

The Early Days of Fish Stocking and the formation of the Tableland Fish Stocking Society

By Alf Hogan

Fish stocking has a long history on the Atherton Tablelands. The first pioneers tried to stock rainbow and brown trout carried in milk cans way back in the 1880's. No wonder they tried to stock fish, because as far as I can ascertain, the only fish in the Barron River were eels, rainbowfish and purple-spotted gudgeons.

In 1949, Ernie Fong On and a few other keen anglers formed the Tableland Fish Acclimatisation Society. I still have all their meeting minutes and correspondence and it makes interesting reading. This group was responsible for establishing bony bream, archer fish, sleepy cod, mouth almighty, banded grunter, eel-tailed catfish and hardyheads, all from the Mitchell River, and khaki bream from the Tully River. The group also tried unsuccessfully to introduce brown and rainbow trout plus sooty grunter into Tinaroo not long after it was built. In all, this society tried to stock 19 species. This lack of success in establishing a larger angling species led to the demise of the Acclimatisation Society. Incidentally, Fong On Bay was named in recognition of Ernie's efforts to stock fish into Tinaroo.

All of Queensland's dams, including Tinaroo, were seen as aquatic deserts as far as angling species were concerned. This led to the push to import Nile perch, a fish closely related to barramundi but known to breed in lakes, unlike the saltwater spawning barramundi. Leading the push was Hamar Midgley, a keen angler and amateur naturalist. His influence led to the establishment of the Fisheries Research Station at Walkamin in 1973. Its job was to investigate the feasibility of importing and stocking Nile perch into Tinaroo and the rest of Queensland's "aquatic deserts".

I started working at the Walkamin Research Station in 1980. While the political debate raged about importing another "cane toad", we got on with the job of researching the local fish biology and establishing hatchery technology for them. We produced hundreds of thousands of silver perch and sooty grunter fingerlings which were stocked into Tinaroo and other dams as far south as Bundaberg and out to Mt Isa. The holy grail was to produce barramundi fingerlings and we cracked that in association with the Northern Fisheries Centre in Cairns using eggs from Weipa. The first barramundi fingerlings were stocked into Tinaroo on 17 December 1985.

For the next six years, biologists from Walkamin and Cairns did a lot of work on barramundi stocking in both Tinaroo and Copperlode dams and the Johnstone River to determine the best size for stocking, survival, growth rates and movement. By the end of 1991, this research was being wound up, which meant the end of fish stocking in Tinaroo. It was a shame, because the fishery for sooties and barra was really hot.

By this stage, hatchery technology for silver and golden perch was well established in southern Queensland and a number of fish stocking groups had been established down there. The government saw these groups as free labour, so established the Recreational Fishing Enhancement Program to support them. Typically, all this money was being spent down south. I said to my department, "Hey, what about us northerners".

Because we had spent so much time netting Tinaroo for barra, we were good friends with Howard Bloomfield, who was with Water Resources and the dam supervisor. He also was keen to see fish stocking continue in Tinaroo.

After some publicity in the local media about continuing fish stocking in Tinaroo, a steering committee of 13 met in the Water Resources shed at Tinaroo, on a very cold night, 11th June 1992. This group included well known fishing journalists John and Jennifer Mondora and keen angler and professional fisherman Dave McAtamney, plus local shire councillors. Howard Bloomfield chaired the meeting. I detailed the prevailing situation in the lake, and it's potential, then outlined the need for a community based stocking group, and came up with a provisional set of aims. We then agreed to form a new Tableland Fish Stocking Society rather than revive the old Acclimatisation Society. At a subsequent meeting on 26th June, the steering committee decided to join the state government's Recreational Fishing Enhancement Program. We adopted Jennifer Mondora's excellent management structure and constitution from her fishing club and Trinity Bay Action Group, then decided to hold a public meeting to formalise the Society, and gauge public support.

The public meeting was held at the recreation hall at Tinaroo, on Saturday, 25th July, 1992. It was chaired by Don Taylor, from the DPI in Brisbane, and assisted by Mike Hegarty from the DPI, Townsville. The public enthusiasm for the Society was overwhelming. At least 74 persons attended, and were entertained by speeches from Don and Mike on what the Recreational Fishing Enhancement Program was about; by John Mondora on barramundi angling; by Dave McAtamney on techniques for catching barra and sooties in Tinaroo; and by myself on what we could be aiming at, and how to achieve those aims, particularly using hatchery technology that the members could implement themselves.

The public meeting elected the following as the first governors:

Alf Hogan, Fisheries Biologist, DPI Walkamin.

Bill Bean, Councillor, Atherton Shire Council.

Dave McAtamney, Seafood Wholesaler, Cairns.

Jim Looke, Convenor, Tinaroo Environment Centre.

Bernie Williamson, Linesman, FNQEB.

Keith deWitte, Councillor, Atherton Shire Council.

Secretary, Shirley Godfrey, Duty Sister, Herberton Hospital.

Treasurer, Howard Bloomfield, QWRC Dam Supervisor, Tinaroo Dam.

Publicity Officer, Jennifer Mondora, Fishing Journalist, Gordonvale.

In its first year of existence, the society stocked 250,000 sooty grunter and 30,000 barramundi, more fish than any other group in Queensland. In fact, the TFSS was so successful and popular that many other areas also wanted a stocking group. So John Mondora and I became a travelling roadshow and using the Tinaroo model, set up stocking groups in Cooktown, Mossman, Innisfail, Tully and Collinsville, plus others I have forgotten. It was a real experience working with someone who was supposedly a cane farmer but spent his entire life going fishing and counting his money!

I would like to congratulate the Tableland Fish Stocking Society on a successful 25 years. It still has a core of dedicated, hard workers who I am sure will see its good work continue. In future years, it might even hold the World Sooty Fishing Championships and Tinaroo is producing world record mangrove jack and other species. As long as the TFSS keeps stocking them and we can keep catching them. Tight lines everyone.