

25 Recommendations

The residents of the Murray-Darling Basin live in an environment very different to that prior to the arrival of Europeans. In some cases the change is most apparent in the form of cleared land and degraded environments, all too obvious even to those without scientific training. Other changes are not obvious and it is only by comparison with hard evidence from the past that we recognise that change has transpired. The information collected and presented in this publication provides a picture, undeniably incomplete, of the former distribution and abundance of the larger native fish species in the southern Murray-Darling Basin. A comparison of the current status of native fish in the basin with the historical information confirms the assessment of the *Native Fish Strategy* that a dramatic decline has occurred and that the native fish populations of today are by comparison a small fraction of what existed at the time of European settlement. They have undergone not only a severe decline in abundance but also in their distribution and the range of habitats they once flourished in.

A large number of knowledge gaps remain in individual catchments and more historical research needs to be undertaken to establish, with what information survives, the original distribution and habitat associations of native fish. This project concentrated on the southern half of the Murray-Darling Basin and an equivalent project is warranted in the north. From the oral history collected in this project it is apparent that native fish had declined in many areas by the 1930s and therefore only the oldest of residents have recollections of the fishery prior to substantial change. With the passing of these people, knowledge is being lost and for this reason in this project it was the oldest residents that were identified for interview. In some areas no one remains with first-hand knowledge of the original fishery. Collecting further oral history is warranted in some catchments but with time, this approach for recording the early fish fauna will diminish in value. It is therefore urgent that people with first-hand knowledge of the fisheries of the 1920s in each catchment be identified and interviewed before they pass on, and their knowledge is lost. One area largely overlooked in this project was the collection of information on the smaller fish species which were not the target of anglers. Future oral history projects should attempt to record these species as well as the larger ones.

After museum specimens, the two most powerful records for the occurrence of native fish in specific waters are photographs and newspapers. Photographs, when of high quality, and whose source is reliably known, provide tangible proof of a species presence in a water. Over 400 photographs were located during the course of this project, but it is likely that a much greater number reside in private hands, remaining unidentified. These could provide critical evidence of the past presence of fish species in some catchments. Most photographs are likely to be of large cod and are of limited historical value. Those recording catches of fish dating prior to the Second World War represent high quality records and their value increases significantly with age. The photographic record is disappearing as families dispose of old apparently worthless photos, and original prints in the possession of historical societies deteriorate. A concerted public campaign to locate photographs of catches of native fish dating from the 1930s and earlier is strongly recommended and should be initiated as soon as possible by government agencies.

Newspapers also provide valuable information on the past presence of native fish though the use of common names can make the identification of some species difficult. The current project by the *National Library of Australia* to make available electronically major newspapers is producing many new records of native fish as well as identifying records of changes to fish populations and environments. It is recommended that ongoing searching be continued in the future, particularly as regional newspapers become available, and that ultimately a publication or database identifying all accounts be produced. Production of an updated version of

this document incorporating all significant newspaper records of native fish upon the completion of scanning by the *National Library of Australia* is recommended.

A focus of this project was to provide information to assist in the development of rarity scores for the *Sustainable Rivers Audit*. While different criteria were used to develop scores, there was an attempt to make them comparable to those used in the audit. There will always be some difficulty in making a comparison between angler catches and assessment of fish populations using ecological survey techniques, but the definitions developed in this project may be a useful guide for future projects assessing fish stocks from historical sources. One area of difficulty is determining rarity scores for species that in some areas had a strong presence in lagoon habitats but were often scarce in the main river channels such as Catfish and Blackfish in lowland areas. By defining rarity scores in terms of species abundance in main river channels they will sometimes significantly underestimate the past presence of species in catchments. Incorporating the presence of species in habitats away from the main channel in rarity scores, or developing a separate set of scores for these habitats, would provide a more accurate description of species abundance in the past.

The definition of habitat zones using altitude based criteria in the *Sustainable Rivers Audit*, while simple to apply, often does not reflect similarities in habitat between catchments. An example is the Goulburn River between Alexandra and Seymour, currently identified as lowland habitat, but physically resembling the Murrumbidgee River near Gundagai which is identified as slopes habitat. Introducing criteria other than altitude, such as gradient, flow, topography or substrate, to identify the habitat zones would provide a much better correlation of habitats between catchments and permit a better comparison of fish populations.

The following recommendations are made to help eliminate some knowledge gaps of the past distribution of native fish and consolidate or confirm existing records:

1. Conduct a project collecting and validating oral history and other historical records for native fish in the northern half of the Murray-Darling Basin;
2. Locate old photographs of catches of fish from the upper Macquarie and upper Lachlan Catchments. Photographic evidence will consolidate the existing evidence for Macquarie perch in the Macquarie Catchment and Trout cod in both catchments;
3. Locate further historical records, particularly photographs, for the upland zone of the Murrumbidgee River prior to 1910. Many existing records originated after the construction of Burrinjuck dam, which prevented upstream fish movement, and the massive translocation of fish from the lowlands. This will clarify the past abundance of most species in this reach for which there are limited records prior to 1910;
4. Collect additional information, including oral history, for the Broken Catchment. While some records were collected in this project, particularly upstream of Benalla, a large area encompassing the lowlands was not actively researched. The past abundance of Trout cod, Macquarie perch and Silver perch in the lowland zone of the Broken requires clarification;
5. Locate old photographs of catches of native fish from the Kiewa, Campaspe and Loddon Catchments. Photographic evidence will consolidate existing evidence for a number of fish species in these catchments;
6. Limited research was undertaken on the Murray River in South Australia in this project. The collection of oral history, particularly in the upper reaches, may clarify former abundance of a number of species

for which there is little known including Macquarie perch and Blackfish. In addition an oral history project based on the Mt Lofty streams may provide records for native fish in an area for which there are limited records.

