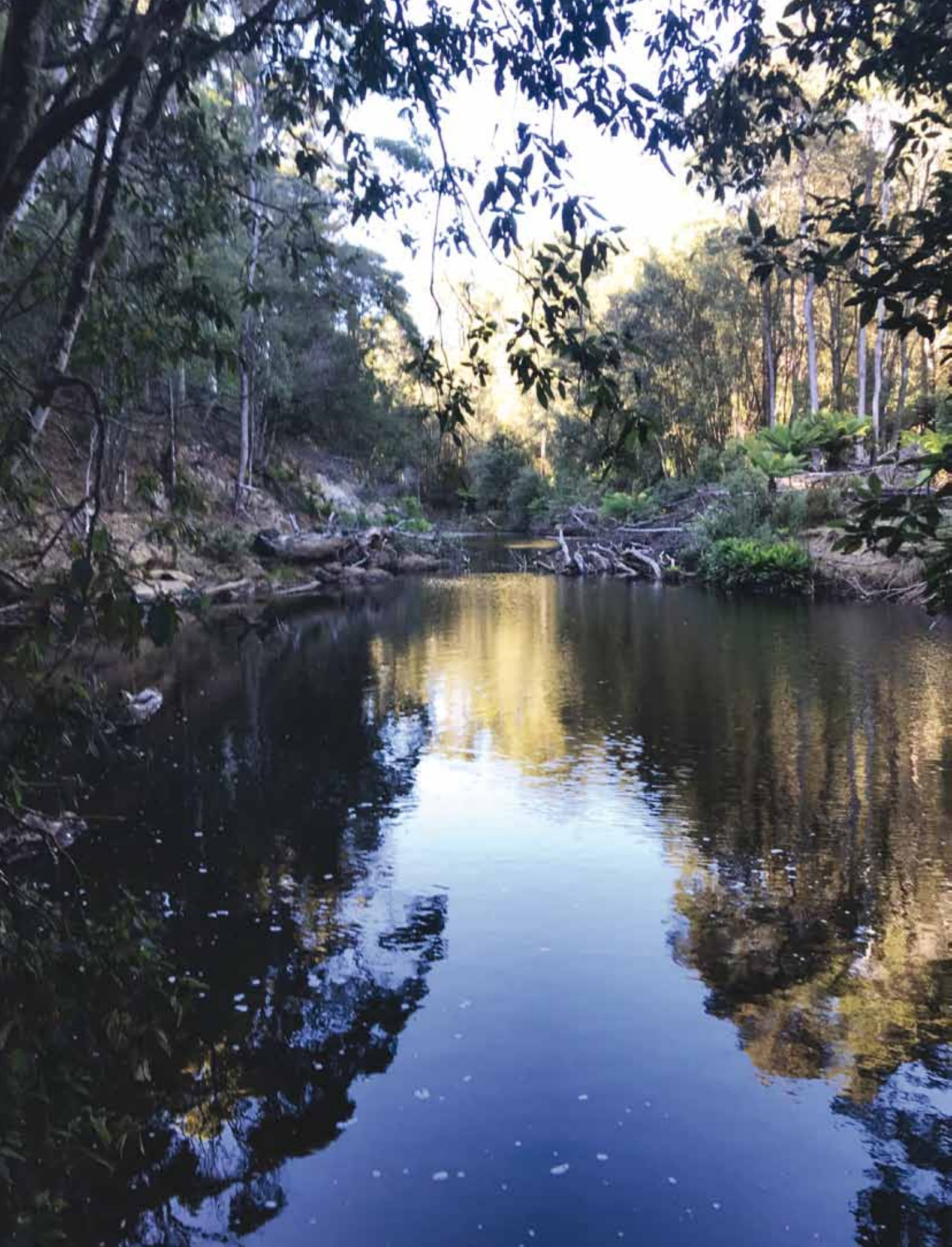

"Surely it's not too much to ask people to stop illegally catching them to eat; for loggers to leave deeper buffer zones along small streams; and for road builders and farmers to minimise soil run-off. Clean rivers and healthy forests benefit everyone. We all need to work together, before it is too late for the lutaralipina."

lutaralipina

writer and photographer ***Terry Mulhern***

I'm panting as I struggle over fallen logs and push through prickly scrub. I can just hear the kids' voices, far ahead. I try to hurry up. I don't want to lose them. I'm not worried about them getting lost, I'm worried about me. I know the kids will be fine, they are with ecologist Todd Walsh, the "lobster man" of northern Tasmania. He knows this forest like the back of his hand. He's been coming to this bend of the river for years, trapping, measuring and tagging the world's largest animal of its type. Tasmanian Aborigines call it lutaralipina – though it is better known as the lobster or the giant freshwater crayfish, or by its scientific name, *Astacopsis gouldi*.

