



Fishers for Fish Habitat Conference and Workshop

18-19 June 2009

Ballina

Ian Freeman and Gail Begbie, two of the 2009 RFA's NSW Future Leaders in Recreational Fishing, attended the Fishers for Fish Habitat Forum in June 09 at Ballina. This is part of RFA's ongoing Trust Funded people development program assisting the 2009 Future Leaders in Recreational Fishing participants to seek out and get involved in recreational fishing conferences, meetings and fisheries matters around our state.

Ian's report

There were around 50-60 participants on both days with recreational fishers from the saltwater world being slightly out numbered by the freshwater fishing fraternity. NSW Fish care volunteers and members of the Recreational Fishing Alliance of NSW were conspicuous in their pale blue shirts so we were well represented.

Steve "Starlo" Starling was a special guest and gave an amusing recount of his life living out of a suitcase while filming the Rex Hunt Fishing show after dinner on the first evening. As usual many of the issues facing recreational fishing were also discussed during dinner over the obligatory bottle of red wine (or two).

Probably the highlight of the forum was a field trip to the surrounds of Ballina where we saw first hand areas of habitat removal or interference and some of the problems associated with land drainage systems such as flood gates that can impact on fish habitat. Other areas where habitat rehabilitation has occurred and these problems have been addressed were also visited by the group. However each habitat that is enhanced leads to the next waterway, just proving that to be fully effective management must address the entire catchment which is an ongoing process.

Suffice to say the presence of old and existing weirs, road crossings and riverbank degradation/deforestation remain huge issues to address to reclaim important fish habitat.

Dr Charles Gray from NSW DPI Wild Fisheries Research unit gave an overview of recreational fish stocks in NSW waters and it was interesting to note the high percentage of the overall take they attribute to recreational fishing. This was particularly evident with flathead, bream, tailor and mulloway where Rec fishers catch far more than commercial fishers. Cold water pollution was

highlighted as a major issue in the freshwater ecosystem due to its impact on recruitment/breeding events.

Craig Copeland from the Conservation Action Unit of NSW DPI gave an excellent presentation on fish habits, their importance as fish nursery areas and what fish need to survive and thrive. His presentation highlighted that even when estuarine and freshwater habitats are suitable for fish to flourish they have a maximum carrying capacity so the only real way to increase fish numbers is to restore and regenerate areas that were once thriving fish habitat and have now been utilised for other purposes. Increasing sedimentation, loss of salt marshes and mangrove forests were highlighted as just some of the threats to maintaining fish habitat.

Andrew Goulstone from NSW DPI Fisheries gave a presentation on climate change and some of the likely impacts on fish stocks and potential implications these may have for recreational fisheries management. Potentially scary stuff and even if you are a sceptic about climate change the topic is firmly on the Commonwealth and State governments radar with specific departments being funded to address potential changes now and in the future. One of the possible outcomes could be for current open river systems and estuaries to become closed lakes which will hinder flushing and degrade water quality and also prevent fish migration. The good news is that Coffs Harbour could become the black marlin capital of the world and I might finally catch one of the elusive billed beasts!!

The Forum was fortunate to receive presentations from several participants who are already involved in or operating successful rehabilitation projects. Their insights into the difficulties and the enormity of the task involved was extremely valuable and will no doubt inspire others to undertake what must at time seem an overwhelming task. Project co-ordinators from NSW DPI who are managing specific rehabilitation projects also provided very useful over views of their current and future activities.

The key take home message from the Forum for us was that there needs to be a wholesale change in community attitude to fish habitat restoration and the prevention of further destruction. This is really a whole of community issue that needs to be addressed in a similar way to the clean up Australia program that has been so successful in recent times. However limited human and financial resources along with competing socio-economic objectives suggest this will best be achieved by the combined effects of a multitude of smaller projects rather than trying to change community attitudes overnight.

As one wise participant at the Forum noted even the removal of one weeping willow from a riverbank helps that habitat in the future.

The Forum closed with the pleasing news that there will be another Fishers for Fish Habitat Forum in the future. This is an excellent project so encourage you to participate in the next Forum when it is arranged.

Cheers and tight lines!

Ian

Gail's Report

There was a sea of blue shirts attending the DPI developed habitat program, between the Future Leaders in Recreational Fishing shirts and the Fishcare Volunteers on Thursday the 18th of June in Ballina. It was impressive to see the level of commitment already being shown by these passionate fishers. For me the highlight of this well designed forum was the practical and solution driven format to each of the sessions. What actions could, and are being taken was at the forefront of each of the sessions. We were shown projects currently underway either by fishers or in collaboration with fishers, such as Rodney Tonkin's rehabilitation of Lake Canobolas. Another project was Kevin Clark's work on the improvement of the Richmond River through weir removal and installing fishways. Talking with the locals involved was a good way of seeing what projects have worked and how they have achieved the improvement of waterways in NSW. It really proved the real need to re-establish access to our lost aquatic habitats (seagrass, mangroves, saltmarsh, floodplains, our creeks and rivers) if we want to safe guard and indeed improve the native fish stocks of NSW.

During the field trip to see how these areas are being opened up and fish habitat increased through habitat rehabilitation programs and actions such as fish passage initiatives. The trip did show the huge area of waterway and floodplain that had been lost to native fish species even in the Alstonville area. We spoke with a local Ballina commercial fisher who has seen first hand the loss of fish stocks that resulted from the restriction of local waterways by drainage schemes, barrages and floodgates for agricultural and urban development.

So we need to improve the knowledge of local fishers and community groups on the support available to them in looking after their local aquatic habitats. We need to encourage fishers to take the lead in identifying and rehabilitating native fish environments in their favourite fishing spots and the catchments that support them. We have a voice... let's apply some Fisher's pressure to your local council, and work for fish habitats for the future.

Cheers

Gail Begbie