and more a strain is being put on the resource. They're starting to realise now that there's a possibility of out fishing the barramundi stocks, for example, in North Queensland but everybody sort of thought it was unlimited a few years ago. So people are becoming aware of our problems and I guess that's all a good thing for the future.

JD Right. Well look it's been great to talk to you Barry. It's a good interview. Thank you very much.

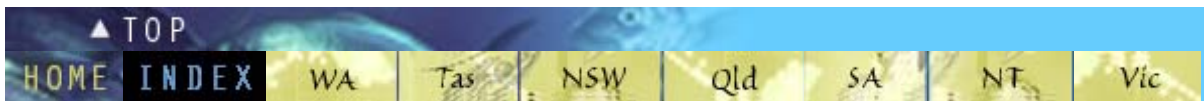
McKENZIE Pleasure.

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr Barry McKenzie of Lakes Entrance, Victoria.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with KEITH MELHUIISH

INTRODUCTION

This interview with Mr Keith Melhuish was conducted by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian Fishing Industry in Mr Melhuish's home in Geelong on the 13th February, 1990.

Mr Melhuish fishes for scale fish in Port Phillip Bay and has done so for many years.

In this interview he tells a dismal story of declining fish stocks, pollution, damage to the seabed and lack of effective research and management. He also deals with the affects of the killing of undersized fish by both recreational and professional fishermen. The increased pressure on the resource due to the need to service debts incurred through the purchase of licences and the lack of adequate enforcement of the regulations. Some will see Mr Melhuish's views as being controversial but the wellbeing of the industry would seem to require what he has to say be taken into consideration by researchers and government.

There is one side of one tape. The interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

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

MELHUIISH It's Keith Melhuish. I was born in Geelong on the 2nd August, 1938. I've lived in Geelong ever since.

JD In this part of Geelong?

MELHUIISH Basically yes. This same area and well I've moved around a little bit but not that much.

JD Did you have a background in fishing? Was your father a fisherman?

MELHUIISH No, no. He was only a mad angler, same as I used to be.

JD And how did you come to get into fishing then?

MELHUIISH A friend offered me the opportunity to go out in a boat and try and my hand, that was all.

JD Had you been in other employment before?

MELHUIISH Oh yes, I'd been working as a pastry cook for seven and a half years.

JD Do you say you were a pastry cook from the time you left school until you left trade and went into fishing?

MELHUIISH Well, I had a couple of small jobs, but basically on the same line, in the bread trade actually.

JD So was that in Corio Bay here that you entered fishing?

MELHUIISH No, I started outside at Barwon Heads.

JD What were you fishing for there?

MELHUIISH Crays and 'couta [Barracouta].

JD And how did it come about that you finally ended up in scale fishing?

MELHUIISH Well I started playing around with a few nets in those days a licence to fish was a licence to fish all Victorian waters. I started at Barwon Heads and I used to do a little bit of netting in the Bay at the same time, out of a dinghy. The little bit of fishing out the dinghy proved more....

JD Profitable?

MELHUIISH profitable, useful, money wise, more satisfactory to my body system.

JD Did you leave the cray fishing industry before it suddenly took off in the 50s?

MELHUIISH Yes, there wasn't much money in it when I was there. We only had a fifteen pot limit. We never made much money out of the pots.

JD So having come inside into the Bay, you've stayed here every since?

MELHUIISH Yes.

JD And what sort of fish are you after?

MELHUIISH Whiting in the winter months, flounders through the summer. Schnapper occasionally and flathead occasionally in the winter months.

JD What sort of boat and gear do you operate?

MELHUIISH Traditional old fashioned double ender, 28 foot long.

JD Is it an old 'couta boat?

MELHUIISH No, double enders were basically made for sheltered water work. They're not much good in open seas, they're all right in waves but not in surf.

JD Is it an open boat?

MELHUIISH Yes.

JD And it's a netting operation that you do?

MELHUIISH Yes, all nets.

JD What's the limitation on scale fishing in the Bay?

MELHUIISH Actual fact is the fish are just getting very scarce. There's several regulations governing what we're allowed to use at different seasons, but basically the fact is, the fish are getting very scarce.

JD You don't have a quota however?

MELHUIISH No, no quotas.

JD Is there a closed season?

MELHUIISH Yes, there's closed seasons for different types of gear.

JD And you would have a limitation on the.....

MELHUIISH Mesh size.

JD mesh size?

MELHUIISH Yes, mesh size limitations is what we have.

JD And length of net?

MELHUIISH Length of net also.

JD Have you seen much change in the fishing method in the time you've been involved in the scale fish or is it still the traditional method?

MELHUIISH Yes, we still use traditional methods. Basically the same as 50 - 60 years ago. The only thing is, with synthetic nets and ropes and things, it's much easier.

JD Is it a hand hauling operation?

MELHUIISH Yes.

JD Pretty heavy work?

MELHUIISH Oh, fair enough. Good exercise!

JD Have prices for the product changed much?

MELHUIISH Yes they've gone up quite considerably over the last twenty years. Like we used to get three and six a pound [average], we now get five dollars a kilo which is quite a step up. Much higher than inflation.

JD So your income from fishing has remained pretty stable?

MELHUIISH The income is a still reasonable sort of thing, even though catch rates are down to blazes.

JD Could we have a look at those sort of problems within the industry, depletion of stock. Is it very evident?

MELHUIISH Tremendously so. Fish are just not available to catch even though we've got better ideas and better gear and better boats. Catch rates are probably a tenth of what they used to be.

JD What would you put that down to?

MELHUIISH Basically the lack of habitat for fish. There's no habitat left in the Bay now. It's all died off possibly through a mixture of pollution and turbulence in the water caused by scallop dredging etc, etc.

JD The scallop fishery has virtually come to an end in the Bay hasn't it?

MELHUIISH Yes. It killed the major portion of the Bay in the process. Left it a desert, a muddy desert admittedly. Where there used to be seagrass, kelp, stones etc. it's just gooey mud now. Nothing lives in it, nothing breeds on it.

JD So that's greatly reduced the scale fish catch?

MELHUIISH Yes, this is the major problem as far as we can see. That and pollution from industries etc. Sewage farms and storm water drains.

JD That pollution, what's that oil refineries?

MELHUIISH Oil refineries, heavy metal works.

JD Does that pollution affect the fish that are still remaining?

MELHUIISH They seem to think that some of the fish have some metal pollution, but basically it seems that mostly it's only in the gut area which doesn't affect anybody anyway. Nobody eats the gut of the fish.

JD There was quite a concern here in Victoria some years ago about the mercury levels in shark was there not?

MELHUIISH Yes. This applies to several other major fish species but it's a naturally occurring thing in fish that grow to a certain age. It takes years for this mercury to build up in their system. It comes from the food chain actually. The little fish have a little amount of it, but by the time the big fish eats a lot of the little fish to grow for 20 or 30 years, he's got a lot of it in him too.

JD I notice a sign to the public on the jetty down in the harbour that shell fish for human consumption were not to be taken. Is that because of pollution?

MELHUIISH Yes, we did have a major wire works in Geelong and they used to tip (spill whatever you like) large quantities of rusty wire water. Water that had been.... well not water, sulphuric acid that had been used to wash, treating the soft wire before they were galvanised. This was cadmium mainly and we have a major cadmium problem in the Bay. It's in the sea floor of the Bay and will not ever leave the Bay. Never, they tell me.

JD Are there any attempts to clean up the water in the Bay?

MELHUIISH No, the only thing the Harbour Trust did for us last year they sucked up a lot of the worst polluted areas and spread it over areas that weren't so polluted with a suction dredge. They did a real good job!

JD It was intended to improve the....?

MELHUIISH I don't think it was intended to improve it. They were just cleaning the channels and the area where the wire works used to be. They used a grab dredge to start and then they used a suction dredge to clean up what the grab had left [chuckles] and then they spread it all over the best fishing ground in the Bay!

JD There would seem to be a great need for a thorough investigation into just what is going into the water in the Bay. Is anybody attempting that sort of investigation?

MELHUIISH Well, we in the Corio Bay Protection Development Society are trying to get a little bit of this work done, but duck shoving by government departments, semi government departments don't seem to get anywhere.

JD This protection society is a group of concerned citizens?

MELHUIISH Yes, it's just a mixture of anglers, divers, boaters and professional fishermen.

JD That haven't had much joy from the Authorities?

MELHUIISH Not very much at all!

JD Are there any other bodies like fisheries research people or CSIRO, investigating the.... or universities perhaps?

MELHUIISH No, mostly they only seem to be interested in the trawl fishery - outside trawl fishery. They don't seem to want to do anything for the Bay fishermen. It seems to be a very small cog in the wheel and they're not much interested in anything to do with it.

JD Would you like to make comment on the management of the fisheries in Victoria? I gather that there is no separate fisheries department, that it becomes part of the Conservation, Forests and Land Management Department. Is that the situation?

MELHUIISH Yes that is the situation.

JD So there's no single department responsible for fishery.

MELHUI SH Yes, that's right. That's part of our problem. No particular area is devoted solely to fish.

JD Do you think the fisheries tend to be overlooked in the much wider objectives of that Department? Forests for instance?

MELHUI SH Yes, yes. This is definitely one of our major concerns. Several years ago, fisheries was a separate area and they did do a little bit of work, but now that it's just hatched in with forestry, most of the money is spent on forestry research etc. Very little goes into fisheries [except for some on mussel and oyster and scallop research].

JD Are the resources then not there for investigation and supervision, policing and so on, on the fisheries?

MELHUI SH Not enough anyway. Definitely lacking in all phases of research, enforcement, everything else.

JD There are professional fishermen associations are there not?

MELHUI SH Yes, but they sort of all push their own barrows.

JD Are their views taken into account when government is deciding policy?

MELHUI SH Yes, yes sometimes they are.

JD Is there consultation between the fishermen and the Department?

MELHUI SH Very little actually. Mostly the people that live in Melbourne, there's one or two spokesmen up there that make a lot of noise and they seem to get a little bit of a hearing but anywhere else you get very little hearing.

JD Would you like to comment on the management of the fishery, management in the sense of departmental management?

MELHUI SH I think there's virtually no departmental management. Anybody that sort of has the money to buy a fishing licence these days can go fishing even though the Bay is overfished. All facets of the industry is overfished and they're still allowing the sale of licences: admittedly on a two for one basis, but I don't think we need anymore fishermen in the Bay. I think the old system when a fisherman retired his licence was just torn up, I think that would have been a better way to go.

JD So you've got a situation where there are two many fishermen....

MELHUI SH Yes, there's much too many fishermen competing in the Bay.

JD competing for a declining stock?

MELHUI SH Yes, definitely.

JD And there's not very much effectively being done to prevent that?

MELHUIISH No. If a little bit of fish turns up in one area nowadays there's an influx of boats (mostly trailer boats these day) and the fish get cleaned up.

JD What about the inroads by the recreational fishermen? Is that a serious threat to the fisheries?

MELHUIISH Yes, it's a major problem yes. There's a large number of people opting for early retirements, people with extra leisure time. Many sorts of various days off. Many go out and catch a few whiting or schnapper and a lot of them sell them, illegally.

JD Where do they sell them to?

MELHUIISH You can sell fish anywhere virtually. Fish shops, wholesalers, cafes, hotels. They sell everywhere virtually.

JD And is there any effort to stop that illegal selling....?

MELHUIISH At the present time, the fisheries officers have virtually no hope of getting conviction for illegal sale of fish. The regulations and laws are just not there to enforce anything.

JD The fishermen have their own associations don't they? Are they listened to at all on this sort of thing?

MELHUIISH Very little. Nobody seems to listen very hard.

JD Do they press for more policing of the industry?

MELHUIISH We as fishermen, have been calling for bag limits to be applied for amateur fisheries for quite a few years to try and stop illegal large catches by amateurs. As yet, we're still waiting and hoping!

JD Is there a State wide fishermens council....?

MELHUIISH There is, but I couldn't tell you who was on it or where it meets or anything else.

JD It's not a matter whereby your association sends a representative to that council or State body?

MELHUIISH No unfortunately not yet. We have an association in this area (70 or 80 members I suppose between Queenscliff and Geelong) and we have one meeting maybe two meetings per year with a representative from Melbourne who tells us what they're going to do and that's about as far as it goes.

JD Are the fishermen happy with that sort of situation?

MELHUIISH Not really, but everybody's an individual and that's basically the problem.

JD The voice of the fishing industry is perhaps a bit overwhelmed by the voices of others in the Department of Conservation, Forests and Land Management. Does that....

MELHUIISH There's a little bit of that about, but basically the people that are on the fishing industry committees in Melbourne are half processors and half scallop fishermen. I think there's about one representative of the scale fishery on this Victorian association.

JD Do the scale fishermen sell their catch through the markets or through processors or direct to shops, or how is it done?

MELHUIISH Well, mostly direct to small wholesalers in the area where the fisherman lives. Excess catches must go to the Victorian Fish Market but that's all. Only excess catches and they're few and far between these days.

JD So you land them and they're sent almost immediately, to the local processor?

MELHUIISH Yes, mostly when I bring in flounders these days they're still kicking when they're on the scales.

JD And he in turn, sells them to the local shops?

MELHUIISH He sells to the local shops and retail outlets.

JD And into other towns and so on. It's a pretty sad picture that you paint of the scale fishery in this Bay. Do you think it has much prospects for the future?

MELHUIISH Prospects for the future are pretty grim at the present time unless something can be done to limit several bad fishing practises by some fishermen. Maybe things will come good in another year after this government enquiry. Maybe not.

JD What would be the worst of the bad fishing practises?

MELHUIISH It would be the catching and killing of undersized whiting in the beach seine fishery (that's each Spring) would be the major problem.

JD Is there a sale for those undersized whiting?

MELHUIISH No, they're just left to rot on the sea floor or feed the birds whatever.

JD How does that happen?

MELHUIISH The method of seine fishing that's employed in Port Phillip Bay uses small mesh bags. Small mesh bags hold the size fish and well as the undersize fish. While you're sorting these out, most of your undersize fish get killed.

JD So that the breeding stock for the future is greatly reduced?

MELHUIISH Apparently whiting breed prolifically somewhere, somehow in South Australian waters and proceed to migrate into Victorian waters and luckily there must be sufficient stocks in South Australian waters to keep up this wasteful [chuckles] fishery!

JD Keith, what would you suggest would be effective methods for controlling the catch?

MELHUIISH I think we need bag limits so that fisheries can enforce some regulations. We need larger size limits, we need on the spot fines for breaches. That would give the fisheries officers a chance to get some convictions and may be stop the escalation of illegal fishing by amateurs.

JD You probably need a lot more fisheries officers too, wouldn't you?

MELHUIISH Oh a few more would be handy but I don't say a lot more. Manpower is very expensive to employ in that field and government departments don't want to spend money on that sort of operation.

JD Could we have a look now at the transferability of licences in your industry?

MELHUIISH Well, for many years when a fisherman retired, his licence was just null and void. If it couldn't be passed on to a son who wanted to follow the following, the licence was made null and void and that was it. Fisheries under duress, with a bit of agitation from some ethnic fishermen who wished to retire several years ago, made licences transferable so that they were saleable as a cash deal and since then, the people that are buying licences are working much harder than the people that held the original licences. That is also making fish much more scarce.

JD They're working harder because of the debt they have to go into?

MELHUIISH This is right. They've had to pay upwards of fifteen or twenty thousand dollars for two licences so that they can go fishing. With that sort of outlay, plus gear outlay on top they've got to work much harder than the original older fishermen who had already paid for their boats and gear and just wished to retire.

JD So it's had quite the reverse affect from what it was hoped it would have?

MELHUIISH Yes this is right. Instead of halving the fishing efforts, it's probably made it four or five times what it was before.

JD Keith, before we finish is there anything else that you would like to talk about on this tape and have recorded on this tape?

MELHUIISH No, I don't there's much more that I could add. Just that the Bay is overfished and over polluted. This is the major problem.

JD Thank you then for this interview. The story you tell is a rather sad one, but hopefully it's not the end.

MELHUIISH Well, maybe not.

JD Right thank you Keith.

MELHUIISH Thank you.

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr Keith Melhuish, scale fisherman of Geelong in Port Phillip Bay, Victoria.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





Verbatim transcript of an interview with DOUG MILLARD

INTRODUCTION

Doug Millard, who is now 73 years of age, started fishing during the Depression years as a deckhand. Gradually he progressed, becoming a skipper, then part-owner and finally owner/operator of several vessels. He has first hand experience of the many fisheries that have worked out of Eden over the years and in this interview discusses them in some detail.

Perhaps the most significant matter he discusses is the evident decline in fish numbers resulting mainly from over-exploitation of the resource, but he also discusses the effects of recreational fishing, pollution, changes in technology, and the economic problems confronting the industry.

The interview was recorded in Mr Millard's home in Eden on the 17th March, 1990 and is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry. The interviewer is Jack Darcey. There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Doug, could you record your full name please?

MILLARD Yeah. Douglas [unclear] Millard.

JD And where were you born?

MILLARD I was born in Milton. That's up the coast, just north of Ulladulla, about four mile north of Ulladulla [in] 1917.

JD 1917?

MILLARD On the day, 12th April, yes.

JD Right. Were you brought up in that area?

MILLARD Yes.

JD So you've lived in this south coast all the time?

MILLARD Lived and went to school [at] Milton. I think we went off to Newcastle somewhere when I was about sixteen and worked up there on and off for a few years. Times being like they were, a job was a job. If you got out of work it was very hard to....

JD That would have been during the Depression?

MILLARD Yes. Really that's how I came to go fishing. Got a job on a trawler, somewhere to live, somewhere to sleep and got good food, good meals so you weren't chasing all over the country looking for bloody work.

JD You weren't married when you went into fishing?

MILLARD No, no, no.

JD Was your father a fisherman at all?

MILLARD No. Father never fished. He worked in the bush or wherever they could get work; the same thing back in those days.

JD Did you have any uncles or people in fishing?

MILLARD No. None of our family were in the fishing industry. An uncle I went fishing with, he was an Englishman, married one of dad's sisters and he'd been apprenticed to windjammers when he was a boy and he'd gone right through, got his Master Mariner's tickets and everything. When he came out here he worked ashore for a few years and he decided to go fishing so that's when he first built a trawler and I joined him.

JD Where were you fishing from?

MILLARD Ulladulla; we fished out of Ulladulla and that would have been.... Oh the first day we ever went out, we came back, we went into the old post office at Ulladulla to see if there's any mail and he came out very depressed. He said, "I don't think we'll ever get to fishing. England's declared war on Germany today." Anyhow his boat was finished in about a fortnight after that so we started to fish. We fished up, oh a couple of years. When the yanks came into the business, they took all the fleet and there was quite a break then for a year or two. I was up [the] Northern Territory then for a couple of years.

JD Where, in the Army?

MILLARD With DMR, Department of Main Roads, AWC mob with aerodromes and mainly in the workshops. It was after that we came back.... Well we had been down to Eden before that. We'd come here and fish for a few weeks and travel between here and Ulladulla sort of thing but after the War I came back and I stopped here. I've been here ever since.

JD Did you get your boat back after the War?

MILLARD Not that one, no. It was fitted out with all the refrigeration gear and they took it up there somewhere, round New Guinea whatever. Just ran it up the bank so

they had refrigeration and that was for the mess unit, see. They didn't.... she never came back, that boat.

JD Did they compensate you for the loss of the vessel?

MILLARD They bought them, yeah. They bought them at somewhere about the value of what they cost to build at the time. Matter of fact, there was only one boat left on the coast fishing, a little one called the **Alathea** and it was the only one left trawling through those years.

JD When you came then to Eden, you had a boat built, did you?

MILLARD I worked with [an] old skipper, sewing seines for the uncle for the whole period he had that boat up until the War. He was getting another one built after but he had a heart attack and dropped dead. The boat was finished but in the meantime I'd gone working with other people and other fellows. I worked on several boats. I skippered them and that till such time as a I'd saved up enough money to buy an interest in one myself.

JD So you bought a share in a boat first?

MILLARD Yeah I bought a share in the first one. I bought a third share and a year or two later I thought, well I was doing alright, I either buy the other two out or they buy my me out and I get one of my own. They decided to sell so I purchased a boat called the **Mirrabooka** then, 56 footer, and I worked her for a lot of years. We were [using the] seine netting method (I suppose they were). [When] we were fishing, we'd use about two mile of rope, a mile either side of the net and shoot it out and winch it back in. That was the method those days.

Then after a year or two of running my own boat I built another one. It finished up, we lost both of them. They both.... The **Mirabena**, she went ashore down the other side of Everard and the **Mirrabooka**, they lost her out the bay out here.

JD How did you come to lose her?

MILLARD Filled up [and] sunk.

JD Just filled up?

MILLARD That was a big setback [laughs] to lose two of them. You never seem to catch up again like that. Since then I've had several boats but I actually haven't worked them myself, only a small one. Like I bought a little 26 footer and I fitted prawn gear onto her and I used to work in the bay here by myself just prawning which was quite good. I could tell myself to go to blazers when I felt like it [laughs]. Nobody worried and I worked that for about ten years, the little boat there. In between that I'd do a bit of mending, making nets for the trawlers and one thing and another, which I still do up until present time. Not the big nets but I do a bit of prawn net work and that which is fairly light and easy.

JD You don't still run a boat?

MILLARD No. I've got no interest in boats now, not now.

JD When did you finally come ashore?

MILLARD Oh, I finally gave up actually out fishing.... would have been probably fifteen years or so now. That's outside work. As I said, I fished right up until a couple of years ago, only prawning which was sort of seasonal in the bay more or less.

JD What sort of fish were you fishing for?

MILLARD Well with the seine netting, the main fish would have been flathead and morwong (or tarakihi as they're known), sea bream and of course anything else that got in the net that was saleable was also taken. I recall when we first came down here to Eden that we were kicking back more fish than we were selling at the market because you couldn't sell them those days. Morwong was.... never even bothered to bring them ashore, just kick them back over the side [laughs] of the boat. You mainly only caught flathead, John Droy, but the scene's changed now, I can tell you. Flathead would come in about, on practically from the beach out to about 30 fathom and you've got no idea how thick they were. The decks of the boats, the rail would be thick and the milks coming out of the male fish would be snow white. Nobody believes me when I tell them those things. About the end of February and into March for a few weeks while they were spawning it was terrific but you don't see them there any more like that.

JD They still get some flathead, do they?

MILLARD They don't come here to spawn like that now.

JD Don't they?

MILLARD Yes, I don't think they get a chance [laughs] these days.

JD They're a bottom dwelling fish, are they?

MILLARD Flathead, yeah, definitely a bottom fish. As I say, they were there thick when we came down here from Ulladulla. Things were a bit scare up there. There wasn't much doing and when we first moved down to Eden, you've got no idea how thick they were. They were starting to thin out a bit when the yanks took the fleet away 'cause there were a lot of boats too. I've seen over 70 boats at the old jetty here at Eden in one night and that's all.... They were all fishing for just flathead and mainly fishing where the fish were thickest too.

When the fleet went things were getting a bit.... thinning out a bit. You could see the difference but after a couple of years with no boats or none at all, they came back. They were just as good for a couple of years. They built up again, you know but it doesn't happen these days. See you could practically set your clock about the fish coming in around about the 26th January and I've seen the fleet go out and everybody have one or two shots where they were, where they thought they should be; nothing doing so they dispersed all over the place. One boat came back in the afternoon, came in with about 60 baskets for two shots late in the afternoon the same day. They just come in spawning. They don't do that any more. You don't seem them now in those quantities now.

JD What other fish did you catch, Doug?

MILLARD Oh when the flathead were about like that, that's all you would get. There'd be practically nothing else with them but we used to get a lot of teraglin. You don't see them any more. There'd be, not great quantities but they'd be in amongst the other fish, but now you never ever see one. Sword shark, used to be oodles of them. We used to curse them because they'd be hanging up and tearing the nets to pieces and you're trying to shake them down and swinging their bills around and spiking you [laughs]. You hardly ever see one now. Fish in general are not in quantities like they were.

JD Why would that be, do you think?

MILLARD Well I think over the years they've had [unclear].

JD Too many taken?

MILLARD Too many boats. One of the main things over the years I've seen, somebody will catch a few fish and the next thing the boats from up and down and near and far have all converged on that place and the whole thing is [unclear] out. It started to happen with the flathead season, same thing. There'd be boats come from north, south, everywhere and the [unclear], where fish were caught. Fishermen never got much out of it. He was surprised with the flock[?] That was that. The only ones that do much good were the merchants those times and it's still much the same today.

You've got these days now and they get hake or jemfish, same thing. They come in about May into about 300 fathom, I think, thereabouts especially for one reason and one purpose, and that's to spawn. You can go there any other time of the year and you won't see a fish. So you get the whole fleet from all the coast right round would be here. Last year they couldn't even catch their 1700 tonne quota that they had; 3000 tonne quota last year. The year before they caught over 6000 tonnes and they halved that down to about 3000. They never made it last year and so this year their quota's down to 1700 tonne. That's for the fleet.

JD It's a big drop.

MILLARD Yeah. It'd be interesting to see what happens, whether the fish are there or whether they're being caught.

JD Doug, were you involved in tuna fishing at all?

MILLARD I did [unclear] while that was going on. I had a go at that but we never ever did much good. The boats weren't really suitable and we had make shift tanks and [unclear] tanks [laughs]. Matter of fact right from the word go with tuna, I was involved with that when the canneries brought a fellow from up around.... A Japanese boy down, Dave Corier was his name. He was tuna fishing up there, brought him down to show us, teach us how it was all done. Back in those days you didn't have to go away. Matter of fact, you'd catch tuna off the wharf and the bay would be full of them in their season. So it started from there but then the boats got bigger and better and it turned out you'd want bigger boats and all the rest of it. I do think now, the last few years there hasn't been hardly a tuna seen along the coast here, you know. I'm pretty sure that once they started with their purse nets and that, they put the kybosh on that lot.

JD It was poling in the earlier days?

MILLARD We were in the poling business and I still maintain that if it had been left with just bait and pole boats, that they would still be catching fish because never did you ever catch a patch of tuna right out poling. You'd get a few and they'd finish up there swimming around the boats. You'd get that savage you could jump in with them because they wouldn't bite and you couldn't get anything about it. With the nets, they can really slay them. Well in a lot of cases they've killed more than the boats can handle which is, in my way of thinking, not very good. The last two or three years on the coast up here there's been nothing, no tuna whatsoever.

JD Doug, do you know any other species that have been fished out?

MILLARD Oh, when you say fished out.... Morwong is one too. It doesn't come, they don't come in onto the grounds like they were when I go back to early years. You've really got to go and look for them in amongst the rocks and the hard bottom places and you don't get them as thick as what they were those times either; [in] fact I've seen morwong swimming along out 30, 40 fathoms, 48 fathoms as thick as ever they could stick anywhere, miles away from reefs or anything but it doesn't happen like that any more.

JD Has there been a shark fishery, school shark and gummy?

MILLARD Not to the extent that it's fished in other places, shark fishing or with the mesh netting and that, there's never been none of that done, not in a big way. It has been like once but not in a big way like they do in Victoria and places, the meshing.

JD Any crayfishing here?

MILLARD No. You could say practically there are a few crays but there's nobody really goes in for crays here because it's not sort of cray country. Really the same with prawns. There's no quantities of prawns, not what you would say that could support an industry.

JD But you made a living out of prawns in recent times?

MILLARD Oh, well when I say a living, for say three months of the year that would be.... it was good. Over six months, from November till about June or end of April, May, three of those months were not much good. Three months it was alright. The rest of the year there's nothing. See the prawns are only the one place over on the beach over there really, school prawns. Well one man on his own could sort of make a few shillings out of it. Put two or three boats on the thing like which would happen and one shot of a morning each and that was it sort of thing [laughs]. Well if one boat had been left on his own, he probably would [work?] all day. There's no quantities of prawns here, when you talk commercial quantities.

JD What about scallops?

MILLARD Scallops are a thing that, what I've seen of them, they were good but only for very short periods in different places. Today you can find a feed of them anywhere. I sent one of my boats at one time scallop[ing] in early days when scallops first start to fish for them up round here. They did well for about six or eight weeks, fishing up around Bermagui. Finished up on a Thursday, everybody had their quotas and they went back on the Monday, the start of a new week, and I don't think they got a bag between them. I don't think we've seen any scallops there since.

JD That's strange.

MILLARD They were gone and you could look every where and they tried every where but nothing. So we just went back to trawling again.

JD Did you ever fish for barracouta?

MILLARD Oh with the little boat I did a bit of trowling around the bay and that but couta was alright but you never ever got much money for them and if everybody was catching them same thing, they were hardly worth pulling them aboard your boat. Back in [the] early years of Eden I saw.... There must have been 50 or 60 little couta boats fishing in the bay here, fellows on the wharf buying them, cash buyers. Terrific[ally] thick and back in those times, that's when tuna and everything else was thick too. As I said, you didn't have to go out side the heads. You could fill your boats up twice a day if you wanted to. A lot of fellows used to go in the morning, catch a heap, knock off and clean them and then go back in the afternoon and catch another stack, twice a day. They don't come no more like that.

JD They suddenly disappeared, didn't they?

MILLARD They seemed to go. I don't know whether they were caught or see leather jackets were another thing. I'm sure they were never ever caught but they would eat your nets, chew them to pieces, chop, chop till you couldn't mend your net and you couldn't use it for patches, ruined. I've seen the water, specially up round Brush Island [which] was one of the worst places on the coast that I could see for leather jackets. The net would come up and the water around your boat would turn yellow with the sight [unclear]. So they were never ever caught, those fish [laughs] because if they went in the net, they just [took] a couple of bites and they were out. The trappers caught a lot but nothing like what would be there. Same down here. We'd reckon this was heaven down here at Eden because the jackets weren't no where as thick as they were up the coast. If we fished of a night we used to get a few, bit of trouble with them, but later on we never ever had any trouble with the nets at all down here.

Our main trouble those times was the bottom was that rough [with] scallops and shells and coral and that. It would cut the blooming foot rope; cut your hand off the foot rope in about two, three shots. You'd have to knock off and lace it all back on again but these days you can fish out there now and you'd break a hand [laughs] in those places. Course they're rigging the nets a bit different too.

JD Are they?

MILLARD Get over some of the hard stuff but I still think that the bottom is nowhere near as rough as what it was going back, well I suppose you could say back in those days was virgin country; never ever had a net on it and no trawlers were heard of. I fished in places down the coast. When fish got scarce up here, we used to keep going further down and further down. I've shot the net down the other side of Gabo and places that'd never ever had a net on it in its history. Every time you did, if you didn't get fast, you got a bag of fish. There's nowhere to day that things like that happen.

I dare say that if we'd have had the equipment those days like they got now, Christ knows what fish we could have caught then. See nobody had echo sounder[s]. I don't think they'd invented the name when I first started. Had no radios on the boats. Had nothing like that. As a matter of fact, I'd fish a lot of times in the night time and all we had on deck for a light was a hurricane lamp 'cause nobody had 240 power [or]

anything like that. Lucky you found enough lights in the foresail to get into the bunk with, that's if you got a chance to get into the bunk.

JD Did you go out for several days at a time?

MILLARD Oh mostly when we were [unclear - seine netting?] three days, probably, if you went away but we were fishing out around here. If you had three or four shots mostly you would get in and unload. You had no fish. There'd be trucks going out every night. You'd get rid of your fish. There was good fresh fish going away all the time then, but I suppose got scarce here, [unclear] trouble, say three, four hours. Well then you might say, we'll we'll stop down here today, two days, how ever [long] the tucker held out or till you got enough fish to come home.

JD Your catch went to Sydney, did it?

MILLARD Yeah, I'd say 99% would go to Sydney. The markets were strange. Fish that sold [for] top price in Melbourne, you couldn't give them away in Sydney and vice versa. For many years that sort of thing happened. I don't think there's much difference these days. I know a lot of fish that we would just put aside, [unclear] and shark and that stuff but you couldn't give it away in Sydney. You could go alright in Melbourne with it so that's where it went.

JD Did you work through the co-op?

MILLARD Yeah, in later years when the co-ops were going, yes. I worked with the co-op. Matter of fact, I was one of the staunchest members of the co-op here in Eden for years.

JD It went bung, didn't it?

MILLARD Yeah in the finish it did, yeah.

JD And then they started another one, is that right?

MILLARD Yeah, well what they've got now is really only a packing shed. There's a few with the money. I think there's only ten or twelve of the fishermen that's members of that co-op. They put their fish through there to go to market, but the other co-op, they were processing and everything and it was quite lucrative for a long time until.... It's main reason it went bung was crook management. They were taking more than what the fishermen were getting. Eventually it folded up and that was it.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD Doug, during your time in the industry the Government brought in lots of new rules and regulations [and] limited entry into fisheries. How did that affect you?

