

Southern Fishermen's Association



SOUTHERN FISHERMEN'S ASSOC. INC.

6th Australian Seafood Industry Awards 2011

Environment Award

NOMINATION FOR:

SFA INVOLVMENT IN ISSUES SURROUNDING THE RECENT ONE IN ONE HUNDRED YEAR DROUGHT

The past few years have seen great changes to the environment and huge challenges to the association to positively participate in managing the fishery, enhancing the ecosystem and keep the profile of the fishers of the region in front of decision makers.

To this end the association has sat on committees and participated in projects that addressed the management of the waterways to produce the best environmental outcomes for the ecosystem.

The two main projects involved:

- Lake Albert Carp fish down
- Barrage Management Document and
- Lobbying for change in management for environmental flows in the Murray River.

Background:

The Southern Fishermen's Association Inc. (SFA) is an innovative organisation composed of the 36 commercial fishing businesses active in the Lakes and Coorong region (and fishery) of South Australia. Our commitment to conservation and sustainability of aquatic (and all) ecosystems is demonstrated at individual, business and association levels - and is very strongly motivated since only with a healthy fish production system can support equally healthy business (and families).

Our Association and fishers have to be pro-active; if we don't take care for the future, the next drought, Government or habitat mis-management can spell the end of our fishing futures. Since conservation and sustainability have been an integral part of our activities for many years, most aspects of our activities demonstrate our ongoing commitment, of which the following examples may tell the clearest story.

History:

Active commercial fishing in the Lakes and Coorong (River Murray) estuary is documented since 1846 (over 156 years) with only the period since about 1976 coming under intensive government regulation (i.e. Limited entry etc.). During the 84% of the history of the fishery with minimal external supervision, the fishers sustained the resource through the boom and bust cycles typical of flood-driven ecosystems. During boom periods, the fishery supplied up to 58% of South Australia's annual scale fish production (1939), demonstrating that the capacity of the fishery and its natural production is by no means trivial. Despite bust periods and the impact of engineering solutions to river flows such as construction of the barrage network (that has removed 89% of the historic estuarine production capacity), our fishery continue to survive and prosper with the association working to ensure the future continues to look bright.

LAKE ALBERT CARP FISHDOWN PROJECT:

The SFA was invited to participate in the Lakes and Coorong Infrastructure committee, a subcommittee of the Coorong Council. This committee was formed shortly after the announcement that a weir was to be built at Wellington. Fearful of the consequences this would have on the ecosystem and the livelihoods of the fishers in the Lakes and Coorong fishery, Tracy Hill was nominated as the industry representative.

Advice was given to the various government departments that were involved in issues to do with water management and building of structures such as the “bund” at Narrung and the “regulator” at Clayton.

A major fear as time went by was a fish kill in Lake Albert due to the rapidly dropping water levels. Hundreds of tonnes of carp were left stranded behind the bund and were congregating at the pumps trying to get to the fresher water coming over the bund. Salinities levels in Lake Albert were building as evaporation increased.

The Objective: (from industry submission to PIRSA)

- *To remove as many fish as possible from Lake Albert before water levels and quality deteriorate to a point where a major fish kill occurs.*
- *Problems that will result from a fish kill include:*
- *Health problems in the adjacent communities from birds feeding on rotting carcasses and spreading disease*
- *Wild life feeding on carcasses may spread disease and possibly die themselves*
- *Putrid smell wafting over the township*
- *A detrimental impact upon the aesthetics and ambience of the surrounding region affecting tourism.*
- *Economic loss to fishermen of the region*

The government agreed to a trial fish down and allocated funds paid on a \$4.00 per kilo basis. This trial lasted for 4 weeks and over 110 tonnes of carp were harvested by 16 fishers.

This project occurred at the peak time of spawning and a variety of methods were used including mesh nets, hauling and gaffing.

The harvest was made extremely difficult due to the low water levels and the very muddy edges of the lake. At time boats were working in less than 30 cm of water and waist deep mud.

Due to the success of the trial, the government then allocated funding for a further 300 tonne to be harvested and put the contract out to tender. This contract was prematurely cut short when floodwaters coming down from Queensland meant that the bund was breached and finally removed in June this year.

(See **Fish down on you tube** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgF70DLeWZU>)

LAKES AND COORONG FISHERY BARRAGE OPERATING STRATEGY:

After years of SFA lobbying for rational operation of the barrages and opportune management of the limited environmental flow we currently get down the river, it was clear that the voice of industry was falling on deaf ears, so we wrote our own document.

Subtitled - *The Commercial Fishing Industry preferred Barrage Operating Strategy to gain optimal ecological benefits of freshwater released into the Coorong Estuary* – this document has been provided to SA Water, the Dept for Environment and Natural Resources and relevant Ministers.