There also needs to be an effort made to locate and collate the original descriptions of the various environments as they were prior to European settlement, presented in the form of a comprehensive, compact resource. Some peer reviewed papers and government publications make reference to these early descriptions and sometimes reproduce extracts from them. What is highly desirable is a resource where all of these accounts in a complete form are compiled into one work for an individual catchment to provide as complete a picture as possible of the original environment. Apart from aiding in the repair of our environment, having such information in the hands of the general public will increase awareness of current environment issues and the need for action.

The historical material collected and presented in this project demonstrates that non-lowland habitats contained substantial populations of large native fish. There is also accumulating evidence that a range of smaller native fish species, thought previously to be exclusively lowland, had a strong presence in higher altitude habitats. For example, 'Atherines' were documented as being present in Burrinjuck Dam and at Gulgong (NSW Fisheries Reports, 1901, 1914) at altitudes well above that previously reported. In terms of both small and large native fish species slopes and upland habitats, when reconsidered in light of the historical evidence collected in this project, appear to have been regions of high biological diversity in terms of their fish fauna and not devoid of angling sized fish, as some have repeatedly advocated. The implication of the past existence of prolific native fish populations in these habitats is that the challenge of meeting the goals of the *Native Fish Strategy* is going to be much greater, as the magnitude of the undertaking has increased significantly. Achieving these goals will require managing some waters upstream of the lowlands for the specific goal of restoring the original fish fauna so that representative examples of these unique fish assemblages are not lost forever, but survive for future generations to witness. This can only take place through the recognition of managers, anglers and the community at large, as to what has transpired and affirm the desire to achieve this outcome.

This project identified a number of probable sites where elaborate fish traps constructed by aboriginal people once existed. Native fish played a prominent role in the lives and spirituality of the first Australians from the lowlands upstream into the mountains. They were active managers of habitat, strategically placing structures in streams to enhance the environment for fish as well as facilitating their capture. Individuals anointed with totems for specific species of native fish were the custodians of a vital resource, charged with maintaining it sustainably. Recognition needs to be given to these aboriginal fishery sites, though the locations of some remain cryptic, whose importance should be acknowledged by the wider community. The loss of some aboriginal groups, particularly from the uplands, leaves all of us with the responsibility of guardianship for the native fish of their homelands, such as Trout cod and Macquarie perch.

The primary aim of this project was to determine the past distribution, abundance and habitat preferences of the Trout cod from historical sources. From the information compiled during the course of this project from all historical and contemporary sources, the following summary for Trout cod is presented and is recommended to be used in future publications:

Trout cod *Maccullochella macquariensis* (Cuvier, 1829)

Common names: Trout cod, rock cod, bluenose, Murray trout, 'Yaturr' (Jari Jari people of the lower Murray in Victoria), 'Ngumel' or 'Gnomell' (Wemba Wemba language of the Swan Hill region), 'Bangami' (Yorta Yorta language of the Barmah region), probably 'Inme' or 'Inna' (Yaithmathang or Gundungerre language of the Omeo region), possibly 'Yambuwa' (Dhudhuroa language of the upper Murray, lower Mitta Mitta and Kiewa Rivers) and 'Bewuck' (Yass/Tumut region).

A large, elongate, deep-bodied fish possessing an overhanging upper jaw when the mouth is closed. Coloration varies from light grey, grey-green or brown dorsally to white ventrally, becoming darker blue or livid grey in specimens from clear water. Markings generally in the form of small black or grey spots and dashes on the back and sides, usually with fewer on the head, larger specimens may be more heavily marked with spots covering the head. A horizontal head stripe passing through the eyes is often though not always present on smaller fish. In larger specimens a dark blue or black patch may be present on the snout and extend along the head between the eyes.

A top order carnivore feeding in the entire water column, the diet including crustaceans, fish, insects and occasionally terrestrial vertebrates. In smaller rivers and streams may actively feed at the surface on insects. A much smaller species than Murray cod, Trout cod were formerly very common up to 5 kg in weight, large individuals up to 22.7 kg have been captured and in excess of 30 kg reported. Individual growth rate is variable but can reach 2 kg per annum. There is evidence that juveniles may become dispersive prior to reaching maturity and that adults in larger rivers typically have a small home range of a few hundred meters though some may travel large distances. Fish become sexually mature at 3-5 years of age, with some individuals being reported to be mature as small as 25 cm in length. Spawning appears to be linked to water temperatures rising over 15°C and can take place from September to December depending on local conditions. The eggs are adhesive and believed to be laid on hard surfaces in cryptic locations.

Historically common to abundant in the faster reaches of large lowland rivers in areas of sand or clay substrate and in slopes, upland and some montane rivers and larger creeks of the Murray-Darling Basin from the Macquarie Catchment south. A characteristic species of slopes and upland rivers penetrating into lower montane habitats being recorded at altitudes up to 1100 metres ASL. Favours areas of flowing water containing cover in the form of wooden debris, rocks and underwater crevices and ledges with a preference in lowland rivers for deep water on the outside of bends. Now critically endangered, one wild and two translocated populations survived into the 1980s. Since 1988 hatchery produced fingerlings have been stocked into waters within its former range where reproducing populations have become established.

26 References

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