MILLARD As far as I was concerned, I was out of the industry then on the catching side of it sort of thing; had no boats, had finished with the boats. We'd sold out about four years before that business came [in], limited entry, units and Christ knows what they've got. There's fellows [who] came in later years, into it, couldn't fell the needle.

Made more out of selling their units than I ever made out of about 45 years of fishing. It's a fact.

JD Because they could sell their licences to other fishermen?

MILLARD Yeah, the transferable units you could buy. I think they'd be paying up to about \$3,000 for a unit. So a boat that had 78 units, he was [laughs].... A lot of fellows that had that, they just sold them off, sold their units out to the bigger boats and cashed in on it. That's how I missed out on all that [laughs]. The biggest one and the biggest boat we had was **Josephine Jean**. We sold it about.... I think we sold her for \$240,000, something like that. That boat today's worth, with its units and licences and what not, worth the best part of a million; same boat. We were battling to get that price we got for it when we got rid of it.

JD Has it been a good thing do you think, this transferability of licences?

MILLARD Well maybe but I think it's all heading for the big companies. That's the way it looks to me with the smaller man getting pushed out. A lot of things that seem strange and hard for me to follow. You can't, well, I say you can't upgrade.... You can upgrade your boat but you can't go bigger than what you've got, engine wise or length wise, the size of the boat but they're still bringing boats from overseas, great factory ships and all the rest of it and let them come; trawling the same grounds and everything. Not that local blokes wouldn't go bigger and that, specially now they've got this roughy fishing and all that, you've got to have big boats and big gear. It's [unclear] gear too for that work. A lot of the fellows are sort of restricted. They can't.... [they're] battling to get into that work. See you've got a boat that's about 70 feet, it's hardly big enough for that work but if you wanted to build a new one, well you more or less can't do it.

JD What, you can't get a licence for it?

MILLARD No, can't get a licence, but they're bringing out boats from Norway and over there, factory ships and that. They're working the same places. Here a few weeks ago one boat was telling me they fished.... they were trawling along behind one of those big factory boats down there. They said the net came up with about four tonne of heads in it. So that makes things seem a bit stupid, doesn't it?

JD What other problems do you see facing the fishermen nowadays?

MILLARD Oh I don't know. They seem to have plenty of problems but I think one of the main problems is still what's plagued the industry over many years that when you're catching fish you don't get much money for them and it wouldn't matter what price they were. When you can't catch any it wouldn't matter [unclear] \$100 a kilo, you still get nothing if they're not there to catch. The economics of the game is.... By the time you pay all your fines; not fines so much but licences and dues and fuel costs. One time we never used to consider fuel. If there was nothing here, oh we'd steam for four or five hours and try. You don't do that today because the cost of fuel has gone sky high. Licences and all those fees are way up. Workers' comp is very heavy for crews and the like and nets. I see a boat building a net down here to go orange fishing (roughy fishing). One net, there's \$27,000 worth in one net. He's just as likely to go out tomorrow and leave that, plus his wire and boards and everything else along with it. It's nothing to do around about forty, fifty thousand dollars' worth of gear. So you've got to get fish and you've got to get a fair price for them too to operate.

JD Is there any possibility for a young bloke to do what you did, to start off as a deckhand, become a skipper, buy a share in a boat, then another share in the same boat and finally own the boat?

MILLARD Well as far as trawling is concerned, I would say he hasn't got much hope whatsoever. You're starting off with nothing, only a deckhand's job. When you put a value of a boat these days, say a 70 foot, 80 foot boat, you're running it somewhere around about \$800,000 to a million or more, there's not much hope of a bloke working on the deck there would get money to go into that sort of thing. Matter of fact, I've often said if I had that sort of money, what they're paying for boats today, I know where mine'd be going [laughs]. It'd be going into a good bank account somewhere where it's bringing in its ten or twelve percent interest and I wouldn't consider going into that.

JD Yeah, so as you say they'll be companies that are running the boats.

MILLARD Oh yeah. If you own your own outfit and run it yourself, you've got more hope of surviving but I think most blokes employ a skipper [and] crews. A lot of places, they're only interested in a few bob for themselves and they don't care much about the boat, whether it sinks or floats or what happens. I see a lot now, they won't go to work on Fridays. They've got to be home Fridays. They won't go to work over the weekend.

JD Why Friday, why don't they....

MILLARD Well weekend and they've got to have weekends ashore now, the young fellows. They won't.... you've got no hope [of] getting half of them away fishing over the weekend. No, we've got to be home Friday, Friday night, weekend and Saturdays; come Monday, they're all too bloody crook to go anywhere anyhow [laughs]. They've got their problems.

JD Doug, what about the question of recreational fishermen? Do they make any problems for the professional?

MILLARD They don't really, what I see of it, they don't really make problems but they create a lot of antagonism sort of thing one way and another. Apparently they want the lot. They don't want any professionals and when it's all summed up I think that they're catching more fish than the professionals. While they're amateurs and they're supposed to only have big limits and all the rest, they must have terrible big bags some of them, the fish they're catching now, especially with all these smart runabouts and things they've got. You see them out on the shore practically every day of the week. The yellow fin tuna and all that stuff, that's what they're after and they're catching them too, don't worry about that.

JD Do they sell them, do you think?

MILLARD Well [laughs] that's anybody's guess. They certainly can't eat what they catch. Some of the catches I've seen come in there, a professional would be pleased to have it. They get a bit one sided in their arguments and things at times, as I see it. Even in the bay here they wanted to have the prawning and everything, that sort of thing that goes on there and it's only six months of the year. They've wanted that all stopped but I can't see much point in it because there's nothing here that they catch any rate. The prawns only come there occasionally.

I think it's much the same all up and down the coast, when you read bits and pieces here and there, the arguments about the professionals and the amateurs. One of the reasons, they said to me, "Why don't you set a few cray pots?" I said, "I like to go to bed of a night. I don't want to sit out there watching my pots because they're not there next morning." [laughs]

JD Doug, is there any evidence of pollution in the bay?

MILLARD Yes. Luckily at this stage it's not in a bad way, but it is. There's a certain amount that comes from the boats. They pump their bilges and things, brine tanks. The brine tank I think is mainly sea water anyhow. It goes a dirty colour with the fish in it, frothy and that so I don't think it causes a big problem. I sit and look out that window there and many times I see a big milky patch of water coming in the bay which comes from the cannery. The muck from that would collect and gather round the holds of the boats on your mooring lines. They [have] a foul smell. I've stood on the wharf and watched one day and I've seen the [unclear] stuff swim into that and within two seconds they're upside down.

JD Dead?

MILLARD Yeah. Those things, they should be stopped, that sort of thing. Otherwise it's pretty clear. I don't think there's any problem. The chip mill over there, never see any evidence. Practically everything that's thrown in the bay will finish up over where the prawns go. It's a strange thing. Thing's that I've seen on the wharf and get knocked off and that. They'll probably finish up over there in a few months. I've never seen any evidence of chips of stuff coming so I don't think that's a problem. I know Cobra Beach and that places there, people have squawked about that at times, walking down and they get all this greasy scum from the cannery on their feet, sticking in the sand. I think that should be something that should be stopped.

JD Doug, you feel the quantities of fish have gone down quite a lot over your time in the industry?

MILLARD I would say they have. Going back and recollections over, especially the salmon fishing around the beaches, there's practically no salmon fishing done here now. The cannery used to rely solely on local caught fish years ago and boy there was some, I can tell you. Catches [were] two or three thousand boxes, no worries, 500, 600, all the little beaches around the bay. As the boats moved and started to work from Lakes Entrance to Tasmania down there, there's practically no salmon come up this way. They don't get passed; odd few but nothing to have to talk about.

I have, personally, worked with a crew and we shot a lampara net just off the old main wharf at Eden and caught 56 big 50 pound tunas in the bay. You wouldn't see that [laughs]. Blue fin, stripeys, couta, the bay would be full of them, but not any more, not any more. So those fish have definitely been caught. Most of that pelagic fish and that sort of thing has been fished out.

JD Do you think they'll ever come again?

MILLARD Not while the concentration of boats and that is there now. I don't think, even a school of tuna and stripes and that, you've got all the runabouts, the amateur fellows and that, they're running them through; just the same, the amateur blokes as how it was the professionals do. The fish really haven't got much hope, when you look at the other side of it, with all the electronic equipment they've got. Even the

runabouts are loaded up with echo sounders and the rest, but inshore fishing, the fish are not there like they were.

When I was a boy going to school, I would jump on my old push bike every opportunity I had at Milton and go to Naroley or Moly[unclear] with a line on a bottle and rarely did you go home without five or six nice bream or whiting, which we used to play in them and sell them too; pick up a little bit of pocket money, just kids. The beaches and the lakes those times, they were literally teeming with fish but you can fish for hours on the beach now and you won't even lose your bait unless a crow or something eats it. So I don't think, unless there was a total ban on all fishing for four or five years, things will ever get back to normal.

JD Doug, did you enjoy your fishing career?

MILLARD Well I look back over it, I really did or I wouldn't have stayed there for so long I suppose. We had our rough times and we had our good times. Actually fishing itself was not really hard work. The hours were long, we found it, and these days where they're using the boards and the wires, it's a lot easier than seine netting because in the early start of seine netting, we used to have to shift the rope along the deck and stack it; seven, eight shots a day. Six shots was a short day so each of those shots would take about an hour and a half to effect. We would have to stack the rope and later they got, some of the boats, wells in them and the rope went down the goiler[?] into the well which made it a bit easier. Today they can, most of them I think, go to bed for a couple of hours while they tow the net line [laughs] and there's only need for one bloke at the wheel, unless they've got a lot of fish to pick up and clean up.

What I liked about it, there was never really one, two days the same. Catch wise, weather wise, there was always something different. You got sick of one place, you could pack up and go somewhere else. As I said, when we first ever started it was a good job because you had your bed, your bunk. All the boats had good cooks those times and you lived and slept and you really were.... Thing was, back in those times too you could earn more money, learn on the boat, a trawler, than you could working ashore. At the finish.... when I first started off I think I was getting 30 shillings a week and a penny a basket. That was the wages. Come the War, at that time I [unclear] was working, really skippering the boat and I was getting up to six pound a week and three pence a basket.

JD You were doing well in those days?

MILLARD Oh, Christ, that was extra good, extra good. Well the basket money was something that everybody really worked for. 83 pence was a pound, and a pound was a lot of money and you had 80 baskets a week, that was a quid. A lot of jobs ashore wouldn't pay that much for 40 hours [laughs]. No it was alright.

JD Alright. Thanks very much. It's been nice to talk to you.

MILLARD Yes.

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr Doug Millard, retired fisherman of Eden, New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with DENNIS MIRABELLA

INTRODUCTION

This interview with Mr Dennis Mirabella, training development executive of the National Fishing Industry's Training Council was recorded at the Industry's National Training and Resource Centre, 14 Parliament Place, Melbourne, Victoria. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey on the 20th February, 1990 for Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian Fishing Industry.

Mr Mirabella comes from a well known family of fishermen in Victoria and was himself a successful fisherman before undertaking the important function of co-ordinating the training of people in the fishing industry and providing access to information pertaining to all aspects of that industry. In this interview Mr Mirabella outlines the contribution his training and resource centre is making and something of its potential for the future development of fishing in Australia. It will be apparent from his comments that the industry is gearing up for the considerable changes that are taking place and will continue into the future. In meeting the challenges of those changes Mr Mirabella and his council will surely play a highly significant part. The establishment of their National Training & Resource Centre all goes well for the future of the industry.

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

TAPE 1 SIDE A

MIRABELLA Right. My name is Dennis Francis Mirabella and I was born at Hastings on the 1st January 1935. My family are a fishing family. My father fished from Hastings for all of his life. He's still.... he's only just more or less retired now. He's 81 this year and he's only more or less just retired. His father, my grandfather, was a fisherman in Western Port Bay prior to that. He actually started fishing..... My Grandfather came to Australia in 1880. He was one of the crew of an Italian.... There were three Italian ships [which] came to Melbourne for the opening of the exhibition in 1880 and he jumped ship and stayed here along with many others. There was an Italian community down at Hastings then and Western Port at that stage and he went down there. He actually hid out on a little island in Western Port called Churchill Island just down near San Remo and I think at that stage if they spent six months in the country they couldn't be deported, they were established residents here then. So he actually hid out on Churchill Island for six months and then he shifted up to Hastings and married my grandmother. She came from a family, they were an Irish family, and they actually were fishing from around Port Phillip Bay and Western Port as early as the 1860s. So we've got a fair background [laughs] in the history in the fishing here.

JD How did you come to get into fishing yourself Dennis?

MIRABELLA Well naturally enough, growing up in a fishing family, my interests were that way inclined I suppose. When I was at school my mother was determined that I wasn't going to be a fisherman so when I actually first left school I worked in a sharebroker's office for four years [laughs]. When I was eighteen/nineteen I managed to talk my way out of that and went back to Hastings and went fishing.

JD With your father or....?

MIRABELLA Well yes and no. He actually had started a retail outlet at that stage as well, selling his own fish so it was the excuse for me to get into the fishing. That business is still running. My nephew is actually running it now. So that was in 1954, was when I started fishing. I fished, apart from a break to do some National Service in the Army, I fished through until I got involved with the training scheme here which was in '77. Actually I did my last trip to sea in August '76.

JD Were you an owner/skipper or skipper of a [unclear] boat or....

MIRABELLA Yeah I started off with, well more or less on my own just fishing in the Bay with mesh nets but I gradually got into a slightly bigger operation and a cousin and myself started working down around West Promontory on the crays. I suppose we would have been fishing together about two years and he was actually drowned. So I just took on the operation on my own then. We had a 28 foot boat at that stage and then in 1964 we launched a 50 footer we built ourselves. So that was my operation and I worked that boat up until '76 when I got involved in the training. So as I said, we've got a bit of a background in the industry.

I became involved in the representative side of the industry fairly young too. That was in the early 1960s. I was appointed the delegate for the Hastings fishermen and so I started attending the Fishermen's Association meetings here in Melbourne around about that time. I think we were called the Victorian Commercial Fishermen's Association at that stage. Then we joined the Farmers' Union, oh I'm not sure of the date. It would be, probably would have been about '68/'69 I suppose, we joined the Farmers' Union. We had quite a good organisation there for a while. Then in '80.... I think we pulled out of the Farmers' Union, must have been in about '80/'81 and we actually moved up here. That's when the Victorian Fishing Industry Council was formed. Of course that's since gone by the board and they've now got the Victorian Fishing Industry Federation. Obviously we're co-operating with them with our training activities. So that's pretty well a thumbnail sketch of my history in the fishing industry.

JD So you came into this training exercise in about '76, did you say?

MIRABELLA Yeah, well how that actually happened.... I had no intention of not staying fishing the rest of my life. I had my own boat. It was all paid for and everything so I was fairly well set up at that stage. We ran into a little bit of legislation which is now known as the Uniform Shipping Laws Code. That of course requested that all fishermen hold the appropriate certification: engineer's [or] skipper's [unclear] ticket. I, through my connections with the Executive of our Fishermen's Organisation, I was more or less given the responsibility of looking at the USL Code and at that stage I was a little bit horrified at what we were going to find and inflict on the fishing industry. I perhaps got a bit vocal and when we started to do something about trying to get the industry organised, we decided that well we'd try and do it ourselves rather than get an educational institution to take on training of fishermen that's, you know, a lot of semi-literate people and people [unclear] might have been fishing for 30 years.

We felt that it wasn't fair to expect them to attend a TAFE institution and to go back to school.

So we took that on then and I somehow [laughs] found myself in the role of organising it and even then I didn't intend to not go back fishing. We applied to, what is now DEAT for funding under the old NEAT scheme. That was, you may remember, was the Whitlam Government were responsible for the NEAT scheme and we were successful in getting a grant under the NEAT scheme to train the fishermen on the basis that because they were potentially unemployed. If they didn't get their certificates they were going to be out of a job so we qualified. We got funding for the first two years of our operation under the NEAT scheme and then [with] the changing times and the Fraser Government decided that we'd been funded long enough and they said, "Well we've funded you for two years now, you can stand on your own two feet" which we did. This was, I might point out, was the Victorian Fishing Industry Association and it was through those connections with the Department that when this AFIC meeting to look at a similar arrangement nationally came up, well we were invited along so we were actually involved with the inaugural meeting out of which this National Fishing Industries Training Council was formed.

JD Does this institution that has grown out of that, is that training in the sense of offering instruction to people?

MIRABELLA Yes it is. We do some of our Councils we... Just to put you in the picture, we have now a network of training councils around the country or training committees. Some of them are committees, some are councils. They're all incorporated bodies, autonomous bodies but we're all linked through our national structure. Now some of them do get involved in face to face teaching. In other instances we use the educational institutions that are there. Where there are education facilities and where the training can be met by TAFE, we don't become involved. We're known officially as trainers of last resort and so if there is an industry need that can't be met through any other source, well we make sure that the training gets to the industry; or endeavour to make sure [laughs] that the training gets to the industry. It [unclear] most of the time but not all the time. So we do, yes we do get involved in the face to face teaching but one of the main functions of the training committee is to insure the relevancy of the training that's imposed on the industry that is really what the industry needs and not what some educator thinks that the industry should have. They're two different things.

JD Right. Your Training and Resource centre of which you're the Director, is that the correct title?

MIRABELLA Well my title is Training Development Executive, yeah.

JD And that's a national body?

MIRABELLA Yeah on the national and we have TDEs in all the states as well.

JD But your....

MIRABELLA Yeah mine's a national operation.

JD A national operation. Just let me make sure that I've got it clear, you act as a sort of a co-ordinator of the training institutions such as TAFE and ensure that they're offering courses that are required by industry?

MIRABELLA Yeah we liaise with the training institutions, the maritime fellows etc. What we have, our training councils, they provide a forum where everybody who has an interest in industry training can sit around the one table and discuss it. Our training council are made up of predominantly industry people and we're people from all sections of the industry [unclear] people fishermen. In fact I'd say the Chairman of all the State Industry Training Councils are active fishermen. We have processors and marketers. The Chairman of our National Body, Milan Rap, he's an exporter of mostly rock lobster and prawns and he's based in South Australia. So our industry principals have the greatest number of representatives on the training councils. Then we have all the Government instrumentalities that are in it. We have the various Fisheries Departments; we have the Commonwealth involved; in the case of the State Training Councils, we have the State Government and the Commonwealth involved. We have the Marine authorities and the educational institutions and the education, you know the Government Departments in the States that are responsible for the Education Departments.

So we do have that and as I said, a forum where everybody who has got a finger in the pie can stir it around and it works fairly well. Where you get the big educational organisations, you tend to get a tendency of the industry decisions not reaching all the extremities of the educational system but as far as the industry's concerned, the industry seems to know what's going on in our organisations but I just think we do have a bit of a communication breakdown sometimes in the educational area. We do get a bit of duplication and that's one of our main functions, is to avoid duplication and cut the cost to industry and to the Government. By co-ordinating it nationally we endeavour to do away with the duplication but we have the State bodies now and our national body has the responsibility of looking after national issues and the State bodies look after the State issues because obviously you've got, what seven Marine Acts and seven Fisheries Acts [laughs] and so the States obviously have the responsibility for things that fall under their State legislation. We overview the lot and try and get that co-ordination all the way through.

Affordability of qualifications is one of the main things that we're concerned with. We want a person that gets a qualification in one State in the country to be recognised in whatever State he or she may go to. Probably most of our work up until this point of time has been with the catching sector and we've had that requirement of the Uniform Shipping Laws Code and we've had to get 23,000 odd fishermen around the country holding the appropriate certificates. I'd say probably its the USL Code really our training organisation came out of the requirement for that but the secondary side of the industry obviously has training needs and we're endeavouring to address those at this time.

JD That's into processing, packaging, marketing, that sort of thing is it?

MIRABELLA Yes. Anything that's fishing industry, we have an interest in it. There also of course aquaculture is another part of the industry which we.... We have a representative from the aquaculture industry nationally, on our national body and all our State ITCs have aquaculture people so that's what we do. In our secondary sector we have processors, marketers and fishermen and the aquaculture. They're our industry principals. As I said before, we have all the appropriate Government departments and anybody else that's got an interest in the scene.

JD But you wouldn't actually conduct courses if someone else was doing a suitable one?

MIRABELLA Well there's no point in competing with them.

JD No point in duplication.

MIRABELLA No. There's no point at all but oh there probably is a bit of duplication and a little bit of competing but I think in the main the TAFE has a policy, not only with our industry, with all industries where industry is answering a need. They see no need to get into it and duplicate it and vice versa. They've always been the main provider, apart from the Maritime College because the Maritime College is a line to industry's needs but we've tended to treat the Maritime College as more of the tertiary training and the vocational, we tend to call the vocational level.... We look to the TAFE institutions to provide that now.

One of the things that we have been doing over the last few years is the traineeship system. We've become involved with that and we do have traineeships running now in the secondary or in the seafood handling area and we've completed the national training planning for an aquaculture traineeship so we're hoping that we'll be up and running this year. It is completed and I think we'll probably see our first one in Tasmania although Queensland are quite interested in conducting one as well.

JD Do you have any relationship with the Universities and CAES?

MIRABELLA Yes. Not so directly but of course through the Maritime College we do but we don't have direct representation from the universities. We have attended meetings to do with university studies at times. There is communication there but there's no formal links, put it that way, but we certainly do have contact with people. In the aquaculture area the universities are quite interested in that and Curtin University has an aquaculture programme. The people involved there have also been involved with us. There's good co-operation and the key centre for aquaculture studies for the country is at what is now the Tasmanian University. It was the Tasmanian State Institute of Technology; it's now part of the University of Tasmania. The principal of that key centre is also the aquaculture delegate on our national body. That's Dr Nigel Fortress so as I say, anybody who's anybody in the industry is represented.

JD Right. The other main thrusts of your enterprise is the Resource Centre. Could you talk about that a little?

MIRABELLA Well we applied for a grant from the Fishing Industry Research & Development Council to develop the Resource Centre. The Resource Centre was a long term objective of the Training Council and it was in our first terms of reference when the committee was first formed. We had been unable, up until this point of time, to attract sufficient funding to establish it and so we got a grant from FIRDA for \$4000 to establish it. It's pretty well on line now. It's getting quite exciting actually. The facilities that are now becoming available and the potential that we see for it, it's got much more potential than we even at first thought. We thought we had a pretty good idea in the first instance but the capabilities of the Resource Centre are virtually limitless.

We've got data basis just on the industry in general. We're actually involved with a labour force data base project at the moment. All that information will be available on our data basis in the very near future. We've been cataloguing and taking information out of industry publications going back to the early '60s and so we've got an incredible amount of information now for the last fifteen months. We've had Paul Curtis especially; he's been employed casually to do the job but he's probably been almost a full-time employee and the amount of information that he's put into that data base out

of the magazines, it's really considerable at this stage. Went through the exercise just a couple of weeks ago of one query, one of our interstate people wanted to find out what we had just on aquaculture research, not on aquaculture in general but just on aquaculture research and we just typed into the research facility the two words "aquaculture" and "research" and we came out with eighteen pages of entries that we were able to pass on and those eighteen pages of entries of course related to either press releases or publications that we have in the resource centre. So that's quite valuable.

The original idea, that's apart from this data basis, was to or is and we're proceeding down that track of having facilities, packages, complete training session packages, that we can distribute to TAFE colleges or any training institution wherever the case may be. The reasoning behind that is the fishing industry, while they're say in the catching sector, 23,000 odd people and about 3,500 in the secondary side of the industry, those people are spread all round the country and it's not that easy to attract sufficient numbers to warrant running a training course. So the idea being that the educational institutions, it's not worth their while to have full-time facilities available in their colleges to run courses. Just say for example, say a Master 5 Course which in the future will be known as a Skipper 3. If we take a remote TAFE college, they might want to run one course every two years. Well obviously they haven't got the staff or the resources to run it. Well this National Resource Centre can make all the teaching material available, video tapes and session plans etc and if need be, personnel to industry instructors or TAFE instructors to do the teaching. So that way we're getting a better utilisation of the resources we have and we're not duplicating them setting them up all around the coast. I mean obviously where the need's warranted we do have facilities set up permanently but we're finding that because of the numbers and because of factors like licence limitation, you've not got a big throughput of people coming through all the time and you've got a definite training market. That market, once you've hit it once, they're only training the replacement people. So we're not necessarily looking at training a lot of people at any one time.

One of the things that we have with the Resource Centre is a course register. On this register we're trying to have every course that's connected with the fishing industry that's being conducted anywhere in the country, to have that recorded so we can let people know well and truly in advance where there is a course being conducted, that they may be interested in. Fishing's a seasonal occupation. If people know well and truly in advance that there's going to be a course at a certain place at a certain time and that's convenient to them, they go to it.

Although another way we're going at this point of time is perhaps a little bit away from some of the formal training. As you'd probably be aware, up until we became involved with the training here in 1976, there was no formal training in the fishing industry so all the training that was being undertaken in the industry was done on the job so it was an on the job training. Now you'd find at this stage that probably 90% of the training that was done in the industry is still done by the industry on the job. We're going through the exercise at this point of time to try and identify that training and obviously there has to be a motivation for it and that motivation is their training guarantee that's being imposed on industry in this next financial year and a training guarantee of course for all enterprises that have a salary in excess of \$200,000. In other words, say equivalent to about eight employees, they will be required to show a contribution to training of at least one percent or an amount equal to one percent of that \$200,000 or whatever their wages bill is (their gross wages).

So it's now become very important for the industry that we do identify their training that is done on the job because the industry is making a substantial contribution to

training through the on-the-job training and particularly the secondary side of the industry and I suppose the advice of the catching sector but not quite as much. Then the secondary side of the industry, because of the seasonal nature of the work, you don't have twelve months of the year employment so you're virtually getting to the situation where the secondary side of the industry is training largely a new workforce every year. So obviously they're contributing a fair bit to training and so that needs to be identified and what we're doing at this precise point of time with our labour force data base, we're identifying the occupational classifications in the industry and then we're doing a skill audit and we'll be identifying the skill levels for all those identified classifications. Having achieved that, we'll then be proceeding to have the on-the job training that is being conducted identified, formally structured and recognised and so they can be taken as a contribution to training. If it's not formally structured well obviously the industry can't claim that it is.

As far as the industry's concerned, this on the job training, or I should say the training guarantee, that's really only going to apply to enterprises that are fairly large. So there's smaller operators which probably mostly predominate through the industry, they're not going to be concerned with it. We're finding it's going to be very important, even for those people, to identify their contribution to training through on the job training because the industry itself needs to be able to say, "We are contributing this \$X to training". So that takes on a fairly important note at the moment. Then added to that is that we've been called on as an industry, as are all industries, to lift our game, to make ourselves more competitive in the international market-place. Now the fishing industry is pretty competitive internationally but even so there's a lot we can do to lift our game and that study, the ASTEC study, identified a lot of areas in the [unclear] area where there is a great need for training. Also another area that we're looking at where training could help us is the import replacement. There's so much of fish imported into the country and I think last year, what 400 odd million dollars worth of fish imported and about 500 and what 30 million exported so we're nearly importing as much as we're exporting. Obviously there's a training need there if we can do something about it. Now if you're going to upgrade your workforce or the skills of your workforce [the way to do this] is to build on the system that you have in place now and the system that predominates as we've just been saying is the on the job system. So that's where we're looking at is upgrading the on the job training so [unclear] instruction we get and upgrading it.

Another one of the Government's current programmes that they're introducing is the competency based training. Now the competency based training concept will suit this industry very nicely and I can see that even for the certificate of competency area of the catching sector, it will reduce the cost to industry by allowing more on the job training and getting the skills that are actually developed on the job, getting them recognised and accredited for their certificates of competency. So that will reduce the time necessary under training of the job and probably answer one of the problems of the marine authorities in that they've been saying that fishermen are not well enough trained. That's something we would dispute [laughs] but some of the State marine authorities, I've got correspondence there relating to the fact that they consider that because of a growing number of incidents involving fishing vessels that the training is lacking and the fishermen need to be trained to a higher standard.

JD This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

MIRABELLA We would dispute that the fishermen need to be retrained to a higher standard and we're saying its the form of assessment that's at fault and that fishing, or skippering a boat, is a practical job. We're saying that fishermen should be tested practically so in other words that they can demonstrate that they have the required skills and not go through the system of writing an essay on what they should be doing but actually prove that they can do it. We feel that the standards there are high enough. They're higher than the international standards and if a person can prove that they actually have the required skills, it will be a better system of doing it.

Now the competency base training model fits that nicely and so we will be pushing that line with the Marine authorities. There is currently a review of the WESAL Code being undertaken and there's a new section being written which relates specifically to fishing vessels. So we're hoping that we will be able to introduce this system for those and the same would apply for the secondary side of the industry. I feel there is a need for us to have formal qualifications that are recognised and the people have developed a degree of skill that they can be accredited with and that that's a qualification that can be transferred not only throughout the country but also to other industries. If you think that the processing side of the fishing industry is fairly closely alined to the food processing industry and that if we can get credits for skills acquired in the fishing industry, that they would have applied generally through the food processing area and vice versa that the food processing area will have developed qualifications that we will recognise.

So I'd say that the future is looking fairly good as far as having people who've developed a lot of skill. As you go around the country and talking to the people on all sides of the industry, there are people who have developed an incredible level of skill that's never ever been recognised. We have an old saying around the fishermen, anyway that the best qualification is your bank balance [laughs]. That's proof that you know your job, that you can't get away from your bank balance [unclear] but now having a qualification, and a real qualification that fits the programmes of the Government, or well the initiatives that the current Government is currently pushing on industry training to make Australian industry more competitive. I think, the way we're going, I think it'll be a good thing. We've just got to get the industry to accept it [laughs].

JD Communication must be a tremendous problem for you; communication with industry and communication with other training institutions of all sorts. Do you have a publication that....

MIRABELLA Yes we've only just started in this financial year to produce a bimonthly publication called **Net News** and that relates specifically to training, promoting the Training Committees Council, promoting the training as a concept to the industry and also letting the industry know what training is available there.

Another aspect that we're looking at is, with the Resource Centre, just the transferring of information. We claim that information is training, being able to have access to information is training; whether that be marketing information; whether that be research information. We consider that the transfer of information is an act of training. The developments in the industry are very important and we subscribe to a press clipping service and we're intending to put out a media watch bulletin on a regular basis just to let the people in the industry know what's available in our data base because it's all being recorded in our data base and just to perhaps give an idea of what the trends in the industry, what's the current happenings around the industry.

It's surprising actually. I thought I was reasonably up with what was happening around the coast and then I find that our lad there, Paul, putting all the press clipping information, knows much more about what's happening in the industry at the moment than I do because he's got the press clippings from all around the country going in. He tells me. If I want to know anything, I ask him now [laughs]. So we decided that's not a bad sort of information to have and we also floated that at the last National Fishing Industries Council Meeting in Canberra just a couple of weeks ago and that generated a lot of interest there from the NFIC people on having access to information, current information. I mean I think that's the value of any data base that it is current; its being updated all the time.

That's going to be one of our big problems of course, paying for keeping it going and these facilities don't pay for themselves so our big question in the future is to get sufficient industry support to keep it going. The FIROA grant, it de-established it and it was quite clear that that grant was just to establish it. It's now up to industry to support itself and to keep the facility going. I think we can demonstrate to industry that there's a lot of value in the centre and I feel fairly confident that we'll get that support, particularly now as the.... No I'd better not say that [laughs]... the training guarantee but that's a fact though. We are eligible for, or if any of the enterprises in the industry make a contribution to the Resource Centre or to the Training Council, that is classified as a valid contribution to training. So may be we won't have such a problem in the future but it is a concern at the moment, attracting sufficient funds to keep the operation going. We're now at the stage where we've pretty well extended our development funds on the Resource Centre and we're using our Training Council Operational Support moneys to keep the system running but obviously we've got limitations there. We can't continue to use the Operational Support grant so we need to attract a little bit more industry money and the way we do that is sell ourselves [to] provide the facility and if you've got the goods, people will contribute. If you haven't they won't but I'm pretty confident that we've got a really good system going here.

As a matter of fact we're going to present it as a model for all the other national industry groups. There are nineteen national networks of Industry Training Councils and we're the only one with this type of resource centre and we're going to develop it as a model through all the other ITCs (National ITCs) and perhaps suggest that it would justify their existence even more by having it instead of having all this information on the industry available nationally as well as having the training materials and information.

JD Do you have access to other institutions' data bases?

