

Lobster tales



writer and photographer *TERRY MULHERN*

Secret rivers

The deep black water hides its secrets well. Fallen fronds of man ferns trail in the water, sending small eddies whirling downstream. Logs covered in bright green moss and the tangled roots of tall trees are woven into the riverbank. The water flows silently under a natural bridge formed by the graceful arc of a fallen tree.

I thread my way along, pushing through fishbone waterfern and under the low branches of dogwood. Further downriver, it becomes shallow where gravel has built up around several submerged logs. Here, a sunbeam penetrates the canopy and sets the tannin-stained water on fire. This riffle zone grades from deep red, through brilliant orange to liquid gold as it dances over the pebbly bottom. The water then deepens again into inky blackness.

This stretch of river, inland from Rocky Cape in the north-west, is prime giant freshwater crayfish (*Astacopsis gouldi*) or (as it is known locally) lobster country. It's one of the 14 areas of high significance identified by Fiona Marshall, the

Giant Freshwater Crayfish Project coordinator for the Cradle Coast Authority's Natural Resource Management team.

The lobster is the world's largest freshwater invertebrate. It has been totally protected for several decades but, sadly, it is still under severe threat from illegal fishing. Because of the risk of poaching, the location of the project sites and the identities of the landholders involved in the project are not made public.

These are secret rivers.

The Giant Freshwater Crayfish Project started in 2019, funded by the National Landcare Program. Initially, Fiona Marshall pored over maps and satellite imagery identifying where the lobster was likely to be found. She then became an internet detective, hunting down the elusive contact details of scores of landholders living along the priority river sections. She made innumerable phone calls and sent countless emails to tell them about the project. When all else failed, she doorknocked.

Secret river, Rocky Cape





Fiona Marshall, Cradle Coast NRM Giant Freshwater Crayfish Project Coordinator

“I got some knockbacks, but I was surprised how many people were willing to listen and then get involved.”

The main aims of the project are to protect and improve these highly significant streams with fencing to exclude stock and to revegetate where the banks have been cleared or where remaining vegetation is narrow or sparse.

Lobsters require cool, clean, clear water to survive and breed successfully. The fencing keeps stock from trampling the banks, which causes erosion and lowers water quality.

Revegetation is important in so many ways. Although lobsters are opportunists and eat any meat they can catch or scavenge, most of their diet comes from rotting wood and leaf litter. So, overhanging trees are important. Also, shade from an intact canopy is essential to keep the water temperature low. With Tasmania’s summers drying out and heating up, there’s a risk that shallow exposed streams will get too hot, and the lobsters will die.

Having a natural mix of young and old trees is important too. Lobsters often live in deep holes under fallen logs along the high bank of the stream. As well as providing lobster habitat, this fallen timber slows the water in flood time, stabilising the toes of banks and so reducing erosion and protecting infrastructure such as fences, bridges and outbuildings.

“When landholders realise it’s a win-win scenario, they’re keen to get involved,” Marshall told me.

The project takes a holistic view of what’s good for both lobsters and landholders. A key aspect is that wherever stock lose access to drinking water because of the fences, there is funding to put in troughs to provide off-stream watering. “One older farmer, who was hesitant at first, told me the project was life-changing,” said Marshall. “He was getting too old to chase stock that waded across the creek onto his neighbour’s place. It eliminated an onerous task and gave him peace of mind.”

Natural Resource Management provides 50 per cent of project costs, either for materials for fencing, revegetation, tanks and troughs, or for hiring contractors to install the works. Landholders can choose what sort of fencing best suits their needs and budget, from a simple three-wire electric fence to near impenetrable wallaby-proof constructions.

Earlier in the day, Marshall and I visited another property near Lapoinya to conduct a final inspection of works. We walked the fence line along the creek with the landholder. Marshall stopped periodically to take GPS coordinates while we chatted about the many benefits of the project. We checked the location of the new troughs and the position of gates and laneways that allowed the landholder to move stock across the creek when necessary.