The objective should be to achieve the optimal ecological benefits and to keep the freshwater within the Coorong estuary for as long as practically possible, particularly in low flow and minor flood events. The current remanent estuary is only 10% of the original size pre-barrages so there will be a high level of skill needed to maximise the brackish/estuarine area within the Coorong.

This document follows on from the other initiatives the association has instigates such as Salt Creek Drainage and Fish Passage for the Coorong Barrages. It speaks for itself.

(view at www.coorongfishery.com/media/documents/lcf-barrage-operating-strategy.pdf.)

VOICES OF THE MURRAY MOUTH

The Australian Conservation Foundation asked the SFA for support in lending their voices to a campaign to get every politician to sign a pledge to support a strong Murray Darling basin Plan.

Henry Jones and Tracy Hill flew to Canberra for a press conference at parliament house as well as meeting with several politicians to lobby for a better environmental outcome for the lower lakes and Coorong.

A film crew also came and filmed individuals expressing their concerns for the poor status of the Lakes and Coorong, future of the river and their communities.

Paste or Follow the links to the You Tube video clips.

- Tracy Hill <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7a5SJX7Zj60>
- Henry Jones <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAsRpUwnA1U&feature=relmfu>
- Garry Hera-Singh <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkZlrZ5A17U&feature=relmfu>

Active Participation on behalf of the Environment: The cliché "You've got to be in it to win it" might be best paraphrased to "You've got to fight to preserve it" in the case of the aquatic habitat. Our members are active participants in a variety of community forums representing the needs of the resource. Committee and other membership is currently being surveyed, but includes:

- RAMSAR Community Reference Group
- Inland Fisheries Management Committee
- Country Fire Service
- Coorong (National Park) Consultative Committee
- South Australian Fisheries Research Advisory Board
- National Carp Task Force
- National Native Fish Strategy
- Murray Darling Basin Committee Community Advisory Committee
- Murray Darling Basin Committee Fish Passage Steering Committee
- SA Water Barrage Operational Strategy – Advisory
- Input & involvement with developing the local disaster plan (in collaboration with S.E.S & Police)

INNOVATION

It was very innovative for an industry group to use its influence and small amount of political capital to get a government to pay \$4.00 kg bounty for 110 tonne of carp. The most important thing is that they agreed to a fish down of the lake. Carp in other lakes around Victoria and NSW were left to rot and the communities were subjected to months of rancid stench

SFA also chose to write a document that should have already been researched and written by the government agency after all the barrages have been operating for over 50 years. No other stakeholder group has taken the initiative to come up with as many environmentally focussed strategies and innovations for the Coorong and Lakes without funding or PHD's.

This fishery continues its tradition of initiatives with the environment as the foremost priority. It was the first multi-species, multi method fishery in the world to achieve Marine Stewardship Council Certification as a Sustainable Fishery.

The scientific scrutiny and rigour required to assess us will dis-spell many myths and ill-perceived perceptions about our gill net fishery. The international and independent assessment of our fishery confirms the L&CF is a responsible steward of the natural resources of the Coorong region.

We have championed other issues such as:

1. Salt Creek Drainage – to return freshwater flows to the Southern Lagoon of the Coorong
2. Barrage Fish ways – to allow fish passage between the marine, estuarine and freshwater environments for breeding events.
- 3.

Other Innovations:

Our Constitution: Fundamentally demonstrative of all our actions is our legal binding of ourselves through our Constitution to an explicit mandate to conservation and sustainability (Aims and Objects of the Association);

2(f) "members are obligated to conduct fishing activities in a responsible manner and strive to minimise any detrimental impact on the environmental integrity of the region."

2(g) "Members and the Association whenever possible endeavour to enhance and restore natural habitat of the region."

2(h) "Members make every effort to prevent and reduce pollution"

2(I) "This Association regularly review all activities of commercial fishing in this region with the aim of continually improving its environmental performance."

2(j) "Members conform to all legislative requirements and relevant codes of practice."

2(k) "This Association liaise with other interested parties on environmental issues in this region."

2(l) "Members of the Association encourage responsible environmental behaviour to other members of the public."

2(m) "Whenever possible initiate fishing methods that minimise the possibility of unnecessary waste of the natural resource."

Our Environmental Management Plan (EMP): On a completely voluntary and transparent basis our Association developed its own Environmental Management Plan to integrate its environmental activities into and across all aspects of the fishery and its businesses. Our first EMP (which was also a world first!) is available on our website.. This plan represents a roadmap for environmental management for each association member - and revisions to the constitution made commitment to the plan mandatory for all members. Amongst our planned actions, several stand out:

By-catch Sub-Committee/Sea Net initiative: Industry has internally recognised that a goal of "zero-bycatch" is in our and the environment's best interests. The Association has constituted a Bycatch sub-Committee charged with continuing to develop methods and techniques to reduce bycatch of all types to zero. This sub-committee has worked hard with mullet fishers to agree across fishers on what represents "best practice". This technology has been presented in a document through a strategic partnership with the SeaNet extension program (and Ms Cherie Heyes). Letters to relevant authorities and scientific literature searches have been employed seeking means to reduce avian bycatch, seal impacts on harvest, and lower bycatch gear types. On the 6th Sept 2002 our first document was launch by Minister of fisheries Paul Holloway. S.F.A obligation to continuous improvement highlights this document is not final. During the development of the Lakes & Coorong Management Plan further stages to a Bycatch Action Plan will be achieve with all stakeholders.