MIRABELLA Yes. I'm not too au fait with what we do actually have access to but certainly all our Training Councils anywhere in our network would have access to TAFE information, TAFE data basis. The Maritime College, our information is available to them and their's for us. The Australian Fishery Service, they've established a contact there and should be able to give you a bit more information on that but certainly we do, yes.

JD Who has access to the information that you have available here?

MIRABELLA Everybody but we're wanting to provide a service for the industry that anybody who wishes to use the facility can do so without a service fee but they can do it, just come and use it free of charge. I think the value of the service, if people had to pay a lot of money to get access to the data base, I don't think they would have a lot of interest in it but there is.... By providing the service and allowing people free access

to it, I think a lot better use will be made of it and information will be transferred around the industry a lot better.

JD What about people from outside the industry, researchers say or the public in general?

MIRABELLA Obviously they will have access to anything that we've got but if it's going to involve a cost to the industry or to the Resource Centre operations, well obviously we'll have to look at how we can recover those costs, but at this stage we don't have any plans for that. The next meeting of Directors of the Council which is coming up next month, this is one of the agenda items actually where we will be going for recovering some of our costs. We do have to be careful that we don't contravene the ICIS at the data base. The software that we're using is ICIS which is a programme developed by the International Labour Organisation and we have access to that as a non-profit making organisation. So whatever we do, we've got to be careful that we don't deny anybody access to that information because that would invalidate the use of the ICIS programme because we get it free of charge because of that. So I would say in all probability the next directors' meeting will establish that everybody has access to it but there's no firm policy written down at this point of time but hopefully in another few weeks there will be.

JD Dennis, presumably when you started with a sort of a [unclear] if you like, a blank form, you had a backlog of information to get onto your data base. Are you up-to-date yet so that you're putting in now only the current material?

MIRABELLA Oh we must be getting that way. Certainly the publications that we do hold, obviously they're catalogued and they've been attended to but we will be getting access to other information that goes back earlier. Obviously that's not on the data base yet but I would say that we're probably up-to-date. I'd have to just check with Paul to see exactly where he is but I know he is feeding in current information. Certainly the press releases are this weeks. (I just remembered I left some downstairs to bring up before. I forgot them). The industry publications.... We subscribe to the international publications like **Fishing News International**, and that, **American National Fishermen, Marine Policy**. They're certainly up-to-date so if anybody wanted a search on what information we had, that would be up-to-date.

JD Before we finish, is there anything else that you'd like to have recorded on this expose of this institution?

MIRABELLA Ah, that's a hard one because you tend to have [unclear] issues before the industry and before the organisation at the moment and obviously because they're the current ones, they're the ones that are coming through on the tape. [pause] No I don't really.... Our long term objectives of having industry qualifications recognised and having skills that have been developed in the industry, having them recognised as a [unclear] qualification, I think that's fairly important. The development of a proper career structure for the industry is something that we're very keen to have happen and with the on-the-job training scheme that we're looking at now, and with the traineeships, I think we're getting to the start of a career structure.

On the other side of the coin with the people that are coming out of our tertiary institution, the Maritime College, well obviously that's another facet of a career structure. So with the industry shifting a little bit from the owner/operator to the integrated operations that we've got with some of the big companies that own the vessels right through to the international marketing thing, the people with the tertiary qualifications are quite important to them. From an employer's point of view it's the

old system of being able to see the written qualifications, so the value of an employee is valid in their cases, although I think also recognised skills developed within the industry is probably just as valid as far as those organisations are concerned. I think that's probably the most important one, is that recognition.

I think the other one to, the uniform should be more [unclear]. We're not happy at this point of time, the industry has never, ever been happy with the USL Code. The fact that it's under review at the moment does give us the opportunity to get standards that we consider are appropriate for the industry and it is a practical occupation, skippering a boat or being an engineer on a boat. We feel that the qualifications should reflect that and after what, twelve, thirteen years of trying to have it reviewed we're finally in that position of having reviewed. If we get the standards that we would like and we're hoping that these will fall in line with international standards, we've been very much involved ourselves in the international scene as well. We have attended international maritime organisation meetings. I personally have been involved with the development of the international document for guidance for training of fishermen which is a joint FAO, ILO, IMO publication and I was a member of the FAO working group that developed that.

If we can have those same standards applicable to the Australian scene, I'll be quite happy because at the moment the standards that are specified under USL are a fair bit above the standards that are specified internationally. We feel that Australian fishermen shouldn't be disadvantaged particularly at this point of time because we have some foreign operations in our waters now and the standards required for people, well virtually competing with our own Australian people, are not [unclear]. In other words our people have got a harder job to get their qualifications than their opposition from our countries. I think with the freedom of movement or movement into the industry being a little bit freer now with a document or a marine order that came into force last year, Marine Order 51, which did recognise foreign qualifications, I think we're having a bit of a tendency with some of the later operators to bring in people with overseas qualifications rather than train up appropriate Australian fishermen to skipper or run their bigger operations. I'd like to see not too much of that. I'd rather see our Australians getting those qualifications. If they're going to be able to get them with the same ease as people in New Zealand or the UK, wherever the case may be, well and good.

Probably too the Americans. I think in the tuna area our fishermen are competing with Americans and the American qualifications are nowhere near as stringent as ours. In fact they're almost non-existent I feel. We have a training manual there for the American industry and below a certain tonnage all they've got to do is sign a statement that they've actually read the manual. So there's no certification involved in it. So I'm not advocating that we do that but I would like to see the qualifications for Australian fishermen to really reflect the needs of the fishing industry and not the needs of the shipping industry.

What they do now, there's a lot of ill feeling towards the certification requirements in that they've been developed by people who have been involved in the trading sector and predominantly foreign young masters and predominantly retired foreign going masters and their recollections of what it was like at sea twenty years ago and the 1990s practicalities of what it's like at sea now, are two different things. When they relate their experience to a fishing boat it leaves a lot to be desired and we're forever running up against the argument of celestial navigation as distinct from satellite navigation that we have now. The celestial according to the old salts is the only way to go and I could point out to them that celestial navigation's only food for a couple of times a day if it's not overcast. If you drop your sexton on the deck it's no good

anyway and they say, "Well what if you have a malfunction in your machinery, your satellite navigator"? Well usually people have back-up systems these days anyway. [with] The weekly GPS you've got an instance read-out. You move a foot one direction [and] its indicated; a degree of accuracy that you'll never get with celestial. I mean that is the 1990s technology and what's more the fishing boats have got them in and we want the syllabus requirements of USL to reflect that it is [the] 1990s not 1900 or 1800, whatever the case may be when their system started.

So that's probably the areas that we've got our most interest in. I think if it wasn't for that I'd still be a fisherman. I wouldn't be here now. As I started to say earlier, I didn't really intend to give up fishing and I got involved in this. I agreed to tell them about it for a little while to get the thing started and I intended to go back to sea but after a period of time I was persuaded to stay ashore. My wife didn't really want me to go back to sea either and so I'm still here. I think it's important otherwise I wouldn't be here.

JD Obviously you haven't found it lacking in interest Dennis?

MIRABELLA There's never a dull moment [laughs].

JD Look, thank you very much for this interview. It's been good.

MIRABELLA Yeah. OK.

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr Dennis Mirabella, training development executive of the National Fishing Industry's Training Council and the National Training and Resource Centre in Melbourne, Victoria.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





Verbatim transcript of an interview with CHARLES NORLING

INTRODUCTION

This interview with Mr Charles Norling was conducted in his home at Port Welshpool on the 23rd February, 1990. It is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry. The interviewer is Jack Darcey.

Charles Norling joined his father's fishing boat at aged thirteen and fished extensively in Bass Strait and along the Victorian and Tasmanian coasts. The family operated a number of boats, some of which they built themselves to their own specifications. They fished for many species including scale fish, shark and rock lobster. Although he spent a very long working lifetime in the industry, Mr Norling did not enjoy the life of a fisherman and since his retirement some six years ago has not set foot on another vessel, nor does he intend to do so. The arduous nature of the work, its hazards and limited rewards as he outlines on this tape, perhaps explain why.

There is one side of one tape. The interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Charles would you please record your full name.

NORLING Charles Ronald Norling.

JD And when were you born?

NORLING 16th of the 7th 1913.

JD And where were you born?

NORLING Rhyll Phillip Island.

JD Oh that's the name of the town? Is that a Welsh name?

NORLING Oh I couldn't tell you. No idea.

JD It's still a little settlement on Phillip Island?

NORLING Oh yeah.

JD Phillip Island would have been vastly different in those days?

NORLING Oh would it what. Yes there was hardly anyone there then to what there is now.

JD Yeah. There'd be what, three or four towns there on the Island now?

NORLING Well there was actually four then but they're much bigger now than they were in those days, see.

JD Yeah, and bitumen roads all over the place?

NORLING There were no bitumen roads in those days.

JD No. Was your father a fisherman?

NORLING Yes.

JD On Phillip Island?

NORLING [unclear] Yes.

JD And did you have brothers that entered fishing?

NORLING Two.

JD Both became fishermen?

NORLING Yeah.

JD Was your father's father, your grandfather.... [a fisherman]?

NORLING No, no, no. My father's father was in Sweden. We never ever knew him.

JD So how did your father come to come out to Phillip Island?

NORLING He came from Sweden as a shipwright on a sailing ship or ship's carpenter they called them in those days.

JD Yes and left the ship here in Melbourne, did he?

NORLING Ran away from the ship in Geelong.

JD Yes. That's a fairly common thing apparently? So many of the people who arrived here like that went into fishing. It's remarkable.

NORLING Yeah a lot of them did, yeah.

JD You were brought up on Phillip Island?

NORLING Yeah. Went to school there.

JD And when did you enter fishing then?

NORLING I left school when I was thirteen and a half and went on the crayboat with my father.

JD Right. Where were you fishing for crays then?

NORLING All round Flinders Island and Tasmania, nor-west and east coast.

JD Yeah. What was your progress through the fishing industry? You started as a deckhand with your father....

NORLING Oh yeah. I was only seventeen when I took charge of one of those boats.

JD As the skipper for your father?

NORLING Yes and just went on from there.

JD Did you acquire a boat of your own ultimately?

NORLING Oh years after, yes.

JD What, did you have it built or....

NORLING I had three or four of them built.

JD Did you?

NORLING I had three new ones built professionally and we built two ourselves.

JD Did you? What, were they wooden vessels or....

NORLING Wooden boats, yes. The last one we had built professionally in Tasmania was steel and the reason for that [was] because we didn't know anything about welding and we couldn't build a steel boat then.

JD So you actually built your own vessels?

NORLING Yeah I'll show you the photos of them in a minute when we've time to spare.

JD Where did you build them?

NORLING Alongside the shed out there.

JD What size ships were they?

NORLING The last one was 60 feet and when they put it on the trailer to launch it they estimated it weighed 24 tonne.

JD Gee. Did you do it yourself?

NORLING Myself and two sons, yes.

JD Goodness. That requires a lot of skill Charles?

NORLING Oh well I'd learned it over the years with my father. See we did all our own repairs and boat alterations and built a few boats with him in between times 'cause he brought all his knowledge from Sweden with him.

JD Yes. What sort of timber did you use?

NORLING Different timber. We had karri from Western Australia in the keel and some of the other large timber, blue gum for the ribs that came from out of the forest out locally in Gippsland here and celery top decking and that from Tasmania.

JD Did they turn out well, these vessels?

NORLING They were good, yeah.

JD As good as the professionally built ones?

NORLING Better. When I say better, they were built the way we wanted them. Professionals don't do them the way you want them. There's things that you ask them to do [and] its not done the way you wanted it done.

JD They were built for crayfishing were they?

NORLING Both of them yes.

JD Yes and the sort of fishing you did, did it require you to be at sea for several days at a time or was it out today....

NORLING Several days?

JD Several weeks?

NORLING When I first started crayfishing you depended on sail and very small motors in the boats and the longest trip I was away from home was 29 days from the time we went till we came back again.

JD Where did you fish?

NORLING Round Tasmania, Flinders Island and down there and [if] you got bad weather you sheltered all round those islands. You didn't come back till you got a load of crays.

JD So you'd be out for up to four weeks?

NORLING The average trip was about twelve to fourteen days.

JD You'd just stay out until you got a load?

NORLING Oh yes, you didn't come home till you got enough fish to go home with. Half the time you had nothing to eat by the time you came home.

JD And how many crew would you have on board?

NORLING There was generally three, two besides the skipper.

JD The weather must have been a real problem Charles?

NORLING It was. You see you only had small motors depending on sail everywhere.

JD Yeah and it's notorious this ocean here, isn't it, the Bass Strait?

NORLING Oh, [a] terrible place.

JD What about navigational aids?

NORLING Well we had nothing in those days bar a chart that you can buy around any of the places in Melbourne. Just an ordinary maritime chart and a compass. Nothing else; not a thing. Oh I had a barometer. Well of course that was nothing to do with navigation but that's all we had.

JD Yeah, [a] bit different now?

NORLING Yes. The last boat we sold, we had everything on it, echo sounders and radar and all this sort of thing.

JD Charles, you're not still fishing are you?

NORLING Oh no. I gave it away six years ago.

JD Yes. Are you pleased to be ashore?

NORLING Yes. I'll tell you what I used to say over the years. If ever I'm lucky enough to get out of Bass Straits I'll never put my foot on a boat again. I haven't and won't.

JD Charles, you'd have started your career in fishing during the Depression. Would you like to comment on your experiences during the Depression?

NORLING Well any fish you caught in the Depression were worth nothing. It was a very, very common thing to catch a load of fish and go in debt on them. In fact here, some of the boats that were here catching salmon and that sort of thing, if it was warm weather at all they wouldn't even send them to the market 'cause they wouldn't pay their way. At one stage I caught 60 bags of crayfish in about three weeks and we were six pound in debt through catching them after we paid all the boat's expenses.

JD That's incredible isn't it?

NORLING Yes.

JD Things changed though, didn't they?

NORLING Well they did. They changed suddenly. I remember we were getting practically nothing for crays and I came in one trip with about 33 or 34 bags of crays and we got a good price. I just forget what it was. We got a good price for them and from then on it seemed to alter.

JD Were you still crayfishing when the market suddenly took off and they started selling tails to America in the mid-'50s?

NORLING Yes but we never ever sold fish to anybody who did that. We sold all our fish to the Melbourne market.

JD Oh. Did you go for other types of fish besides crayfish?

NORLING Yes. In 1942 we switched over to sharking; went out of the crayfishing onto sharking.

JD There was a great demand for shark during those war years, wasn't there?

NORLING Yes. It increased and increased; (the demand) increased until you were getting good money for them. There was more money to be made at that than crayfishing because there was more of the shark about.

JD Yes. Were you selling the flesh of the fish or the livers, or both?

NORLING No flesh AND the livers, both.

JD The catches in shark have declined in recent years haven't they?

NORLING Oh very much so, yes, yes.

JD Why would you say that's happened?

NORLING Oh it's still being over fished. They've been fished out. That's the reason they've been declining.

JD And crayfish has declined too in terms of the catch?

NORLING Yes. I believe this year's [a] very, very poor season.

JD Would you say for the same reason do you think?

NORLING Oh I think so, yes, yeah. It would have to be.

JD Charles, what are some of the other problems besides the depletion of stock that the fisheries face?

NORLING Oh well I couldn't say what other reasons it would be why the fish have got scarce.

JD Not just the scarcity of fish. Is there a problem of pollution in this area?

NORLING Oh doesn't seem to be, no. I wouldn't say so.

JD What about management? How did you get on with the Fisheries Department?

NORLING Oh we always got on alright with them [and] had no problems with them.

JD Regulations weren't a problem?

NORLING I think the regulations they enforced were necessary. We didn't think so perhaps at the time but it turned out, it was. No doubt about that.

JD What about licences? Was that role handy, do you think?

NORLING Oh I think so, yes. The licence didn't amount to very much when I was fishing first, [it] didn't amount to very much. I just forget what it was but it was very low, a very low fee.

JD It's very difficult for a young person now days to get into fishing, isn't it?

NORLING Yes. It's almost impossible really because for two reasons. Finance is going to stop him for a start. It's gonna cost a fortune to get into a boat and then again the quantity of fish and that that's about, it would be very hard to pay that off.

JD Do you have sons in fishing?

NORLING Not now, no.

JD They were once in fishing?

NORLING Yeah, the three of them. One's up in Buchan, Victoria and the other two are in Melbourne.

JD They've got out of fishing altogether?

NORLING Yeah.

JD So what, you're the last now of the family to do.... [unclear]

NORLING Yes. There's no Norlings left fishing at all.

JD Your brother Jack was a fisherman too, was he?

NORLING Yeah, I've been thinking of that. He'd be interested to have a talk to you.

JD Has he also left fishing?

NORLING Oh yes, he's over 80.

JD Is he.... yes. What about fishermen's organisations, Charles? Are they effective?

NORLING Well I don't know whether they are or not. They had an association here and its never been very.... got along very well. There's too much squabbling between them and at the present time I don't know whether it's even working. There's always

somebody that wanted to get out of it and do something that wasn't along with the rules and sort of messed it up.

JD As we came along to your place we passed the fishing boat harbour, I suppose it was, and there were quite a few vessels [which] appear to be tied up there.

NORLING There's some scallop boats there I think. To tell you the truth I never ever go down there.

JD Don't you?

NORLING No, but somebody said there's a few scallop boats tied up down there because there's no scallops about.

JD What sort of fishing do the people who are still fishing from Port Welshpool.... [are they] still in the crayfishing?

NORLING There's two cray boats [which] work from here and there's oh I think four or five shark boats and then there's a few little inlet boats that do netting in the inlet here.

JD For scale fish of course?

NORLING Scale fish, yeah.

JD In its heyday, how many boats would have fished out of Port Welshpool?

NORLING I think there was twelve or fourteen crayboats and there was.... you might not believe this, there was no closed seasons then. There was crayfish in this port all the year round. They used to moor them on those.... you've seen those triangular crayfish caufs as they call them? Well they used to be moored out on a line out there and there'd be some here nearly all the year round.

JD What about shark boats?

NORLING They only started about 1940. There was one came here from San Remo. He came here to put his boat on the slip and went out and did a couple of trips sharking and he stopped here all his life, for the rest of his life. That started the sharking here.

JD Were there many boats fishing for shark from Port Welshpool?

NORLING Oh yes, must have been.... Oh not a lot. I suppose [all] there ever was was four or five. It's about the same as what the.... No I think there's only three now.... (one, two three) about four now I think.

JD Was scalloping ever done from here?

NORLING Only of late when these boats came here lately. Over the years, no it wasn't.

JD No one dredging on the Tasmanian side, was there?

NORLING They used to work round Tasmania a lot, [the] Tasmanian boats but they didn't bring them here but these boats that were here now or have been here lately have been dredging locally. They're getting a few [but] no quantity.

JD Charles, do you see the fisheries in this area reviving?

NORLING [pause] No, I don't think I can because as long as you keep fishing something that's down pretty low, it's not gonna get any better is it?

JD It must be hard lines on the fishermen?

NORLING Well it's the same in every thing you go into. Some make good money, some make just mediocre and some make nothing. That's going on here at the moment.

JD Right. What about getting labour - deckhands? Is that easy?

NORLING Well years ago it used to be easy because those young fellows walk around [and] couldn't get jobs anywhere else but today it is pretty hard.

JD Is it hard to get anyone or is it hard to get suitable people?

NORLING Well it's more or less hard to get anybody but there's not very many experienced ones about; not many at all.

JD Did you have trouble getting crew when you were fishing?

NORLING No, not so much, no. Those days, as I say, people just took it in their stride to go fishing and there wasn't much else in the port to do you see.

JD You'd have been involved in fishing when the rules about having vessels surveyed were brought in?

NORLING Yeah.

JD Was that a good idea?

NORLING Definitely. There were boats in this port that should never ever [have] left the jetty they were in such terrible condition.

JD And did the fishermen object to having their....

NORLING Some of them did. Some used to say, "I keep my boat in good order. Why should the surveyors have anything to do with it"? That's not the point. You might not believe this but there were [which] boats left here to go out crayfishing many years ago, they had no motors and they were depending on sails and some of those sails were patched with crayfish bags and the old worn out links in the anchor chain, they used to cut them out and put two or three turns of pot wire in them. That's honest.

JD In this sort of area that you're fishing in, or were fishing in, with boats as run down as that, there must have been lots of accidents, loss of life?

NORLING Well surprisingly few. As time went on there was an occasional boat got lost but not as many as what you would have thought.

JD Do you think the introduction of surveys has reduced the accidents?

NORLING Well I think it has. Another thing, when you stop and think of it now, the average person today that knew of those things, he wouldn't go out in those boats now that we went out in years ago. Boats that were leaking that much that you had to sleep with your foot through a hole in the floor so when the water came up it woke you up to get up and pump it.

JD [laughter] Yeah, you wouldn't sleep much would you? Do you see a problem for commercial fishermen because of the growth in the number of recreational fishermen? Is that a problem do you think?

NORLING Ah locally it is because the recreational fishermen have been trying for some time to stop the commercial fishing in the inlet here. They haven't been successful so far but eventually they might be like the greenies, they might be successful. Oh yes they make a difference, there's no doubt.

JD Charles, in a life time spent in fishing, you would surely have met many interesting people (characters)?

NORLING Yes well see quite a number of the crewmen on these crayboats here years and years ago were old Scandinavian seamen that came here off ships and wandered down in this direction. There were some comical fellows, there was no doubt, with nicknames.... There was Californian Bill and Silent Harry, Gramophone Chris, [laughs]; all these different ones. An odd one fell off the jetty and got drowned; two or three of them actually over the years.

JD They'd been celebrating I suppose?

NORLING Mostly, yes. They had been too.

JD Any other people that stand out in your memory as memorable?

NORLING Oh not really.

JD Can you recall any events that happened to you in your vessels that should be recorded?

NORLING Oh no only I lost a crew member over board once, a local man here that had eleven children. They were mostly grown up at the time but we never ever got him.

JD What, did he fall over board or....

NORLING Yes it was a clear fine day with a little bit of breeze and the boat was rolling a bit. There was five or six fellows aboard the boat, a fairly big boat, and five or six of them aboard it. Everyone was on deck and not one saw him go over.

JD Goodness me.

NORLING Not one saw him go over.

JD Did he get his leg caught in a rope or....

NORLING We don't know. No we didn't have any ropes over the side or anything. We were travelling.

JD Just over balanced and fell?

NORLING Well what we put it down to.... he was gonna go down and make a cup of tea and must have gone to get a bucket of water to wash his hands because the bucket was missing.

JD And you went back to find him.... [unclear]

NORLING Oh we went back and we found him but we couldn't get him. There was a chap dived over board and got hold of him and this young fellow that day got cramped and we nearly lost him too. He still lives here locally, the young fellow who went over to get him.

JD Fishing's always been a hazardous occupation?

NORLING Oh yeah.

JD Did you like it?

NORLING The fishing? NO. I didn't mind the fishing part of it so much but I didn't like the Straits and I didn't like the life, the isolation and that I didn't like.

JD So you wouldn't recommend it to a young fellow?

NORLING No. None of my boys liked it and would ever go back to it.

JD Right Charles. Well look, thank you very much for talking to us.

NORLING You're welcome.

JD Thank you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Charles Norling, retired fisherman, of Port Welshpool, Victoria.Z

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with TIM O'BRIEN

INTRODUCTION

This interview with Mr Tim O'Brien, ex Victorian Fisheries Officer and now eel fisherman, was conducted in Geelong by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian Fishing Industry on the 12th February, 1990.

In the interview Mr O'Brien outlines fisheries' division organisation, the duties of the fisheries' officers and the changes he saw taking place in many of the Victoria fisheries. He comments on management techniques and on problems such as pollution, poaching and depletion of stock as well as the conflict of interest between amateur and professional fishermen among other things.

In a fascinating segment, Mr O'Brien describes the eel fishery he now engages in, their habits, harvesting, cultivation and marketing.

The interview is of particular interest in that it gives an account of the fishing industry from two different aspects of an enforcer of the regulations governing the industry on the one hand, and that of a practical fisherman on the other.

Mr O'Brien manages to maintain a fair and balanced outlook from both points of view.

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

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Could you record your full name and date and place of birth?

O'BRIEN My full name is Frank Bassett O'Brien, born at Eagle Hawk, Victoria, 5th April, 1925.

JD Were you brought up in Victoria?

O'BRIEN Yes, I went to school in Bendigo. I joined the Navy as a boy in 1941 and I stayed in the Navy until '46 in the hydrographic branch of the Navy. Then after '46 ('47 I think I came home finally) I went back to a stock and station agent job I had and then finally joined the Fisheries in 1950 (I think it was 1950) and I left there in 1975. I was stationed mainly at Port Fairy and Geelong. I also worked in other districts on Murray cod and freshwater fish, trout, kelp. Caught cod and kelp for the Noranda Fish Hatcheries in New South Wales when they were starting off making their first attempts to breed Murray fish.

From 1951, when I went to Port Fairy or 1952 (I'm not sure what it is) Port Fairy was the western district office of the Fisheries Department. Its boundary went from Port Fairy to Ballarat in the north, from Ballarat to the north of Hamilton to the South Australian boarder and down - about 12,000 square miles. It was a one man [laughs] one man station. I think at the time they had about seven of these districts in Victoria and they were all one man stations. In Port Fairy that included.... you also had to do the sea fishery and then later on (when the Commonwealth took an interest at the time of Gorton) when Gorton was Prime Minister they brought in the Commonwealth Fisheries Act and Julian May (an extraneous appointment) was the Commonwealth Fisheries Inspector. So that's just a rough outline of how the Department was situated in those days.

JD Was it a separate department then or was....?

O'BRIEN It was called the Fisheries and Game Department then and your duties included fisheries and also policing of the game (the duck season) and issuing permits for kangaroos and looking at the possum population; having open seasons on possums and water rats and all the various things. We were kept very busy [laughs].

JD You must have done an enormous amount of travelling too?

O'BRIEN Oh terrific yes. Used to wear a car out every year.

JD Was your role policing the Act, was that....?

O'BRIEN Yes, yes that was one of the roles. We detected offences both in the professional and the amateur field - that's in the fisheries. You attended Courts, prosecuted your own cases - you had to do the lot.

JD You've been busy all right.

O'BRIEN [laughs] With 10,000 square miles....

JD During your time in the Department you'd have seen a considerable growth I fancy in fisheries in your part of Victoria?

O'BRIEN Well, in actual fact, the 'cudal fishery failed about that time which was quite a big thing in western Victoria. Port Fairy was a big port, much bigger than what Portland was as far as fishing vessels were concerned, but then in the late.... The thing that held them together was the shark. Well the industry (the shark industry) was started mainly during the war for the (financed by Aspro) livers for extracting vitamins. Well, then the flesh was found to be marketable and it was marketed as flake of course and that sustained the.... that really kept the industry afloat for quite a number of years. It wasn't overfished in those days because the method of fishing was purely long lines. It wasn't until the introduction of mesh nets that you saw a depletion of the stocks about this time.

Another thing that happened about roughly in the.... I think it must have been somewhere about the 1960s, they discovered quite large crayfish grounds well off shore about 90 to 100 fathoms. The shark fishermen discovered these and they rigged up pots with long lines, 60, 70, 80 fathom floats and they had a ball for a couple of years. And they were sending off huge quantities of crayfish both out of Portland and Port Fairy. I suppose the grounds lasted roughly, I reckon, about five years and then

they became depleted because of the enormous pressure on them and at this particular time, Portland developed more.

Safcol came over from South Australia and they built facilities at the wharf at Portland in the new harbour (the new harbour had just been completed) and they actually built a cannery on the wharf hoping to can 'cuda and salmon. But unfortunately they didn't time it very well because it was about their first year when the mysterious disappearance of the barracuda occurred. They did can, they canned several lots of 'cuda and salmon (Australian salmon that is) and also abalone in those days. They canned abalone but I can't tell you the exact date that Safcol really collapsed there (or the factory collapsed) but it functioned for two or three years and I think the major thing there was just lack of stock.

JD Did the salmon industry decline?

O'BRIEN Well, I don't know that it declined. It was just one of those.... no one ever really made much effort or concentrated on salmon. It was just one of those more or less fill-in things. They used to get one of the old fishermen to stand up on the beach and if he saw a shoal of salmon, he'd get on his bike and ride down and say, "There's a shoal of salmon off the beach," and they'd rouse up a few fishermen and away they'd go and they might net 500 boxes in one shot whereas if you go down.... it was different on the east coast where they were employing aeroplanes and God only knows what, as spotters. That never occurred in the western areas.

JD Was is a beach fishery in the western....?

O'BRIEN Yes, what might have made a difference to the salmon in the western part of the State is that they're a sub species. The salmon that are found in the western part are actually spawned off Albany in Western Australia and they come over and tide (as juveniles) and then they grow up in the bays, mature and go back and the main fisheries, of course, were on the mature fish back in Western Australia and the fishery.... well really those fish were about three and four pound weren't mature fish. But the eastern salmon, he moves and spawns to the east - up the east coast.

JD He's a different..... ?

O'BRIEN No, for all intents and purposes he looks to be exactly the same fish but the only difference was that the western salmon, he only had seventeen gill rakers on the rakers - on the gills. The eastern salmon had 40. The eastern salmon, its main food was crill whereas the other salmon, its main food was whitebait and pilchards and one thing and another. Not that it wouldn't eat crill but with the set up of the gill rakers the salmon just opened its mouth and the water went through and the gills just held back all the plankton and swallowed it. Something like a whale for you, I presume!

Well, I don't ever consider it was a concentrated effort on salmon, not really. Everyone seemed to be into the money maker at the time. They'd just start exporting crayfish and as I said, they found these grounds in deep water and they fished those for three or four years perhaps, and anyway cleaned those up. By then the nets were operating on the shark and, of course, that increased the catch dramatically for a while and naturally, after two or three years of fishing, the stocks were definitely depleted.

Then you had the great mercury shemozzle. That played an immense and important part. Well, I'm not sure the year it came in, I should say it would have been about.... oh it was in the '60s any rate for a start, and it prohibited you catching shark over a certain size because it was considered the mercury content in the oversize shark was

too high for market - was a health hazard. There's no doubt about that, they live a long time. There were taggings by CSIRO on school shark and some sharks of the larger variety they tagged, somewhere up around the five foot, four foot length. They only grew another inch in about ten years or something like this [laughs] so they certainly were long lived. They must have been about 50 years old, they must have absorbed a lot of mercury. Where from? I don't know whether it was there naturally. There was a great lot of argument about that, of course, whether it was from industry or whether it was there naturally.

JD Does that law still apply?

O'BRIEN Well it's been eased over the years and it's been brought in again.... it all depends on how the government reacts. I haven't, in actual fact, I'm not sure if.... I haven't marketed fish in a market for about three years (I just sell direct and I don't see the market now) but there are all sorts of prohibitions. You couldn't bring shark across the boarder in a filleted form, but I think in the main, you'd have to check that out as to what State.... the regulations. They change them dramatically at times, but in those times (those '60s) they were very strict and transports were seized and Lord only knows what, carrying shark from South Australia.

Then, of course, the fishermen woke up. Tasmania didn't have any restrictions so they all landed in Tassie, sold it there, processed it there and sent it over to Victoria [laughs]. What you call a bureaucratic bungle [laughter].

JD Were you involved with the tuna industry at all?

O'BRIEN Only in a very small way. I think there were only two or three boats came across from South Australia and looked for tuna off Portland and I don't ever remember them getting good results there and they went back to Port Lincoln to their home port. I don't know, I don't think the tuna actually were present off those parts of the coast to any great degree.

JD Were you involved with scallop fisheries?

O'BRIEN I was in Geelong, yes. That was another bungle in many ways because the first thing they did, was state a minimum size and to my way of thinking the dredge they used was a great big heavy iron thing that they dropped on the bottom and they squashed everything. They pulled it up, then they sorted out the scallops and supposedly were to throw the undersized scallops out so they'd recover, but I don't think they ever recovered, not after being dredged and bucketed and one thing and another. Anyrate most boats were.... well let's put it this way, quite a lot of the boats they used to have a couple of scallop splitters on board and all the small stuff went down that way, and that was all split and nicely washed and cleaned and it went ashore. But regulations were brought in that it was more or less a mortal sin to start cleaning scallops at sea. That goes for all Australia, all these fisheries, you're not to clean anything more or less, or process anything at sea.

JD Why because it....

O'BRIEN Well you can't measure it. If you turn a thing into a fillet well that's it, isn't it. That's about it, but then the scallops.... At Geelong they used.... it was pretty easy to convert a normal cray boat or shark boat into a scallop boat. They used what they called an A-frame. Now all the A-frame was, it was like a derrick at the back and constructed like the figure A with a line to the top of it going back to the winch, and they lowered the bucket (the dredge over the back) and just used the A-frame more or

less as a derrick in which to lift the dredge back up again and tip it on to the deck (on to the back) and sorted out the scallops.

