

This article is reproduced by courtesy of The 'West Australian'.

'WEEKEND EXTRA' - SATURDAY, JUNE 19, 2004

Why WA's fishing industry is catching everyone's attention.

Treasures of the Deep

WA fisheries have a weather eye on the future. Writer Norman Aisbett looks at the success of our fishing industry, from crayboat to counter, and discover why we're now leading the world.

Red and green navigation lights flicker beckoning to the west as a deep roar shatters the early morning quiet. Jimmy Waters and Sapphire are going to work.

"Brand new, first season," Jimmy draws, while backing his 18m, \$730,000 rock lobster boat from the jetty, along which Meridian, Bold Venture, Suicidal Dream and others are also being untethered. "

Had her built by Geraldton Boat Builders. They did a good job, give 'em a mention.

No novice himself, Jimmy started as a 16 year-old deckie on the family's last boat, bought in 1975 when his parents sold their wheat-and-sheep farm. He became the skipper when his late father, Tom, retired a decade ago.

Today, the laconic 36 year-old, who works out of the Jurien Bay marina 260 km north of Perth, is the father of three, owns a two-storey waterfront home and is keen as ever to pull the 123 pots he expects one day to hand to his children, two of whom are boys.

During the November 15 to June 30 WA rock lobster season, Jimmy out with Kelvin McLeary, 38, and Ron Johnson, 44, retrieving pots from 6am to 3.30pm for pretty much seven days a week.

"It's hard when the weather's bad but the boys are used to it," he says in the wheelhouse, lit by the coloured screens of an echo sounder and GPS (Global Positioning System) used to find good underwater terrain on which to drop their pots.

Never have fishermen been so mobile. Their fast boats (Sapphire cruises at 20 knots) are much bigger and can carry the gear needed for long trips. It's possible to fish off Cervantes, 200 km north of Perth one day and be setting pots at Cape Naturaliste, 250 km south of Perth the next.

During our time on Sapphire, all pots are pulled close to shore and Jimmy and his "boys" reap a 100 kg haul by midday. In December, 400 kg to 500 kg are taken up to 30 km offshore on the edge of the Continental Shelf. The catch could be much bigger but for tight controls supported by the fishermen who want a sustainable business. We see scores thrown back because they are undersized or mature females. Also according to scientific studies, the use of escape gaps in the pots means that for every undersized animal brought to the surface, three have already escaped.

The "beach" price of \$21 /kg from processors could be better, though it sank to \$16/kg in December, down from an earlier high of \$35/kg. Because 95 per cent of WA's catch is exported, external factors like the strong Aussie dollar, and the depressive effects of terrorism and SARS on the dine-out scene in the big Asian market, came into play

Jimmy is not bothered by that, and equally sanguine also about the controls under which he fishes. "We just get on with it," he says. "You deal with what you can deal with. Sometimes the fisheries people suggest something and you say no, but most fishermen agree if it's good for the industry."

There's also a selfish reason for fishermen to observe the rules. Pots which sold for \$250 each in 1963 now fetch up to \$30,000, which means a holding of 100 pots is worth \$3 million. There could be few better investments.

But Jimmy's only a small cog in a diverse WA seafood industry making a \$1.2 billion annual contribution to the WA economy.

The 1,500 licensed fishing boats include 595 that catch rock lobster and employ 4,500 directly and another 15,000 indirectly.

WA Fishing Industry Council chief executive Graham Short also points to a total capital investment of about \$7 billion, including land, buildings and trawlers costing up to \$3 million apiece. As fishing tales go, it's a beauty, especially since WA's coastal waters are much less fertile than widely believed.

The Leeuwin current flows from north to south and brings warm, clear waters that are low in the nutrients needed for large-scale production of fin-fish, but they do encourage the growth of extensive seagrass beds that make ideal rock lobster nurseries. In contrast, the cold currents off lower-west Africa and South America flow south-north and have 'upwellings' that bring nutrients to the surface and promote some prolific fish stocks.

The demand for seafood is reflected in specialist shops like Sealanes, Seafresh and Kailis Bros, the seafood counters of Action, Coles and Woolworths supermarkets, hotels and restaurants and the local fish 'n' chip shop.

Sealanes marketing manager Paul Paino talks of a 20 to 30 per cent annual growth in retail trade and of an adventurous public which appreciates seeing a variety of whole, fresh fish and crustaceans laid on glistening mounds of ice, or as neat bundles of boneless fillets. "The days are gone when the little old fish shop on the corner used to put a few whole fish out, with no ice and not much refrigeration", he says.

