

## Game Fishing on the Great Barrier Reef

by

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Gamefishing in Cairns began with the capture of a 1,000 pound marlin in September 1966. This was the first time that a 1,000 pound black marlin had been caught since Cabo Blanco in Peru finished in 1958. This 1,000 pound capture flashed around the gamefishing world and in no time we had inquiries from people wanting to come out here. African game shooting was finished, leopard and tiger shooting in India was being curtailed and the last challenge to the red-blooded man was to catch a big fish. In 1966, Cairns had one boat, owned by George Bransford. In 1967 we had three, 1968 we had six, 1969 five, 1970 seven, 1971 ten, 1972 fourteen, 1974 twenty three, and 1977-78 twenty-five.

The value of these boats, cruisers, and mother ships has been conservatively put at \$3.8 million. That's a lot of money to be invested in floating palaces, but they were built in Cairns, Innisfail, Brisbane and Sydney, and that's all been ploughed into the economy of Australia.

The attraction of Cairns is that we have waters that offer more 1,000 pound fish than any other place in the world at the moment. We are the black marlin capital of the world. Since the beginning of the records of the Cairns Game Fishing Club in 1966, there have been 300 fish over 1,000 pound caught. Techniques developed by Australian skippers and boat crews are now recognised world-wide as the ultimate in the catching of these big fish. The equipment is even manufactured in Cairns and exported.

Since 1968, we have developed a program in which anglers are encouraged to tag and release fish. This program has been ably supported by the captains and crews.

We like anglers to weigh perhaps their first fish and bring it into the scale and hang it up and get their photo taken with it. We have been encouraged by various sections of the community to tag and release fish, and in so doing we know we are preserving our black marlin stocks. Despite \$3.8 million in boats berthed in Cairns, there will be no more game fishing in the Cairns region if there are no fish left.

We also tag and release in an effort to gain some knowledge of fish migration. In the first two or three years, we were getting quite confident that we had some idea of where these fish went. We had some recoveries on the South Island of New Zealand giving a fairly good indication that the fish moved south. Then to our utter amazement, fish were caught at Samarai. We also had some tags returned from the Solomons, thereby confusing the issue completely. We had them going north, east and south. We have a theory, but we haven't any real proof of where they come from or where they go to. A lot of fishermen have their own personal opinions. I personally think they come up onto the continental shelf and go back down the shelf. We have had fish that have been tagged at sea, released for 400 odd days and have been recovered. We record the area where they are tagged, the estimated weight, the angler and the skipper of the boat. These facts are then forwarded to the N.S.W. Fisheries. Previously we sent them to the Oceanic Research Station at Fort Lauderdale as we were using American tags and cards. Now I am pleased to say we are using N.S.W. Fisheries tags. We hope that the Queensland Fisheries Service will soon be instituting a tagging system as they are doing with mackerel at the moment. Some 1,100 tags were issued last year by the Secretary of our Club to boats that were fishing the Cairns area. Nearly 900 cards have been returned indicating that 900 fish have been tagged and released. We weighed 68 fish during that period. That means we killed 68 fish and put them on the scales. I think this gives some idea of the manner in which the captains and crews and the anglers are looking after the marlin fishing industry in the north.

Tagging is a treacherous business. When the angler and the skipper consider the fish is manageable enough, the fish is wound in. A boatman with a pair of gloves struggles with a 700-1200 pound fish on the end of a wire trace pulling it to the back of the boat. The tag, a metal tip with a plastic body, is inserted into the fish just near the dorsal fin, near the shoulder by a second deckhand using a long pole. The wire is then cut and the fish released. When the fish are tagged they are inclined to jump about. Some people say that the acids in the fish take from a fortnight, to six months to dissolve the hook.

One incident indicative of the effort of these boatmen handling tagging programs: we had one 900 pound fish in 1977 when the wireman took the wire, pulled the fish in and when the tag pole went in, the fish leaped up and speared him through the rib-cage. There was a bit of a hullabaloo as you can imagine. We transferred this chap to one of the faster boats,

took him into Lizard Island and the Flying Doctor dashed up there and brought him back. I went up to see him one day in hospital and I said to him "By God Jimmy, you're a bit lucky". He said, "Eh". I said, "That fish nearly got you in the heart". He said, "There was no worry about that Jock, my heart was in my bloody mouth!"

We now have something like 25 boats, most of which are based in Cairns, some come from Innisfail, Townsville, Brisbane and Sydney. We have private boats that come from Melbourne, Adelaide, and Perth.

In all, we have about 30 boats fishing out of Cairns during the big, or heavy tackle, season.

Game fishing is not like a duck season, there isn't a declared season. Game fishing in Cairns exists from the 1st January to the 31st December. Sporting light tackle fishing takes place from January through to August. Light tackle tournaments are usually staged in July and August. The professionals, in conjunction with the Innisfail Game Fishing Club, conduct light tackle tournaments from Dunk Island in July. Innisfail and Cairns have a light tackle tournament in August and the fishing is tremendous. Then they move onto the big fish time which goes from August to December. The big season exists for about 120 days. Of that, about 10 days are lost to the boats in revictualling and recharging the batteries of the crew. About 500-600 guests come from the United States, Spain, Germany, Brazil, Equador, Tahiti and New Zealand. I think a lot of them travel first class, they bring their captains and crewmen, their wives or their girlfriends. We particularly ask them not to bring both - we don't want any trouble. These visitors spend something like \$700,000 in overseas airfares. They then have to come from Sydney or Brisbane to Cairns and that's not cheap. Then there's all the Australian anglers who travel to Cairns and they bring their wives, and that's not cheap. So you can easily see that in airfares they spend something like a million dollars getting to Cairns. They stay overnight in Cairns during the early part of the season. Then they go out and join mother-ships and on the way back we get them coming and going in the hotels. In the latter half of the season, they fish out of Cairns. They pay \$300 to \$350 per day for a boat or up to \$600 or \$700 per day for some of the complete boats where they sleep on board. They have to pay \$200 to \$300 per day to stay at the mother-ship when they stay behind the Reef and they sleep on board the mother-ship and fish on the game boat. The big game fishermen

bring with them a certain aura and glamour which the media pick up and dispense through their various papers and periodicals. We get stories of people like Lee Marvin, Jack Nicklaus, the late Gypsy Rose Lee, and Bob Dyer, a great fisherman who in the old days was a great TV personality.

They bring publicity, writers and journalists who write in all the big selling magazines of America and the world, and they speak about the big fish and these glamorous characters who come to fish. They speak about the top class gamefishing boats, about the quality and techniques of the crews and the skippers. All this has made headlines in large circulation magazines throughout the world, gaining for Cairns an untold amount of publicity which no tourist organisation could possibly have afforded, and we got it for free.

Everybody, if you travel around, knows where Cairns is. "That's the place on the Barrier Reef where they catch them big black marlin". And this is so.

The boats have to come into Cairns for maintenance. It costs a lot of money, something like \$10,000 per boat per annum is spent in Cairns. The victualling is done in Cairns. Tourists and travellers shoot miles and miles of movie film. They don't buy movie film by the packet, they buy it by the carton and take it out and reel it off - 35 mm action shots, they take the lot. But its the hardest thing in the world to get a copy of what they have shot. They hang on to it. I've been asked on several occasions for shots of jumping marlin and its the hardest thing in the world to get them. All this has been done with the energies of the Queensland Game Fishing Association in conjunction with the Cairns Game Fishing Club.