I can remember.... when the season was about to open in Port Phillip there would be boats from Portland, Port Fairy, Tasmania all over the place. There'd be 70 or 80 boats moored at the wharf at Geelong and in those times there was no licence register - there was no restriction on it. In the Fisheries Act in those times there was no provision for the restriction of a licence, but still that was altered in, I think in 1968, and they did. But see all those things about restricting licences, if you worked it there is a great argument. The scallop industry off Lakes Entrance, they used to work there, and they'd work here, and it almost came to a war as to where they were allowed to work and they weren't allowed to work. When they brought in the restriction on it you sort of had a licence to where you fished last - the Bay or Lakes Entrance. Of course, most of them maintained they fished both places [laughs] so you.... a lot of confusion there.

Then they brought in bag limits, bin limits on the scallops and that didn't come for many years because the opinion was that the biology of the creature, it only lived for about three years and it wasn't much good throwing it back if you caught it because it would only die any rate and be wasted. I don't know whether that thinking persists now or not. They used to do counts by measuring.... having grids in certain areas of the Bay and they'd send a diver down and they'd give a per square yard count and if the count was up to scratch, they'd fire the starter's gun and everyone went out. Oh it was a very lucrative industry. In Geelong alone they were one.... there was Mantasaris, Masinos, Kaitos, (there was another fellow). I think there were five plants and a lot of those would employ 40 women.

JD Processing?

O'BRIEN Yes. Some places they had 20 or 30 women, but a place like Masinos and Kaitos they'd have 20 or 30 women going flat out all the time, opening scallops and processing them. They were all export, most of them export and then they woke up to.... they made the product more acceptable to export when they froze them singularly so that when they were put in a little pack they'd come out.... if you wanted two scallops you could take them out. First of all they put them in big five kilo blocks and of course, a five kilo box would cost you a fortune over in Greece or somewhere, but then they brought them into.... They went to work and looked at the packaging and one thing and another, but it's state at the moment I don't know. I'm unsure you'd.... as I say the last lot of scallops I saw were in Melbourne markets. That was a great place there. They had processors in the market itself and of course there are great problems there. They soak scallops and by osmosis they'd take on a greater quantity of water and where you started with a kilo of scallop and you put them in the brine overnight you'd have a nice healthy half a kilo of water to [unclear - laughing] and all sorts of things like this had to be dealt with.

I was never involved with the scallop industry in Gippsland and that had problems all of its own, well just the same as the Bay.

JD Yes, it seems to be greatly reduced in the Bay though.

O'BRIEN Well, I think that the licences are definitely restricted which is a good thing and I think that the constant dredging did certainly damage the ecology and I think it had a lot to do with decreasing the habitat of the scallop.

JD Squid was another industry that had a flush and then....

O'BRIEN Yes, well that was the aeroplane.... I think they call it the aero squid. The calamari is the squid that they use locally in cafes and one thing and another. Well the calamari is just caught on jigs mainly off Queenscliffe on that dark ground with.... inside the bay areas and there are quite a number of fisherman would go out there and jig two or three boxes of squid a day, and that supplies the local market. But there was an attempt made to rig up a couple of boats. I think that must have been about the 1965, 70 somewhere about that, 1970 to fish for the Japanese market. And they did rig up boats (they got government assistance) and one of the Fisheries boats, the **Melitta** also, was rigged up as a demonstration model. And they went out with lights and they showed it possible, it was a great.... well there was potential there for a fishery but I think what happened to that was the product wasn't acceptable to the Japanese buyers. They required a more stringent cleaning than we could supply and I think they made a lot of excuses because they wanted it themselves. I'm pretty sure they got into it anyway. There are reports that fishermen saw people operating and one thing and another, but that only lasted to my knowledge, for about a couple of years. Whether the stock's still there or not, I'm uncertain.

JD There's very little export market in that as far as we're concerned in Australia, is that right?

O'BRIEN Well, I believe that's right.

JD Could we look at some of the problems that you've seen within the industry. What about the question of pollution?

O'BRIEN Well, pollution in bays in Corio Bay in my opinion that was the end of the scale fishery. What you West Australians call the white fishery isn't it. Here they call it the scale fishery. By 1965 a great number of the species they were tainted. There was mullet, some of the flatheads, any 'cuda, salmon (there was a lot of salmon in Corio Bay - they came into Corio Bay salmon - they were a great thing once). I think the only fish that didn't get tainted were, from memory, were whiting (oh dear there was another one) dorys they got tainted, but it was almost impossible for instance to market. No salmon, or mullet or fish like that caught in Corio Bay would be accepted at Melbourne market.

JD Tainted with what?

O'BRIEN When you cooked them you could smell and taste kerosene.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

O'BRIEN The Commonwealth was very much aware in the 60s that pollution was a big thing and they had an investigation (a Commonwealth one) into pollution and they sat in Geelong two or three times and evidence was given by all the fisheries people of the day, myself and the Deputy Director of Fisheries. Shell of course, denied any responsibility; that their traps were efficient and that they weren't actually discharging anything into the Bay that was in any way a pollutant. But the problem was pretty deep because the refinery uses a tremendous amount of water and it's taken in from the Bay and then it goes through the system and in refineries, no one can tell you how

many joints there are in a refinery then each one can leak a little bit of oil. There must be leaks and the oil gets in the water and then when it's finally discharged the algae and plankton break that oil down chemically and then the fish ingest that part of the food cycle and away it goes and everything absolutely reeks of kero. Kerosene taste. Matter of fact they used to call them butane boosted! [laughs]

Also not only did it ruin their market in Melbourne, but it ruined it here. In those days there'd still be fifteen (dozen or fifteen) fishermen that brought their catch to the wharf and they had a little shed on the end of the wharf here which was supplied by the Harbour Trust, gratis. Matter of fact the Harbour Trust were very good to the fishermen here, they supplied their moorings gratis, built all that as part of the complex (as a harbour) and a part for the fishermen and one thing and another, and put groynes there, and the fishermen were very happy tucked in behind there. And they had a good local market, mainly flounders. Flounder was a very successful day fish, perhaps one of the best the flounder. In season they had whiting, schnapper, flathead and, of course, they could no longer market mullet or salmon, teraki and things like that. They were definitely gone.

The only other big problem was seals. In a net fishery seals are absolutely devastating.

JD Tim, what about the management of the fisheries.

O'BRIEN Well, there's been many attempts at management. The first real one was in the cray fishery when, as a result of Mick Olsen's work, he pointed out without any doubt at all, that the female cray didn't often reach the minimum legal size required for crayfish in Victoria. So the matter was looked at. Alf Butcher was the Director at the time, and he saw clearly that these fish should be included in the Victorian catch, so he lowered the size of the females.

There were always seasons on female crayfish and, of course, fishermen frequently didn't throw them over and then they imposed a full closed season on crays to prevent this. What actually they did, in many districts for a couple of weeks prior to the opening of the females, they'd store them in pots and then they'd come in with a great well full of female crays that they'd been catching a fortnight before! So what they did, they had to have a complete season to prevent all.... this is one of things they used to do and it was just closed for females.

JD A sort of a holding pot?

O'BRIEN Well they had coffs, and they had.... they kept them in pots with lids when they caught them. They'd be fishing them for a week and they kept quite all right. The only thing that.... as octopus got in there they'd kill them, but still if you've got ten pots full of crays, what's an odd occy! Well, I've seen it myself, they'd come with a great well full and I'd say, "By golly, you had a good catch last night." "Yeah, ripper wasn't it!" Well that was the sort of attitude.

Well, you can see that a total closed season was essential. That, of course, was the limiting of equipment that mainly went in craypots, size of the vessel and the number of pots per foot etc. The shark fishery, well as I said before, the Nelladeftha that was the mercury, so it didn't receive a terrible amount of attention as far as regulations were concerned. They had size limits, minimum size limits. 24 inches for a gummy shark I think and 36 inches for a spill shark and at any rate, you weren't allowed to catch them much over that size so there you are.

Other regulations well, there was multitudes of them governing the use of nets in Corio Bay, the number of nets, the size of the meshes (that's in mesh nets).

Seasons for them, that mainly was brought about by pressure from the amateur fishermen who wanted a part of the action and they wanted it in the summer when they were able to get out so the professional, he was given the winter. And I think the season opened about May and then went on June, July, August up to about November, something like that - October. Then it was shut down and the amateurs took over in their thousands. It's nothing to see... amateur boats here have always been a big thing and, of course, you get a good outboard, the amateur fishery became well, much greater than what the professional was.

I should say without any doubt at all, that the amateurs would take ten times more fish. Even going way back in those days in 1965, '70, '75 the amateurs took far more than professionals ever did.

JD Would you say that the fisheries generally in Victoria, are well managed?

O'BRIEN Oh, I would say they're managed, but as to well managed... it's one of those things that as I say, there have been many attempts by the fishermen themselves to manage and the governments have given them their councils and there are a tremendous number of things that fishermen are able to sit on. But in my way of thinking well, it doesn't get them very far, it doesn't increase the stock. What I'm sort of thinking, it's the management of a dwindling resource, that's the way I look at it. The resource, in many instances has been depleted beyond question.

JD Do you think there's enough research into this depletion of stock?

O'BRIEN Well, no I don't think there is. I mean you take the trawl fishery at Portland. Well you see that sort of happened by well, without very little research. The fishermen themselves more or less set that up and there were a few efforts I think by the Department but I don't know if anyone has really been able to assess accurately the stock. I think you would have to make pretty good enquiries and see if anyone's actually written anything about it in recent times, or published anything.

JD To come back to the recreational versus professional, does that cause ill-feeling between the two bodies?

O'BRIEN Oh yes. There's a tremendous lot of these amateurs sell their catch.

JD Do they?

O'BRIEN Oh yes. There's no bag limits, there's no... it's always been a thorn in the side because an amateur as the law reads it, he has to take fish... If you were detecting the defence and you were the officer detecting the offence, you've got to prove that he caught those fish and the fish he caught are the fish he's selling. Now if you come to a processor and a fellow walks in the door with a big basket of whiting you say, "Right, got you!" and he'll say "Got what?" he said, "I bought these off Bill Smith down the wharf."

Now there's no offence to do that. So what they have to look at to prevent this is not allowing unlicensed people to be on these premises with fish. Things like this. They've got to look at it, and another way of getting around it was there'd always be a professional who'd meet these people; take their catch aboard and he'd make himself

a nice little commission. This went on, of course it went on, but still this sort of thing's been going on particularly in Bay fisheries where whiting.... whiting is the main. You could sell whiting anywhere practically - King George whiting - and amateurs do. I know amateurs now that make a living by fishing for six months of the year and just hooking whiting. They don't net them or anything, they don't have to because you can go out there and on a good day you can hook a 100, 120 good whiting and at so much a kilo.

See, as I say, I suppose I'll have to be careful what I say, but I know that a lot of the processors they'd buy that in. They wouldn't pay the same price as they'd paid the professionals. This is where you get the professional man, he joins forces with them. He's got the licence and he can sell it.

JD Are the scale fish sold direct to fish shops as well?

O'BRIEN Oh yes. You see there's no marketing restriction at all on selling direct. You don't have to sell through a market like you do (New South Wales I think you got to market through a recognised market - Victoria's never had that).

JD What about the question of poaching? I believe it's a real problem for the abalone fishermen?

O'BRIEN Yes, well that's almost a new event mainly I think, with the coming of the migrants. I think from what I can understand, the Vietnamese are the main ones and they seem very adept at and they love shell fish and I think they're the ones that have been responsible. Well, I've heard officers say that you can go to places now and you won't see a shell fish of any description; that these people are just spending all their time, their spare time, hunting around getting abalone and they're almost a.... Well they've had a pretty big battering over the years.

When I first went to Port Fairy in 1950 you could walk out in two foot of water on that basalt coast and you could put your hand under a rock and you could say how many dozen do you want, off the one rock. That's how thick they were. All they used them for was cray bait. Marvellous crayfish bait otherwise they weren't used at all. But since the.... well they have a large Asian population and they require shell fish and if they can go and get it without paying that huge price that is expected, well I suppose you can't blame them in many way, that's the way they've lived, but that in my opinion, is getting to the main reason for the failure of fisheries in Australia is the export price.

The crayfish was available to anyone until the exporters got in the 1960s. You could go down the wharf at Port Fairy before the change of currency and you could buy a big crayfish for two shillings and sixpence. I mean a big one! Now the minute.... in all our fisheries, the minute they get an export market they want export price at home and I think personally, that's one of the great failures and the resource belongs to everyone and we don't get any benefit from that resource. It's just sent overseas and the money goes to the processor and the fishermen and there's no benefit to the consumer. He doesn't consume anything because [laughs] it's not available to him at these huge prices!

JD Would you like to comment on the transferability of licences?

O'BRIEN Well, yes. I think they should be able to be transferred because if you work all your life as a fisherman, you end up - and you transfer or sell your licence - you end up with a boat and a heap of gear and what are you going to do with it? It just becomes useless, worthless, so I think that well, someone might buy it but they know

they can get it for next to nothing, don't they, under those circumstances? But that transfer of licences I don't know how many.... it doesn't apply to the eel fishery. You can't transfer licences there. I don't know about the Bay fishery now, long lines that sort of thing.

I believe in it, the principle of it. I think it's a good thing that at least the man ends up, when he's got to finish he's got an asset, he hasn't got a liability that he's struggling to get rid of. And he can look forward to getting some money out of it. Any other business can be sold, can't it? That's the thing. Other people in commercial ventures can sell out, I don't see why you can't do it with fisheries because licence limitation, it restricts the entry of other people into the industry. If you're going to limit licences and keep them at a steady level well, naturally, you've got to be able to transfer one licence to more or less maintain the status quo, haven't you? Otherwise you're going to bring new people in and more licences. Oh yes, I'm a believer in it.

JD You mentioned eels a moment ago. Since you've retired I believe you've become a professional eel fisherman. Could tell us about the eel fishery?

O'BRIEN Well yes, the eel fishery is.... it originally started in Victoria mainly for a few men operating to catch eels for shark bait. They were very good as shark bait, eels, because when they were running to sea they develop a very tough skin, when they're running out of the estuaries into sea, and that's where the shark fishermen like to catch them. Well, when the long lining finished there was very little sale for eels when the nets took over from the long lines and fortunately about that time, the Dutch people came out here, Vanderdrift from Skipton - set up in Skipton what he called Eels Pty Ltd. And they started processing and shipping eels overseas in a very small way and it just grew and grew. I sell to them there, but I sold to markets in Melbourne for a number of years. The problem there was that as soon as you got a good price, the poachers would step in and then they load the market and the price would drop back to zilch, you see. There was very little effort made by the Department to stop these people. You know, they were given plenty of information but they didn't want to interfere with the marketing. They withdrew their man that they had at Melbourne market about this time. This was about the period this Conservation, Forests and Land as they called themselves took over. So anyway what I do here, I fish locally and I sell my eels to Skipton and they lease waters from the Crown - big waters. Some of those waters would be 10,000, 20,000 acres and they stock them with the eels they buy from me and then they fish them and when they've got the eel the right size, the right fat content for their overseas market, they catch them again.

JD What's it a mariculture?

O'BRIEN It's.... you can't breed them, of course. They have to go to the sea to breed and the elvers come back (but I catch eels about well, anything up to a kilo in weight) but they farm those out into lakes.

JD Inland?

O'BRIEN Inland waters.

JD Right.

O'BRIEN And they farm them out and in the lakes they've leased they have quite a number of these lakes. They must be leasing many thousand of acres or hectares as it

is now and they just grow them in that water. They're just growing naturally and then they fish those waters.

JD They're not artificially fed?

O'BRIEN No, oh no [laughs]. And when they're right they're packed and sent over mainly to.... Germany the market is. But I sell them about 16 tonnes a year which they farm out. They put them out to grow and other people sell to them. They're a big concern. It's a great thing for a little country town like Skipton to have an industry and it's been functional for many years and it must be a godsend for a little town like that. As a matter of fact I think it's the only place in Australia where the local Shire crest has got an eel on it. They had to redesign the Shire [laughing] crest and put an eel on it. This is how much it's meant to them.

JD How do you catch the eels?

O'BRIEN Oh in what they call fike nets. They have a wing on them - the net has a wing and it just leads into a series of funnels.

JD A set net?

O'BRIEN Yes, you just set it. Along a reed bed or wherever you fancy you know, you think you're going to catch eels and....

JD Is it a gill net?

O'BRIEN Oh no, no. The eels.... the mesh is very small so they won't damage themselves. You must keep everything alive even when you market them. When I used to market in Melbourne every eel has to be alive. They won't buy a dead eel. They won't buy a dead eel.

JD Is there a market for local consumption of eels?

O'BRIEN Oh yes there is really. I used to sell to two or three shops here. They had no trouble in getting rid of them, none whatsoever but since.... in the last three years or so I.... well that's a fair bit of extra work you know, bagging things up, but I just mostly fish for Eel Pty Ltd and they take the catch back and that's what they do, they grow it in these waters. I don't know, I think they say from their last report, I think they shipped out a million and a half dollars worth from there annually. They probably might even ship more out, but the last figure I saw was about a million and a half - something like that.

JD No evidence of the eel population in the wild reducing?

O'BRIEN There is, but that's mainly due to drainage of swamps on the rivers, river usage. You know a lot's altered in the last 30 or 40 years in Victoria as far as.... been tremendous amount of drainage because land.... oh premium price in the 1950s, '60s and every farmer bought a backhoe and cut channels and drains and where he used to have a swamp he no longer has it. The driest country on earth and they trying to make it drier.

JD And those swamps are the breeding grounds....

O'BRIEN Oh well that's where they grow. They're very productive waters as a rule, they run off agriculture land and the eels grow pretty rapidly. They probably take under normal circumstances, about seven years to mature and they'd be pretty big eels by then, well over the kilo. Perhaps two kilos. You know in about a seven year period, in conditions like that.

JD Anything else you'd like to talk about before we finish?

O'BRIEN Well I don't think so. We've had a fair bash! [laughs]

JD Well look, thanks very much. It's been very, very interesting to talk to you.

O'BRIEN That's all right.

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr Tim O'Brien, ex-Fisheries' officer and now eel fisherman of Geelong, Victoria.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with KIT OLVER

INTRODUCTION

This interview with Mr Kit Olver, owner/operator of a deep sea trawler in the south east trawling industry was recorded at his home in Portland, Victoria on the 8th February, 1990. The interview is part of Murdoch University's history of the Australian fishing industry and was recorded by Jack Darcey.

After a varied background of experience in other industries Mr Olver became seriously involved in fishing some seven years ago. He has been remarkably successful in that endeavour, particularly in the orange roughy fishery but also in the capture of other deep sea species. In addition he has successful involvement in the rock lobster fishery in Victoria.

Mr Olver expresses some disenchantment with the way in which the south east trawl is managed and is not happy with what he sees as the interference of government in the industry. Not everyone perhaps would agree with his point of view but it is important that it be put forward. He states his case with vigour and clarity and in doing so makes a valuable contribution to this oral history.

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

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Could you record your full name and date and place of birth place.

OLVER Yes I will. My name is Christopher John Olver. I was born on the 29th of the first, 1946 here in Portland. I'm known as "Kit".

JD Kit have you lived all your life in Portland?

OLVER Oh no, no. I've wandered around the traps; worked oil rigs; all sorts of jobs.

JD And did you have a fishing background?

OLVER Oh, I suppose vaguely I did. My father at one stage of his career was a fisherman [with] very much smaller boats than we have now of course. He had a love of the sea, obviously which he passed on to me. Yes, I've fished on and off. I had small coota boats and small shark boats and small cray boats but in those days I cut wood in the summer. There was more money in it. [I would] Catch some crayfish and a few shark in the winter. [it was a] Pretty free and easy lifestyle.

JD When did you come into fishing originally?

OLVER I came into fishing originally, professionally if you mean that, really only eleven years ago. I remember quitting fishing, oh fifteen or twenty years ago because some clown met me on a wharf and asked me did I have a licence for some cray pots. I guess that was about the start of this rotten bureaucracy we've got now. I had fished on and off. I then went as a young man, as a 25 year old, or twenty year old, went working oil rigs in Western Australia. I became a brickie's labourer. I did just about everything. [I] Came back to get married, which I did; [I'm] still married to the same girl. Again I fished on and off, but as I say I got serious about it and got my ticket six or seven years ago and went off on my own. I deckied for a few trawlers prior to that.

JD So when you returned to fishing you went straight into trawling?

OLVER That's near enough to true, yes. I stuffed around a little bit, sure. I got serious about trawling seven years ago.

JD Yeah; and you then acquired your own boat, did you? Or did you become a skipper or what happened?

OLVER Well, as I said, I deckied on a few. I was a deckhand for.... Again on and off but for two or three years until the necessary sea time was recognised by the bureaucrats. You see it seems to me that all of a sudden a bunch of rules came in, but however the rules were there. Eventually I managed to comply with them, got some tickets and went fishing.

The first command I had was a little boat called the **Karystos**. I worked pretty hard on that and the owner of it decided to give me a start. I ended up buying half [of] it. I then went and skippered another boat called the **Halcyon** and I managed (shore managed) one from the boat if you like and fished the other; fairly successfully. The **Karystos** was lost, five years ago now, with all hands including three pretty good mates, or two of them certainly good mates; a bloke called Micky Lloyd. He was about 30 when he died.

I then graduated, if that's the right word, from the **Halcyon** to a more entrepreneurial twist.

JD Just before we go on, would you tell us a bit more about the loss of the **Karystos**?

OLVER Yes Jack [pause]. The **Karystos** was a converted tuna boat and I'd, as I said, been given the opportunity by an owner to prove myself, to prove how gungho and pretty special and smart I was, and I did. Created all sorts of bucks. Caught more fish than a lot of other boats bigger and I guess in retrospect, I'd taken an awful lot of risks. A young man that I'd had an awful lot of time for and in fact had worked for me, wanted the opportunity to do pretty much the same and I guess until my dying day there'll be an element of blame in it for me.

We were fishing together at a spot five, six hours south east of Portland known as "the Mudholes". I was trawling one way and Mick was trawling the other and we [would] speak to each other on VHF radio, similar to [what] you and I are [doing] now and on channel 73 which is the one we always used. As I said, Mick was trawling one way and I was trawling the other and I moved out to let him past. Of the various reasons that were put forward for the disappearance and subsequent sinking of the thing, and in fact we know it sunk 'cause in the next few days with air and sea searches etc. we found a [unclear] pieces of wreckage. His last words to me were that he was going to

move in. Told me the depth, that he was going into 298. I was going into 302 fathoms and he said, "Rodger dodge, see you down the track mate". That was his last words. Yeah, but he's dead.

JD Were you ever able to piece together what happened?

OLVER Well there was an investigation of course and a coroner's inquest of course, some months later. Various experts, myself included, put together or put forward different propositions. AH...well there's things like ship stability or the stability of the vessel that was questioned at one stage but from figures that were available we ascertained that it was OK. It could have been run over by a ship. It could have had a gas bottle explode but then, like any investigation, the continuance of the logic excludes.... For instance if the thing had blown up, any wreckage you found, or burned, any wreckage would have been charred wreckage or could have been charred wreckage.

So in logic it would appear that one of two things happened. Either he put a few fish on the deck and she rolled arse over head, or a ship hit him, or and PROBABLY the most likely, that one of his otter boards stuck in the mud whilst he had a few fish on the deck. That's the usual practice to get the fish on pretty quick 'cause it's a competitive caper. However it's happened and he's gone. Left a dirty taste in everybody's mouth.

Twelve months later to the day another bloke did the same thing just up west of Portland and there were four young men drowned on that, or three young men and the skipper who was a silly old twit. However, they drowned. A boat called the **Allen**; wooden boat with stability problems and they ascertained that that was the reason. There was one survivor and a mate of mine, in fact the bloke that's skippering my boat now while I have this break, a bloke called Larry Markey, picked the survivor up and took him to Portland. It's all on record of course. There's various newspaper reports and....

JD It's still a pretty rugged industry isn't it?

OLVER Well these things Jack, they do a couple of things. They tend to make skippers and owners and crew more aware of the problems and I guess we all at one stage have to go up the learning curve. We certainly did it pretty bloody quick after that but nowadays it's less and less up to the skippers and crew. We have something like two or three bureaucrats for everybody at sea and they make sure that nothing can go wrong. They try anyway.

JD This is in terms of surveying the vessels and....

OLVER Well that's always been done of course but more and more there are rules and regulations. There's a new set coming out every other day. Have a look around you. Look at my desk. There's papers everywhere that I can and I can't do that. Unfortunately most of those rules were made of course by people that wouldn't have a bloody clue, so most of them are irrelevant but a lot of them of course make sense.

JD Can we come back then to.... You were telling us about your career in the fishing industry and how you'd become or had adopted a more entrepreneurial role.

OLVER [laughs]. Yeah. Gees it's giving me a great opportunity to be vain isn't it? Yes well at that stage I did. I caught a few fish and we'd made a few bucks and like all young men with a bit of blood in them they want to set the world on fire and I decided

to do just that. I don't know that I've been all that successful. There's been others that have been a lot more successful [laughs] but I managed to catch some fish in a vessel that I was on then, the **Halcyon**. I met a bloke, a bloke called John Caines. Not that stinking bloody Labor Premier we've got, another one, an accountant fellow. He put together a company of which I had a few shares early in the piece. He gave me some incentive to make money and catch some fish and I did.

I ended up getting off the **Halcyon** and buying a 48 year old tug, the **HA Lumb** that a chap had converted and more or less gone broke. We bought it for \$320,000.00 licences and all.

JD This was on your own account or with a company?

OLVER No. My mate and I bought it personally. He bought half and I bought half. I went to work and he went to Melbourne which suited me pretty fine. We got the old girl working and we caught some fish. I remember that we'd lost a.... My mate got the stitch. I'd lost money and lost money and hadn't caught fish and spent money and he had the stitch. He'd had a gut full of it and he told me that if I didn't catch any fish that particular month that I was gone, that we'd have to sell. I couldn't hang on to her. The fuel agent was telling me pretty much the same thing and the tax man for last year's tax of course was sticking his bib in and the grocer and just about everybody else. Anyway that trip we came among 56 tonne of roughy and I sold them for 120 grand and boy that saved me.

So then of course it was time to start building castles in the sky again. When we sold her, we sold her for a couple of million bucks and we'd made some money. This house is the result of it. It's all pretty good stuff but then in came a few problems into the industry and a lot more people of course. A lot more people and the Government saw fit to place controls and pieces of paper in front of us and log books and hell I haven't got time to fish now. I just sit here filling out papers and answering fool dam questions. [laughs] Present ones excluded of course. Yeah, as I said Jack, it's an excellent opportunity for me to be vain. I think everybody likes to talk about themselves [laughs].

JD Yeah. Do you still go to sea yourself?

OLVER Yes I do. I'm getting old and fat but I do. I've now got another boat, a boat called the **Aqua Enterprise**. After I'd sold the **HA Lumb** my partner went on to start a company with some other smart fellows called Rigel Kent. (The company was called Rigel Kent, not the fellows). They put together seven or eight boats, mine included, and they were the ones that actually bought the **Lumb**. I pulled out. I didn't like the way it was shaping over a period of six months or so. I sat up here on the hill telling meself how clever I was and watched them go broke and they did in a pretty big way.

So when all the kerfuffle died down I bought another boat called the **Aqua Enterprise**, a wreck and we wacked it with dollar notes sufficiently well to get the thing working and its working now. I've got a skipper on it for one month and I take a month; he takes a month. It's starting to work. The thing sank on the moorings a few months ago and that certainly got us behind but thanks to a pretty good insurance company and a fair bit of patience on the part of my creditors we got her going. My bank manager, God bless his heart, was probably.... Christ he ought to be canonised, he should have a sainthood; but you may as well say there was enough patience from everybody and we're back going in now. We're making money and we've paid our bills and everything's pretty good.

JD Good. Could you describe the **Aqua Enterprise** to us.

OLVER Yeah. She's a Baltic class trawler; a Russian trawler. A fellow called Carl Armstrong bought four of them over. They've all been successfully converted.

JD From Russia?

OLVER From Russia, yes. On the back of a ship or on the deck of a ship. A brilliant design. A well proven sea design. They've made hundreds of them. I understand that [it was] the Gdansk Shipyards in Poland but [they had] Russian influence and Russian machinery and East German.... Bloody rubbish all over them like you wouldn't believe. Everything falls to pieces and of course now we're fishing deeper, we're putting a lot of strain on that sort of machinery. We've just finished refitting ours; putting decent engines in etc. We've spent over \$300,000.00 bucks on her to get her going and she's going pretty well now. Yeah. We're happy with her.

JD What crew do you take?

OLVER Oh, usually four or five, depending on what we're doing. If we're market fishing with Grenadier especially. They have to be cleaned of course or they'll spoil in two or three hours. It doesn't really matter how many you put on the deck, you've only got two or three hours cleaning so you employ blokes for that purpose that are pretty slippery with a knife and they can get them away pretty quick 'cause it's for the fresh fish market. Roughy are a different thing. You catch twenty, 30, 50, 100 tonne in one wack and it's mainly put away with machinery. You still use the same crew. Of course you do. I've had blokes with me that have been.... I've had one bloke been with me three years but usually four or five. USUALLY, I say usually, there's usually a couple of experienced lads that can take watches etc. At times you're fishing three or four days from home, five days from home. You know we fish 500, 600 mile away so you've got to know what you're about and what you're doing. It's pretty much more professional now. As I said, we're going up that learning curve.

JD Any women go to sea?

OLVER Not for bloody me they don't.

JD For any of the trawlers?

OLVER Ah, there's the occasional old scrubber that jumps on for purposes that might include cooking. I don't know. You don't see many of them. I understand you do up north on the prawn trawlers or the weather suits them better but it's not a lady's game in my opinion. Yes I am sexist.

JD Kit could you tell us the process by which you fish? What's the technique? How do you operate?

OLVER Well we're trawlers, Jack. We're bottom trawlers. We're not allowed in this country to.... I say not allowed, that's probably not quite fair but we're discouraged from doing any experimental fishing or even becoming efficient at what we do. We've adopted a method that's been used overseas for years and quite successfully too, of bottom trawling. We use two otter boards with sweeps and bridles to sweep the fish down into the net that's also on the bottom. The boards are weighted to keep them on the bottom and they're angled as you'd imagine a paravane would be to create the spread that we've pre-set for our gear for different types of nets. There's various types

of nets but they all follow pretty much one principle. That is that the boards herd the fish towards the net and the fish go down the net and into the codient; then the retrieval of the gear of course is exactly the same as shooting it away or the opposite of it.

We fish anywhere from 80 fathoms to 700 fathoms depending on what specie we're after; usually on the edge of the Continental Shelf in Commonwealth waters. We're licensed by a south east trawl committee and we're told pretty much where we can and we can't go. Have to understand that it's Australian resources. It's not mine and as you can see I'm starting to look cynical but that's true. It is an Australian resource. Mugs like us use our expertise that we learned a bit hard to go and make the country rich. I think that's how it's supposed to work.

Jack the distances that we go... You'll appreciate the Continental Shelf goes around Australia and from where we're sitting it also goes around Tasmania, not inside it but outside it. My boat is currently on its way down to fish off Maatsuyker Island which is oh 60 or 70 mile south of Tasmania and that's where the Shelf is. So it's about a two and a half day steam to get down there and a two and a half day steam to get home but quite often, because the economics of fishing are what dictate how long we're away for, the fish keep quite well. We make our own ice on board. We prefer to use ice but some boats use refrigerated seawater and we hopefully wait until we fill up but quite often if the market dictates that fish are going to be, for example, \$3.00 a kilo and we've got ten or fifteen tonne on, fine we'll make a dash for home but if they're \$1.00 a kilo of course we have got to catch more. You try and catch as many as you can anyway.

I like to kill fish. The directives now from government, and there are plenty of them, are for us to catch our fish more efficiently and more economically and to facilitate that there's strong talk of, or more than strong talk, there is talk of quotas and what we can and we can't catch. The result of their interference so far has been to introduce an awful lot of inefficiencies. It's very hard to borrow money now with this socialist government whilst they think ideally that they'd like to make life easier for everybody. Usually with all these plans somebody's got to miss out. In this case it's been the fishermen, rather seriously. We've got some real problems facing us now. Not with the lack of fish. I mean three or four years ago or five years ago they told us there weren't any more fish to catch and we went out and we found these. Certainly without their bloody help. Now we've found these of course they told us well we can't catch these.

