Recreational Fishers Keeping Watch on the Territory

Illegal incursions, exotic infestations and serious fishing and boating infringements frequently occur in our fishing areas and often go undetected. AFANT, with funding support from the Commonwealth Government’s Recreational Fishing Community Grants Program has devised an easy way for you to participate in an important reporting project geared specifically at recreational fishers —Your Eyes on the Water.

The project provides the information and tools you’ll need to become part of the project’s coordinated approach to recognising and reporting illegal, dangerous, and environmentally damaging activities on our waterways.

As well as reporting to the authorities identified here, we are asking you to also contact AFANT so we can keep track of reports, follow them up when necessary and, most importantly, ensure you receive feedback on the results. Contact AFANT on 1800 456 410 or email research@afant.com.au

HERE’S WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Fisheries and boating infringements
Contact Police Fish Watch on 1800 891 136 as soon as possible if you see fishers exceeding personal possession limits, fishing nets of any kind strung across creeks or rivers, commercial fishing vessels operating within restricted areas or anything that appears suspicious.

Exotic pests and diseases
You should report to the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) on 8920 7000 if you see debris from overseas boats and yachts on-shore; signs of unauthorised landings such as marks on the beach, temporary shelters, damage to vegetation, fish drying racks and so on; or any signs of unusual plant pests or diseases.

Threats to our precious fish stocks
Illegal foreign fishing activity poses a serious threat to the sustainability of Australia’s fisheries resources and our nation’s sovereignty in general. Illegal foreign fishing vessels also pose quarantine risks to Australia. If you see anything suspicious, report it to the Customs Hotline on 1800 061 800

Australian Government agencies have issued the following guidelines to help recreational and commercial fishers to act safely and sensibly if you come across foreign fishing vessels in north Australian waters:
• For health and safety reasons, it is most important that you do not board a foreign fishing vessel or allow anyone from a foreign fishing vessel to board your boat.
• Be aware that civilians are not authorised to act on behalf of government agencies.

A crocodile on the Daly River. It appears its head has been cut off by trophy hunters. (Photo Lionel Egan)
• Customs will ask questions such as the position of the sighting, type of vessel (i.e. motorised or sail power), the number of people sighted, whether the vessel is close to land and, if so, whether any people can be seen ashore. Customs will also request your contact phone number in case any follow-up action is required.
• If you fear for the safety of the foreign fishermen and/or their vessel, you should report this to AusSAR (Search and Rescue) and also advise Customs when you call.

Exotic weed incursions
Weed Management Officers from the NT Government are particularly keen to hear about sightings of five key species that pose real threats to our waterways. They are mimosa pigra, cabomba, salvinia, pond apple and Siam weed. If you see any of these weeds, call the weeds Branch on 1800 084 881.

You can also take some simple steps to help prevent the spread of weeds. Weed fragments and seeds can be easily caught up on your boat, trailer, tackle, car or camping gear so please check all gear thoroughly before moving away from a known weed-infested area.

Wildlife in danger and Significant Wildlife Sightings
You can assist Parks and Wildlife by reporting significant wildlife sightings to the senior Wildlife Officer on 0401 110 205. Keep an eye out for dead, injured or parts of crocodiles, turtles, dugongs, dolphins or other wildlife species; nets, traps or other suspicious items or activities relating to catching or killing wildlife: and large whale sightings, or large concentrations of other marine wildlife such as turtles, dolphins, dugongs, sea snakes and seabird breeding colonies.

Discarded fishing nets, fishing lines or plastic also have an alarming impact on large marine species including turtles, dugong and dolphins. Heavy numbers of entangled marine animals are being reported by coastal community residents — and that doesn’t account for the toll along more isolated coastal stretches. Report what you find as soon as possible. Quick action can often save entangled animals from a slow and painful death.

For more information about Your Eyes on the Water and how you can participate:
Contact AFANT on (08) 8945 6455, email: research@afant.com.au or visit the website www.afant.com.au.

A dugong in Bynoe Harbour that has had its belly slit and an anchor attached to its tail to try and keep it underwater. (Photo Peter Levick)

REMEMBER! When reporting matters of concern, precise details of time, date and location can mean the difference between a successful or failed outcome. Photographs and/or video can also be invaluable and GPS coordinates may also be important if you can record them.

