

History of the New South Wales Rod Fishers' Society

Formation

Founded in November 1904, The New South Wales Rod Fishers' Society was largely the initiative of Howard Joseland, an architect, writer and poet, later described 'as the father of trout fishing in NSW'. Joseland was the first Secretary of the Society and continuously held office on the Executive Council of the Society until his death in 1930.

The original objects of the Society were very similar to those of today, and the 1907 report notes that the efforts of the committee were still absorbed chiefly in matters concerning trout fishing, as they felt 'they could do more service to the country in that direction than in any other.' However, also noted in the original objects was the phrase 'by promoting modes of angling for salt and freshwater fish...'

Early activities

At the first Annual General Meeting held on 30th November 1905 the Society voted a substantial sum for the destruction of cormorants (how history repeats itself) and the establishment of trout hatcheries on the Snowy and Duckmaloi Rivers and at Robertson. Its efforts were successful and in 1906 the Government established a temporary hatchery at Mt Kosciusko. Not that fishing in the area could be described as bad. At the Second AGM two members reported they, and a friend, fishing in the Upper Snowy, had landed 800 rainbows ranging from 2 to 10 lb in 10 days. The great bulk of these fish were returned to the river thus establishing the Society's over-riding interest in conservation and the 'catch and release' ethic.

From its inception the Society flourished. It not only established an interest in trout but native freshwater fish also. It lobbied the Government to establish a bass hatchery at Prospect and reported members catching bass up to 4 ½ lbs in the Nepean River on salmon flies.

In 1909 the Society was importing trout ova from New Zealand and liberating them in the Snowy, a river which is closely linked with the history of the Society. Near the confluence of the Snowy and Thredbo Rivers (now covered by Lake Jindabyne) an old workmen's hut built in 1906 became the most famous fishing lodge in Australia. The Creel as it was known, became a mecca for Society members. For almost 60 years it was the unofficial club house for many generations of Rod Fishers. By the early 1920s the Society had succeeded in having a proper trout hatchery built at this site. This was maintained by Jim McGregor who also

doubled as the Manager of the fishing lodge. Later the Creel hatchery was moved up to Paddy's Corner and is now known to us as the Gaden Hatchery.

In its first 40 years the Society campaigned vigorously for the establishment of trout hatcheries throughout the State. Its first success, the Gaden Hatchery, is still operating today.

The other operating hatchery was the creation of Mr L.P. Dutton, a member of the Society, who generously donated land to the Government and worked tirelessly to raise trout in the New England area. The Dutton Hatchery is located near Armidale. Both these hatcheries are now managed by the NSW Government.

In 1939, following a gift of 10 acres of land by the Caldwell family, a hatchery was opened on their property at Bungarby. It operated until 1950. The Caldwell family have maintained a link with the Society over many generations. The Bindo hatchery at Oberon was an initiative of the Society. In 1939 it funded the purchase of 25,000 rainbow fry from Montana, which were hatched at Bindo and distributed throughout the Oberon region.

Regrettably none of these hatcheries has survived.

In any discussion of trout hatcheries in this state, the name of Dr Spiller Brandon, our fourth president, looms large. Not only was he greatly supportive of Joseland in his efforts with the Society to create a hatchery on the Monaro, he was the first person in the State to hatch trout in hatchery boxes, a method which he championed for many years. Later Jim Gaden paid tribute to him and acknowledged that he had been his teacher and mentor.

Salt water and big game angling

The association with salt water angling originated because members reported in 1906 'that more members indulge in salt water fishing than fresh because of the relative inaccessibility of freshwater fishing.' Indeed interest in salt water fishing blossomed and continued for nearly 60 years. There were constant reports of good fishing for bream, Australian salmon, whiting and blackfish (luderick). Even in the early days blackfish were recognised as 'the gamest scrappiest fish of its class.' Today many members continue an interest in blackfish angling especially during winter months.

