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FACT SHEET 2

Lakes and Coorong Commercial Fishery

The Commercial Fishery

A Proud History

Fishing in the lower Murray Lakes and Coorong region has been documented from as early as 1846. . During this early period of development, the fishery consisted of artisanal and subsistence operations, with most fishers operating on a seasonal basis.

In 1906, a newspaper report (*Register*, September 1906) documented that two men were fishing on a commercial basis to supply the needs of the local Goolwa community and starting to preserve fish for wider distribution.

Commercial fishing developed slowly during this early period due to inadequate transport infrastructure and poor storage facilities. The growth of commercial fishing activities in the Lakes and Coorong region was stimulated by the development of the steamer-barge trade, which commenced in 1853 through the ports of Goolwa and Milang.

Over time, fishing provided full time and part time employment for residents of the local area and for idle steamer crews waiting for cargoes, or during periods of low water levels when their vessels were unable to safely navigate the River Murray.

As fishing developed in the region, both ports served as bases for commercial fish landings, where fresh and preserved fish were consigned for sale at the Adelaide fish markets. The main species taken from the region during this period were mulloway, bream, yellow-eye mullet, Australian salmon and Tommy-ruff. Fishing equipment used included locally built wooden vessels with set lines and various natural fibre nets.

Prior to construction of the barrage network, up to about 30 commercial fishers operated regularly in the southern Coorong lagoon when conditions were favourable. In 1940, following barrage construction in the Coorong, there were 64 fishing licences issued in the Lakes and Coorong region.

This number dropped to 13 by 1970, evidently due to military enlistments and regulations on the number of additional agents (persons assisting fishing operations) permitted. Following this, records indicate that the number of licensed commercial fishers in the fishery rose to a maximum of 106 fishers in before being substantially reduced with the introduction of new licensing criteria.

A number of unique methods have been developed over time by commercial fishers, including swinger nets and cockle rakes used to target mulloway and Goolwa cockles respectively, on the ocean beaches of the Sir Richard and Younghusband Peninsulas.

*One of the old time fishers
Lester Rumbelow*



From Subsistence to Export

Since early European settlement, commercial fishing in the lakes and Coorong region has played an important role in establishing and maintaining the adjacent and surrounding coastal settlements. Fishers are mainly concentrated in regional towns of Meningie on Lake Albert, Goolwa and Murray Bridge.

Improved refrigeration and access to transport has allowed fishers to market their catch to most of the major fish markets in Australia. Fresh fish from the Lakes and Coorong make their way to Sydney and Melbourne fish markets as well as the local Adelaide SAFCOL market.

A number of fishers also value add their catch by processing into fillets, smoked fish and other products. These are sold throughout South Australia either through wholesale and retail outlets, restaurants, farmers markets and door sales.

A few fishing businesses are testing out emerging export markets, particularly with cockles. In addition the fishery recently signed on to the State Seafood Implementation Plan to collaborate with the other fishing sectors on projects that will assist with quality, cost, and supply chain issues and ultimately result in additional value through export sales.

A Vision for the future

Although modern technologies and materials (such as motor powered aluminium fishing vessels and synthetic fibres used to construct fishing nets) have been adopted, changes to fundamental fishing practices have been relatively superficial, when compared to the advances made in many other commercial fisheries. This reflects the unique characteristics of the Lakes and Coorong region and a desire from the commercial industry and Government to contain effective fishing effort levels within historical and sustainable limits.

The commercial fishery has provided a significant contribution to regional economies and helped to shape the social structure of coastal communities in the region through the provision of fish products to local consumers, small business enterprise, employment and economic flow on effects and, in more recent times, tourism.

Currently there are 37 licenses held by 35 businesses. The fishery retains an owner operator policy to ensure that those who understand the fishery and the environment are the ones who catch the fish. It is one of the many effort reduction methods the fishery maintains.

A recent survey was taken to ascertain the economic value of the fishery to the state and discovered that the number of years that licence holders in the Lakes and Coorong fishery had owned fishing licences ranged from 1 year to 42 years, with an average length of ownership by individual licence holders of 14 years.

Several fishing families have held licences for a number of generations. On average, each family had held a licence for 15 years, however, this timeframe ranged from 1 year to 55 years. The majority of licence holders were aged between 31 and 60 years at the time of the survey, with the highest number of licence holders in the 36-40 year age bracket. This is in comparison to the average age of farm owner/managers was 50-53 years.

The future for the fishery looks extremely bright, as there are numerous value adding opportunities, including several under-utilised species. As long as the environmental drivers of the fishery are not negatively affected in any significant way, and initiatives such as improved flow management, dredging and fish passage achieve the results anticipated, the Lakes and Coorong Commercial fishery should be operating for another 160 years.