A dugong in Bynoe Harbour that has had its belly slit and an anchor attached to its tail to try and keep it underwater. (Photo Peter Levick)
Fishing access has always been a key concern of AFANT's and we have worked hard over the years with different governments to open up new fishing areas and improve access to others. As our fishing population increases we are finding increasing pressure in our usual fishing areas. You only have to look at Shady Camp in the Run-off or Corroboree in the Dry to see evidence of this.

The current Government's policy on fishing access was set out in its Recreational Fishing — 2001 Election Policy where it stated: "If the Territory wants to avoid over fishing in popular areas alternatives must be found. It is the government’s responsibility to ensure that this occurs... Only government has the ability to achieve this and in government our efforts would be aimed at delivering an access package to recreational fishermen...a road, a ramp, a map and a camping ground". The Chief Minister reconfirmed this in 2005 when she wrote to us as follows: “The Martin Labor Government will continue to deliver on better access for anglers. We will continue to open up even more areas to recreational fishing...”

The Fishing Access Working Group was established to help implement this access policy but it has not been particularly effective and, in May 2005, we asked for the committee to be reformed with membership that would allow it to do a better job of improving fishing access. Despite repeated requests from us, the reformed committee has not been established and many access issues are now very urgent. In fact, while we wait for the committee to meet, we are losing access to some areas like the King River junction on Manbulloo station (and this despite the fact that the landowner was quite willing to provide open access to the area).

Access issues that need urgent attention are:

**Public Liability Insurance Issues.**
The problem of providing public liability insurance for landowners who are prepared to provide fishers with access is one of the main stumbling blocks but no progress has been made on this matter for over a year.

**Access to 57 Mile on Elsey Station.**
Owners want to set up a permit entry system with AFANT but we cannot progress it due to the public liability issue.

**King River Junction (Manbulloo) Access.** Despite promises from the Minister, no action has been taken and it appears that access will now not be provided due to insurance and road turn off concerns.

**Point Stuart Access.** Access may be available this year but it will not be free and we are still awaiting advice from the operator on access arrangements and fees.

**Channel Point Access.** Internal roads and the camping area are under construction but there has been no advice on the issue of boat launching or how the permit system will operate.

**Shady Camp Boat Ramp.** A new boat ramp in an appropriate location in the Shady Camp area is needed to provide ongoing access to the lower Mary River system as the existing launch area silts up.

**Boat Ramp Building and Maintenance Program.** There are problems with design and construction of two new ramps — Gregory National Park, and Mule Creek. There are maintenance problems (in some cases posing danger to the public) at Channel Island ramp (access road), Corroboree ramp, Roper Bar ramp and others.

**Corroboree/Hardies Road Access and Facilities.** The Corroboree road and ramp are now in very poor condition with usage increasing and there are no toilets or other facilities at Corroboree despite heavy usage.

**Bynoe Harbour North Shore Access.** Road access to designated public boat launching at Keswick and Raft Point is seriously damaged but, because it is not a public road, Government seems unable to make any repairs. These are the only boat access points on the northern side of Bynoe and are shown as boat ramps on all our fishing maps.

**Damaging and Dangerous Condition of Many Roads Used to Access Fishing Areas in the Territory.** We continue to seek improvements and more regular maintenance to roads that lead to important fishing areas.

**Determining Priority Infrastructure Projects.** We need to deal with submissions for the 2005-2008 fishing infrastructure program which closed recently.

We need The Fishing Access Working Group in place now so we can get on with the job of implementing Government’s policy of improving fishing access.
AFANT is extremely concerned about the choices of Darwin Harbour and Bynoe Harbour as locations for the proposed Marine Harvest sea cage barramundi fish farm facilities and it is our view that the potential for these farms to adversely impact on recreational fishing is sufficient that they should not proceed. We have made this clear in our recent response to the Environmental Impact Statements for these facilities.

AFANT and successive NT Governments have worked progressively to ensure a high level of protection for Darwin Harbour and it is now closed to commercial barramundi fishing and commercial mud crabbing. In further recognition of the importance of recreational fishing in Darwin Harbour, Government is currently in the process of arranging, through the buy-back of fishing licences, the removal of commercial coastal net fishing from the area which means it will be free of all commercial net fishing.

Bynoe Harbour will be a major fishing growth area as Darwin’s population increases, fishing tourism develops, more residential areas are established to its south and road access is improved. We expect it to become the most fished waterway after Darwin Harbour over the next 15 to 20 years. AFANT has been seeking to have Bynoe Harbour’s recreational fishery protected and the NT Government has established an advisory committee to assist it with planning for the implementation of the multi-use Bynoe Harbour Marine Park. AFANT is seeking to have at least the same levels of protection put in place for Bynoe’s recreational fishery as those that exist and are planned for Darwin Harbour.

