

PLOD ESSAY

Crays, Muttonfish and Gars with tails like pick-axes: Fishing yarns from the Bunurong Coast

My Uncle Foxy once told me a fishing story that made me laugh. It was the 1970's, he was driving the beat-up old Holden ute he had back then. He'd finished milking for the morning, and was heading back into Wonthaggi along Wilson's Road. Back then it wasn't much more than a goat track. It was dusty and rutted, which meant the radio constantly dropped in and out. Foxy spotted a familiar figure riding his bike up ahead. It was Jimmy Macdonnell, the bloke who lived in the huts on the edge of Foxy's farm. Jim was making his way slowly along the road. As Foxy slowed down to say g'day, he saw the battered wooden crate lashed to the handlebars.

Catch a few to today, Jim?

Yup, got a few.

As he got closer, Foxy realised how good a day it was.

That bloody box was overflowing with Gars Old Jim had caught down at The Wreck. And I'll tell you what, the things had tails the size of bloody pickaxes! That's how it was back then.

Foxy finishes telling the story, shakes his head, then starts yuck yuck yucking to himself (as is his way).

As you can plainly see, the title of this essay takes its cue from Foxy's turn of phrase. It's a story about fishing, crays and muttonfish (abalone) but before we get cracking, best I share a word of warning. Like any good story about fishing, there will be elements of truth and elements of historical fact, but there will also be embellishment and overstatement. Crucially, there will also be a few outright lies.

Our story focuses on crays and abalone rather than line fishing, although it does touch a little on the latter. In doing so, it aims to highlight how important both crays and abalone have long been to the people of the Bunurong Coast. It's an essay that seeks to document how fishing techniques have changed over the years. It also aims to shine a light on some of the outlandish stories that one can find, read, and hear in the Wonthaggi & District Historical Society archives.

The area we'll be focussing on encompasses Wreck Beach, Harmer's Haven, Cape Paterson, Shack Bay and Eagles Nest. That being the case, we best start with how important abalone, crays and fishing have been for the Aboriginal people who've lived and fished these shores for millennia. Coastal places like what we now call Wreck Beach were obviously regular dwelling places for the Bunurong/Boonwurrung. It's a site that most likely would have been permanently occupied in the late Summer and early Autumn year on year.

Wreck Beach has good shelter, good water and an abundance of food, so it's not surprising that the dunes there are full of middens. Their scale provides a clear indication of how plentiful the place was. Those middens are full of shell fragments from limpets, whelk, tubros, and abalone. Numerous archaeological



surveys undertaken over the years catalogue a huge array of shell species, but they also list a wide variety of bone fragments—possums, wallaby, kangaroo and mammals. Those same surveys also cite snapper bones, which indicates the Bunurong/Boonwurrung fished, be that by line, net and/or spear.

Bruce Pascoe's book *Dark Emu* describes the fishing and diving practices undertaken by Aboriginal groups of the southern shores, highlighting how important crayfish and abalone were in the Aboriginal coastal economy. Pascoe suggests that in both Tasmania and Victoria, the collection of shellfish was predominantly (but not always) done by women. Interestingly, he points out that some of the skeletons of Aboriginal women from Victoria's coastal regions, once held by the Melbourne Museum, were found to have odd bone growths in their ears. The Scientists recognised that the bone had thickened to protect the ear from extreme cold; the women were likely diving for abalone and crays. They had what we would now call 'surfers' ear'.

Pascoe's book also includes descriptions shared by Aboriginal Elders about how men netted and speared crayfish. Those blokes would swim to a reef and hang onto the kelp while using their feet to find the feelers of the crayfish. They would then dive down and grab the horns and haul the crayfish from its cave by hand.

Dark Emu also describes how the abalone (and other shellfish) were likely cooked. It involves a campfire on the bare sand. You let the Teatree roots burn down to coals, then you put the shell on the coals with its flesh facing up. They marinate in their own juices. It's a method I've tried with freshly caught abalone a couple of times. It looks like the flesh will end up rubbery and tough, but once you move it off the coals to cool in the sand, you see the flesh relax. It's surprisingly good, especially accompanied by sapphire blanched in boiled seawater.

Our Society has a rich archive of oral recordings in which Wonthaggi's early residents reflect on their regular trips out to the nearby beaches. If you take their stories at face value, there would have been times when the Bunurong/Boonwurrung wouldn't have even needed to get wet to get their crays and abalone. In the 1910s and 1920s, the rocks of every beach in this area were said to be absolutely smothered with abalone at low tide. Any punter would have been able to simply pick their way along the rock platforms and pick them off by hand. Same with crays. You would have been able to see crayfish or at least their horns while standing on the rocks. Often, some got trapped by the falling tide in the deeper rockpools. In those cases, you could just reach down and grab them while they loitered out the front of their holes.