That the local fishery can feed the retail boom (with help from cheaper imports) is testament to 40 years of careful management and scientific smarts - an effort that in 2000 saw the WA rock lobster industry become the world's first fishery to receive Marine Stewardship Council certification.

The London-based council is a joint initiative started by the multinational industry giant Unilever and the World Wide Fund for Nature. It uses market-based incentives to promote environmentally sustainable fishing practices, including the prevention of over-fishing, such as that which caused a precipitous decline in northern hemisphere fish stocks in the 1990s. The certification, now eagerly sought, bestows use of an eco-label that is readily identifiable to consumers who become part of the solution.

Crayfish lovers might choke at the thought, but the coveted delicacy was canned during World War II and sent to the services. After the war, it was exported to the US as frozen tails and a new name, rock lobster, was adopted to help the marketing. As the trade grew, so did the local fleet, from about 500 boats in 1959 to 845 in 1963, including about 45 big vessels which processed their catch at sea.

Overfishing threatened, so a young research scientist named Bernard Bowen, who had joined the Fisheries Department in 1951, was asked by his director, Alec "AJ" Fraser, for ideas. The result? In March 1963, WA became the world's first limited entry fishery in which the number of boat licences was frozen.

Pot numbers were also slashed that year by 25 per cent to 76,000 (they would be cut by a further 28 per cent in the late 80s and early 90s). "AJ" retired in 1968 - the year that prawn trawl licence numbers in Shark Bay and Exmouth Gulf were also frozen - and was succeeded by a 38 year-old Bowen, who stayed until 1992. He later became chairman of the Environmental Protection Authority, a post held until last year.

Still oozing the fabled charm that masked a rock-hard toughness when environmental principles were at stake, Dr Bowen (he received an honorary doctorate from Murdoch University last year) says an initial priority as director was to harass the processing boats, which were suspected of catching undersized animals.

"The skippers eventually stopped processing or quit the industry altogether," he says, adding that a war over over-potting followed and about 50 boats lost licences in the early 70s for having more than three pots per foot of boat."

And crucially, the scientific push initiated in the 50s by AJ Fraser, who forged close ties with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), was accelerated. Jim Penn, the current director of the department's marine research laboratories at Waterman, was one of the first researchers appointed. In 1971, internationally recognised invertebrate biologist Don Hancock came as chief research scientist.

At that time, the main focus was on rock lobsters, prawns, trout, marron, snapper and salmon, though most rock lobster biology work was done by the CSIRO. A sudden drop in the lobster catch in 1970, the first on record, sparked a 'dramatic upmarketing' of data gathering, with the CSIRO helping to study the number of eggs being laid by the rock lobsters, the survival rate of young rock animals (puerulus) coming inshore, and more.

Fishermen were also asked to supplement their mandatory catch reports, which were basic, with detailed voluntary logbooks giving details of where they'd caught lobster, at what depth, the number of immature animals, the number with eggs, and so on.

Today, 40 per cent of rock lobster skippers and all prawn trawlers provide the voluntary logs. With the monitoring, including a constant check of inshore puerulus numbers, scientists can quite accurately predict

the rock lobster catch four years in advance. Scientific research is the key, says Dr Bowen: "You have to have the best knowledge base you can get, otherwise people won't accept it. That includes the politicians. Because we are secure in our knowledge, we can tell them what we've got to do and they believe us".

Licences were capped in both the rock lobster and prawn trawl sectors and, when in 1981 the same happened in the fin-fish sector, the entire WA seafood industry Research on fin-fish - until then focused on South Coast salmon and herring and Shark Bay snapper - was boosted. Today, the biggest fin-fish fishery is on the North-West Shelf, off Point Samson, where trawlers catch a dozen varieties of North-West snapper.

Back at the research labs in oceanside Waterman, Dr Penn tells how, as the technology and efficiency of trawlers improved over time, their numbers had to be reduced to avoid over fishing. A licence buyback scheme had a significant effect, as did restrictions on the 'effort' used fin-fishing boats - by measures such as a limited number of fishing days and the full or partial closure of areas.

Big Brother arrived about five years ago in the form of a satellite-based Vessel Monitoring System. It monitors the GPS devices on fin-fishing boats. "Our enforcement people know exactly where they are, every minute of the day," Dr Penn says. "If they stop, we know they've stopped; if they start, we know they've started; and each day their fish is deducted from the total they are allowed for the year."

"If they do enter closed areas, alarms go off in a monitoring centre in Fremantle, and the vessel can be immediately told to move. There's a 'three black marks' system which is draconian but supported by industry. Boats are very careful not to stray, as you can potentially lose a \$6 million trawling licence if you have three prosecutions for fishing in closed waters."