AFANT has the some major concerns with the proposals for Darwin and Bynoe Harbours.

**Cumulative impacts:** A key consideration in the proposed Darwin Harbour and Bynoe Harbour locations for these sea cage barramundi farms is their cumulative impact when taken together with other current and future developments in these waterways. Also, allowing one sea cage aquaculture operation in these location may set a precedent for more of this type of activity there.

Darwin Harbour is already impacted on by urban development, port infrastructure, natural gas processing and so on. As Darwin continues to grow we can only expect more of these and other forms of development and we question the ability of the Harbour to sustain a quality recreational fishery if sea cage aquaculture is added to this list. Through good planning, we currently have a policy to preserve a very high percentage of mangrove stands in Darwin Harbour and these will play an important role in maintaining water quality as sewage (treated and untreated), storm water and other urban run-off increases. Sea cage aquaculture has relatively high nutrient outputs which can only add to the load that these mangroves will need to deal with.

In Bynoe Harbour we have a virtually pristine and largely undeveloped waterway which is in close proximity to Darwin. AFANT does not believe that the significant infrastructure and intensive farming practices associated with sea cage farming and their potential impact on the environment and the recreational fishery are compatible with the ideals of a marine park. We also question if the proposed farm will deliver sufficient economic benefit to justify it being located in what will become an important marine park.

**Diseases and parasites:** Marine Harvest has experienced disease outbreaks at its farm in Port Hurd. It claims that the risk of transfer to the wild population is low but, in the case of many overseas sea cage salmon farms, diseases and parasites spread from farm fish have decimated important recreational fisheries. An example of this is in sea trout fisheries in a number of Scottish lochs where sea cage salmon farms are located.

**Aggregating wild fish:** Marine Harvest acknowledges that wild fish are aggregated to the sea cages and states that “it is unclear what overall effect they have on fish populations within particular areas.” The important issue is that we do not know what the effect of wild fish aggregating around the cages is. One thing that is clear is that wild fish are drawn to the cages making them unavailable in other areas of the fishery. Another is that fishing for barramundi in close proximity to the sea cages is hardly a natural or wild fishing experience — even if the farm operator gave recreational fishers the access to do so.

**Farm fish escapes:** AFANT is particularly concerned about the possibility of large scale escapes of fish from the proposed farm facilities and the impact that these fish may have on the wild fisheries in the estuaries where they are located. Since Marine Harvest commenced operating at Port Hurd, some 400,000 fish have escaped due to a variety of failures of the sea cages. We have sought information on the impacts of these escaped fish on the estuary and, although we have been advised that there does not appear to be any reduction in normal fodder species in the area, we are not convinced that the artificial introduction of this level of fish biomass can occur without significant impacts. We note that new cage and net designs are to be utilised for the proposed facilities but, given the company’s record at Port Hurd and the strong likelihood of a number of severe weather events impacting during the active lives of the farms, we believe that escapes are likely rather than possible.

**Pollution:** The fish faeces and nutrient loads from the proposed farms will be significant and, as the company acknowledges in its EIS documents, could have “moderate consequences.” Even accepting the company’s rating (which we do not), these are risks which should not be taken in either location. The nutrient loads from these facilities are in the order of those that are currently being
When I packed up and moved to Darwin from Perth in 1989, I brought my old Quintrex Lazeabout with me — a 4.5 m aluminium with a 60 horse Johnson. Going fishing was great as there were not so many larger boats with big motors zooming around our waterways. Now it seems that every time I am able to get out on the water with my friends or family, no matter where it may be, there are a lot more boats larger than mine heading to the same areas to fish. There are a growing number of the smaller boats as well, and this combined number will only increase as our population in the NT grows and more and more people come to our great Territory for the chance to go fishing.

This has to have an effect on the fishing quality at times for certain species. I have seen quoted in the paper in recent weeks that the big Spanish mackerel seem to be caught more during the week than on the weekends due to less boating activity on the water. There must be a relationship between boat noise and feeding. The more noise, the more timid the fish become. I’m sure that there are others out there that have been trying to catch longtail tuna by drifting down on a feeding school only to have another boat come flying up into the middle of the action. All the Tuna sound, and you may not see them again for another 15 or 30 minutes.

A lot of us are very happy to arrive first at one of our favourite fishing spots and have a great fishing experience while it is nice and quiet. Quite often, as more people arrive and there is more noise, the fishing quality diminishes. Is it that they have all been caught, feeding time has passed, or have they become more timid due to boat noise?