My dad Jim remembers instances of this as late as the 1960s. My grandparents – Nell and Arthur Quilford – had a farm above what was called Boiler Rocks (which is between Wreck Beach and Cape Paterson's F-Break). The farm is now owned by my Uncle Foxy (whose yarn provided the opening for this essay) and Aunty Rhonda. The family ran a dairy herd on the property from the 1950s through to the 1970s. The milking shed isn't far from the cliff line where Jim Macdonnell had his huts. Dad recalls ducking down for a swim after milking cows on a hot summer afternoon. Now, I take everything Jim tells me with a grain of salt, but he swears seeing big crays in the rockpools even as late as that.

In the 1910s and 20s, Wonthaggi's miners worked a six-day week, which left Sunday for beach trips and fishing. Families, fishermen and kids made regular walking pilgrimages out to the local beaches each weekend through the summer months. Long-time Wonthaggi resident Jim Longstaff once reflected on a weekly ritual of walking out to Wreck Beach:

I used to say to all the kids at school, 'Dad's taking me to the beach on Sunday'. Then what did you know dozens of kids would present themselves Sunday morning with a packet of sandwiches and a

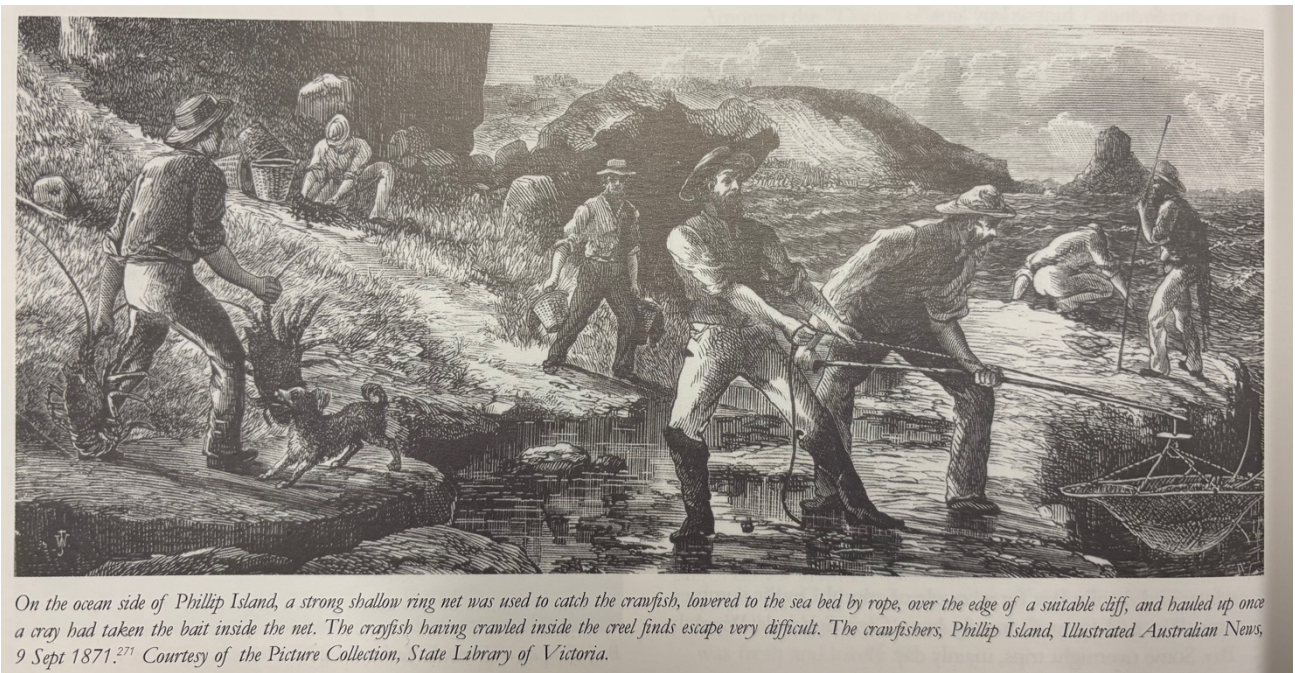
bottle of raspberry vinegar, then Pop would lead us all over to the beach for the day. He was like the Pied Piper.¹

Numerous family and friendship groups ended up building permanent huts in the bays and cliff lines to provide a base for overnight, weekend and holiday stays. Fishing and craying were a key part of the daily routine.