Unlike me, decades of bush bashing have kept Todd Walsh fit. Fit enough to still play footy at 50. Walsh used to work for the Tasmanian Inland Fisheries Service. These days, he runs an environmental consultancy business called Kanunnah. The kids ran off like pups alongside the alpha male as Walsh strode purposefully into the bush.

Did thylacines hunt in packs? I'm finally catching up. I can hear them on the other side of a glade of man ferns, down on the riverbank. I emerge from the cool, green shade into the bright sunlight. They are below me on a gravelly spit that stretches out into the dark, slowly moving river. Walsh is hauling in the trap. The kids are on either side of him, leaning forward with eager anticipation. As the trap nears the surface there's clearly something in it. Something big.

Freshwater crayfish were part of the traditional diet of Tasmanian Aborigines. The evidence comes from two first-hand reports from the early colonial period. The first is from February, 1827. Henry Hellyer, surveyor for the Van Diemen's Land Company, came across an empty Aboriginal camp near the headwaters of the Flowerdale River, inland from modern day Wynyard. He reported to his superiors, "Twenty miles from the sea, picked up the shells and claws of very large lobsters and crayfish, which they had roasted."

It was the remains of a feast of lutaralipina. A second, later report comes from the journals of George Augustus Robinson. On May 12, 1833, near the junction of the Conder and Wanderer Rivers in south-west Tasmania, Robinson noted, "The natives brought me a large freshwater lobster,

which is excellent eating. The natives are fond of this fish: they are inhabitants of most of the rivers of the island."

Based on the location, Robinson enjoyed of a meal of the western freshwater crayfish, *Astacopsis tricornis* – smaller than lutaralipina, but still very large.

Robinson's interactions with Aborigines were controversial, both then and now. In 1829, Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur appointed Robinson as "Conciliator", and for five years Robinson and his band of Aboriginal negotiators, including Truganini and her husband Woorady, travelled extensively across Tasmania on the so-called Friendly Mission. Robinson convinced, cajoled and, at times, deceived the remaining, war-wearied Aboriginal clans into exile on the Bass Strait islands. Robinson saw himself as the saviour of the Tasmanian Aborigines – in both body and soul. He was a devout Christian and his government-sanctioned mission was to physically remove the Aborigines from the battlefields of the Van Demonian Black War. He was to "civilise" them by teaching them English and how to farm and, most importantly from his perspective, to reveal to them the "Word of God".

In short, he saved them from immediate death only to inflict slow cultural genocide. Within a generation, neglect and disease would almost, but not quite, do the rest. Tasmanian Aboriginal culture was more resilient than white people gave it credit for. From the nucleus of a handful of Aboriginal families, mostly from the sealers' camps on the islands, the *palawa* would re-emerge.

While Robinson's motives and actions were questionable, his extensive note-taking provides valuable cultural and historical information that would otherwise have been lost. During his missions he kept detailed journals and recorded a vocabulary of Tasmanian Aboriginal languages. A number of other smaller vocabularies were collated during the 18th and 19th centuries, but Robinson's is widely held to be the most reliable and is unique in its level of detail. Robinson could speak and understand some Aboriginal language and he was accompanied by multilingual Aborigines who could translate for him. Although he was no linguist or anthropologist, he collected words on country and attempted to spell the words as he heard them. Robinson also often annotated his vocabulary with the tribal group and sometimes the name of the individual interviewed.

