

# FIX IT

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## AND THEY WILL COME...

I think it was Dr Seuss who said "it's not about what it is, it's about what it can become". Perhaps he was talking about the Condamine River?

Originating as a trickle in the Border Ranges in southeast QLD, The Condamine snakes its way through the towns of Killarney and Warwick, before becoming the Balonne River at around Surat, and eventually flowing into the Darling. As is the case for many rural riverside communities, the River has played a significant role in the lives of local residents over the years, and fishing has been the cornerstone.

With healthy populations of Murray cod, Golden and Silver perch, Eel-tailed and Hyrtl's catfish, River blackfish in the headwaters, and Spangled perch, or 'bobby cod' as they are sometimes known by some of the older fishers, you never knew what was going to 'bob your cork'.

Like too many other rivers around Australia, the once-great Condamine has suffered from years of poor land management. Large-scale removal of snags in the 40's-60's, coupled with prevalent livestock access had caused significant erosion. Installation of barriers along the river had disrupted fish migration. Loss of bankside vegetation denied fish important shade, habitat and sources of food, and infestations of weeds and pest fish species (mainly Carp) also took their toll.

Whilst being interviewed as part of a fascinating study into how our rivers, fish and fishing have changed over the years, (see 'Further Reading'), local gun fisher Noal Kuhl recalled how bad it had become, referring to the river as a 'glorified gully', with 'basically no habitat for native fish to live under'.

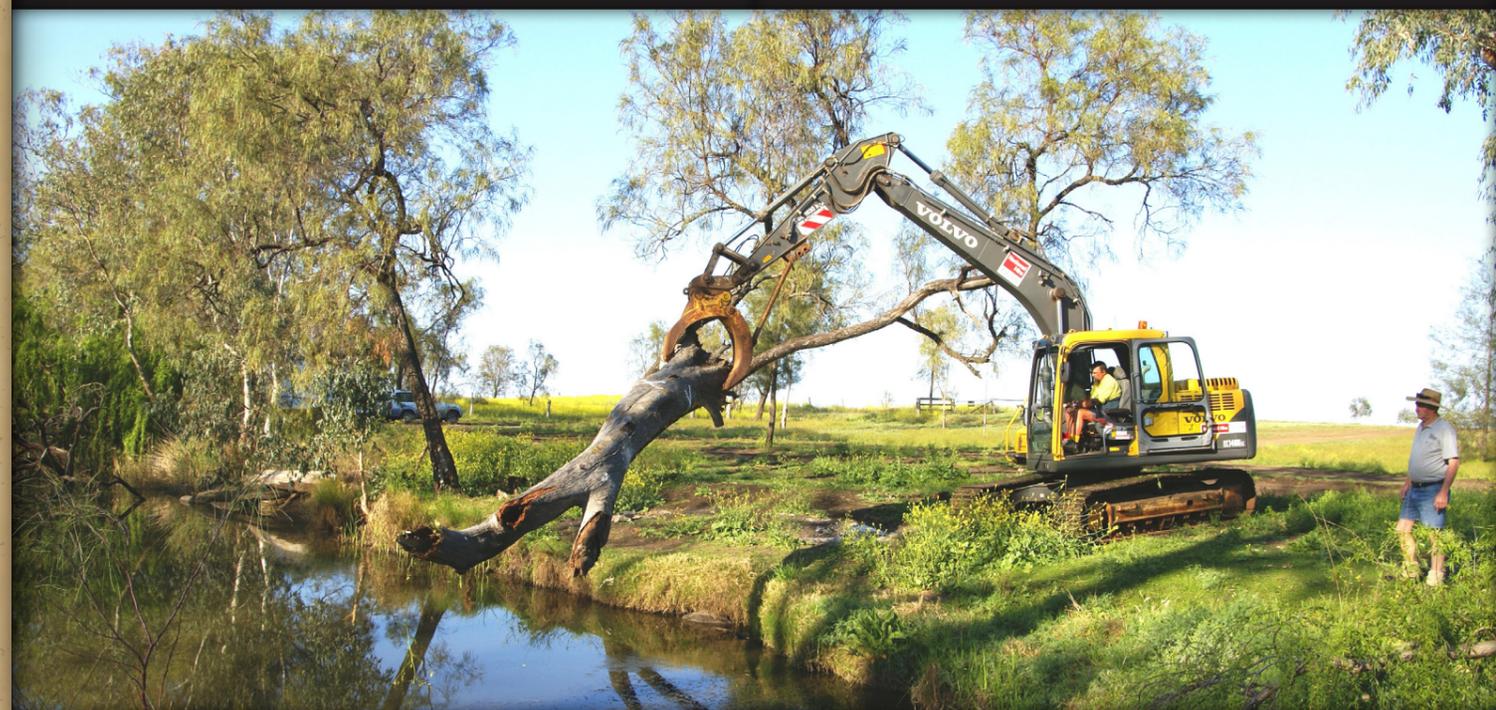
Perfect country for carp, but not much else... And so by the time the 'Millennium drought' started to bite from 2001-2009 the river was really on the ropes. Local resident, fisher, and fish stocking club member Brian Kuhn recalls walking the river - then a series of disconnected pools - with a few other dedicated people who loved fish, and relocating stranded cod into deeper pools. The state of their river and fishing opportunities helped the local community to reach a tipping-point, resolving that things needed to change, and they needed to change them.