I'll give you a beaut example. Last May there was a particularly good patch of orange roughly found off St Helen's on the east coast of Tasmania. Everybody went down and we wacked them and I mean we wacked them. As a fleet we probably took twenty or 25,000 tonne out of the thing. Lets remember that these dollars that we're getting for these things, the majority of them are export dollars. It's an exported fish and we thought that we might even get encouragement from the Government but that wasn't to be. They actually closed the hill with no consultation to the fishermen. They just [said], "Well you can't go there any more". When we asked why, it was for research, so they closed it. That was the official reason and Kerin finally closed the thing for research which was beaut. So they then gave us a bill for two or three thousand dollars each to police this research. Obviously the thing had to be policed to stop us nasty fishermen fishing there and to do this research. They told us the hill would be open in two weeks. Well they put the policemen on of course. They always do that but they forgot to research it.

When they were reminded a fortnight later that they hadn't done any research they said, "Oh we forgot". Truly, I kid you not. They said, "We forgot". Then they also said

at a meeting, "Oh we didn't have enough money so you'd better give us some more of that". So we did and they did some research and that research indicated that.... I might add the research is done by fishermen, usually by fishermen that can't make a living fishing. That's why they become research vessels and that of course is par for the course. They did that. They did their research and the research told them that we wouldn't be allowed to catch any more so they closed the hill. Just like that. There's literally.... There's a couple of hundred million bucks sitting down there.

When we asked why and we obviously did, all the different associations around the coast asked why.... When we asked why they said well it's for conservation reasons. We asked them, "Did you know the habits of the fish? [do] You know the age of the fish and its reproductive cycle"? Oh no. They didn't know that. It's interesting that they can close a fishery on the basis of conservation having knowledge of the fishery and then freely admit they don't know anything about them, and still do. They really don't know. They assume that there was a 40 year reproductive cycle with orange roughy. My fish agent paid the bread to a couple of New Zealanders.... Yes, one New Zealander and one English biologist, as was told to me. They proved the fish was no more than five years old but it didn't alter the conservationist's view of the thing. Seems to be a real thing, if the fish is there, don't catch it you might kill it. You can't go doing that can you [laughs]?

JD Kit, who is the managing authority for the orange roughy fishery?

OLVER Well the Minister for Fisheries is Kerin.

JD It's a Commonwealth controlled....

OLVER It's a Commonwealth fishery. The States stick their bib in. Llewellyn in Tasmania seems to have some influence. Oh well the Labor Government needed the greenie vote. It's about that simple. There's a quasi green government in Tassie as you know and this Llewellyn was doing a lot of squawking. He made all sorts of statements. One was that if we caught them in Commonwealth waters off Tasmania we had to unload them in Tasmania. When it was pointed out to him, "Well what are you going to do with them"? Well he didn't really know about that but he wanted some dollars so the Federal Government has just done a deal with putting Russian fishing boats to catch these fish instead of us. They say it's for waters further off Tasmania but they won't licence us to do it. They say our boats are too small and they're quite right but when I wanted to build a bigger boat, I'm not allowed of course because under the rules of the South East Trawl Committee they won't let me fish. So they won't let me build a bigger one. Then when I haven't got a bigger one they say, well we'll have to give it to the Russians so they've done that. They did manage to sell some wheat and some wool so.... and of course placate Llewellyn They've put some bucks into Hobart by tipping.... They'll tip Russian boats in there. That's inevitable. They still say they're deciding which it is but by gees I wouldn't mind an even money bet that it's Hobart 'cause Llywellen, the greenie, squawkes a fair bit and he'll get it of course.

JD Do fishermen have a profession fishermen's association, the trawler men, do they?

OLVER Yes. We have an association. We've had a couple of them Jack. The latest one's a couple of thousand bucks to join and you only get one vote per boat because the first one we had was taken over by big companies or by THE big company that's here now but own six or eight boats or ten boats and their interests quite often are different than hours. You see this quota system that we've got, there's two options for fisheries management. They can have TAC which is total allowable catch or they can

have individual transferable quota. Now if they say that only 20,000 tonnes can be taken, 20,000 tonnes of fishery per year taken, the big boats, the big companies who have the bigger boats, who are allowed to build bigger boats, or have the money to buy them obviously want total allowable catch 'cause they can get in and wack them before we can. The small boat owners, and I don't like to include myself in this 'cause I'm an advocate of free enterprise, but the small boat owners of course want individual transferable quota so as they can either sell their quota or at least take their time and catch it more economically.

I don't see ITQs (individual transferable quota's) as fair, I don't think. If you haven't got the boat and you haven't got the expertise... Christ if you can't stand the heat get out of the kitchen. It's about that simple. I don't think we should be whining to governments to help us there but however governments have imposed some controls and what their controls are is just an interference. They see it as a cure for one thing to make a decision and they don't take into account the [unclear] problems they create with it and this is one example that they've tried to help us and have just made a mess of it. As usual; as you'd expect. Christ they can't run the country and how they can run a fishery, I don't know.

JD Which of the two management techniques are operative at the moment?

OLVER Well we only have one really. It's a south east trawl run by the Australian Fishery Service which is Commonwealth Government. Now that's it in a nutshell. I understand it's going to be replaced with a statutory authority called... whatever. I don't know that a name's been decided yet but it is Kerin's intention to create a statutory authority, a single statutory authority for all Commonwealth fisheries and an interference regime of course to go along with it and a lot of fellows with shiney badges and as I say, most of them ex-fishermen; fishermen that can't make a living.

Personally I don't see much future in the fishery. The thing that they've done again that I disagree with, although I took advantage of it, is to create a paper value on a licence. I had an old boat that was not worth too much money. It was only worth as much as I could catch in it but then they made it a limited entry fishery and so all of a sudden your licence is worth a half a million or a million bucks. When a young fellow now goes to a bank he hasn't got to buy a boat. He's got to buy a piece of this paper and of course because he's servicing his boat and his licence two or three million bucks, he's got to catch an awful lot more fish and he's got to take an awful lot more risks. Of course he does. So that increases effort. [it is] Rather ironic that the main aim of the management regime was to decrease effort. It's actually increased it of course because it's put everybody in debt except for a few of the fat old cats that said, "Beaut. I'll sell my licence and get out". They're following New Zealand's method. It hasn't worked but they can see a plan in front of them. They're too bloody stupid to think of their own so they grab the first one that comes along and they happened to grab the New Zealand one. It won't work. It'll bankrupt our fisheries but that's not inconsistent of course with the rest of the bloody country.

JD Is it having the effect of keeping the sort of owner operator out in favour of large companies taking over the [unclear] ?

OLVER It's certainly had that effect but I am an individual operator. I owe the bank a million bucks which in the scheme of things and in the entire operation is not all that much money, I guess but yes it does. Of course it does. The numbers are too big for an individual operator but again, if an individual operator is good enough, he has the right and if he has the ability he can be there. So I don't think we can blame governments for that. I think we can just blame, if you like people's, for want of a

better word, greed, ambition if they want to form companies. Hey mate, if you and I want to buy a boat, there's nothing to stop us. It's still a democracy isn't it?

JD Is it resulting in the inflow of overseas control do you think?

OLVER No I don't. It's resulted in an increase. Yeah the bottom line is that we've had an increase in overseas technology and overseas....

JD Capital?

OLVER I don't know. Maybe. I suspect that certainly not openly but there is some overseas money of course, I guess. The important thing I think.... You see we....

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

OLVER We've got New Zealanders here and of course we've got their money but I think more importantly we've got their expertise; a lot of disgruntled young men that have worked in the company system that New Zealand's got. As I said before, the same thing's happened in New Zealand. The companies have taken over the small operators but I did notice that a line of very smart young men became the drivers of these boats and really they're the fellows that had the expertise. Of course we've had the spin-off of getting their advice and their help and a lot of them are skippers here now and pretty successful ones. The top three or four fishermen in this country, or certainly in the south east trawl made up of about 70 boats, are New Zealanders. They know their stuff and quite a few of them are pretty nice fellows too.

JD They're experienced of course in the fishery aren't they? You mentioned that it's an export fish. Where's it exported to?

OLVER Mainly the States. J.R. Ewing on that bloody stupid TV show apparently jumped up and said, "Oh God dam" he likes Australian roughly and that really started the fire off for it, you know the yanks but it did and there's quite an industry come up for it. The way our dollar falls on the arse every ten minutes has helped of course with our exports but I understand they're having trouble again selling them; or they're having trouble selling them now. I don't really know why but it's happened two or three times since the fisheries got going and quite a few processors have gone broke. It's still a big export earner for Australia. There's not much known of it but there is a dollar in it for Australia. Unfortunately the Government doesn't want us to catch them so....

JD It's not the only type of fish that you catch, is it?

OLVER Pretty much the only one that's exported. You see Australia's a gross importer of fish in a big way. I forget the figures but I think 50 or 70 million dollars worth of fish products are imported every year. Mainly because we're either too lazy to bloody well catch them or too lazy to pack them and that's the usual thing. We have a resource out there but the Government's decided to.... Rather than create incentives in exporting fish, they've taken the conservationists' viewpoint.

I will say, and look as I said before, I'm cynical of them because they seem to be taking some bloody thing off me every other day but they really have made a point of

introducing inefficiencies into our industry. It's criminal some of the things they've done. If they were accountable, and of course they're not.... If somebody does make a faux pas it's just considered normal but some of the things that have been to us.... So yes I'm bitter but to the industry more importantly [they] are criminal. How a group of public servants can set themselves up to be efficient managers when they can't.... I mean Christ, most of them never made more than \$500.00 a week in their own lives. Never spent a rainy, cold night worrying about their finances. Never had to talk with a bank manager with his knees rattling. How they could manage anything is beyond me, but they set themselves up and they're doing it. Well they're doing it badly.

JD Is the way fishing or the fishing industry is managed in Victoria say where it's a part of a much larger department, is that a fair sort of arrangement for fishing?

OLVER Well the Victorian fisheries of course is a different ball game. As I said before, the south east trawl fishery is a Commonwealth run fishery. The State Governments have their own fisheries and the conservation argument with them is pretty strong. Most of the State fisheries here in Victoria are crustacean fisheries: crayfish, abalone. They appear, and I've got mates in the industry. In fact I own a crayboat myself; a little boat called the **Georges Bay**. It's fishing quite successfully. It's managed but it's managed on the basis of conservation. It's necessary management and so they had the co-operation of fishermen which does help. The south east trawl doesn't have any co-operation from the fishermen. In fact I moved a motion at our last meeting that we just take a confrontationalist approach to everything the Minister says. That motion was passed so I can say quite effectively that the confrontationalist approach is the one that we will be taking from now on. We've been screwed completely.

To answer your question, I think from what I've seen from the abalone industry here in Victoria, it's very successfully run by some very clever people and they use advice from fishery biologists and people that do know what they're doing. Of course it's an easier fisheries to understand what's happening because they're in 50 or 100 or 150 feet of water, where ours is right off the edge of the Continental Shelf and you can't just pop down and have a look like you can with abalone and crayfish. I think, from what I've seen, certainly crayfish and abalone are well managed here in this State. In fact I think they're an example to any fishery.

JD Could we have a look at some of the other problems that might [unclear] be confronting your trawl fishery? What about pollution? Is there any evidence of that?

OLVER Well there's evidence of course. I was in Melbourne this week and I shore manage from my boat when I'm having my month off and yes the harbour's full of junk but it's not a problem to us as fishermen because we fish off the Continental Shelf. You might get the occasional plastic bag wrapped on a water inlet and blow a motor up. That has happened but again we've got shutdowns to stop that happening. So no, it's just more a bloody nuisance to us but I can imagine that for people who have to live on the water front it would be.... it stinks. We don't. We live off the Continental Shelf so it's not so much a problem to us.

There's been a lot of requests for us not to throw rubbish of at sea and of course we comply with them. I think any sensible person does. [it is] Interesting that it's pretty unusual in the course of a week's trawling either down of Maatsuyker Island or off St Helen's or up off the Beach Port or Adelaide, where ever you are, it's fairly unusual not to trawl up Japanese or Russian beer cans and bottles. So whilst that pollution has

very little effect on us, it's pretty obvious that there's been some other fishermen there first.

JD The question of weather in these parts must be a constant problem to you? Does it stop you going out much?

OLVER Well no Jack it doesn't. A strong wind warning is 25 knots. We can fish in 40. Wind isn't so much a problem. Steerability [is]. If you can steer your boat with your gear on the bottom you can put up with it. We have all sorts of ways of putting up with weather but basically if I was to plan a trip, if I was leaving tonight to go fishing and I had a day or two days' steaming in front of me, I'd go anyway. If it's 40 or even 50 knots you then just either duck behind an island that's 20 or 30 or 50 or 60 mile away from where you're fishing or you'd idle up into the breeze. So no. Anything above 80 or 90 feet the weather's not so much of a problem. Oh I mean we'd very much prefer good weather but it doesn't stop us as such. There are times of course that we don't go fishing when the weather's bad but I mean my boat's punching out now and it was 40 knots this morning off the prom and he left Melbourne which is pretty dam close to go down the east side of Tassie; sorry the east side of King Island. I spoke to him on the telephone three or four hours ago and I said, "How's the weather" and he said, "Oh just a pain in the arse" which I guess means just that. It's a pain in the arse but it didn't stop him.

JD Sure. You don't seem very confident about the prospects in the fishery?

OLVER [laughs] Oh I'm confident in the fishery if it was left alone Jack. I said I was a cynic so you're probably asking the wrong fellow. I've got a tainted view. Seems to me that my biggest battle is not the weather; not the fishery which I helped to develop; not the methodology which I had to invent for myself 'cause there's those of us that do learn something don't spread it about. Not all the things that... and blowing up engines and bank managers stirring you up and all the problems we've had. Believe me, you know, I'm not 90. This face didn't get wrinkled by kissing cousins. The biggest problem we have is this government thing and I'll say this. It's become a bit of an obsession with me so you're probably asking the wrong bloke if there's a future in the fishery. I think probably that a fresh young man may well come along and be able to put up with it all in his stride and leave me with egg all over my face.

See the Government has got the backing of the people. So I guess what we're saying is that the rest of Australia doesn't want us to do this thing that we've got pretty good at. I say it again at the risk of repeating myself. I'm a cynic. I detest socialism. I detest.... See I've educated five kids and done [a] pretty good job of it. Now I've got to educate everybody elses. So I do battle all the way through this and I will of course. The Government wants three-quarters of it anyway to educate some blackfellow's kid or some other buggger that's too lazy to work. I've got to do that for him too and I'm into [my] mid-40s and I'm starting to think, "Aw I think I'll go and get a storeman's job" or one like you've got hanging onto that bloody mike [laughter].

JD What about your sons? Are they planning to go into fishing?

OLVER Yes. My son's a fisherman with me, Anthony. He's eighteen. He's been at sea on and off since he was, oh Christ, I remember headmasters ringing me up and asking me where the hell he was and he was off on some fishing boat somewhere. He started an apprenticeship as a fitter and turner. I actively discouraged him from going to sea. However he's at sea. He's a leading hand on my boat now on the **Aqua Enterprise**. He's a natural. He likes it. He likes the companionship and the beer drinking and all the things that go on when you put young men together and of course the good

income. He detests authority as I did. I'd like to claim that I didn't have too much to do with bringing him up. I was never home but however that's the way he's grown up and he's a fine young man. He's not nearly as cynical as I am of course. I guess if I sell the boat, and I think I will, the bucks will be there to kick him off. Of course if it's mine, it's his. I don't see it as being worth the effort, no.

[I] tried to get into South Africa a couple of years ago and do it but they got some problems over there that I guess I don't need either but they've also got an undeveloped fishery and they don't have a management regime anywhere near as stiff as ours. I reckon I can get over there and make a quid but it probably.... Well it'll never happen. So no. I think I'll sit here and grow roses or as I say chase your job. I want your job Jack.

JD [laughs] I'm sorry. You can't have it [laughter]. Before we finish Kit, anything else that you'd like to have on this tape?

OLVER Oh, no Jack. I think we've covered it. You sort of took me a bit by surprise and as I said, it sounds terribly vain of me to talk about my life; although it's been lovely. No. We've pretty much covered it. I'm not the achiever of the future. You go interview a 25 year old man with some of that hot blood we were talking about.

JD Good. Well thank you very much for the interview.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with NICHOLAS POLGEEST

INTRODUCTION

This interview with Mr Polgeest of Apollo Bay, Victoria was conducted in his home there on the 10th February, 1990. The interviewer is Jack Darcey and the tape is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry.

Mr Polgeest came to this country as a boy of thirteen years of age with his parents from Holland. His father became the manager of the Fishermens Co-operative in Apollo Bay and from that introduction, Mr Nick Polgeest entered the Barracoutta fishery here. Consequently he turned to shark fishing and cray fishing and in addition, has been prominent in management committees of the industry and in the management of the Apollo Bay Fishermens Co-operative.

On this tape Mr Polgeest gives a clear exposition of the fishing methods used and also of the many problems that beset the industry. He makes a plea for more research, greater co-operation throughout the industry and more effective management intervention if the fisheries are to remain economic.

His point of view is important perhaps vitally so. Certainly it deserves attention.

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

TAPE 1 SIDE A

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

POLGEEST My name is Nicholas Polgeest. I was born overseas in Holland in 1941. I came out with my parents as a young person of 13 and we went from Melbourne to Derrinallum as a married couple where we, as a family, lived there for eighteen months. My parents then moved camp, went to Apollo Bay. My father worked in a quarry there for a matter of twelve months during which time he didn't enjoy the type of working he was doing. He was working in a quarry, he felt his health would be affected and consequently he was offered a job at the Apollo Fishermens Co-operative as a works manager. My father worked there for a period of eleven odd years and as a young fellow I grew up in the town of Apollo Bay which is a small town near the Victorian coast which has a population of round about 800 people today. During that time it was probably a little bit less, but not that much less because we had an industry of ex amount of farmers which were producing butter fat and we had a small industry making butter and at that stage we had a very much alive isolated community, you might say where the township created its own sort of environment.

We had two mills going, butter factory going; we had a fairly extensive fish industry going. So from that point of view the town was very much self sustaining.

Being a young fellow at that time and being a foreign young fellow at that, it was somewhat difficult to slot into the community because when I first came out at the age of thirteen I couldn't speak English, yet I knew it because I had studied it extensively overseas. I had to also study French, German and when I came out to Australia my education was that far advanced to the ordinary Australian standards, apart from the English of course, that I went to the Camperdown High School first from Derrinallum. I used to go by bus in the morning and bus back again which was a hell of a culture shock for me. I mean you don't see that overseas and I was able to slot into things like Algebra, stuff like that quite easily but English was the bit that held me back at the time and I was very fortunate that I had a very good teacher over in Camperdown. I can still remember my first English exam, I got thirteen for it. I couldn't believe it! I thought, my godfather! [laughter] But the second exam I got 60 odd which made it a lot better.

Then we moved from that area to Apollo Bay and I came to the Apollo Bay Consolidated School in Apollo Bay and I had done Form 1 in Camperdown, and I came to Apollo Bay but because of my advanced education, they felt I should go into Form 3. And I thought ah well, why not, if that's what the headmaster feels I could probably tackle it. I think that was the wrong thing to do because I missed out that twelve months English which is an extremely important subject. So anyway, I battled on and I passed Proficiency in those days and then I got involved in the workforce on a part time basis.

I worked the freezer filleting fish for my father, which at that time was Barracoutta which would come in droves here and we couldn't sell it and we used to pack it, freeze it and hold it for people like Kraft and then it was sort of a little bit different. You're sort of out of a school environment, you went into the workforce a bit and then I started getting itchy feet and I felt maybe I ought to work and do my studies at night.

So I started doing Intermediate by correspondence which I found extremely difficult. I passed four subjects and held them so I could go on to Leaving the next year which I started once again with correspondence and then unfortunately I fell by the wayside because I just couldn't cope. I had a fairly extensive workload around me, and being a young fellow in a country town, itchy feet, looking at girls, I mean, that was the end of me as far my studies.

Then I worked at a hardware store in Apollo Bay after I left school for eighteen months and at that stage I went out very much with the commercial fishermen in the port of Apollo Bay because being associated with my father at the freezer I knew all the people involved and I really liked what they were doing. They were very gutsy people and I sort of liked that lifestyle. Eventually I hired a boat myself and I became involved in the fishing industry.

JD What type of fishing were you doing then?

POLGEEST At that stage it was mainly Barracouta. There wasn't anything else at that stage which was as big and which had as much production as Barracouta.

JD The Barracouta industry had a special sort of vessel didn't they?

POLGEEST Yes, it was mainly an open boat with the part of the deck.... the front of it decked in and you stood in the back of it. Most of them in the early days, the ones that

I hired, had a Rugby motor which is just a four cylinder petrol motor with a carburetter and a magneto type ignition system where you put a belt on the flywheel, you made a flywheel start. You had a leather belt that you put around the flywheel and the flywheel had a pin in it. So you put this belt, can't remember whether it's clockwise or anti clockwise, I think it used to pull anti clockwise when you used to pull it. And it fired away if you were lucky enough if the motor wasn't damp because if it was damp it wouldn't start.

JD About what size boat were they?

POLGEEST Mainly between 22 feet to 27 feet that was the norm of the day and some of the more advanced ones they were doing a dual type fishing, they were catching 'couta during the 'couta season, catching crays during the cray season and they were more or less spelling the cray reefs by catching Barracouta during that period of the year.

JD That was an inshore fishery was it?

POLGEEST Very much so. It was mainly no more than three miles off the shore and probably more in the vicinity of a mile and half where the schools used to linger. You used to go out every morning because they were so thick you were on a quota system. The Port could only handle ex amount of 'couta and each boat was allocated ten or fifteen boxes and you could be guaranteed that the twenty boats or twelve boats that went out would catch that each day for months on end. Apollo Bay used to, when I was associated with it, send a semi load almost daily for weeks on end.

JD Was it a line fishing or net?

POLGEEST No, it's trawling. You trawl for them. You have eight lines behind your boat and when you look at it it's in sort of a formation, the centre one is the longest so when you take a turn it's stays untangled for the rest of them. And as you come.... from the centre of your boat the lines get shorter, so the outside ones are the shortest. So when the 'couta jigs catch a 'couta, the 'couta doesn't get tangled in the rest of the lines and you go round and round and round and the idea is that first of all you lead for them, use ten pound of lead in the shape of sinkers, you put this on a line and I think it was something like twelve fathoms long (the actual lead line) and you would lead for these fish first because they would be three, four fathoms down underneath. You'd have to bring them up to the surface, get them in a feeding frenzy and we used to do that by burlying a handful of white bait and throw it in the prop wash and that in turn used to spin the white bait around in such a manner that it looked very much alive. It's done today with the tuna boats of course which use the same sort of system, but of course theirs is all alive. You used to get them in a feeding frenzy and then two of you hop into them quickly. The 'couta woods were made out of a bit of half inch dowel, the hook was an Eleven 0 with no barb on it and you had a little bit of wire tracer in front of it so that they wouldn't bite it off. You'd grab it and just flick it over a de-hooking board which was just a board with a raised bit of rod on it, and usually on a slight angle forward so the 'couta would fly over the top and the short bit of wire being faced forward would mean there was a slight angle and the 'couta would flip backwards and of course, having no barb on the jig the 'couta would fall quite freely off the de-hooking board.

We used to wear bicycle tubes around our fingers so you didn't get those lovely grooves in your fingers because catching ten or twenty boxes per day for weeks on end, if you didn't, after two days you would just sit at home and wonder what the

other boats were doing because your hands would have big grooves in them, and be too sore.

JD Nick, suddenly the Barracouta disappeared I gather.

POLGEEST Yes, its a mystery that. There's consensus of opinion.... there's two consensus of opinion, one is that the water temperature got warmer and the schools of 'couta stayed south of King Island and around Tassy and the other school of opinion is maybe the foreign trawlers were taking a lot more than they ever made out and consequently depleted all our stocks. It's only the last couple of years I've seen 'couta coming back again. It seems to be ironic that we declared our international fishing zone so many miles for the last few years and these 'couta are coming back again so it will be interesting to see what happens from here on.

JD Is there still a 'couta industry of some sort?

POLGEEST Well, the 'couta industry have been.... you wouldn't call the industry, I think the trawl fishery have more or less taken over from a very much sort after cheaper types of table foods in the early days. Now it's the in thing to eat fish because of heart conditions and all sorts of diets and I think people haven't seen 'couta - they're not familiar with it. I think Orange Roughies, Blue Grenadier, Gem Fish have really taken over the market.

JD Orange Roughie that was exported largely wasn't it?

POLGEEST Yes, very much so. The local price is mainly geared on the export price overseas. It's been a bit of a bonanza for a lot of people. It'll been interesting to see what happens from here on because the resource may not be able to take it. Certainly the government's very much aware of it, they've imposed restrictions and lets hope they are in time because from my opinion what's happened, the time I've been associated with the fishing industry, a lot of fisheries have declined through greed and total ignorance and Gem Fish I feel is just one of them not so far down the track. The schools of Gem Fish are being depleted to the extent where they are also in strife.

JD To come back to the 'couta boats, when that fishery more or less collapsed, what did the fishermen involved in it do? Did they go into another fishery?

POLGEEST Well they had to go into a different sort of fishery because most of the fishermen are.... it's a sort of occupation that you fall into either by choice or else it's just a way of life. I dare say in a small community like Apollo Bay it's been a way of life for a lot of young people for three generations. In my case I fell into by chance because my father was the freezer manager, and I've always been associated with water overseas. We did a lot of sailing so it was more or less in my blood. I think that's how it has to be with a lot of people.

JD So when you left the 'couta fishery you went into what?

POLGEEST Well I didn't really leave the 'couta industry I was more or less forced to leave it because there wasn't much left. Prices were appalling, crayng took over into this area and because of the 'couta being in such abundance early and everyone was making a real good dollar out of it, the cray reefs were left very much alone. And of course all of a sudden, you looked around and everyone was gearing up for crayfish and although it was a natural process, it didn't take very long for every boat to be geared up for crayfish and consequently the design of the boats changed. They then became, instead of just being 'couta boats, they became boats with wells in them,

because you had to accommodate crayfish and I can remember boats going out, filling up their wells chock-a-block with crayfish and having bags (canvas bags) with crays in them and they'd come in and just put them in big coffs in the harbour. They'd stay in the coffs there for a week and then they'd sell them over to the Melbourne fish market alive, and then that changed because they were being "had" by the processors and wholesalers in Melbourne. Then they decided they'd cook them (that's through the co-operative system) and market their produce not as a raw commodity, but as a cooked commodity and that went on for many many years.

JD Did the crayfish.... the crayfishing industry took off in the 1950s didn't it....?

POLGEEST Yes.

JD With the export of the tails to America....

POLGEEST Yes, which actually started in South Australia through Fowler. He's more or less started all that. Through Safcol.

JD So that was fortunate..... Was it at the time that the crayfishing industry really got going, I think in the 50s with the export of frozen tails to the USA, was that the era when 'couta fishing uneconomic from the fishermens' point of view?

POLGEEST It had all the signs of it then. People, the way they are, looked at the most profitable part of fishing, and of course, that time crays were becoming very much their main income (certainly leaning towards that side of their income a lot more than it used to). And of course what happened then the boats evolved into bigger boats and of course once you built a bigger boat, you got bigger expenditures. It's a natural flow-on from that, that you try and catch the most profitable specie and that's how it more or less evolved.

JD Did you go direct from 'couta fishing crayfishing.

POLGEEST More or less, yes I did. I had a local boat builder "Putty" Ferrier who built a small boat for us - a 32 footer. And I more or less went from Barracouta into crayfish and I used to catch Barracouta mainly as a side line then and also for cray bait. Because we all know Barracouta is probably the best bait you can get apart from Salmon for crays.

JD Did you ever try shark fishing?

POLGEEST Yes, I did my apprenticeship with Billy Ferrier as a young guy - as a deckie. Baiting up probably round about 1,000 odd hooks with frozen eels early in the morning which was quite a mean feat when it's a Force 3 or 4 out there [unclear] those, slippery things. And we found that shark was also a good sideline - certainly a very good sideline for off season fishery. That was probably going on between catching Barracouta and catching some crays and catching some sharks from the early days onwards. So as I said, it became mainly an economic thing as the fleet grew bigger, which specie that the individual target, crays, shark or Barracouta.

JD Were these limited entry fisheries in those days?

POLGEEST No, all we had to have was just a fishing licence and go for it. It was just a matter of.... no restriction at all.

JD So you then became....

POLGEEST Apart from (I'm sorry) apart from the cray industry it became a closed fishery in 1969.

JD The progression of your career was though that you.... having done your time as a deckhand you then acquired your own vessel....

POLGEEST Yes.

JD and you were owner operator of the vessel....

POLGEEST Yes.

JD and that has continued through to the present day?

POLGEEST Yes.

JD You've been involved in a lot of other aspects of the industry though haven't you?

POLGEEST Well, I've always been a person that I suppose you could call a romantic type, I'm probably that way inclined. I've always believed that the industry should be left to people following on behind me the way I found it. It's been good to me and I certainly would wish it to be good for other people following behind my footsteps. Unfortunately this is not going to be the case the way it's shaping. Most fisheries in the world are being overfished and it's no different here.

JD There was once a squid fishery here I believe?

POLGEEST Yes, we had a squid fishery here. Probably when you look at the whole fishery you'd have to look at the co-operative as a sort of the main hub of it, and bear in mind the place was built in 1947. It was geared for Barracouta and having been associated with the freezer for many many years, as Chairman for fifteen years and Director still today, you can see the changes. And it's ironic that the place was geared up for one specie and it had to keep pace with all the other changing species, the different species. Consequently we've never had the right property up there to look after the fishing industry. It's always been ad-hoc. We've never had enough finance to keep pace with the changing times and so we've seen really Barracouta in the early days, then we saw crayfish coming on stream, then we saw the shark fishery taking off. We saw the gill-netting of shark.... we've certainly caught a lot of sharks in Apollo Bay. We had something like twelve net boats with an enormous heap of nets. Then we saw two years of scallop fishery. We had scallops caught in Bass Strait off King Island - two seasons. Then we had the squid fishery take off. So you can see that we've had enormous changes, constantly changing types of fishery in just this small town of Apollo Bay.

JD Are all the fisherman that fish out of Apollo Bay members of the Co-op?

POLGEEST No. A lot of fishermen, because of the nature of their occupation are very individual. They have their individual thoughts, their individual philosophies and also outlook and they are quite a unique specie. So some people believe in a co-operative system, some don't believe in a co-operative system.

I believe the co-operative system is unique and should be preserved because it gives the fishermen the only voice they've really got. They haven't got much of a voice elsewhere. The fishermen are totally fragmented and that's really a sad thing in a way, but the co-operative harnesses all that and gives them a good solid voice. And that's been my view for a very long time.

JD There are fishermen's organisations presumably?

POLGEEST Yes, we've had several goes in Victoria where we were associated in the early days as an individual body then we became amalgamated with Victoria Graziers organisation and that didn't last because we felt we were sort of a very small poor section of that quite large body. Then we had another body sort of cranked up with the Victorian Fishing Industry Council as its main speaking voice and of course today, we have once again revamped into a totally independent style body where we are not leaning on any sort of government hand outs and we are now actually going to be standing on our own two feet. Hopefully that will survive but I have some doubts.

JD You've been involved with this Statewide?

POLGEEST Yes. Just Victoria. I was on the Victorian Fishing Industry Council for three years and I've also been associated on the Victoria Rock Lobster Advisory Committee for a number of years.

JD Would you say the fisherman's voice is listened to?

POLGEEST Well, it is in some circles, in other circles it's sadly being pushed aside. I think the fishing industry hasn't got the numbers and bearing in mind, politically, it's a numbers game. We have never been financially strong enough so we haven't got that much clout. Consequently we've been pushed aside by the bureaucrats time and time again.

JD In Victoria, the management of the fisheries comes under the Department of Conservation, Forests and Land Management I understand....

POLGEEST Yes it does.

JD whereas in some other States it's a separate department on its own.

POLGEEST Yes.

JD Do you think it's an advantage or a disadvantage for the fisheries in Victoria to be part of a larger department?

POLGEEST Well I tend to think that it's a disadvantage because early on I thought it would have been an advantage to have the resource of a bigger department to cope with our problems, but it's my opinion today that it's definitely detrimental. We're becoming a very small industry in a very large body. Consequently, we're not getting the resource like we should.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD Nick, in some States it is the stated policy of Government that the user pay principle should operate in the fishing industry. That is to say that management of the industry through the relevant government department should be funded by the fishermen themselves. Does those pertain in Victoria?

POLGEEST It hasn't in the past, but it's certainly leaning that way now. We find it in all sorts of areas creeping into that sort of philosophy. For instance, we'll be paying for our boats to be moored in the marinas in Apollo Bay harbour and we're looking at probably paying anything in the vicinity up to \$4,000 per year just to be mooring our boats there. And with the Co-operative, we are also find now from a \$100 fee per year as a lease (on Crown Lease) we are told that it will be in the vicinity of \$12,000 per year.