A big topic of conversation was the severe weather and damaging winds, just a few weeks before in early June 2022, that brought death and destruction to northern Tasmania. We moved quickly under a huge broken branch hanging precariously over the



Walking the new fence line, Lapoinya

track, and then looked up the hillside and noted where some other big eucalypts had been smashed to matchwood. Marshall explained how the shape of the land and the density of vegetation can funnel the wind causing damage in one place but leaving other sites unaffected. Judicious reforestation can actually help protect life and property.

End-of-project visits like this one are important. The landholders only receive their funding after all work is complete and signed off by Marshall.

“Once bitten, twice shy!” she said. “Sometimes priorities change for the landholder and if the funding is given up front, fencing supplies can just sit in a pile unused, and that’s not a good outcome for anyone.”

Inspection complete, we depart with a wave and a final pat of the dog. Marshall drives us west along the coast to check progress at another site. We turn off the Bass Highway and rattle over unpaved roads until we reach the front gate. From here, a track



Natural bridge, Rocky Cape

climbs uphill through the forest and then down onto the river flats. In the distance, a sinuous thread of blue smoke rises from the chimney of a shack by the river. As we drive towards it, Marshall points out the new fences and where they are yet to be completed. We drive around a large boggy patch of reeds. Marshall explains how planting this area with paperbarks and tea tree will help soak up the water and make the whole paddock more productive.

We park the ute and find the landholder, Kevin, out in the shed tinkering (Kevin has agreed to the use of his given name). While Kevin and Marshall discuss progress on fencing and revegetation, I wander in rapture along the river. This place provides a glimpse of lobster paradise. It's no surprise it's a focal point for Kevin's extended family, who gather to enjoy the broad reach of the

river they use as a swimming hole. He relates with great gusto the tale of his grandchildren recently catching an enormous blackfish just metres from his back door. It got a kiss and was released.

It's an old northern Tasmanian adage that, "wherever there's blackfish, there's lobsters." And this is as true here as anywhere. During a survey, a large blue adult female was caught, tagged and released at the very same spot.

Kevin was born and raised in this area, so I query him as to whether he caught and ate lobsters in his youth – before they were protected. He surprises me. "Nope. Never caught them on purpose and never ate them." But I shouldn't have been surprised. As we walk around, he speaks proudly of where on the property you can see different birds and animals. It's clear he sees himself as a custodian and protector, rather than owner and exploiter.

We finish the day helping Kevin revegetate another stretch of the river. Marshall lays out the tubestock of different species in the appropriate locations, Kevin breaks the ground with a clever, pointed shovel he's welded up in his shed; and I follow with a tree planting tool and make a tubestock-shaped hole. My 11-year-old son then plants the seedlings. It was a privilege to help.

Kevin has kindly invited us to return whenever we want to see how the new plantings are going. I look forward to taking him up on this offer.

There's an old Greek saying that "a society grows great when old people plant trees in whose shade they know they shall never sit". The greatness of a society can also be measured by how many men and women, such as Fiona Marshall, Kevin and the other landholders who, through their example, teach their children and grandchildren to love and respect this country. ■

TERRY MULHERN is a writer and academic. He has lived in Victoria for more than 20 years but, like a swift parrot, he migrates every summer across Bass Strait to north-west Tasmania.

CARING FOR OUR CRAYFISH

The Tasmanian Giant Freshwater Crayfish (*Astacopsis gouldi*), commonly known as Lobster, is the largest freshwater crayfish in the world and is endemic to rivers in northern Tasmania. The species is slow-growing and long-lived and is threatened by poaching, habitat loss, siltation of waterways and climate change.



Image credit: Todd Walsh

It is illegal to fish for any species of freshwater crayfish, including yabbies, in Tasmania.

Poaching of the Giant Freshwater Crayfish is a serious offence and substantial penalties apply under the *Threatened Species Protection Act 1995* and the *Inland Fisheries Act 1995*.

Report all illegal fishing activities to infish@ifs.tas.gov.au or **1300 INFISH**.



This project is supported by NRM North and Cradle Coast NRM, through funding from the Australian Government.