Voluntary Environmental Monitoring Project: SFA members are continuing to develop a voluntary environmental data collection system to maximise the value they can provide during their time spent on the water (*A fishers actual data sheet appendix 4*). After 3 years of operation improvements continue to be made. However, clear evidence is accumulating in "unlikely" areas such as visitor and recreational angling use, as well as key migratory wader activity. This is indicative of the information which can be gleaned from observant commercial fishers. Clearly current data demonstrates that angling activity is limited to the Christmas and Easter Holiday periods - this information should be of use to fisheries managers and other regional managers.

Clean Coorong Scene: SFA members are committed to collection of their own and other people's rubbish as part of their daily activities. Members carry dedicated fish boxes on board to retain rubbish; use of special bags proved less practical. At least once a year, with local Council assistance, SFA fishers get together to patrol part of the Coorong and collect garbage. In 2000, over 2,500 kg of rubbish was collected, of which the majority certainly did not originate from the commercial industry.

New species/Unusual Occurrence Reporting: association members have been instrumental in reporting new fish and other species from the Coorong and environs. Sick and other usual fish are also regularly reported. Most recently members were issued with a waterproof, disposable cameras to record unusual conditions and events while fishing. For example, SFA is now the primary contact for reporting of exotic introductions within the national CSIRO reporting network e.g. European Shore Crabs. Sick carp have recently been provided for pathology work. An SFA member provided a specimen of a wide-bodied pipefish, *Stigmatophora nigra*, as a new record from the Coorong (deposited to the SA Museum) and other material awaits identification.

CHALLENGE

Having no control over the environmental factors that affect the fishery, the fishery faces a continual uphill battle to ensure it remains a responsible steward of the resource.

Dealing with bureaucracy, multiple jurisdictional issues, public perception and factors that no small organisation could expect to change, the SFA is continuing to punch above its weight with no paid staff (until this current financial year) and all on a voluntary basis.

It was the first multi species fishery in the world and only the third in Australia to achieve the highest environmental standard in the world for fisheries sustainability (Marine Stewardship Council), a fact that is better known around the world than in its own back yard.

The SFA continues to demonstrate its commitment to improving the environment, improving environmental performance of the fishers and sharing their prosperity with their communities.

Our fishers are a very pro – active group. Other fisheries around Australia have copied initiatives undertaken by our fishery as best practice and leading the way forward for commercial fisheries. Eg. Bribie Island fishery Queensland developed a Environmental Management Plan after consultation with SFA. It is very similar document. The Bays and Inlet fishers from Victoria have used many components of our Management Plan. The Northern Rock Lobster fishery of South Australia voluntarily counts whales whilst fishing. (An initiative from our voluntary environmental data sheet).

Our local fishing industry has developed important community linkages with donations of fresh fish products to our local school and the Coorong Good Food Program. Our Women's Industry Network (the all important partner of a commercial fisher) have worked tirelessly to promote the network between kids, good food (fresh fish) and the local fishing industry.

Pursuit of the Marine Stewardship Council certification of the L&CF is a first for a Scale fish sector in Australia. Achievement of this accreditation can reassure the community that the industry is ethically and sustainably harvesting a natural resource of the region.

We have won three major environmental awards in 1997 (adjudicated by the Marine & Coastal Community network). 1999 The South Australian Fishing Industry Council environment award and in 2000 and since then:

- Finalist, Australian Seafood Industry Environment Award 2003
- Winner, South Australian Fishing and Seafood Industry "Fishing for the Future" Environment Award 2003
- Winner, SA Great Regional Science & Environment Award 2002
- Winner, South Australian Fishing and Seafood Industry "Fishing for the Future" Environment Award 2001

Clearly the SFA's achievements addressing the degradation of habitat issues as well as continually improving our fishing practises, have given our fisher's confidence for future industry development. This flow-on effect has stimulated sustainable economic growth and employment opportunities. This also helps enhance the social framework of regional South Australia providing security for the community and our families.

Until the fish down, the hard work over the years of promoting and addressing sustainability issues for the benefit of everyone has not cost government or the community (taxpayers) a cent.

The Southern Fishermen's Association is a worthy recipient of Environment Award.

www.coorongfishery.com

Photos are at

www.coorongfishery.com/pages/initiatives-awards/awards/photo-gallery.php