Commercial fishermen must file their own records on the number of days spent fishing, the catch and where they caught it - and all this is independently monitored. Researchers can then make the year-by-year adjustments needed for a sustainable level. All of the big, tropical North-West fin-fish categories are satellite monitored. Others like mackerel will soon be included, as should the shark fishery where two species are causing concern.

Jocularly referring to himself and his team as fish accountants who strive to ensure their industry clientele remains solvent, Dr Penn says. "We work with the fishermen. We are out on their boats, so we've got people observing what they catch and we tag thousands of fish."

He adds that the bulk of the large fin-fish industry had not been fished reasonably until the 1980s, and from that point there has been serious research programs on all of them.

The latest move is the so-called integrated fisheries management initiative. It's coinciding with another review that will close the last gap in commercial controls by setting limits on the handline fish catches made randomly by all licensed boats. The integrated process will try to end a growing feud by setting a demarcation line between commercial fishermen and the State's 650,000 recreational fishers, big numbers of whom also use echo sounders and GPS.

The 'commercials' complain that the 'recreational' are largely unfettered and growing so fast in number they threaten most species as they roam about without making a significant financial contribution to fisheries management. The 'recreational' retort that they are the poor relations and allege that the areas best suited to recreational fishing are over-exploited by commercial fishermen taking unlimited quantities of anything that falls under their licences.

Fisheries Department acting director Peter Millington says an assessment of the respective catches is under way so that a panel of eminent people, appointed by the minister, can sustainably divide the pie and ensure equity between the groups. There is already a mini experiment in Shark Bay where the commercial pink snapper fishermen have a revised quota and parts of the bay are subject to early or total closure. Recreational fisherfolk have to buy \$10 tags for some areas and pin them to each fish caught.

Back on the land, Alex Kailis is the high-octane, 37 year-old managing director of the big M G Kailis Group, which employs about 500 people. Founded in 1960 by his late father, Michael, the company processes prawns, rock lobster and tuna for worldwide export, and is heavily involved in the pearling industry.

Friendly and down-to-earth, he obligingly tells how his father began in the industry by buying a half-finished processing plant at Dongara: "I think between he and my mother (Patricia Kailis), they owned one asset, which was my mother's car. They used that to buy the half-finished factory, then convinced some lobster fishermen they were worth dealing with."

Of the seafood industry, Alex says: "WA is a world leader. I can't think of one species that's not pretty well managed. There might be different cycles but it's done very well."

"We have a good conservation element but what leads to good fisheries conservation is a good structure of fishing rights, a very reliable system in which people own a licence to go commercial fishing and their expectation is that that's pretty well a perpetual licence. "So if they look after that resource, their licence is going to be of value, something they can earn an income out of for their lives, then sell for their retirement, or hand on to their children."

That principle extends beyond the big boys of WA fishing, some of whose pioneering efforts are legend.

The Fremantle Octopus Company was started four years ago by Ross Cammilleri, 60, and brother Craig, 50. They catch thousands of octopus in pots designed with dollar-for-dollar Federal Government research support. Family members help to process and bottle the catch, which is prepared in a herbal marinade that took months to perfect. Added to that, the company collects research data for the Fisheries Department.

Among other outlets, the Cammilleri product is sold in Sealanes, where Paul Paino is the grandson of Sealanes' founder, Salvatore Paino. Salvatore came to WA on his own from Italy at 13, became a shopkeeper and went on to build a ship's supply business which branched into Seafood wholesaling and, 12 years ago, retailing.

Mr Paino says the big demand for seafood stems from greater awareness of the health benefits from eating fish, the hygienic sales conditions and the many fishing and cooking shows on TV.

"Consumers are a lot more confident because the operators are doing it a lot better," he said. "At any one time we could have 12 to 16 varieties of fillets on display, 20 varieties of whole fish and six or seven varieties of prawns. Ten to 15 years ago everything was frozen, but now it's fresh or live product. People are even putting tanks in their restaurants or retail shops."

He agrees the cost is an issue for some people but says it can't be helped when rock lobster must be bought for local sale at export prices and when there is competition for finfish varieties from buyers in the Eastern States markets. When people do pay higher prices for WA fish, they do so with an eye to the known high quality.

After noting a potential record rock lobster season this year, he expresses confidence in WA seafood industry's future.

"I certainly see it there in 50 years," he says. "There's possibly a couple of species that may not be around but the Fisheries Department do manage it well. They've got the runs on the Board".