Efforts to catch large salt water fish were not very successful. In 1927 a sub-committee was formed by the Society to promote salt water game fishing. A few years later the British Sea Anglers Association offered the Society their certificates for the best salt water fish caught. This together with a visit to Australia by Zane Grey, who was made an honorary member of

the Society, was the impetus needed to get game fishing firmly established in New South Wales.

By 1938 a special fishing contest was held to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of Australia, during which the world's heaviest fish on rod and reel to that date was caught, one member landed two and a half tons of fish and another, Anthony Hordern, caught eight marlin and eight sharks.

Following Zane Grey's visit the big game activities of the Society increased. The Society was instrumental in the formation of local big game angling clubs along the coast of NSW. So influential did it become that Vaucluse Council handed the control of the Watson's Bay Weighing Station to the Society in 1939 and this responsibility continued until 1960. Interest in salt water activities ceased in 1961 as big game angling was then firmly established with many active clubs in NSW. Since then the Society has specialised in freshwater angling activities. It is now generally recognised as the leading representative body of New South Wales fly-fishers.

Representation and lobbying

By the early 1930s the Society had become the pre-eminent fishing organisation in the State and was recognised by the Government as the voice of amateur fishermen. In 1934 there was a move to change the name to the Australian Rod Fishers' Society with activities Commonwealth-wide, incorporating all kindred fishing organisations.

By 1933 the Society commenced lobbying the NSW Parliament for the introduction of new fisheries legislation and trout licences. Almost a decade previously the Society had amended its rules to provide for the affiliation of kindred organisations, thus starting the Cooma District Rod Fishers followed by societies at Jindabyne, Armidale, Blayney, Guyra, Bathurst, Orange, Albury, Blue Mountains, Bermagui, Glen Innes, Tumut, Monaro, Yass and many other towns. When finally in 1936 the Government legislated for the formation of acclimatisation societies, it was only natural for the affiliated clubs situated in trout areas covered by the new Acclimatisation Areas to form the nucleus of each local acclimatisation society. After all, Rod Fishers had the experience of manning hatcheries, importing ova and stocking streams.

The Oberon area, being the closest trout fishing to Sydney, is perhaps the most popular with members. This is no accident and we owe a great debt to the foresight of previous Society members for the fishing we enjoy today.

To stock the area The Rod Fishers' Acclimatisation Society was formed in 1939. However a legal technicality prevented the Society from acting as an Acclimatisation Society, so the then Committee of the Society, together with some individual members, formed the Central Acclimatisation Society, built the Bindo Hatchery and imported the ova from Montana.

As early as 1906 the Society had recognised the need for an umbrella organisation to represent the interests of NSW anglers. By 1910 it had helped to create a NSW Piscatorial Council which did not survive the First World War. It was not until after the Second World War that efforts were again made to form an umbrella group, when it was clear to the Society that a united voice was necessary to negotiate with the Government to preserve our streams and maintain our chosen recreation. It took a decade for Rod Fishers to organise all the acclimatisation societies and angling bodies into a united organisation. It again initiated the NSW Piscatorial Council and provided the first Chairman of the Council in 1949. But to the frustration of Rod Fishers, the Council did not succeed.

A further decade passed before the Society again attempted to combine the major acclimatisation societies and to lobby the government for improvement of freshwater streams. This later attempt was more successful and in 1958 at a meeting convened by the Society the Institute of Freshwater Anglers (NSW) was born and later in the same year a Constitution ratified.

The Society continues to play an active role in the Institute with delegates holding office and performing important administrative roles. In addition it is represented at the Federal level through the Australian Fresh Water Fishermen's Assembly.

Library

As a contemplative sport it is not surprising that members are avid readers. A library was first established in 1906. Since that time the Society has acquired many rare and valuable books, and maintains an active policy of updating the collection with contemporary angling books and videos.