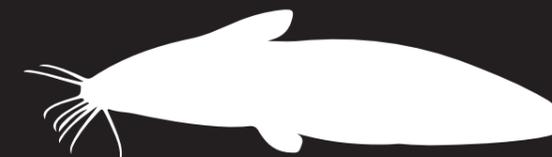
OVER 2,500KG OF  
PEST FISH HAVE  
BEEN REMOVED



13,500 NATIVE PLANTS  
HAVE BEEN PLANTED



OVER 150KM OF FISH  
PASSAGE RESTORED



# FIX IT AND THEY WILL COME...

With help from the Condamine Alliance and Fisheries Queensland, the Nobby and District Fishing Club and Oakey Freshwater Fish Stocking Association began to explore how to restore the health of their river, and improve local fishing opportunities.

They knew that stocking fish into the river would not fix the problems: if the river health was restored, the fish would bounce back. Noel explained "We asked the question: when we put fingerlings in the waterways, is it worth the effort?"

We needed to understand what the creeks were like before and what we see today. Once the changes were identified we looked at if we could rectify the bad aspects"

In 2006 the community started working together to fix the problems that had been slowly killing their river and fishing. They named a 110km stretch of the Condamine River and its tributaries "Dewfish Demonstration Reach", after the common name of the local eel-tailed catfish species, "Dewies". Within that stretch of river they started methodically tackling each issue, with help and support from a number of sources including the Murray-Darling Basin Authority.

In this way, to date they have removed over 2500kg of Carp from the system, restored fish passage to over 150km of river through installation of fishways, planted over 13,500 plants and undertaken extensive re-snagging. They have also installed over 9km of fencing to keep livestock out of the river.



9KM OF FENCING HAS  
BEEN INSTALLED TO  
KEEP  
LIVESTOCK OUT



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## THE RESULT? A HUGE SUCCESS...

Having healthy habitat in place meant that as soon as the drought broke, the native fish started to appear in droves. Golden perch abundance increased by over one thousand percent, Eel-tailed catfish by over three hundred percent, and Bony bream (a vital food source for many larger fish species), by over two hundred percent. Also, the Hyrtl's Tandanus catfish - which had not been seen in the reach for over 15 years - was once again recorded.

As the fish community started to recover so did local business, as tourism and tackle sales started to improve. Anecdotal reports indicate that visitor numbers started to increase, and people started staying longer. Andrew Henning who works at the Camping World and Complete Angler Dalby explains "We've definitely seen a change in the River over the last few years thanks to the habitat improvements and recent floods. We have been hearing of lots of Yellowbelly catches and a huge increase in juvenile Murray cod. Our tackle sales have also increased considerably over the last few years in response"

Dewfish Demonstration Reach was awarded the two most prestigious environmental awards late last year with the 2012 National Riverprize and the 2012 Banksia Environmental Award for Water.

If the first half of this article reminds you of a fishing spot that you love, and you would like to find out more about how you can help improve your local fishing opportunities, get in contact with the team from the Fish Habitat Network [www.fishhabitatnetwork.com.au](http://www.fishhabitatnetwork.com.au)

### Further Reading

Check out this great Youtube clip about the Dewfish Demonstration Reach: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1arXbhaSovs#t=106>, or you can get all the info you need from the Condamine Alliance website: <http://www.condaminealliance.com.au/dewfish-demonstration-reach-resources>

Some of the comments from local community members have been quoted from "Talking fish, making connections with the rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin", [http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/442081/Condamine-FINAL\\_Jan-2013-for-web.pdf](http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/442081/Condamine-FINAL_Jan-2013-for-web.pdf)