They're using San Remo as an example; they've already been sent a bill back-dated retrospectively since 1987, and bearing in mind, of the co-operatives - we are one of the few left. There's only Lakes Entrance, San Remo and us basically - all the others have fallen by the wayside. And if they were that buoyant and that lucrative all the others would still be afloat. We [would] find with those sort of fees it would be extremely difficult to have co-operatives stay afloat, and also individuals stay afloat; because [of] all these government charges which are creeping up all around us - survey charges and radio surveys, compass survey (any survey they can think up, we've just about got). And I find myself in the situation where I can't even afford (I suppose I can afford it if I like to) give away one of my best crayfish months to the insurance companies. I'm not even insured today because if I insured today I would lose one of my best months income and I can't afford it. That's how the industry has become. That's the sort of fishery that you're talking about when you're talking crayfishing. That's my main income today and I can remember not so many years ago (I'm going back probably ten years) whereas your gross turnover catching crayfish, (and bear in mind you would be fair dinkum about it, you wouldn't be semi retired) would be gross the value of a new boat in twelve months. Today you're lucky to get one third of that value of a boat.

All the other charges have crept up around you and you find that you don't really have the purchasing power left at the end of the year. You just don't earn that sort of money any more. You can't catch any more crays even if you wanted to. Coloured sounders have snuck in whereas in the earlier days you had a little private patch that no-one really knew they couldn't quite understand why, or if there were crays on it, or where you used to catch the crays. With coloured sounders any guy off the street can hop on a boat and you just explain what the colours mean and they can just go out and catch crayfish. So in the early days it was different. It was entirely different. So there were bits of reef, Jack, that were virgin and you just hit them once every two or three years and you would get a bonanza. Those days are finished. Totally finished.

JD The total catches declined fairly....

POLGEEST Oh yes, yes. We used to produce, through the Co-operative I suppose that would be a fair sort of a yardstick because you're talking about "X" amount of people and if one performs better one year than the next, the production would still be the same you'd have a sort of an average through the co-operative system. We used to handle 2,000 bags. 2,000 bags and that's one hundred pounds (lbs) in those days - it was a lot of crayfish. Today we're lucky to.... I think we handled 80 tonne last year.... which was.... in fact it wasn't even 80 tonne I think it was a lot less than that. It is only a fraction of what we used to catch and bear in mind most of the fishermen today are just targetting one specie - crayfish. In the early days they weren't. They had

some Barracouta, some shark, some crayfish. Now it's bang: straight on the one specie. That's the danger. The stocks cannot take it. I've been saying it for years - they cannot take it.

JD That means then if the industry's going to continue, that the effort will have to be reduced.

POLGEEST Yes, well I was involved in the early days of coming to grips with that. We devised a system of a reduction on everyone's pot entitlement so we had (I don't know if you are aware of the Victorian system) a system of a pot per foot, boat length, and there was 20 for the skipper and 20 for the deckie. So consequently if you had a.... During that particular time you.... most of the boats would probably carry the amount of pots that they comfortably work and most of them at that stage were working 70.... I believe Bill Patterson in Portland he was one of the bigger entitlements, he worked 90. And with the percentage of reduction on each pot entitlement, would have meant guys like Bill would be down to 75.

We had a pot reduction of 10% and 15% and that was a fair way of doing it and we knocked a lot of boats out of the industry by doing that, and then we made the pots saleable so people could buy from each individual fisherman. And there was a pot reduction of one in five on the transaction. So you had a buy-back scheme that in time would work, but unfortunately what's happened is that we haven't got that much time left. The intense fishing pressure that we'd applied as commercial people, is outstripping the reefs. And I feel that what will happen is you'll have a natural wastage before very long because a lot of people will go broke. It's as simple as that. And the costs around, as I said earlier, are spiralling. Your production.... you can't work any harder. You can't catch any more crayfish. You can't get any more for your product. You're completely encircled in an area where you can't do much more. So consequently I see a real danger that if that happens, if the industry's not buoyant enough to cater for the good calibre of people, these good calibre people will drop out and you're going to left with a bunch of ratbags. Consequently the industry will suffer once again. And to me that's sad because the industry deserves more than that.

It's a good industry, it's been good to me and it should be good for the next generations to carry on.

JD That's a pretty sad story....

POLGEEST Well I think....

JD Depletion of stock really is the basis of the problem is it not?

POLGEEST It's a twofold thing. It's technology and bear in mind what I've said, there were areas there which were just like virgin reefs and they were probably breeding grounds. I used to relate to them as our breeding grounds in the early days and they just would multiply and those areas would become very dense with crayfish - very thick. They would migrate to other reefs and replenish other reefs, and with our tagging programme in Victoria a number of years ago, it shows that crayfish are not a stationary resource. Very much a transitory resource, but sadly, in Victoria we've had very little government assistance in the way of research. It's sad because industry once again, has been left stranded.

JD Is the research that is carried out done by the Conservation, Forests and Land Management Department?

POLGEEST Well, the only research that was done, was done a number of years ago and that was a tagging programme and we got startling results from that. Absolutely fantastic results. Why the hell it was ever abandoned I would never know. We've had other research done: I was advocating it at the management committee time and time again, certain aspects should be copied in Victoria. They were already.... in Tasmania they had escape gaps where the young juvenile crays could get out in case an octopus gets in the craypot, the little blokes can just dash out. If the craypot gets left alone for a number of days because of bad weather, which is very often the case in our type of fishery, you can't haul all your craypots when it's blowing a gale. At least the little blokes, your breeding stock, has a chance of escaping and it's only now in 1990: next year it's going to be a regulation that's going to be imposed, a compulsory regulation in Victoria to have escape gaps. It's taken 20 odd years to come through and I've been saying this at seminars, at committee meetings with the fishery division and it's only now that it's come through. And I think it's appalling that you have to wait so long. Absolutely appalling.

JD Is there a problem with people taking undersized fish?

POLGEEST Oh Jack, I mean it's a thing that's been.... it's another one of my pet hates for years. It's a thing that's been going on for a very long time. It's a commodity that's always been easy to sell, crayfish. You could sell it to the local pub, friends; hanky panky creeps in and we've got a situation particularly in our area, where you get a lot of tourists, get a lot of skindivers, guys come down in this area, they dive almost on a semi-commercial basis.

JD And sell the catch?

POLGEEST Yes. In all fairness, the last two years our local inspector has really clamped down on them and the Victorian Government has passed a regulation, you can't use captive air, which means oxygen tanks and stuff like that, to catch crayfish. But you've got once again, a situation where the numbers of amateur divers probably outnumber the commercial guys. So when it becomes a political situation, once again the commercial guys are done like a dinner. Politically once again, we haven't got much clout, but from the resource side of it, it's certainly been devastating because inshore reefs were also our breeding grounds.... it's like a cancer. Divers go down and they're just plundering it.

JD Is there a closed season for crayfish?

POLGEEST Our closed season used to be just one month, October, and then it became.... as today, September, October and half November and that's probably a good thing. I say that probably the schools of thought are that September should have been left open because it was probably more beneficial to catch crays in September, because the market forces were such that you would get a higher price and I've leaned towards the area of whatever it takes to put the industry back on its feet, let it be that way and my belief is that it's a good thing.

JD It points up the need for more research though, doesn't it?

POLGEEST It sure does, yes. It's evident that research in Victoria is lagging, sadly lagging behind West Australia and also South Australia. They're very much aware of what's happening, particularly West Australia where they do juvenile counts in small imitation seaweed beds where they count the young juveniles. They sort of finally find

that area as a home and from that they can predict what that resource will be doing in two, three, five years time.

JD And remarkably accurately.

POLGEEST Extremely accurate. We don't even know in Victoria where our juveniles go. You've got a situation today where you've got, you talk about the same specie in South Australia they've got a smaller legal size than Victoria. You've got poaching going on at Portland boarder area by South Australian fishermen that come into Victoria, because they've got a dual licence. They go back with Victorian undersize crayfish which are legal back in South Australia. They say it doesn't happen but we know it happens. We tend to think it's in the vicinity of something like 50 tonne get plundered out of Victoria and we don't even know if that resource was left what it would do to the Victorian stocks. We don't know whether our juveniles which float through the ocean currents for three months as plankton whether ours replenish their stocks or whether theirs replenishes our stocks. And bear in mind what I said earlier, crayfish are a very transitory stock, as our tagging programme showed, and to me, the two governments should get their heads together and say, "Lets straighten this one out, once and for all" because you can't have fisherman bickering against fisherman. You can't have market forces fighting market forces as you've got today. The whole thing is just totally ridiculous and it should be straightened out once and for all.

JD Does it seem to call for commonwealth intervention?

POLGEEST Well it seems to be that the two States can't cope with it and as I said before, the Victorian crayfishing industry is going down the gurgler. It's going slowly but surely. I said it in 1977 at a seminar in Portland. I felt the industry was declining by 3% per year. We've had the introduction of coloured echo sounders which offset that, because it hasn't really showed. You've also got enormous pressure being applied by fishermen buying other boats and they've got to work harder. It's only the last few years that guys have used their echo sounders, the coloured echo sounders, to the best of their advantage and of course with these other people applying enormous pressure because they've borrowed money on these new boats I think you find a lot of people from here on, will get into trouble.

I see it, a local instance, of a local fisherman here, second generation fisherman - no fool. Can't even service a loan of \$200,000. Now he's a young guy of 34, he's not married and he has extreme difficulties even coping with it. Now, that's not a lot of money today really to finance a sort of a commitment like that, and he can barely do it. He had to sell his block of land the other day to cope with it.

JD Just can't catch enough?

POLGEEST Just can't catch enough. That to me is sad. It comes back to the industry. It is in trouble and you cannot get that through to a lot of people. We had an Arnold report in Victoria trying to grapple with what really is happening but I don't think it will politically be dealt with. I think it's.... once again it's going to be put in the "too hard" basket.

JD What about some of the other problems that confront the industry. Is there a problem of pollution?

POLGEEST I'm not aware of it. I have noticed some scarring on crayfish the last couple of years. Some marks on them and that worries me. I saw a documentary from

Canada on the Canadian crustacean through pollution, through sewerage, stuff like that and it had lumps and bumps and deformities and I have noticed some of that the last few years and that does worry me. Tails which have deformed. Holes in crayfish. I haven't said much about it at this stage because I'm not sure. I've certainly mentioned it to a few people and they have said to me they've seen similar incidences. When you see crayfish that looks like it's had a spear through it and it's got a hole in its head that hasn't healed, you see a shell of a crayfish, the head of a crayfish and it's deformed, its gills are sort of sticking out the side of its body, it's worrying to say the least.

Any other pollution I haven't seen and when you talk pollution you're talking plastics and stuff like that, I take it.

JD Or chemicals or whatever.... oil.

POLGEEST No, I don't know. We see the odd shopping bag which is a real scourge in Victoria. It's probably all over the world and that's one area I would like to see something done about. Fishermen are becoming pollution conscious. I take all my plastics back home in a fish bin. The only stuff I discard is a natural product like cardboard. It doesn't last very long, but plastic bottles, any plastic substance comes back and I think you'll find probably 50% of the fishermen today think the same and the other 50% you may never change. That's just the way they are, just the calibre of the person.

JD Is it a worry to fishermen in Victoria that there seems to be a considerable inflow of capital from overseas, particularly into the processing and marketing of crayfish.

POLGEEST No I haven't seen it in Victoria but I'm fully aware of what's happening over in West Australia with the Japanese capital flowing into the processing side of the market there and that's a worrying aspect from my point of view as a fisherman. I believe it's 20% is allowable from overseas capital. My opinion is nothing should be allowable. None. And from other areas like the farmers' point of view also it's a worry to really know who owns what. I think that area should be kept fully Australian owned at all costs. But of course money speaks louder than words often but I haven't seen it in Victoria at this stage. The only nationality, or other nationalities that are involved in processing is probably the Greeks in the Melbourne fish market and that's a thing that's evolved probably the last two or three generations. It's a bit like the Italians in the citrus fruit and the Greeks are in the fish markets sort of, but not big capital.

Just to cap it off as a last comment from me as a professional from 28 years being involved in the fishing industry actively, I think from here on, the industry will go down hill. I can't see any other species being caught around here that's going to lift the industry. We're hanging our hat on squid. We're hanging our hat on the shark fishery and I can't see any other species caught in this area where our local guys can say, "There is a light at the end of the tunnel." We can really say, "We'll change, we'll become more economically viable from here on if we turn into that other type of fishery." I just can't see it and I believe that unless there's some intervention in the crayfish industry certainly I believe crayfishing could have a good future, a long future and that it should be able to last for many generations but if there's not intervention soon by government who says, "Hang on a minute, this industry is really in trouble, it's not just heresy or pub talk or breakwater talk, these guys are really telling the truth," then if we don't get that it's doomed. Simple as that.

As I said earlier, your good calibre of people fall by the wayside, you're going to be left with a bunch of ratbags and it's going to be a sub-type sort of occupation, whereas

today a lot of guys are professional people. They've got to know what their diesel does, what happens to the electronics. They've got to read the weather charts, fax machine. They've got to be able to understand a lot of bits and pieces.

JD And run a business really.

POLGEEST And run a business yes. As I said, the economics are just not there. So my final comment, is although we've had in Victoria a buy back system through the change of licences, and that it has knocked out a lot of boats, I believe that it is still not enough. I think we need to get rid of more boats and until we get rid of.... (I felt in 1977), 25% of the boats and fishing pressure, I believe that, that still holds today. I think that we should get at least 25% out of it from 1977 at least. And I don't think we've reached that as yet so consequently you've got an industry that's still going downhill. We haven't levelled out at this stage.

JD And to achieve that sort of reduction in effort is going to require a lot of close co-operation between department and fishermen, would you agree.

POLGEEST Yes sure. If you don't get that sort of co-operation pretty soon you'll have an industry that'll be flying by the seat of its pants. You'll have guys that'll go by the bye. They'll just fall, they'll just go bankrupt. You'll have boats for sale, you'll have an industry that's is no longer an industry. You'll have guys that'll go out for six months and get a part time job. I've got another business running today because I can't make enough out of the sea. I've got an earthmoving business going as well and I make a little bit out of that and I make a bit out of fishing. And I fish for seven months of the year so you can't call me a slouch. I work quite hard at it and that's my brother and myself, we've both got families and one commercial fishing unit will not keep two married families today.

I remember a few years ago where it would handsomely do that - handsomely.

JD Would you say that applies to other fisheries, other forms of fishing such scale fish?

POLGEEST I'd say so. Nothing's changed. I believe that's probably the case in other type fisheries. In trawling it's probably the same. You've got a feast or famine situation at the moment with orange roughies where it's almost, a goldrush virtually, but how long the goldrush is going to last them, no one really knows. You had it with the gem fish certainly, guys used to line up like "browns cows" and just go one after the other just trawl and just fill the nets up. You don't see that today. It's becoming hard slogging for them too and it'll be hard slogging for the roughie people before too long the way I see it. That's the way any other fishery has gone so I hope there's some government intervention and I've certainly seen it in our fishery newsletters and places like that where government has intervened and it's probably a good thing.

JD Looking into the future would you see any place for some form of aquaculture or [unclear] culture in crayfishing?

POLGEEST Well there's talk about it and I've often spoken about it. It's an area that's always been close to my heart. I can see it happening one day, but you've got to break the cycle of that three months floating cycle, of that juvenile when he, as an egg floats through the currents. That's a hard act to copy. I don't know how you're going to copy mother nature for three months and you have to.... after that harness that little bloke and put him in tanks and then you've got to wait eight years I believe, before he's size. That's a long time, it's a lot of problems for a long time, but they will do it eventually. There's no question in my mind that they will do it and it probably will

not be Australia, it probably will be one of the Asian countries. Japan or Thailand places like that, where they will do that. Because they're already doing other aquaculture so.... it's almost finished is it?

JD I think perhaps we'd better finish off Nick. Thank you very much for this very interesting and informed run down on the industry here in Apollo Bay.

POLGEEST It's a pleasure. I hope my contribution will be used in the right areas and if it makes that fishery better, by all means use it.

JD Thank you.

That is the end of this interview with Nick Polgeest, fisherman of Apollo Bay, Victoria.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with HAROLD SMITH

INTRODUCTION

Harold Smith is now 75 years old. Like his father and grandfather before him, he spent a long working lifetime fishing out of Port Albert. In Harold's case he fished mainly for shark and crayfish in Bass Strait. On the tape he gives a clear exposition of the boats and gear employed and the fishing methods, using long lines and mesh nets as well as cray pots. He also talks of the changes in technology he has seen and the effects of this on the fishermen and their catches. Other matters of concern for fishermen that Harold Smith discusses are weather conditions and loss of vessels, overfishing and recreational fishing methods as well as management practices and their effects on professional fishermen.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry and the interview is recorded by Jack Darcey at Mr Smith's home, Port Albert, Victoria on the 10th March 1990. There are two sides of one tape and the interview starts at 0.22 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Harold would you record your full name please?

SMITH My full name is Harold Joseph Smith and I was born in the Arum Hospital up here on the 15th February 1915, and I have lived [here] all my life. Only for a short while I went to Melbourne when fish was very cheap to try my hand out and I finished up driving two years for the Melbourne Tramway Board, a double decker driver. And then I found out that I couldn't take [it] I wanted to come back to the open, and I came back and went fishing again with my father and I stayed fishing there right up until I retired in 1972.

JD You come from a family of fishermen don't you? Your father was a fisherman and your grandfather was a fisherman. Could you tell us a bit about the fishing in your grandfather's day. What sort of boat did he use for instance?

SMITH Well my grandfather.... in those days they had a boat which was rigged, trawler type like English trawlers are and that's where they got their ideas from and slinging their nets so that they could catch this type of fish off Deal Island and surrounding islands in the Bass Strait down to Flinders Island in the Bass Strait. And their ships were steam - one of them was steam and big powered kerosene engines and they traded between Port Albert and the surrounding islands; and when they

caught fish they had to bring them back to Port Albert and to be shipped from Port Albert to Melbourne market.

Now to get the fish to Melbourne market they had to have ice [in] which they could ice their fish down properly because it took, in those days, three days to get your fish to Melbourne to be sold, because you had to have your fish boxed up today to catch the train, then the train. We would land in Melbourne in the afternoon and the fish wouldn't be sold until the following day at 4 o'clock in the morning. So consequently you had to have your fish in first class order to be sold. Now to do this you had to have ice and therefore - there were no two-way radios in those days for fishing boats and consequently there was no contact until you hit the wharf. And then when you arrived home here there was a maniac dash to get your ice ordered and made (as there was no refrigeration in those days) so that you could have your fish iced down to go away.

JD What species were they catching?

SMITH In those days they were catching anything that was in the net which was trevally they were mainly after, but they would also catch perhaps two or three ton of salmon in the nets and different classes of fish. But trevally in those days was the main type of fish that they caught in the trawlers.

JD Did they fillet the fish at all?

SMITH No, they just boxed it up with head and gut and everything on it and sent it away that way.

JD And then your father became a fisherman also?

SMITH Yes. My father was a fisherman on the boat with Grandad and when he got married, of course, he had children and I was the only child he had. And when I came of age I went fishing with my father and learnt the trade, but I had different ideas. I wanted to go out and catch these shark (which I thought was a cunning fish) and that's what we ended up doing, converting our boat into a shark boat.

JD Was it the old steam trawler?

SMITH No. No our boat was a petrol engine, converted to power kerosene so it would run economically and they were mainly consisted of old car truck engines, and we converted them with the help of mechanics - converted them to power kerosene and they were antique. Then we finished up, when we got on our feet a little bit, by ordering a diesel. They were the thing in those days. So we put a diesel in our boat and from those days we never looked back as regard to engines. As each boat was built, they went from a 20 footer up to a 50 and a 60 footer and that is the type we fished in, and they were all diesel powered and no trouble.

JD Were they wooden vessels?

SMITH Wooden vessels, yes.

JD Where were they built Harold?

SMITH They were built in Tasmania, Gippsland Boat Builders, and we had a local builder here called Brochie. He built several smaller boats, 45 and 48 footers. They

were all shark boats. We worked with long lines which consisted of 1,000 hooks. When we first started off we only used to fish with about 100 hooks and then we found out that we would have to have more hooks on, so we finished up with 1000 and 2000 hooks on and then we were catching very payable freight. Then when the war came on the shark got that popular that the prices went up and everyone was making a good living. And even the liver, we were sending that away. And that was sent to Aspro to be manufactured into shark liver oil which was made into Aktavites and all this type of health food and stuff and we were getting up to a dollar a pound for our livers. Of course this helped to pay for our fuel and everything. So the sharking not only stopped at the long lining, but as we were going along the Japanese started and they invented a net called mash net that could float, it was made of nylon and was rot proof and they converted from the hooks to mash netting.

And they developed a big reel, like a cotton reel, and put on the stern of the boat and rolled their net up just like you would roll up a cotton reel of cotton. Then when they went to shoot their net out they would throw the buoy over, and the weight, and the big flag buoy up with the lights on so you would know where it was so that you could lift it in the dark. And then you shot your line out, which ran off this big reel just like as if you had a cotton reel and you were walking along letting all the cotton walk behind you until you came to end. When you came to the end you just put a big heavy weight on, dropped that and your flag buoy on the end, and your light, and you just dropped your anchor in your boat and you waited. If the weather was fine you would wait until daylight next morning before you would attempt to lift back onto your boat the net.

Now to lift the net back onto the boat you would have to lift against the tide and that kept your bows straight splitting the tide and your net came over the bow, through a big roller, along the deck like this [demonstrating]. And as it was coming along the deck you would say, "Shark, shark!" and you would stop the net and you would take the sharks out, throw them on the deck and there would be one of the crew there cleaning them. Then the helmsman or the skipper would put her into gear and away the net would start again, pulling the net over the bow and rolling it up tight, just like a cotton reel of cotton on a sewing machine - same system. And you didn't have to haul your arms out, all you had to do was haul the buoys in. The centre bouys were tied on in case the net got bitten in half by a big shark, you would have a buoy to come along and lift up to save your net.

Well then we would go right along like that, which would take about (in fine weather) 3 hours to lift your net. Well when you came to the end of your net if you had a good payable freight you'd just pulled the buoy aboard, throw it on the deck and head for home. On these modern boats, of course, we had ice, of which we could get plenty, but which we couldn't get (as I said previously) in the early days. You had ice on board and you could ice your fish down and they would be in first class order when you got back to Port Albert. And then the transport would be waiting there with refrigerated or ice truck, and as you unloaded the fish was set in bulk into a big bin and iced down and went to Melbourne. And when it got to Melbourne it was still in ice and that's how it arrived. Nine times out of ten in perfect order.

JD Harold what length of net would you be using?

SMITH Oh, up to 3 mile or more. It all depends on the weather and how many nets you had on. See, some boats would use 15 nets and other use 8 nets, so each boat had different lengths according to the size of their vessel. The biggest boat as a rule used to carry the most net because you could put a bigger reel on to wind it up on.

JD And did the net float on the top?

SMITH No, the net right to the bottom, but when it went to the bottom it would float up this way - like a fence. You know wire netting fences that go along through the paddocks - and as a fish would swim along real innocent like, they would swim into the net and get caught and meshed and they would stay there until you lifted the net up and there they were. That's how they worked.

JD Would you get other fish as well as shark?

SMITH Oh yes. You would get snapper or you would get shark and you would get those beautiful flathead they would wrap themselves up, stringrays, porpoises and anything that would swim into it would get tangled, because the net was like a fine hair net. Yet it was so strong that nylon, and it would hold a big shark that got wrapped up to where he couldn't chew to get through the net.

JD It must have been difficult to get them out.

SMITH It is difficult to get them out. Like everything else if the shark wasn't too big and he was kicking and flapping, you would throw him between your legs and then you would just have to cut sometimes the net to get his head through, but still throw him on the deck and he was right. Nine times out of ten they usually were drowned - anything up to four feet was drowned when he came to the surface. If he was any bigger and he was too heavy, well you would just have to cut him in half and let him go.

JD Did you use all the types of shark?

SMITH Yes

JD There was a market for all of them was there?

SMITH Yes, even the big maneater. If we could get it aboard with say our block and tackle on, and the weather was smooth enough for us to fool around to get it in his gills or somewhere to lift him up, we would fillet him and send him away filleted up too. But he was good eating according to the cafes, but his price wasn't as good as the snapper shark which was about 4 feet long and the gummy.

JD Did they have to be bled?

SMITH Well when you cut his head off - they cut his head off and gutted him, they were all gutted before they went to Melbourne sharks, and consequently in first class order.

JD Is there a strong ammonia taste?

SMITH Yes there is. Some sharks if you are not used to it when you are cleaning sharks, your face is all red, just like a red balloon; it seems to aggravate the skin and burn the skin a bit, but not injurious, just makes you flushed, that's the ammonia.

JD Before you retired you went into crayfishing too didn't you?

SMITH That's right yes. We went off craying and I worked mainly around the islands of Kents Group, Flinders Island, the top end of Tasmania and right down; when we

went on the slip we went into Hobart and sold our crays there. In those days when I first started, we had to sell our crays in Tassie for whatever the buyers would give you we had to take, and we got up to sixpence a pound for our crays. Then as things got going, the aeroplane came in and they found out they could send their crays by freight and be sold in Melbourne within an hour, alive, and bring about 26 cents to 30 cents a pound. From that day the crayfish never looked back, then they kept on going up and up and up and now they are selling for up to \$27 a kilo - crazy!

JD Yes, it's a changed world isn't it?

SMITH Yes, but there you were.

JD But they tell me that the catches aren't nearly as good.

SMITH No they are not as good now because when the electronic echo sounders came in, or depth sounders came in, it puts you [unclear]. If you were there and you could read it, you could be just as good a fisherman as me; because you watched the sound and you would go out in your boat and come to a reef, and you look in your sounder and it would show you the reef, and you just shoot your pots along that reef and you are on good ground. If you didn't have an echo sounder I might come along and I am the best fisherman on the coast and I'll throw my pots on sand and get nothing; and you, a college student, could come along with this echo sounder and catch a thousand dollars worth of fish, because the sounder puts you right on the right ground.

JD Everybody has sounders now?

SMITH Yes, and the latest model sounder now you can even see the fish swimming on the bottom and you can see what they are. If you are after a gray or shark, you can tell; and if its a batch of trawl fish there is a big acreage of fish like a big black patch in front of you.

JD You would have seen a lot of changes wouldn't you?

SMITH Yes. See when we first went out we had to go out and to look for a reef it might takes us a half a day to find a reef. The way we found the reef was.... we would set our boat and would say a boat does 8 mile an hour, and we would steam for an hour and trust to luck that our course - say we were steering south-east, was correct. Well when we got there we would shoot our pots, but we might have missed the reef. So when we got out there we found out we had to get a lead and put fat on the bottom of that lead and throw the lead out; and sand, and sand, and sand. [We] would fill up the bottom of the lead again with nice clean fat and throw it out again - ah, and you would come along and you would find the fat dented where it had hit that rock. "Ah," you would say, "we are on the reef!" and you would throw a pot over, and you got your line and you would keep on going. When you ran out of dents you would come back the other way and start again. That was the old fashioned way, which might take a full day to do. But with the modern equipment you can come along and you steer out your course and you look at your speedo and it says 8 miles. You say, "Oh, well the last time we were here we went 10 knots." Right! You go a few more knots, turn on your sounder and there is the reef. So you shoot your pots, they're all on ground and the whole job takes an hour. Then you can turn around and steam back to the island and sleep the night and go out next morning and find your pots; whereas you couldn't do that with the old fashioned sailing boat because it might be dead calm, or without a sounder or without a speedo.

JD Did you pull the pots every day?

SMITH Yes. If you could go out, yes, everyday you would have to.

JD How many pots would you work?

SMITH Well I was working 40 pots, that is what I was licensed for because my boat was over 50 feet; I worked 40 pots and, as I say, made a good living to retirement day. There you are.

JD How many crew would you have on a 60 foot boat?

SMITH Well I only had.... my father worked with me and when he left I only had a boy and a deck hand, and we then finished up nine times out of ten just the two of us, because we rigged the boat and we could work it two handed. And we got power on our windlass so that you just switched the power on the windlass and that helped to pull your anchor up, and the deck hand - all he had to do was stack the chain. Whereas the other way it would be two men on the handles with the skipper steering the boat up to it. So when the power came along with its hydraulics and different inventions it made everything so much easier.

JD Harold, the waters you were fishing in were pretty rough aren't they?

SMITH Yes. The Bass Strait - we would have to cross the Bass Strait and when it is blowing a strong breeze it is rough, and when it was blowing a gale wind you couldn't come home at all. You had to lay there until the wind was favourable, either behind you or a lee to put your sail on to steady your boat to come home. That's very rough water and if you shoot your pots expecting say easterly wind and it comes in westerly, well you can't lift your pots because the sea is rolling in from this angle and breaking up on the rocks and you can't go along there because you can't steer your boat. But if the wind is from the east there is dead smooth on this lee shore because the wind is coming this way over the hill, if you are lying behind or working around behind an island.

JD Did you lose many vessels in the industry in this area?

SMITH Well while I was fishing there were about half a dozen that were lost here. Coming in on dark nights, two got lost on the bar - tipped upside down with big easterly gales because Port Albert shore is open to easterly wind. All along up past the lakes is all open to easterly wind. But westerly wind is off the shore and it's not so bad, and that is where our wrecks are caused mainly here - with eastern winds and tide against the wind.

JD Are modern boats much better able to cope with the conditions than the earlier boats?

SMITH Oh yes, because they have good engines in. In the earlier days there were a lot of reefs that I don't know for sure because it was before my time, but they had sails and sometimes they would come and they couldn't sail in because the sails would be flat and they couldn't fill the sail. If they filled the sail they would go ashore. They couldn't drop their anchors because they wouldn't be able to get them up as they never had the equipment that they have got now; and consequently if they came in too far, well they couldn't turn around like a motor vessel and say we are in the wrong place, because the sails wouldn't fill. They are the type of boats that a lot of them got

lost between the promontory outside Port [unclear] entrance and up to here, and along this shore. But I don't know the name because it was there before my time. I only got what my grandfather told me.

JD One of the things that seem to be apparent nowadays, Harold, is that the catches have gone down. Why is that?

SMITH Because we are catching too many fish and these nets catch everything that swims in to them. See when you put over a hook, it is just the same as you are fishing in the creek, you can see the fish there in the creek and you have got your hook over and the fish will swim all around but won't take your bait. You can see it because he is there, he is only in two feet of water, you can't catch him. But with a net, if that fish is swimming along and he is looking at you and he is not looking where he is going, he is caught and he runs into that net and he is trapped. And that is why these latest model nets are really dangerous to the fishing industry because they are catching too many fish.

You have got big Japanese trawlers, say at the back here, out in the deep waters catching fish on those virgin reefs which I, and my father and grandfather always imagined that those big deep water reefs a way out (in say 100 fathoms or so depth) we could work in; supply the reefs next to them, and the reef next to them, and then the reef next to them until they get right in to the virgin shore. That was in the olden days, but now with our modern equipment we are starting to clean up the close inshores - and we are cleaning up a little bit out further, and we are cleaning out further, and now these monumental nets come in, (which I am telling you about is how we fish now). They catch nearly everything that swims into them. The only fish that will dodge them is the fish that is not bothered to swim, he is just lying there having a sleep; well then you lift your net but he doesn't go in because he is not swimming. But if this fish here misses my net and he swims on a bit further, he runs into yours. And that is why these monumental fish nets.... if you happen to lose your net through a storm it will stay set there - it might stay there for years because it won't rot. It is all plastic it won't rot, and providing it doesn't get overladed with kelp and bits of wood that is floating down deep and flatten the net, but while everything is standing up like a wire netting fence well posted in, it is catching all the time. As fish go into it they die, and then the crabs and that come along and eat them and they are gone just the same, and that net is fishing all the time.

So that is why the Australian Government is thinking about now of barring these floating nets that the Indonesians, the Chinese, Japanese - you might have read about it - and Russians [are] working, they are catching everything and they are going to clean up our shores. Our deep water fish that come in to supply our reefs for us, they are going to catch that up; and consequently it is going to be like a ploughed field with no seed in it. So that is why we have to be so careful with these monumental nets not to lose too much on our grounds. That is what is causing this scarcity of fish, we are catching too many - clean them up.

JD Do you think the management of the fishery by government is efficient?