Another experience that I have had is in the Elizabeth River catching feeding salmon and tarpon using an echo sounder. Drifting past with the sounder on, it seemed to create a no feeding zone 10 metres each side of the boat. If the sounder was turned off, the fish then fed right up to and all around the boat. Something as small as the click of the sonar from the boat can cause the fish to go quiet.

It is up to all boat users to use our waterways carefully. Simple things like slowing down a little more and taking more note of people already fishing will help to provide a more user-friendly environment for all fishing enthusiasts.

Also, particular care is needed when boating in more restricted waters where clear visibility is not available. A good example of this is the cutting between Sampan and Tommycut creeks at Shady Camp. Over the last couple of years the mangroves have grown over fairly thickly — in some places they have had to be cut away to allow access. Once you were able to look over the floodplain to see another boat coming but this isn’t possible now, however boats still seem to fly through there at great speed. I believe we have been lucky over the last few years with the relatively small number of accidents that we have had. There may have been more but we have only heard of a few.

We are very lucky in our Territory with the expanses of water that we are able to access and the variety and quality of fishing that we have right on our doorstep. If we all take a little more notice of other people fishing, learn the right way to operate a vessel when out on the water and make an effort to teach our children as they grow up, it will make a big contribution to the future pleasure of our own fishing and boating experiences.

Member’s Comment

Safe and Careful Boating — More Enjoyable Fishing

Dennis Smart
AFANT Committee Member

When I packed up and moved to Darwin from Perth in 1989, I brought my old Quintrex Lazeabout with me — a 4.5 m aluminium with a 60 horse Johnson. Going fishing was great as there were not so many larger boats with big motors zooming around our waterways. Now it seems that every time I am able to get out on the water with my friends or family, no matter where it may be, there are a lot more boats larger than mine heading to the same areas to fish. There are a growing number of the smaller boats as well, and this combined number will only increase as our population in the NT grows and more and more people come to our great Territory for the chance to go fishing.

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<td>Roche Reef &amp; surrounds</td>
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<td>XXXX Gold 2006 Gove Game Classic</td>
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**CORPORATE MEMBERS**

Allycraft Modifications  
Alvey Reels Australia  
Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge  
Australian Monofil Co. PTY LTD - Platypus  
Berrimah Secondhand  
BLA PTY LTD  
Bridge Toyota  
Bynoe Haven Boat Hire  
Camping & Sporting Wholesalers  
Channel Nine Darwin  
Crab Claw Island Fisherman’s Village  
Duphny Sports Fishing Imports P/L - Shimano  
Fishing Monthly Group - QLD Fishing Monthly, NSW  
Fishing Monthly, Fishing QLD Annual, Fishing NSW Annual, VIC Fishing Monthly, Fishing VIC Annual, Australian Fishing  
Tackle Retailer & Tournament Angler Guide.  
Frost Ford  
Gus Veness Fishing PTY LTD - Hawk Tournament Tested  
Halco Tackle Company  

In & Outboard Marine  
Jarvis Walker P/L  
Jonese Web Design  
Leaders Creek Fishing Base  
Lowrance Electronics  
Mary River Houseboats P/L  
Murray Pest Control Darwin  
OAMPS  
Reidy’s Lures  
Southern Aurora  
Strikeback Tackle  
Taylor Marine  
The Capricornia Hotel/Motel  
The Yacht Shop NT P/L  
Tidy Car  
Top End Imports - Arafura Tackle  
Top Gear  
Waeco Pacific P/L
In the year to 30 June 2006 570 were caught during 1034 fishing hours. 479 were released. See www.afant.com.au for more information.

AN EPA FOR NT

The following is a summary of AFANT’s comments on the discussion paper “Towards an Environmental Protection Agency for the Northern Territory.”

In developing an EPA for the Northern Territory, we believe that a key consideration should be the recognition that we have a largely undeveloped natural environment which is an essential social, cultural and economic driver for our future. Any developments, be they urban, pastoral/agricultural or resource exploitation should be open to comprehensive examination within this context.

Government in the NT is comparatively small, there is a relative “closeness” of public service decision making to the political arm of government and there are interrelated Government agency structures where it is often difficult to clearly separate promotion, policy, regulatory and compliance functions. Within this context, there is a real risk that the effectiveness of an Environmental Protection Agency that is not independent of the public service and does not operate with legislated independent authority could be compromised. In our view, we should be developing a form of Environmental Protection Authority which can, and can be seen to, operate as a strong, credible independent body whose activities and decisions stand unless there is direct intervention of the appropriate Minister (who can be held publicly accountable through the political process).