Robinson's hand-written notes were the starting point in 1950 for Brian Plomley who, in a project that lasted more than a quarter of a century, compiled "A Word List of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Languages". Plomley's word list contains Robinson's vocabulary and more than a dozen others, including those of the explorers James Cook and François Péron. Plomley's word list contains two distinct names for freshwater crayfish recorded by Robinson. The first is a north-eastern word from the Cape Portland tribe. Robinson recorded it as "loe.ter.er.le.pe.en.ne". Plomley suggested that this word refers to "… a northern one which grows to a large size, sometimes as long as sixty centimetres, and is known as the Freshwater Lobster…", by which he means *Astacopsis gouldi*. The second word is "tate.yer", for which Plomley lists two variants from Robinson: tate.yer from the eastern Oyster Bay tribe; and tate.te from the Bruny Island tribe. Plomley lists a further two variants from Joseph Milligan's later vocabulary: tayatea (Oyster Bay) and tay-a-teh (Bruny Island/South).

Without doubt, tate.yer refers to the small southern crayfish *Astacopsis franklinii*, as this is the only stream-dwelling species found in those regions. It is less certain whether loe.ter.er.le.pe.en.ne refers exclusively to the lobster, as the Cape Portland tribal region includes areas where *Astacopsis gouldi* and *Astacopsis franklinii* are found separately, as well as the narrow strip where they overlap. Sadly, no western language group words were recorded for freshwater crayfish. I can't

lutaralipina and me, eye-to-eye.

*Todd Walsh the "lobster man" with lutaralipina (*Astacopsis gouldi*) of northern Tasmania*

help but feel that Robinson let that word slip through his fingers. That evening, as he sat down to his meal of *Astacopsis tricornis*, Robinson was surrounded by a group of Aboriginal people composed of members of all the major language groups of the island. But instead of asking each of them what they would call the amazing creature he was poised to eat, he recorded their various words for "wombat".

Recently, it has been common to use tayatea as the Aboriginal name for the lobster. Recognition of Aboriginal natural history knowledge should be encouraged, but the historical record does not support the use of this word for this species. The *palawa kani* language program of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre has revived lutaralipina (pronounced: lu-tah-rah-lee-pee-nah) as the Tasmanian Aboriginal term for the giant freshwater crayfish (*Astacopsis gouldi*) and tayatitja (tie-yah-tee-tchah) for the small southern freshwater crayfish (*Astacopsis franklinii*).

As a scientist, I understand that formal scientific names have their place. But as a society, we choose the common names. These animals already had common names – names that were common for hundreds of generations, not just what white settlers made common. Lutaralipina live in the rivers of the north. Tayatitja are found in the south and-east. And I'll keep scouring archives and settler diaries for that elusive Aboriginal name for the stream-dwelling crayfish of the west.

Walsh deftly opens the trap. The unimpressed lutaralipina waves its claws at him. He waits for his moment, then expertly grasps it behind the head and lifts, flipping it over to look under the tail.

"Female. Feels like a couple of kilos. Probably about 30 years old."

I am gobsmacked. This is a yabby the size of a small dog with claws like bolt cutters – which

would probably take your finger off in much the same way. Walsh pops her into a bucket of water and covers it with fern fronds. "Keep an eye on her and make sure she doesn't get away. I'll get the tag ready".

Her long black antennae flick through the ferns and a menacing claw emerges briefly, before submerging again. I'm not exactly sure how I would stop her doing whatever she decided to do. As I peer into bucket, I'm fascinated by the colours on her shell. Green and brown merge into black, but there are patches of aquamarine blue on the back of her head and fiery orange on her legs and claws. What look like clusters of chocolate brown spots are infestations of leech-like parasitic flatworms. She is simultaneously beautiful and ugly, but also unique and precious.

Lutaralipina is a threatened species, listed as endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. In August 2017, the "Recovery Plan for the Giant Freshwater Crayfish (*Astacopsis gouldi*)" was released by the Tasmanian and Commonwealth governments. It spells out clearly the actions that will save this animal from extinction. Surely it's not too much to ask people to stop illegally catching them to eat; for loggers to leave deeper buffer zones along small streams; and for road builders and farmers to minimise soil run-off. Clean rivers and healthy forests benefit everyone. We all need to work together, before it is too late for the lutaralipina. 40

***Further reading**: The author's research into "Correcting misconceptions about the names applied to Tasmania's giant freshwater crayfish* Astacopsis gouldi *(*decapoda: parastacidae*)" can be found in volume 152 of* Papers and Proceedings of the Royal Society of Tasmania.

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