SMITH No it is not in my opinion. They shouldn't let any Russian trawlers come in to use our ports and catch our fish because with the gear they've got and the size boats they have got, they could practically pick up a submarine because they've got the gear to do it. In other words they could catch a thousand boxes each on a lift, and they can lift it all on the deck because they have got the equipment. They have got the gear and they have got the factories to can their fish and everything on them. So they are what is going to kill the local fishing industry around Australia, because if they are

going to catch great big quantities like that, what is going to supply our inner reefs here with fish when they are going to catch them all outside our reefs? And if that happens well that is going to spoil our trade. So if the Australian Government.... in my opinion - I am only a fisherman talking now - in my opinion if they were to stop these Russian trawlers and grant no more licences and just keep the present day fishermen working with their certified amount of net, the industry will last a long while because the fish will be able to breathe.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD One of the changes that would have happened during your time fishing was the limited entry into the various fisheries, would it not?

SMITH In what way do you mean?

JD In earlier times all you had to have was a licence to go fishing.

SMITH Yes, well that's right, in the early days if I wanted to.... In the early days they had a closed season for shark that was 3 months and it would be from the end of August until the first of December, well during that time we were able to just turn around and put shark lines on and go out sharking to make a living while the closed season was on for crayfish and that was it. Then they turned around and there was no need to worry. Well now you can't do that, you've got to have a special licence to go crayfishing or to go sharking, providing there's a month's crayfishing closed now, which is November. If you want to go sharking you can't go sharking now to make a few extra bob so that you could pay for your payments on your boat to the bank. Well you've got to tie your boat up because you can't go craying because it's a closed season for the females to breed in and that's where it's awkward a bit, and it stops amateurs from coming into the game to try and make a living while you're tied up, they've got to have a licence.

JD There's a lot of fish taken by amateurs though isn't there?

SMITH Oh yes! You take the.... I've seen them go out here, these amateurs, they are supposed to go out here and spear flounders here in Port Albert, supposed to spear flounders for a feed for the wife, themselves and family and they'll start spearing and spearing and if they can spear 140 they'll spear 140. They only want a dozen for themselves, they'll go and sell that 12 dozen in the pubs around and take the food out of the professional fisherman. And they can go out on Saturdays and Sundays spearing whereas the professional fisherman here is not allowed to go until Sunday at 5 o'clock, he's closed up from 12 o'clock on Saturday until Sunday night.

JD In order to give the recreational fisherman....

SMITH No, for the recreation so they could go out or have Sunday dinner at home and that, and their day off. Now the amateur can still come down and go spearing and buggerin' up their shot.

JD Do the amateurs use nets as well?

SMITH They did for a while but now they've stopped them, they're only allowed to use a spear so they can go along spearing; and some of them, their wives are better spearmen than their husbands are and they won't stop. They're what you call chasing the fish off the ground, frighten the fish off the ground, and they're earning a living on the quiet selling the fish to the pubs or the cafes, undercutting the local fisherman.

JD Aren't there Fisheries Inspectors to....?

SMITH Yes but there's only one man here to police from the Lakes Entrance to San Remo, he can't do it. And if he's here and I'm going in another entrance and with two way radios on I can turn around and say "How's the coast, is it clear?" and your wife comes on; she says, "No, you better not come to the entrance tonight the coast is not too clear" and that's how they work with these two way radios. Then their wives might drive their truck down to the Albert River and meet the husband there and take the fish, and the husband steams around to Port Albert to come on the entrance.

JD What about the fishermen's organisations, don't they object?

SMITH They do, but when Hawke can't control what hope [have] we got [laughs], so there you are and that's the way it is. They use the head for thinking and that old sin of greed comes into it again.

JD Unclear

SMITH Unclear....I'm alright.

JD Yes right. Harold, it's very, very difficult for a young man to start professional fishing now isn't it?

SMITH Oh yes, he's got to go on as a deck-hand and then he's got to learn, and he's got to stay on the boat for three years or so until he gets a good idea of it. And then the skipper knows whether he's capable of steering that boat in while the skipper has a sleep or something and if he's that good then he can put in for a licence to become a professional fisherman, like the skipper of a boat of his own if he wanted it. Then he's got to wait his turn or buy you out or me out. If I wanted to retire he can buy my licence and he's got the ability that he can skipper a boat, if he get's financed a boat.

JD It costs a lot of money though.

SMITH Oh it does, yes, too right.

JD If you had your time again would you go fishing?

SMITH Yes, yes, too right I would and know what I know now, it would be lovely. [Laughter].

JD Do it a bit differently would you?

SMITH Oh yes, because you wouldn't have to worry, you've got everything made. You've got beacons all up the channel and you've got lights everywhere, and you've got two way radio that tells you what the weather is doing. Nine times out of ten it's right for a fisherman, it mightn't be right on the land but for a fisherman it is. You know that the weather at Sydney is blowing an easterly gale; now you know, being a fishery man yourself, the glass is falling, that's going to come down the coast, it will be

here tomorrow morning. Well you lift your nets and come home or you go to the islands and lay, all that sort of business; whereas before you didn't have that, and what sets you did have they couldn't get more than a few miles.

JD It's an easier job now?

SMITH Oh yes! Even lifting the anchor you don't have to break your neck because you've got hydraulic hawsers to lift your anchor, and you've got hydraulic winches where we used to have to haul.... Like there's two men on the side and hauling the nets in or hauling shark line.... so there you are!

JD I noticed down in the wharf here, in Port Albert, a lot of.... looked like 'coota boats, there's a dozen or more of them there.

SMITH Small boats?

JD Yes.

SMITH Oh, they're the flounder netting boats and the small seine boats. Seining, like where you get two men to work, drag your net on to the shore, the other boat he shoots his net off over the stern and he hauls it in by hand instead of going round a reel. It works the same principal and they usually wait until the tide goes down and the net's flat in the water, they walk along, take the fish out, put it in the bag and go back to the boat. Then they wait for the tide to rise and when the tide rises then they lift it in by hand and then come home.

JD Do they do alright?

SMITH Yes, they make a living and that was what my father worked at until we got going on the shark fishing and, as I say, we started sharking in the '30's.

JD You've been out of fishing for a while now?

SMITH Yes since '72, I sold my boat.

JD Do you do any fishing at all?

SMITH No, only if someone asks me to come out and help them and steer the boat, I won't do any [unclear] now and that being very rare too now, because I don't go.

JD Do you do it just for fun?

SMITH No, my wife doesn't like fishing and even if I did have a little dinghy to go down the channel she wouldn't go, she hates it, gets seasick.

JD What do you do with yourself then?

SMITH I try and grow vegetables [laughs] and listen and talk and so forth. Oh yes, when I was a young bloke it was different, I'd be bike riding [unclear] playing the piano at dances and everything.

JD Are there many old fishermen live in this town?

SMITH Not now, they're gradually dying off, I think there's only about four left here now and it makes me think. [Laughs].

JD Right Harold, well thanks very much it's been nice to talk to you.

SMITH Good.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with RAY STEWART

INTRODUCTION

This interview with Mr Ray Stewart, scallop fisherman and trawler operator of Portarlington, Victoria was recorded by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University at Mr Stewart's home on the 14th February, 1990. The interview is part of the University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry.

Mr Stewart entered the Port Phillip Bay scallop fishery before the decline in that fishery. Subsequently he entered the in-shore trawl fishery in Victorian waters and then trawled for orange roughy out of St Helens in Tasmania. Following the curtailment of that fishery Mr Stewart and his sons, who by then had joined their father in the family fishing enterprise, re-located their operation to Victoria.

Mr Stewart is highly experienced in the [unclear] of the scallop and trawling fisheries in south eastern Australia. He has served on management committees with government representatives and on this tape considers issues such as departmental organisation, the tensions between amateur and professional fishermen, the record of some fishing companies and the need for management controls. He is a concerned fisherman with a considerable stake in the industry. His point of view deserves attention.

There is one tape of two sides. The interview starts at 020 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

STEWART My name is Raymond Douglas Stewart. I was born at a place called Charleton in northern Victoria on 18th April, 1939. My background before I entered the fishery was to be trained as a motor mechanic which took some seven or eight years. Then we decided to open a garage at Portarlington which is a small fishing port twenty miles east of Geelong. I worked in the garage for a few years and I wasn't happy with the money that we were making and decided to enter the trucking business with my brother-in-law. We worked along at this for a few years and were reasonably successful but eventually hire purchase and various means of funding other truckies forced us to look for something else to do.

We noted at that time that there was a lot of new boats working in Port Phillip Bay within easy sight of where our garage was so one winter when we were slack we decided to build a scallop boat. At that particular time a licence was almost free. I think it cost \$8.00 to buy the licence and we set about building what we thought at that time would be the best scallop boat that we could build. We decided not to build the biggest one, what we thought would be the most efficient. Nine months later, with

the help of two or three men from our trucking business, we built **the Gemini** which we started to work almost immediately. That was in 1969.

Unfortunately for us the scallop industry was winding down and I can remember the first day that we fished we caught sixteen bags which was a top catch for our port on that day. However after that the catch rate for all the boats reduced and after approximately twelve or eighteen months we were down to where we were just catching enough scallops to pay for the skipper's wage and the fuel. It was inevitable that all the boats would be tying up.

Of course at that particular time there were practically no regulations. You could fish 24 hours a day, seven days a week. You could have two or three crew on the boat and after eight or ten hours you could change the crew and put a new crew on and continue fishing round the clock. We never did that. I suppose it wasn't worth it at the time. Scallops were only bringing about 30 cents a kilo I think, or (sorry) 30 cents a pound at that particular time for the shucked meat and it didn't seem to be worth while working crews at night. The industry had been going for some, oh six or seven years prior to that and it was basically founded by Tasmanian scallop fishermen. I know in the early stages they say there were 200 scallop boats working in Port Phillip Bay and as is usually the case when something new and exotic like that starts up, I think we got all the people the Tasmanians didn't want. I think they talked them into coming over here. They had their own ideas as to what the law ought to be and then they certainly didn't want any management at that particular stage. They thought it was best just left to fish flat out and when they were gone they would go back to Tasmania and do the same thing over there. Of course that had already happened in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel area and that's where most of these fishermen came from.

When the scallops wound down to where it was unprofitable, most of these people went back to their home state and the fishery in Port Phillip Bay at that time pretty well closed down for two or three years. The boat that we built, **the Gemini**, we leased to another fishing family, the Cull family. They took the boat to Lake's Entrance and successfully fished it there in the Bass Strait fishery for two or three years. We had our trucking business to wind down. We were sick of working in that for nothing and I was keen to take over the scallop boat. However my brother-in-law and myself decided the best way was to sell the boat that we had built and split up the money and then if I wanted to go into the scallop fishery we could buy our own boat at a later date and this is what we did. In 1972 I bought the steel fishing boat called **the Gungadin** and successfully fished that in Port Phillip Bay from then until when we built a new fibreglass boat to replace it.

However not long before buying **the Gungadin** I did buy a small scallop boat and I worked that for some time and a friend of mine noted that we were working it successfully and he wanted to buy it. So I sold it to him and I went on and purchased **the Gungadin** which you know, was a bigger and better vessel. At that stage size limits were introduced to try to control the fishery. This was a pretty unpopular means of controlling the fishery because you were at the discretion of the policing officer as to what he... or his method of checking the scallops. Of course we had gauges on the boat to check the width of the scallops. A freshly growing scallop has a very thin edge on the shell where you measure it. Although it might have been sized when you picked it up and put it in the bag, after dumping the bag and dragging it from the tray up to the deck and stacking other bags on top of it, by the time you unloaded it at the pier and the fisheries officer comes along and he tips the bag out and walks all over the scallops, and then measures them, of course some of the shells are chipped and can be easily measured and found to be undersized although they may very well have

been sized at the time they were put in the bag. This method of controlling the fishery was eventually abandoned.

Other steps were introduced too along the way. I remember early on, one of the first management steps was to limit the fishing to daylight hours only. That was from 5.00 o'clock in the morning till 5.00 o'clock at night and nobody complained too much about that because by the time you spent twelve hours scalloping, you've had enough anyway. You're ready for twelve hours off. Later on another time management was introduced and that reduced the working week to four days, Mondays till Thursday (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday). This was happily accepted by the fishermen. It gave them their weekends off and gave them Friday to do maintenance which there's always plenty of on a scallop boat. Scallop fishing at that time looked pretty good. You could earn a reasonable income; had enough money to maintain your boat and you had reasonable hours.

It was about this time that my two sons were leaving school or looking to leave school and both of them finished up joining our family fishing business. Course that creates a few problems in its own because we then had to find two boats. They weren't happy to both work on the same boat of course. I was quite proud to have them in the scallop fishery at that time because I thought it had been running for some ten or fifteen years and could see no reason why it wouldn't continue. However this turned out to be incorrect. At the moment we have not really had a successful scalloping year for about three years and [there] is not really any guarantee that there's going to be any within the next two or three years either.

Lots of management ideas have been tried. At the moment we believe the method of controlling the fishery to the advantage of the fisherman and the environment is to only take the fish during their period when they yield the greatest weight and our seasons have been shortened once again. We now very rarely start scalloping before April and quite often the season is closed about August or September. Theoretically it's supposed to run until November but usually by that time we've fished out the existing scallops and on consultation with the Fisheries Management Committee, the fishermen themselves and the scientists from [the] Marine Science Laboratory at Queenscliff, a mutual closing date is arrived at and last year we fished for only a few weeks and this year it's doubtful whether they'll be a season at all but we still believe that this is the best method of controlling the fishery. If the fisheries inspectors notice that the size of the scallops is getting down to under three inches, they then ask the fishermen to have a meeting and a closure is usually imminent to give the scallops the chance to grow for another twelve months. [it] Also gives them a chance to spawn once more and perhaps gives us a chance to catch them when they've grown to a reasonable size.

In 1983 when my sons were fishing we decided to build a new scallop boat and we set about building a fibreglass boat. This was a large family effort on our part. I had my father and my two sons and my nephew [who] all contributed to the job. As well we employed a boat builder to help build the mould. We then engaged a firm from Geelong that specialises in fibreglass and they taught us how to use a chopper gun. We eventually did about 80% of the fibreglassing ourselves but we thought it was good to get them to do the outside skin as that would be the part that everybody would see. We didn't think that was the place that we should be learning to use this fibreglass equipment. My father, who at that stage was about 73 years of age, worked on the boat with me for about six hours a day and my two sons, when they came home from scalloping, also put in three or four hours each most days in the week. Of course on Fridays and Saturdays and Sundays they would work a full day. They did occasionally have some time off but we considered that we had a lot of our family's

income at stake and everybody had to tow the line. I regret that we built the boat out of fibreglass now. I think steel would have been a far quicker material to build it out of. None the less we finished up with a fine vessel.

One of the things I forgot to mention earlier was when the first down turn [came] (that I experienced in the scallop industry anyway), [it] was not long after we built the boat **the Gemini** and we leased it to the Cull family and they took it to Lakes Entrance. That proved to be a very wise move because the boat was then licensed to fish in Bass Strait as well as Port Phillip Bay or "All Victorian Waters Licence" is what it later became known as. This means that that boat could then fish in Port Phillip Bay and all the waters of Bass Strait.

At that stage I think we could fish up to within three miles of the Tasmanian coast with that licence. Later developments have been that Tasmania has put a twenty mile coastal zone for Tasmanian licensed boats only and Victoria has complimentary legislation much to the same effect which the Victorian licensed, or the area controlled by the Victorian Fisheries & Wildlife also goes out to twenty mile off the Victorian coast. The central zone as it then became which was between those two zones is still in an unsettled state really. The Commonwealth have got control of it but they are allowing the States to control their adjacent water and there's yet to be a big argument over that as Tasmania claim that they have got exclusive fishing rights out to 3912 which is a line not very far south of Wilson's Promontory, only a few miles.

There's been a more recent development and a Court case caused by some South Australian Fishermen debating the right of the South Australian Government to control the waters to do with crayfishing adjacent to their State. It went to a High Court decision and the High Court ruled that the line would have to go back to the only known line which was 3912 and it actually had been modified to suit some oil resources. So at this stage we're a little bit uncertain as to where that area that we call common area or Commonwealth zone of central Bass Strait [is]. We're not too sure how much of that we're going to in future be allowed to fish. At the moment Mr Kerin has said that because scalloping has been going on for some time that he will not interfere with the existing boundaries which means that we can fish still within twenty mile of Tasmania.

The boats that went to Lakes Entrance during that first downturn were lucky because they got their licence. After a few months fishing down there the Government decided that there was enough boats working out of Lakes Entrance (the port was pretty congested) and they were uncertain as to how long the beds in the Bass Strait were going to last so they closed the fishery. Any Port Phillip Bay scallop boats who had not already fished in Bass Strait were now no longer allowed to go to fish in Bass Strait. They were, in other words, restricted to Port Phillip Bay only and this has caused quite a bit of resentment by that twenty or so boats that then became known as "Port Phillip Bay only scallop boats".

There was also a small group of fishermen, notably from Queenscliff, who let their licences slide. In other words they didn't pay their licence fees thinking that when the scallops came good again that they would still have the entitlement but the Government ruled that as they hadn't paid their fees and their licences had slipped and the fishery was then closed, that they had no entitlement. This is a sore point with those fishermen even to this day. To make matters worse, those licences that they let slide, some of them have been selling for in excess of \$100,000 so you can sort of understand why they've got a bit of a chip on their shoulder today.

Later development of our fishery came about when, with this more recent down turn in the scallop industry, we found, you know, we had two boats and my two sons who were quite competent fishermen at that stage, had nothing to do as there was no scallops and we had no licences to do anything else of any note anyway. We decided to get a licence to trawl within twenty miles of the Victorian coast. You know, ideally we'd have been happy if the Government had let us have an inshore trawl licence which covered an area, say between Cape Ottway and Cape Schanck. This would have let us work from Queenscliff out to a distance of about twenty mile I suppose in the middle of that area. We felt it was an area that wasn't really being fished but when we applied for this licence we were told that it was too special and that the Government were not into just issuing special licences to suit special applications or that and that if we wanted to fish in that area, it would come under south east trawl.

At that stage we thought that the \$300,000 or \$400,000 that it would cost for a licence was too much so we bought a Victorian inshore licence and we persevered for about nine or ten months trying to make a living fishing inside the three mile zone along the Victorian coast. This proved to be pretty disappointing. A lot of that area is covered with reef. A lot of it is too shallow and the type of fish that you catch are usually pretty low priced and we also found out that trawling in shallow water isn't very effective because the propeller noise of the boat frightens the fish away from the path of the net. So even if there was a few fish there, the propeller noise [would] frighten them away and you didn't catch them anyway. This became very obvious when we were fishing out of Apollo Bay. There was a couple of Danish seine boats [which] came down from western Port Bay and they could easily catch 100 boxes of flathead in a day. I think our best day was about 15 or 20 boxes. Their boat had 100 horse power in it. Ours had 250 horsepower. I imagine their boat would have originally cost a couple hundred thousand to build and the one we were using [in] current day values would have probably cost \$500,000 to build and yet they could out-fish us about four to one.

So we had by this time acquired good trawl winches and fairly good electronic equipment and we still had no fishery that could earn us any money so we took the plunge and bought a south east trawl licence. This cost us \$407,000 for the licence and we bought it from a boat that was being built at Lakes Entrance to fish, at that time, exclusively out of Lakes Entrance and we thought that that licence would eventually be given a B sector as well as what they call the sou-west sector but the Australian Fishery Service in Canberra denied us that licence. We fought against it for some time but in the long run decided that if they thought that the B sector was over fished and they were going to have to put quotas on the gemfish which was the main species that could be caught in that area, that we would probably be wasting more money if we fought the Government in [the] High Court or something and even if we did win it we would probably finish up with a very small quota as the gemfish quota was set according to your past record and this licence that we bought had none so we would have finished up with a very small quota anyway.

We then took the boat over to St Helens in Tasmania because that gave us an area of deep water close to a port and on the sheltered side of Tasmania. We thought with our small trawler, this would be the ideal place to work. It did prove to be a good place. At that particular time there was a fisherman over there, Alan Barnett, who had just recently set his boat up to catch orange roughy and we worked with him for some time. In fact we carried some of his fish and we made quite good money out of just carrying his excess catch into port. We also found that even with our small inshore trawl winches we were quite capable of catching orange roughy ourselves. I think the best catch we had was some ten or twelve tonnes for one day's work which brought us in \$2.00 a kilo. It was quite a good catch by our standards, although it was pretty

small compared to some of the big orange roughy boats that we were working with at that particular time.

We eventually decided that if we were going to stay in the orange roughy fishery we needed to spend a good deal more money on electronics, as to catch orange roughy which is a target fishery, you need [the] absolute latest in electronic navigation equipment [and] the most powerful sounder available to the commercial people of the word. I've no doubt the American Navy have got better sounders but we found that to catch orange roughy you need the best that money could buy to see the fish at this depth. We were just in the process of fitting this electronic gear and the bigger winches that we required to hold the two and a half kilometres of cable each you need to fish orange roughy when the Australian Fishery Service did some testing on the grounds off St Helens and they decided it was a spawning ground and closed it. This was a bit of a shock to our income because it virtually meant that we'd spent some almost \$200,000 on extra equipment and the only place that we could work our small trawler was now closed to us for nine months of the year.

So we shifted the boat to Portland and went on to catching general trawl fish which for a long time we were unsuccessful at. Partly because of our inexperience and not having the correct nets. Recently however our catches have picked up a little bit. A lot of this has got to do with the majority of the fleet working on the orange roughy beds south of Tasmania and that means that very few boats are catching general trawl fish. Consequently the price has almost doubled and at this particular stage we're just making headway and we're looking forward to the fisheries opening the grounds off St Helens and hopefully we can catch some orange roughy there and perhaps even make a living.

For about the past ten or twelve years anyway I have been involved in the Victorian Scallop Fishermen's Association. For up until last year anyway, I've been the president for some five or six years and for the last three or four years I've been the scallop representative on the Fisheries Management Committee and I'm also the scallop representative on the Scallop Management Committee. These jobs take a lot of time but I find them very interesting and it gives you a good insight into what the fisheries management people have to come up against.

JD That is the end of side A of this interview. The interview continues on side B of this tape.

TAPE 1 SIDE B

STEWART Over this period that I've been involved in the Management Committees and Scallop Association etc the Government has been allowing the scallop fishermen to have a bigger say in managing their own industry. This is much appreciated by all the fishermen and at this stage we feel that we have got a good say in what happens and the fisheries are very understanding of the fishermen's views.

Sometimes we have some pretty rugged meetings and at one stage I remember where the Director came along to a Scallop Association meeting, stayed for about twenty minutes and left very disgusted at the brawl that it appeared to be but of course basically the scallop fleet in Port Phillip Bay, or all the scallop fleet, is about 70% Greek origin. This was the first time that the Director had been to a meeting involving Greek people. I in no way have got any disrespect for the Greek people. They are just a different community and in a lot of ways I think they could show Australians a thing or two. This problem of the two races being involved in the scallop job has at

sometimes been pretty rugged but gradually we're getting used to them and they're getting used to us. I think these days the relationship between the Greek scallop and the Victorian people is pretty good.

JD In recent times, fairly recent times, there's been a change in government organisation in that the Department that looks after fisheries now is the Department of Conservation, Forests and Land Management. How's that affected the fishing industry?

STEWART Well in the early times I think fisheries came under a different sector of the Government. I think it was agriculture and at that time I felt that we were one very small voice amongst the hundreds of thousands of farmers who all appeared to be at least as bad off as any fisherman, probably worse off and the troubles that we were in didn't get a mention at all. I know at that particular time we thought it was a good move to go under a different port folio. That is a debatable point. Some of the new comers to the scallop industry think that we would be better off if we went back to agriculture but I'm not too sure about that. I think that the only thing that would really suit us [is] if they had a special port folio for fishing alone. This probably is a greedy attitude. Everybody would like to have their own port folio controlled by only one person that was only interested in fisheries.

We sometimes feel that conservation takes a much higher place than does the rights of the fishermen. We have the greenies on the one hand saying that we shouldn't be taking fish at all and the Government is a little bit inclined to listen to them because they control a lot more votes than all the fishermen put together.

JD Is there a conflict of interest between the recreational fishermen and the professionals?

STEWART Yes [laughs]. You hit on a real good one there. The amateur fishermen believe that Port Phillip Bay is just there for their exclusive use and that all professional fishermen should be kicked out. Probably this gets a lot higher profile than it should because there's a few programs on radio, one in particular that comes to mind, where the chap that speaks on the program portrays himself to represent all the amateur fishermen in Port Phillip Bay. In actual fact he is just representing himself. He has a bait and fishing tackle business [in] Sandringham or somewhere and he feels that if he got rid of all the professional fishermen out there he would be able to sell a lot more gear to the amateur fishermen. I don't believe this is the right way to go. I've been led to believe about 28% of the population like to catch their own fish and the other 72% have to rely on professional fishermen to catch their fish. I think that is a reasonable balance and if that was the case there should be controls put on the amateurs to see that they only catch 28% of the fish that are caught in Port Phillip Bay.

As the Marine Science Laboratory are not frightened to tell you, if you take snapper in particular, they at one stage said there was about 800 tonne, they guess, [which] swam into Port Phillip Bay; 200 tonnes was caught by the amateurs and 200 tonnes was caught by the professionals. 400 tonnes swim out. Now since then they brought in this situation where anybody with a professional long line licence in Port Phillip Bay, if they want to sell it, they have to get somebody else that wants to sell theirs to and they have this two for one situation. So they have reduced the number of licences. Not by half yet, but it won't be long before it's reduced by half.

We already accept that the amateurs caught half so probably they're catching three-quarters of the snapper in Port Phillip Bay anyway. I don't mind them taking a fairly big share of the fish that are caught in Port Phillip Bay but I do get annoyed when I

see them selling the fish that they catch. This to me is a very blatant mistake that the Fisheries don't seem to be able to do anything about. Of course I've got ideas that all amateur fishermen should be licensed and bag limits should be placed on their catches and some of the money that would come in as revenue for their licences could be spent on better policing. It's not hard to see what is happening to the flathead population of Port Phillip Bay. If you go down to any camp on the Port Arlington foreshore here during Christmas and look at the camp sites you'll see them lined up in rows there filleting flathead that are about seven or eight inches long and taking them home and putting them in their freezer, or selling them, whichever suits their fancy and then scream blue murder because they can't catch a decent size flathead in Port Phillip Bay. It's not the professionals that do that. If we take under size fish, they are seen by the Inspector at the market and we are duly prosecuted. We think that some measure of control should be put on the amateur.

JD Before we finish Ray is there anything else that you'd like recorded on this tape to do with the fisheries you're involved with or with fishing generally in Victoria?

STEWART I think just generally the fishing industry is in a pretty poor state. At the moment my thoughts of course go towards the trawling because that's what we're involved in mostly. It seems to me that the big operators, companies or what have you, have got the Government's ear and they control a lot more political clout than the small operators. I believe they're probably wasting about 20% of the fish they catch through greed and over fishing, keeping the fish too long on the boat and they're a pretty poor product when they come in. That's a pretty difficult thing to control. It's considered to be a bit like gold fever, this orange roughy fever, and once they see another boat alongside them bringing in a catch of say 100 tonnes or something in their net, just about anything appears to be good enough as long as they can all get a slice of it.

I think that somehow or another some management controls have to be brought in that will not do away with the fishermen such as ourselves. We were induced into the fishing industry some time ago and there [are] a number of other families in a similar situation to ours. We will be still fishermen probably in twenty years time. These big companies come into it just for the quick quid and if the company goes broke and their shareholders lose their money it doesn't seem to worry anybody very much. There's another set of shareholders there waiting for them when they want to go into something else whether it be mining or some other enterprise. I think the Government needs to keep a close watch that there are controls put on that don't rule out the small family fishing operation such as ours.

JD That does seem to be a trend, doesn't it? Where you get more expensive and more sophisticated boats and gear, in bigger fisheries it becomes rather too expensive for most people to think of having a boat and operating it?

STEWART Yes. Well you're getting into a company situation as we've seen and they've got a pretty poor record of lasting. I wouldn't like to be a shareholder in one of these, what appear to be, pretty flashy fishing operations at the moment. We've seen the likes of Rigal Kent, Allied Fisheries etc come and go and the people that think up these ideas certainly protect themselves and they never go broke. It's the shareholders [who] finish up losing and probably the biggest loser is the fishing industry.

In the case of Allied Fisheries they set about and they had 60 boats built. Most of them were [of a] fairly poor standard because they were smart enough not to go to a traditional boat builder because he knew how much it cost to build a boat. They went

to engineering firms and had boats built by an unsuspecting engineer who wasn't quite a wake up to the fact that there is not one right angle or one straight piece of steel in a fishing boat. Consequently they built them for so much a tonne, the same as they would a bin or an elevator or any other normal piece of fabrication. Consequently they put almost all the traditional boat builders out of business in Victoria and Tasmania and broke quite a few engineering firms. I don't know whose fault it is that these companies can get going but certainly it's pretty obvious when you look at the results that some control should be.... or somebody should be keeping watch over them to see that they're not causing the damage that has gone on in the past.

JD Right. Well thank you very much for this interview Ray.

STEWART OK. Thank you for the opportunity. Look forward to hearing the results of it.

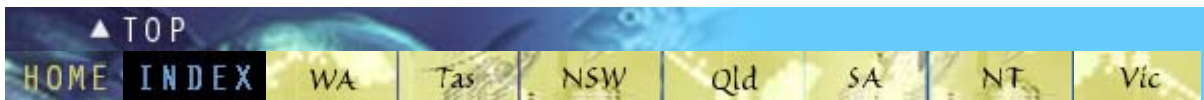
JD Good.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Ray Stewart, scallop fisherman and now trawler operator of Port Arlington in Victoria.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with JACK WARN

INTRODUCTION

Jack Warn has spent a long working lifetime in fishing in three Australian States, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania. He has engaged in many kinds of fishing and for some years fished with his wife as crew. He has also been a long serving director of the highly successful Lakes Entrance Fishermen's Co-Operative.

On this record he discusses some of the more significant changes he has seen during his years in the industry, the introduction of echo sounders, synthetic nets and ropes, increased engine power and two-way radio for example. He also discusses the depletion of fish stocks, management techniques and the current difficulties facing newcomers to the industry. He deals with the rights and wrongs of the recreational fishing effort, enforcement problems and pollution as well as indicating some of the less well known early fishing ventures in south-eastern Australia.

John Warn speaks from long experience in fishing and presents his view in an un-emotive and balanced fashion which enhances the value of this account. The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry. It was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Warn's home in Lakes Entrance on the 13th March, 1990. There are two sides on one tape.

TAPE ONE SIDE A

JD This is John Warn. [next few words not recorded]

WARN ... Date of Birth 2 March, 1913.

JD Could you tell us about your early years, your boyhood and where you grew up?

WARN Oh I grew up at Bermagui until I was about thirteen when the family moved down to Merimbula. Had a happy life in the country then. The only thing you could do was go fishing or something like that, which I did a lot of around the rocks and the beaches and had a real happy childhood. After that, when we moved from Merimbula I went to high school in Parramatta at Sydney way and after.... How we came to be at Bermagui in the first place, my grandfather and dad were mining engineers in the country and they came to the coast. They liked the area there and they stayed there. Dad got into the fishing game and eventually oysters, and I was around the water [at] that time. Just before I joined up I had about six months in the fishing and after that I had five years in the Air Force at which times I was a fitter 2E, that's working on aero engines. I was at Richmond which is an aircraft depot and we were at Darwin and from there I was [at] Morotai and Balikpapan in Borneo.

After the War I came home and a friend of mine that was fishing at the time, he had a trawler built down at Metung, which is not far from where we are now (Lakes Entrance). Another chap and I and the owner came down. We put the engine in it, took it back to Eden and after a month or two I skippered the thing for them out of Eden which is a deep water port but you're sort of married to a boat up there. You cannot leave it and go away for any extended time because the surge that used to come in there, they could damage themselves, which a lot of boats did. The name of this boat was (a seine trawler) the **Busy Girl** and we caught a lot of fish and I was one of the first.... I think I was the first boat that came down to the south-east of Gabo Island for night fishing for morwong (which are called tarakihi now).

It was during this period, one trip, I was half way to Lakes Entrance, between Eden and Lakes Entrance down the way round Everard Point (it's now) and I had a load of fish. I thought.... I'd met a girl at Lakes Entrance and I thought, well it's just as easy to go to Lakes Entrance and unload the fish as to go back to Eden, which I did. When I got here I think it was the first load of fish from a trawler that came in here and I forget what year. It would be about '57 I think, 1957. I served a dual purpose and anyway I've still got the same girl. They weren't used to handling quantities of fish here then because they had no boxes. They had to scout all round the place to get enough boxes and ice to send them to Melbourne (then). Anyway, shortly after that there were more trawlers came in here from Eden way until it developed into one of the best seine trawler ports in the country.