The EPA that the Territory needs does have to “work smarter” and we are a small jurisdiction faced with diseconomies of scale but this should not become an excuse for not resourcing it to the level required for it to be truly effective. An EPA that is not properly resourced now and into the future will not be able to deliver the framework that we need to provide a sound basis for sustainable development and effective and appropriate environmental protection. The real cost of future work to correct environmental mistakes (if indeed they can be corrected) will ultimately be vastly more than the cost of establishing and sustaining an effective EPA.

In our view, the EPA should be the body responsible for Environmental assessment, regulation and monitoring, not other agencies. An effective EPA should have more than the “powers of moral suasion to ensure agency conformance…”

A comprehensive, clear and publicly-understandable approvals framework needs to be established to cover the full range of developments which may take place in the Northern Territory including urban planning, agricultural and pastoral developments, aquaculture activities, mining, industrial development and so on. While not all developments require the same level of assessment, all should be covered by the framework. This means that there is a need for clear links between environmental assessment processes and other development approval mechanisms such as planning schemes, building approvals, approvals for agricultural and pastoral developments and so on.

While an EPA may not necessarily be the approving body for all these developments, it should have the necessary statutory authority to intervene in cases where it believes significant environmental issues may be involved.

The make up of the EPA Board should be set out in legislation and its membership should reflect the need for it to have expertise across the so called “triple bottom line” — environmental, social/cultural and economic. One key issue for the Board will be to try and deliver a balance between the Territory’s needs for development of all kinds and our need to preserve the essential environment in which we live.
With a number of plants already declared as weeds under Northern Territory weeds legislation, as well as numerous other nasties lurking around our borders, exotic weeds pose a significant threat to our natural environment. When fishing along waterways, rivers, billabongs and even the coastlines of the Northern Territory, you are ideally placed to spot new incursions.

Cabomba is an underwater plant probably introduced into Australia by the aquarium industry in the 1960’s. In 1997, cabomba trade was outlawed in the NT after it infested Marlow Lagoon in Palmerston. Evidence gathered at the time suggested that the infestation originated from a discarded aquarium plant.

In 1999, cabomba was listed as a Weed of National Significance due to its potential to reduce biodiversity, reduce water quality, reduce water storage capacity of dams, block water distribution infrastructure, and severely impede recreational activities.

The Marlow Lagoon infestation was eventually eradicated in 2002. However, in 2004 a larger infestation was discovered at Darwin River approximately 50 km south of Darwin. This infestation is just 5 km downstream from Darwin’s water supply, Darwin River Dam. If cabomba gets into this dam it is likely that a multi-million dollar water treatment plant will be needed to restore water quality.

Promoting awareness of this aquatic weed to locals and visitors boating and fishing throughout the Northern Territory is vital to stopping its spread. Weed fragments and seeds can be easily caught up on your boat, trailer, tackle, car or camping gear so please thoroughly check all gear before moving away from a known weed infested area. Don’t bring aquatic life into the NT without a permit, and don’t discard aquatic life irresponsibly. For more information, call the Cabomba Hotline on (08) 8999 8954 or visit the cabomba website at: www.cabomba.nt.gov.au.

Top Left: Close-up of cabomba, showing its distinctive white flower, fan-like underwater leaves and linear floating leaves. Right: Cabomba in Darwin River. Dense infestations can choke the entire water column in more than three metres of

Northern Territory Recreational Fishing Possession Limits

The NT Government has released a discussion paper proposing changes to some of the Northern Territory Fish Possession Limits.

The paper proposes:
• A reduction of the current possession limits for Spanish mackerel and black jewfish from five to three;
• The introduction of a possession limit of 30 red claw yabbies and/or cherabin;
• The introduction of a possession limit of three sharks; and
• Protection for clams.

It also considers the removal of the limit exemption which allows you to have more than the prescribed number of fish and crabs in your normal place of residence.

You can download the paper from the web at www.nt.gov.au/dpifm/Fisheries/news_media_archive_article.cfm?newsid=119&ws=1 or pick up a copy from Fisheries at Goff Letts Building, Berrimah Farm.

AFANT encourages all fishers to comment on the proposals either directly to fisheries or let us know your views and we can incorporate them in our submission.

Comments have to be provided to Fisheries by Friday 27 October, 2006.