Many of our members have been accomplished and gifted writers. Any review of the best of Australian angling literature would include the following authors: Joseland, Stead, Roughley, D'Ombra, Wigram, Hedge, Stewart, Sautelle, Massy, Dunn and Hole, all of whom were active members of the Society. Today the tradition continues, and we number among our members contemporary authors such as John Bethune, Peter Leuver and others well known in the fishing journals of Australia.

Fly-tying

Fly-tying has been a continuing interest to many of our members. The 'Bredbo', a fly adopted by the Society as its motif, was designed by Dr R. Brady and C.R. Burnside in 1896, and was the first Australian designed trout fly. These two gentlemen along with Howard Joseland and others were founders of the Society and Dr Brady was its second President. It was a wet fly in the tradition of the time and an attempt to imitate the grasshopper. Many members are accomplished fly-tiers and an annual fly-tying night is held to assist members wishing to learn the art.

Casting

The first Fly Casting Day was held at Centennial Park in 1907. The Society organised the first Fly casting Tournament held in Australia and at one time had a pontoon maintained in one of the Centennial Park ponds for use by members. The President's Cup for accuracy and presentation was a feature of the Annual Dinner. This was the forerunner of the current Annual Casting Day, now held at the conclusion of the fishing season.

Dinners, luncheons and meetings

The first Annual Dinner for members was held at Aaron's Exchange Hotel during the 1908/09 Season. Except for interruptions during the two Great Wars and the Depression this tradition has been maintained. After the Second World War the Dinner was held to coincide with the NSW Sheep Show, when a large number of property owners would be in Sydney. This enabled the Society to thank landowners for the privilege they extended to our members allowing them to fish their properties. When the Sheep Show was amalgamated with the Royal Show fewer landowners came to Sydney. Now Annual Dinners are held in Cooma and Oberon specifically to thank landowners, and the Annual Members' Dinner is held in Sydney.

Our first Patron was the Earl of Dudley P.C. the Governor General of Australia. He accepted the invitation to be Patron in 1909. Various Governors-General acted as Patron for many years. However in the 1930s when the Society became the pre-eminent fishing organisation in NSW it was felt the Vice Regal patron should be the Governor of NSW and this situation continued for many years. Many former Governors have been active fishers and members of the Society. The first club rooms were secured in 1906 on the first floor of Aaron's Exchange Hotel, a Sydney landmark situated near the original Stock Exchange and not far from our current meeting place. This became the headquarters for members and was actively used. By the 1930s the Society was sharing rooms with the Royal Zoological Society of NSW in Martin Place and after the Second World War it moved to the NSW Sports Club, then the Australasian Pioneers' Club, Sydney. It is currently based at the Union Club, in Bent Street, Sydney.

To enable members to meet regularly, exchange fishing information, and promote good fellowship, monthly meetings with guest speakers have been a feature of the Society since 1906. A luncheon is held on the first Thursday of each month (January excepted). Details of all social functions are listed in 'Tight Lines'.

Publications

The first official publication was the 'New South Wales Rod Fishers' Gazette' published in 1932. The publication continued monthly until 1942, when due to the stringencies of the War effort publication ceased. Copies of the Gazette are held in the Society's Library and in the State Library of NSW. After the Second World War the journal was reintroduced as 'The Bulletin' and then under its present title, 'Tight Lines' which is published as a bi-monthly bulletin and an annual journal.

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In ninety years of existence, with a membership largely domiciled in Sydney, the Society has never favoured any local area for freshwater angling preferring to spread its fishing interests state-wide. It is perhaps for this reason any history of the development of freshwater angling in NSW will be dominated by men of vision who were enthusiastic members of the Society. Thus people with the stature of Joseland, Spiller Brandon, Dutton, Gaden, Halliday, and Southam all contributed to the growth of the Society.

Today the Society plays a leading role in conservation of our trout streams and endeavours to foster good relations with landowners, and by promoting ethical and responsible conduct amongst its members by insisting that they practice the Society's code of fishing ethics. Members are encouraged, indeed expected, to promote the continuance of the original objects of the Society.

L. S. R.