After about two years on the **Busy Girl**.... My uncle had a big boat and in conjunction with the CSIRO, who lent him two big seine nets for purse seining, we caught fish up around Eden and after that we went to Tasmania on the east coast, fishing out of Triabunna. We could catch the fish alright. We got tonnes of them and the canneries were going to play merry hell with the price until they saw we could catch big quantities and the price dropped to anything so we gave the game away, as far as purse seining.

JD What sort of fish was it that you were landing?

WARN Oh cowanyoung were the fish. They're a mackerel type looking fish and they're not a really good eating fish but today they could make all sorts of things out of them in pet food and all this type of thing and processing but I then bought another smaller boat of my own. In the first instance we were just hooking fish and many a time we came in with over a tonne of flathead that we've hooked. There was couta there by the boat load to be caught, cod. They're a soft fish but they sell well in Tasmania. We did really well out of them.

An interesting fact, fishing over there, most of the boats in the early days, they had wood stoves in them (not like all the mod cons today with gas and all that type of thing) but the good point about them, if you ran out of wood, you had a dinghy, you'd hop ashore somewhere and get another load of wood. Going out on my own (and the wife was at home), we thought it would be a good idea if she came with me, which she did for four years. I lived like a king because many a time we had a baked dinner and everything, hot scones. [In] fact some of the other boats at times when we were about thirty miles from home, we used to pass them over some hot scones or something like that and they thought it was great.

After that then I went into.... That was for nine months of the year. Then I used to go scalloping which was mainly down the D'Entrecasteaux Channel south of Hobart for three months of the year which was the length of the season. That was good money then and you didn't get sick of scalloping because it was only three months. Then I

went crayfishing and the wife stayed ashore then because you had to have a crew and it was different type of work altogether and really good. In the end, fishing down past Hobart in the winter time, it's very cold. All the mountain range, Wellington above Hobart, mountain ranges further south, they're covered in ice in the winter and it's really cold. So I gave it away and came back to the mainland.

During this time I built another bigger trawler over there, the **Atlantis**, and we went to Sydney with it and got it turned into a trawler and came back to Eden to give it another try but the condition of the wharf and in the harbour there is such that you couldn't go away for any extended period because you could get your boat smashed about which a lot were even over night. So I said, "Oh well, we'll go back to Lakes Entrance and try there." This was about 1956, I think, and we've been here ever since; seine trawling mostly. At one period I went back to Tassie with the boat and fished down off Triabunna and caught loads of flathead there but Lakes Entrance, we both liked the town here, the area and everything else and the climate and I've now retired from fishing. I can say I've had a very happy life in the industry. I've really enjoyed it.

JD John, when did you retire?

WARN Oh I retired, I don't know the exact year. [It] would be about ten years ago in, say 1980.

JD From the pre-War, really until about 1980, you'd have seen many, many changes in gear and methods and prices and all that sort of thing, technology. What would be the important changes, do you think?

WARN Oh there's been a lot of changes for the better. One of the big things about even crayfishing and sharking (I've done sharking too), there were no echo sounders so that you had to have a sounding lead to get your depths, especially sharks. Out on the edge of the Shelf sometimes in Tasmania they were really just over on the top of the Continental Shelf and if you didn't find that, you wouldn't get so many. If the current was right, sometimes you would go over the edge and the line would go down probably into two or three hundred fathoms in the middle. It wasn't always a dead loss because of the deep water ling and cod and fish like that were about, you'd have one on every hook; but not having echo sounders was a terrific drawback because it meant you had to pull this line up and down there which became work and it was a lot slower. Also for the crays, crayfish if you get very often in places just off the edge of the reef, even a matter of feet, and on the sand you wouldn't get a fish, but if you can find the very edge of it, you really get more. So echo sounders now, they've really revolutionised any of that type of fishing.

Another big change is in the gear used; a lot of synthetics and nylons and all that type of thing. They're stronger, they last longer, they're easier [to] handle in every way and with nets there used to be cotton nets where you had to dip them in some solution to stiffen them up a bit. The big draw back with them, they didn't start to fish properly until they had just about worn out in many cases. You were forever mending them, where nylon you get a really good spin out of them. It's not near the work and they stayed at the same way as you hang them, like they don't stretch or shrink like the old cotton did which.... It's vital that you get the measurements right, the number of meshes to the foot, for argument sake. If they're not right, you won't catch the fish. So that's another big advantage but everything is better.

In the early days, before the War for argument's sake, an ordinary little fishing boat, if they were going hooking fish, they may have only had a few horsepower. A lot of them

if they had twelve horsepower, that was big power. Now the same boat, they'd probably have four times that. Until trawlers, they've got up to the bigger ones, up to hundreds of horsepower. It [is] not only quicker to work, but you can get around the shot for seining quicker. Everything is faster and makes it better.

The wireless, two-way wireless, there were none of those in most cases. The boat I had in Tasmania (that I had built there), the **Atlantis**, I could go anywhere in Tasmania and break down and I could get home. A lot of boats that were there, when I had that built in '55 she was probably one of the biggest there and a lot of the boats couldn't have towed me home so I had to have sail on so you could get home yourself, particularly around the south of Tasmania if you get caught, but they were cotton canvas sails then. Now they're nearly all synthetic which, they're lighter and a lot easier to handle and you can handle the wind better because they catch every little bit of breeze. They would be some of the main differences and things that have occurred.

JD It was a much sort of more free and easy arrangement in terms of licences and things like that, earlier on John?

WARN Yes. Licences are not easy to get now. In the early days I could go and do any sort of fishing I liked. If you wanted to go sharking or craying you'd have a licence certainly, but you could get them. Now a lot of licences, they're nearly impossible for the average fellow to get a start because they're so dear. Abalone licences for argument's sake: my son's in the abalone game and he's got a single licence because he started early. Now, to get into the game you've got to buy two licences to make one. He was telling me, by the time they buy a four wheel drive and a speed boat, which is generally speaking a fairly good one with a couple of engines, and all the gear, you're looking at over a million dollars. So it's nearly impossible for a young fellow, unless he's really got something at the back of him, to get into it. Generally speaking, if he's got that much at the back of him, he won't get into it, he'll find something else.

The ordinary fishing now, it's hard to start off. The only hope I think you've got is if you can work your way into.... if you've got ambition and you work your way into a partnership with somebody or skipper a boat and to have some arrangement that you can eventually get enough and somebody will lend you the money to get one, but just to go in and rush in, you can't, and you're restricted to the one unless you've got the money to buy all these licences and most people haven't. It's the same with cray licences. In the early days you could virtually please yourself what you did, although you may have paid for a scallop licence or your cray licence, but you could go and get it. Well now you can't, not unless you've got the money to buy somebody out.

JD In your day obviously, you as a New South Welshman, could fish in Victoria and down into Tasmania and back to Victoria again, back to New South Wales, apparently without any problem with the authorities. Is that still possible?

WARN No it's a lot harder now. You're virtually.... you've got to get a licence wherever you go and sometimes they're just as hard to get in one state as what they are in your own so you're sort of restricted. Like when we were fishing in New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania, well there was no trouble at all. We just went there and got the licence for what you were going to do and that was it, but now with all this licensing.... See they've tried to restrict the licences and make them a lot harder I think to get because the fish stocks are definitely not what they used to be. Tuna which were a world wide fish, they're getting scarcer and scarcer. The flathead that were here, they're not as thick as they used to be even although you do have good runs at times,

but all this fish, it only stands to reason. They must get caught out with the continued high effort on them.

They've tried to do something about it but the point is, a lot of these fish now on the close inshore waters, they're not like they used to be and I can understand why they've got to do something about the licences but I don't know how long they'll last, but if they're restricted to a certain degree, I suppose they will last for years to come. One big advantage is it's like a lot of the things, as there's less fish, you get more money for them and I think that's a big help too. Of course then there's the deep water boats now where they trawl up to about 600 fathoms I think for orange roughly and a lot of those other fish. Seems to be an unlimited quantity of them at the moment but I think they'll be like everything else. They're catching them all around the coast, South Australia, Tasmania, here, Flinders Island and over in New Zealand. We may not see it but some day they'll be the same as anything else see. I don't think they'll be there unless they get bigger boats again; like the Russians are going to go outside the 200 mile from Australia down the south unless they find some other fish again and go on from there.

A lot of it's becoming a thing that it's like England. A lot of the big trawlers, they're companies and it's got to come that way here I think eventually because it's getting too much money involved for one man. I know if I had the money to buy a big boat like that which, the biggest one here's 90 feet, if I had that money in my pocket, it'd stay there. Yes well that's about the....

JD Could I just ask you a question or two John, is there any evidence of overseas money coming into the fishing industry here?

WARN Well I'm not too sure. At one stage there was a crowd started up here and they had a lot of boats. They've since gone broke and sold out but I don't know where that money came from. I don't think anybody did but that was for different types of fishing and they've been all bought out by.... a few people I know have bought their boats but where the money came from.... I don't think.... As far as I know, there's not any money to speak of from other countries. At one stage I think Australia was working in conjunction with a Japanese on this squid there and that didn't come to anything. I know the local co-operative at Lakes Entrance, they were working with one of them and they could catch a fish but I don't think in sufficient quantities at the time to make it pay.

JD Is that still a fisherman's co-op?

WARN Yes. The co-operative here, I think when we started it, I think I was one of the original ones in the small place here until we moved to Bullock Island and we've got a terrific place over now. It really made it for the fishermen because we could regulate the fish to market. Instead of sending them down there in two big a quantity, you get nothing for them and then the next three or four days [with] bad weather you couldn't get to sea and there'd be no fish but now we can regulate and send them to market. We've got a cold storage over there. [We] ice the fish down and keep them there and regulate the market and it's terrific.

JD And that co-op's still owned by the fishermen?

WARN Yeah, the fishermen's co-op.

JD There are other fishermen's organisations, are there here professional fishermen's organisations?

WARN Oh the co-op handles most of the fish here. There are lake fishermen here but a lot of them sell their fish through the co-op because it's such good facilities here. We make all our own ice, you can go and get it. All the gear's over there and what's not there, you can have it back tomorrow from Melbourne and nearly all the fish go through. Those that have tried to send it on their own, they soon come back because they just haven't got the facilities. All boxes and everything are there.

JD Does the co-op export?

WARN Yes we export a lot of fish, particularly school whiting, to Japan and they're big business. We can sell all there that we can fish. I think they have tried other places and I think there is a market, oh up around Thailand or somewhere up there I think. I don't know what they're selling there at the moment, but it will come. One of the problems is that we can't catch enough fish half the time to supply the markets that we've got there as well as the local markets. We do send a lot to Sydney as well and they're all sent up to Sydney there in big enclosed trucks now and the fish are well iced and everything and they get there in tip top condition.

JD Do we still dredge for scallops in this area?

WARN The scallops here were terrific. We used to.... When these came on I was scalloping here too and it's a twelve months in the year job which becomes a bit strenuous after a while but the scallops at the moment, the last two years, have been no good at all. They seem to have been caught out and whether.... If they're left alone I think they'll naturally breed up and come back again but at the moment you may as well say there's nothing caught. The last time the season opened last year sometime, oh I think it was only a day or two and it just wasn't worth going out.

Another thing, a lot of these boats are fairly big boats and big horse power; they cost money to run with fuel and everything, where a smaller boat could have went out and caught three or four bags and probably made just wages out of it but a big boat, it wouldn't be worth going but they probably will come again. It's the same in Tasmania, they're not like they used to be all around there. They did spread around the north coast of Tasmania and all down the east coast but they're not like they used to be either. There's more a combined effort on them and particularly here there were dozens of boats there dragging there and it's amazing the scallops that they drag out in a day and they couldn't last forever.

JD Do you think that the scalloping affected the other fisheries at all?

WARN No, I don't think so. You hear a lot of these things but.... See a lot of scallops get broken with these big dredges going over them and crack them and everything and there's a lot of fish come in and feed on all that stuff. I don't think it's affected them at all. It stirs it up but I don't think scalloping affects the fish at all.

JD Would you say that when the Government is making regulations about the control of fishing, that the fishermen's point of view is taken into account?

WARN Oh yes, very often. I know we used to have a good working arrangement with the authorities from the co-operative. I was a director there for years, one of the original ones on the co-op over there and anything that was coming up, they used to notify us and get our opinion and everything and we had a pretty good working

relationship with them, but what it's like the last few years I couldn't say because I'm not that up-to-date with it but I will say that the co-op, in my opinion, it's made the fishing for us because we've got all, everything we want there.

JD This interview continues on side B of this tape.

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD John, pretty well everybody nowadays seems to have a boat, recreational fishermen, they must be taking a lot of fish. Does that fishing effort affect the professional?

WARN Oh I don't think it does. I think to be fair about it, everybody's got to realise the recreational fisherman is entitled to do that for sport, also for fish to eat and again, on the other hand, if the amateurs want to be fair about it, they've got to realise that there are a lot of people in the country and in the cities, they can't go and catch their own fish and if they would like a brim, well they've got to have professional fishermen to catch them so that they can get that opportunity to eat fish. Looking at it like that, I think it's the only way to look but one of the troubles with some amateurs (and I've seen it myself), that they can catch some tiny little, say brim about five or six inches long. People have taken them. It's been said that they put them through mincers and take them away like that or I've seen them let them die on the wharf or on the bank. Now they talk about the professional fishermen, there are a lot of fish that die too but if they do throw them back in the water, at least if they can swim away they can, but if they're left to die on the bank they can't. Overall though I think they're getting to the majority and they're waking up that [if] you want more fish there, you've got to look after your stocks and if they're under size, throw them back instead of taking them.

By and large I think everybody's happy to have amateurs fishing where the professionals can fish as well. I remember years and years ago at Merimbula, there's a chap used to come up there every year and stay a few months and he said when that lake at Merimbula was open for netting for the professionals, he used to catch more brim and stuff because where they'd dragged their net over the bottom, they'd have stirred the bottom up and the fish would come in there. So he was quite happy for it because he said he caught more fish. In a place like the Gippsland Lakes, there's a lot of fish comes out of it and there's room for.... I wouldn't say the amateurs hurt the professionals. They may lose a box now and again but that's fair enough.

JD Is there any evidence that many amateurs are selling their catch?

WARN Oh well there has been people caught for it just this last year. I think there were about two to three lots of people from Melbourne netting in the Tambo River which is a non-netting area all [the] twelve months and they were taking them back to Melbourne for sale but I don't think there's a lot of that going on; but I would say in some cases might'n be this area, but generally speaking all over the place, that there'd be quite a few sold from time to time where they do get big quantities. The trouble with it is they don't sell at the going price. They would sell it at a lower price so the fellow would buy them. Well that's no good to the professionals and so they've got a bit of a gripe in that respect.

JD Are there enough inspectors policing it?

WARN No, well that's been one of the things all over the years but we know inspectors cost money and not only that, if there were ten times as many, it's very

hard to catch somebody that's going to do something in the middle of the night or any night in the year and you be just on there when you look at the huge area to cover but overall the inspectors have done a fairly good job. I know in scalloping in Tasmania the police used to [be] in charge of the boat and they'd come alongside you when you were fishing and tip a bag out and go through it for undersized ones, and you're only allowed just a handful, half a dozen or so. Now they've taken the size limit off them and if you can get them opened, you can let them catch them, but for years and years there was a size limit at Lakes here to and they'd tip your scallops out when you came back and go through them.

It was a good thing. I'd like to see that size limit put back on in one respect because if you take them too small you haven't got the bigger scallop which can grow a bit and spawn and probably breed a few more but at the moment it doesn't make any difference because there's not enough to catch anyway.

JD John is there any evidence of pollution in the Lakes?

WARN Oh there would be pollution, but I can't see that it's going.... They're talking about these ocean outfalls for some of the La Trobe Valley. Whether it would hurt it or not, it's problematical. I know there's a lot of complaints about it but coming out the lake here itself, well we were told by an engineer that the water from our local sewerage here, it's not going into the sea yet but it's in the town, that the water from that there's very little different to what's going out the entrance at the present time and of actual pollution, I don't know whether there'd be a lot because we haven't got a lot of factories that's putting a lot of water into the place, but I know up in Sydney way where the raw sewerage goes into the sea, well that's gone in there ever since I can remember. The water there is brown. You can see all sorts of things floating in it. The water is a bit deeper but it comes around onto some of the beaches there, but I've seen boats fishing and that and pulling fish up and while it may be deeper, I wouldn't say that that's really 100% pure water on the bottom either, yet the fish live in it; doesn't seem to affect them. I don't think we're too bad for pollution here at Lakes.

JD What about litter of plastic bags and that sort of thing?

WARN The where?

JD Litter, litter in plastic shopping bags and that sort of thing.

WARN Oh, litter. Oh well there's plenty of litter around the Lakes like papers and all that type of stuff that's thrown around, cans, bottles. We had a clean up here with the Keep Australia.... What was it, clean or beautiful or something? I was in that, along with a lot of others and Rotary, we got.... Oh at one stage I think we got three big speed boat fulls over on the surf beach there, the one down along the shore there, but oh I don't think we're any worse off here than anywhere else.

One of our big advantages here, we haven't got a lot of factories and stuff that can cause pollution, not like a lot of other places. La Trobe Valley, some comes down there and it comes in the top end of the Lake but it's not too good but I think they're getting better all the time with restrictions placed on them and different technology and all that type of stuff.

JD John, anything else that you'd like to have recorded on this tape?

WARN Oh, I can't think of anything at the moment. Oh one thing I could say. Before the War and when I was only young, when my father and his brother, they knew all

about the tuna being out wide off the coast here because they used to go porpoising and in those days (don't ask me what year, I was only very young), the porpoise were caught for their teeth. They were rendered, heads were rendered down, got collected the teeth and they were sold to the islands for the natives to use as currency. That lasted, oh two or three or four years, whatever it was. I can remember dad and my uncle talking about how many thousand teeth and they were good money. That was an interesting thing.

Another thing, Montigue Island, north of Bermagui, the seal rookeries on the northern side.... I've seen a boat there coming right in with the engine running and not game to stop it and catching snapper right in to the very feet of the rocks and the seals all there and diving in the water and catch a snapper and when he got too close, he'd steam out again and drift in again. The birdlife on Montague island, oh it was an eye opener, turns, seagulls and penguins, particularly on the northern.... It's the one island but it's very low in the middle of it and a big sea can just splash through. The northern part though you couldn't walk for seagulls and terns' eggs when I was young. That was really an eye opener 'cause parties used to go over there just for the day and have a look through the lighthouse and back home again, and get sick on the way at times. Oh it was really nice.

I've had a good life in the fishing. I wouldn't swap any of it. I've been in three States and had a really good time and I think if you live a satisfying life, well that's a good part of things, isn't it?

JD Yeah. Finished?

WARN Yeah. Did you have any other questions?

JD No I didn't John other than to thank you very much.

WARN I can't think of anything else.

JD Good. Well it's been very interesting to talk to you. Thank you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Jack Warn, fisherman and ex-board member of the Lakes Entrance Fishermen's Co-Op, Victoria.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

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Verbatim transcript of an interview with CECIL WILSON

INTRODUCTION

Cecil Wilson is the son of a fisherman and became a fisherman himself when he left school. He has fished mainly in the lakes at Mallacoota but was also involved in shark and crayfishing for a time. He was out of the industry for twenty years when he relinquished his licence and then found he could not get it back until he appealed against the last of several decisions to refuse his application and won that appeal two years ago.

During his years away from fishing he retained his links with the industry in that he was involved in the building of some twenty fishing boats of various size and type. In the interview Mr Wilson discusses a number of problems the lakes fishermen face. Some of these are: plagues of jellyfish and slime, poaching, the recreational effort and noise pollution. He also discusses the need for closures and for reduction in the fishing effort in order to conserve the resource.

The interview, which is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry was recorded on the lakes' shore at Mallacoota by Jack Darcey on the 15th March, 1990. There is one side of one tape. The interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

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

WILSON Cecil, Roy Wilson. Date of birth, 27th of the third, 1927.

JD And where were you born?

WILSON Cain River

JD That's quite close to here, isn't it? Have you lived in these parts all your life?

WILSON Yes.

JD When did you come into fishing?

WILSON Oh I can in around about 1943.

JD Yeah, you'd have done something else before you came fishing?

WILSON Oh no. I started fishing when I left school.

JD Straight off?

WILSON [Yes]

JD Was your father a fisherman?

WILSON Yes, yeah.

JD And his father?

WILSON No, no, only my father.

JD Yeah, and he fished in these lakes, did he?

WILSON He fished here for a period and then Tamboon mostly. He started there in about 1928, I think it was, on the Tamboon and fished there for six months of the year. Then it was closed against netting for six months and he did other work then like building and that sort of thing, you know.

JD Yeah and you joined him then in the fishing?

WILSON In the Tamboon, yeah.

JD And did you then acquire your own set-up?

WILSON Yes, I suppose it would be around about 1948, I think it was, when I started on my own then.

JD And how old would you have been?

WILSON Oh would have been around about, about eighteen then I suppose, twenty.

JD You went out on your own at about eighteen?

WILSON Yeah.

JD And was that in this lake?

WILSON No, no. It was Tamboon.

JD Tamboon again. When did you come over there, then?

WILSON Oh I think it was about 1952, '51.

JD What sort of fish do you catch here?

WILSON Oh mostly brim and luderick, potty mullet, skipjack, sand mullet and gardies. One year there was quite a heap of salmon came in, a few thousand boxes.

JD Here into the inlet?

WILSON Into the inlet, yeah.

JD That's a bit unusual though, presumably?

WILSON Yes, yes, not very common. They've only been here, to my knowledge, about three or four times since I've been here.

JD Could you describe the operation, what you do?

WILSON Well we use what they call a lake seine. In those days it was 400 fathoms and we use the old wooden winches we turn by hand and shoot from the shore out and round and back on to the shore again.

JD Using a boat to run.....

WILSON Yes, yes and close it together, both ends and then start winching it in.

JD Is there a restriction on the size of net in terms of the gaps in the net?

WILSON Ah, no; only the length.

JD Only length?

WILSON Only length, yeah. You can use whatever size mesh you want to.

JD And are the recreational people using nets as well?

WILSON No; no no, they're all solely hooking.

JD Yes, and you land the fish here, then what happens to them?

WILSON Well you land them here and in those days we had the freezer on the wharf and they used to be shipped to Melbourne twice a week by road.

JD Oh yeah. Nowadays you're using a different system, aren't you?

WILSON Yes. The only thing different now is the motor winchs.

JD Yeah but you use three boats?

WILSON Oh we always used three.

JD I see, yeah.

WILSON Yeah that's the only difference now, the motor winch and a shorter net, 300 fathom.

JD It must be very difficult to operate on your own?

WILSON Oh not really, not when you've got two deckhands.

JD [laughter] But they don't go out and shoot the net with you, do they?

WILSON No, no.

JD So how on earth.... What, do you anchor one boat?

WILSON Yes and shoot away from that and work one end at a time.

JD Yes, oh I see, yes. Right and you still send to the Melbourne market?

WILSON Ah, Sydney and Melbourne [unclear]. Until Sydney went off haywire there about a month ago, I haven't sent any back there since but probably will again shortly.

JD Do you do any other sort of fishing at all?

WILSON Oh I used to do shark fishing outside and crayfishing but of course that's all restricted now. You've got to have an endorsement on your licence to do those type of fishing now (which I haven't got).

JD How many fishermen fish the lake?

WILSON Oh [pause], there's around about six here I think.

JD Only six?

WILSON Six, yeah, which is enough for the size of the lake.

JD You left the fishing industry a bit, didn't you?

WILSON Yes. Yeah well I left when they started importing the fish from South Africa. That's back about 25 years ago, I suppose and the prices fell on the Melbourne market. For a two handed crew, which we had to use those days, on account of the cotton nets and things, to tan[?] them once a fortnight and that sort of thing, it was a bit too much for one bloke to do, you know. So I decided to get out of it and go building.

JD Had you been a builder before?

WILSON Yeah I'd done a bit of it, yeah.

JD What was that, house building?

WILSON Yeah.

JD But you also did boat building?

WILSON Oh we did boat building through those years, too; off and on.

JD How many boats did you build?

WILSON Oh I probably would have built, all up probably about ten or a dozen I suppose.

JD Did you build them here in Mallacoota?

WILSON No. Some at Cain River.

JD Were they timber boats?

WILSON Yeah, timber, yeah.

JD Yeah. What size boat would they have been?

WILSON Oh around about eighteen twenty foot.

JD Good? Went alright?

WILSON Oh yes, went very well yeah. Then of course I went down the lakes and did the two down there for Dick and Rodney Coachman.

JD Yeah, they were bigger vessels, weren't they?

WILSON Yeah, 62 foot.

JD Yeah, that would be a big undertaking? They [were] built down at Lakes Entrance?

WILSON At Lakes Entrance, yeah.

JD And are they still going?

WILSON Yeah, they're still going, yeah. Oh they were only finished, oh about four years ago I think.

JD What sort of timber were they?

WILSON Blue gum and box keel (grey box keel) and celery top deck.

JD And did you set them up with engines and tackle and all that?

WILSON Oh the last one for Dick Davidson, I stayed there until we got it going and I did a couple of trips on it but Rodney set all his own up himself, you know like with engines and winches and things. They were quite good boats.

JD Did you relinquish your licence when you left fishing and went into building?

WILSON Um, yes. Well I hung onto it for a while and I was told then that (by one of the inspectors here) if I intended to go back fishing in the near future, he told me that I'd be better off letting the licence go because he said, "If you hang on to it, we'll take it off you and then you'll probably have a job to get it back." Well I let it go and it took me about twenty years to get it back.

JD Twenty years?

WILSON Near enough.

JD How did that come about? What was their story?

WILSON Oh well they sort of brought in a law amongst them. It wasn't passed in Parliament but they just sort of made a law of their own up for the fishing game that they wanted to restrict the licences in inlets and they also stopped the fishermen from moving from one inlet to another. You had to have an endorsement on your licence to fish a lake. Oh I suppose a lot of things sort of come into it. Every time I applied for one they had some excuse why I couldn't get it back, until about two years ago I went to the Appeals Board and that's how I come to get it back again.

JD And you won the appeal?

WILSON I won the appeal.

JD So really you've only been back in it two years?

WILSON Yeah, about two years, yeah.

JD So, still a living in it?

WILSON Oh well, make a few bob out of it. Haven't been in it long enough yet to get an idea what it's going to be like.

JD Do you enjoy fishing?

WILSON Oh yes, yeah.

JD Would you rather do building or fishing?

WILSON Oh, well it's a toss up between the two really.

JD Yeah. What about boat building? Are you likely to do that again?

WILSON Oh I doubt it; not as far as I know, anyway.

JD Yeah. They've all gone into steel and aluminium, fibreglass.

WILSON Oh in this end of the world anyway. I don't think... You'd have a job to get the timber to do them, the way things are now.

JD Would you? Yeah that blue gum's a Tasmanian timber isn't it?

WILSON No, no. It was cut at the Ben River by Des Brunt and the keels were cut a Wangrabelle.

JD Could we have a look at the problems facing your fishery? I believe there's a slime that develops in the lake at times. Have you come across it?

WILSON Yes. There was a bit of it here just recently. It hasn't been bad but I think the main problem here in the lake at present is the jellyfish; probably [a] bigger problem than what the slime has been.

JD What's the effect of the jellyfish?

WILSON Well you can't haul a net through it. It lifts the net off the bottom.

JD It would be that thick?

WILSON Yeah, it floats, yeah. It gets really thick at times but otherwise the lake's pretty good, like the bottom and all that sort of thing's very good.

JD Would you say the stocks of fish are holding up?

WILSON Oh, well I don't think there's as many fish here as there were a few years ago. I think.... Most likely I think a lot of it is a cycle they go through. Probably in another few years time there'll probably be as many here again. That's providing the deterioration of the river and [unclear] and that sort of thing, sanding up; that might have a bit of an effect on it. I don't know because brim like quiet waters to breed in and that sort of thing. So it's very hard to say whether they'll build up again. I think they've got to do something with it, like close it in the breeding season and that sort of thing which Butcher brought in when he was the Director of Fisheries in Victoria. He closed it September and October. He did a research on it and he reckoned that September and October was the two months that was as near as he could get to that were the breeding months.

JD There's not a closed season now?

WILSON There's not a closed season now. The anglers took it off but I think that they'll probably bring it back in again, the way things look at this stage.

JD There must be thousands of recreational anglers use these lakes?

WILSON Oh yes there are and they take a lot of fish out too.

JD Do they sell them?

WILSON Oh as far as I know they don't. Some of them may do, perhaps.

JD But do you feel they're in competition with the professionals?

WILSON Oh I don't think they're really in competition. They certainly don't like [unclear] fishermen, I don't think, the majority of them. They'd rather see them out of the way.

JD What, they feel that you're taking....

WILSON Oh I think they do, yes. They come up here and they can't catch a fish and they sort of blame us for it but I don't think that's altogether true because a lot of them couldn't catch a fish anyway if you put it on the hook for them. The other good

anglers, they.... There's a chap I was talking to the other day. He said that's the best angling he's had here for about the last ten years, in the top lake, the brim.

JD Do you think the noise pollution from all these motor boats jazzing about affect[s] the fish?

WILSON Yeah I think it does have a bit of an affect on them. We noticed here at Christmas time the fish seemed to disappear when the speedboats and that get round the lake.

JD Is there a professional fishermen's association here?

WILSON No. We belong to the Gippsland Lakes Estuary and Fishermen's Association.

JD Is it an effective body?

WILSON Oh it's pretty effective, yeah; which we pay a fee of \$60 a year (this year it is) to be in it.

JD And does government listen to them?

WILSON They have done, yes.

JD Is there any research being done in the lakes in the fishing [unclear]?

WILSON No. There's been no research. As far as I know there's been no research done since Butcher did it when he was the biologist for the Victorian Department and a chap by the name of Lee (I think he was a Chinaman).

JD That's some years ago now?

WILSON Yes. That's a fair number of years ago now. I believe that's recorded in Canberra 'cause Kim (my son), he went in and had a look and he said any research [that] has been done that's of any consequence is recorded there and that's all he could find.

JD Do you think there's a need for more research?

WILSON Oh I think there is, yeah. That's probably where they've fallen down on the job a bit I think through not doing any research on them, on the lakes.

JD Any other problems that you see with the fishery here?

WILSON [pause] Oh I don't think so.

JD Do you think it's well managed? For instance, is there enough policing of the regulations?

WILSON Oh yes I think that part of it's alright. I think it's probably.... probably that goes along alright. I don't think anyone's really doing the wrong thing; perhaps apart from poaching and that sort of thing which has been something that's gone on for

years. I don't know whether it's still going on or not but I think most of the poaching was done from New South Wales.

JD When you say poaching, what's that mean?

WILSON Taking fish out of the rivers with nets.

JD Oh I see, amateurs setting nets....

WILSON Not altogether amateurs, no. There were some professional fishermen at it from New South.

JD Yeah, in what is to them foreign waters, really. How would you see the prospects for the future in the fisheries here in the lakes?

WILSON Well I think it'll be alright if they can probably.... I'd say this lake would be worth, it would probably carry about three nets I'd say and the eventual outcome of the whole lot, I think if they shut it down to about three nets, it'd probably do alright.

JD And that's only three fishermen operating?

WILSON Only three fishermen operating, yeah.

JD Yeah, what do you feel it's a bit over-fished with [unclear]?

WILSON Well I think there is a bit too much at present the way it is.

JD So that the available fish are being shared among too many fishermen?

WILSON Too many, yeah.

JD Ultimately that would probably result in a reduction of stock, would it?

WILSON Well at this stage it probably does help to reduce them a bit until probably they start breeding up again. Then they'll probably come good again, for a year or two again 'cause when I first came here there was.... The fishing wasn't that good. There was a lot of small fish about and then we had a run of a year or two of fairly big fish and we were getting twenties and 30s, perhaps up to 50 and 60 here and there. Then it's dropped off again.

JD You do get these rises and falls though, don't you, normally?

WILSON Oh yes. I think it's something that goes with it, I think. Just goes in cycles.

JD It's not a bad life-style, is it?

WILSON It's very good.

JD If you had your time over again, you'd do it again?

WILSON Oh I might'n do it quite the way I've done it. I wouldn't get married for a start off.

JD [laughter]. Join the club [laughter]. Right anything else you'd like to put on this tape, Cecil?

WILSON Oh I don't think so. I think that's about all I can tell you about it.

JD Alright then.... sure?

WILSON Yes, pretty sure I think.

JD OK, well thank very much for talking to us.

WILSON Thank you.

JD Good.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Cecil Wilson, lakes fisherman of Mallacoota, Victoria.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)