Fish, crayfish, and, to a far lesser extent, abalone were a very important food source and commodity in the early days of Wonthaggi. At that time, commercial crayfishing operations ran out of both Inverloch and San Remo. A commercial market for crayfish has existed in Australia since European settlement. Permanent commercial crayfishing operations are known to have taken place on Phillip Island from as early as the 1850s (see illustration below). The particulars of the delicacy were described in the shellfish section of *The Colonial Cook* as early as 1864:

Crayfish (vulgo, Crawfish) 1lb 7 lbs. Very fine. Sold in immense quantities, a favourite from high to low is in season about eight months of the year. The Victorian variety was described as "2 lbs to 8 lbs. Very fine and delicate."²

Commercial operators maintained fleets of boats and used traditional hand-made Cornish fish traps. The hemispherical "cray pots" were made by weaving cane and Tea-Tree stakes over a metal frame. Some of the commercial fishermen operating out of San Remo used to spend a couple of weeks each year camping with Jim Macdonnell while weaving their pots for the forthcoming season.



On the ocean side of Phillip Island, a strong shallow ring net was used to catch the crayfish, lowered to the sea bed by rope, over the edge of a suitable cliff, and hauled up once a cray had taken the bait inside the net. The crayfish having crawled inside the creel finds escape very difficult. The crayfishers, Phillip Island, Illustrated Australian News, 9 Sept 1871.²⁷¹ Courtesy of the Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria.

Fishing also provided a means for everyday anglers to make a few extra bob. Freddie Davis had a rowing boat at Wreck Beach that he'd fish from. He'd take fish into town on a Monday morning to sell. Jim Longstaff once provided an overview of the going rates:

He'd sell six Mullet for a bob. A decent-sized Snapper of 5 or six pounds that might have been one and six.³

¹ Jim Longstaff interviewed by Joe Chambers. Wonthaggi & District Historical Society, Oral History Recording OH-0077, recorded 12th August, 1987.

² Cited in *Western Port Fishermen*, p.188

³ Jim Longstaff interviewed by Joe Chambers. Wonthaggi & District Historical Society, Oral History Recording OH-0077, recorded 12th August, 1987.

Boats were kept at many of the coastal bays. At Wreck Beach, it was Freddie Davis, Bill Ramsey and Jim Macdonnell), at Cape Paterson's Bay Beach, it was James 'Pop' Legg, while Shack Bay had several boat sheds.

The town's younger brigade also got into their fishing and craying. Roy Davis and Tommy Burgin once built a homemade raft to go craying at Wreck Beach. The first time they took it out they immediately started landing crays but soon realised they'd forgotten to bring a bag. They couldn't keep them caught on the raft. The ingenious solution they concocted was to take off their trousers and shirts and tie knots in the sleeves and pant legs then use them as bags. They came in hideously sunburnt but with an enormous bounty of cray flesh.⁴

The technique used to catch crays from the shoreline was pretty simple. A length of cord with a weight on it and a net was all that was needed. Parrotfish, horse meat, and beef offal were often used as bait. Easier still, abalone could simply be pried off the rocks for bait. The baited cord would simply be dangled in front of a rock ledge or at the edge of a kelp bed. The cray would walk out, grab the bait, and the line would slowly be pulled up. A net would be slipped underneath their tail, then cray would be popped in a bag or sack. Hooks weren't required; the cray would just latch onto the bait and often wouldn't let go. The technique was later refined, and a nylon stocking was used to hold the bait—the crays would get their claws tangled so it couldn't let go.

Night fishing was a popular pastime. All you needed was a carbide lamp on a miner's helmet, a pair of waders, and a hand spear or a net.⁵ Garfish, Flounder, Whiting and squid were plentiful.

There was certainly a commercial market for fresh caught fish and cray (both in Wonthaggi and to be shipped to Melbourne), but given that crayfish was so plentiful, the people who lived here weren't really prepared to pay for them. Abalone had even less value. It was seen as worthless – it was known as muttonfish. Eddie Harmer, whose family ended up coordinating the subdivision at Harmers Haven, spent a lot of time on the nearby bays and beaches. He said:

*You could have caught dozens of crayfish out there in those days. We only took what we needed or to give to our neighbours. There were plenty of other fish too. Every ledge or every rockpool was absolutely covered with mutton fish then. We only used them for cray bait.*⁶

Given crayfish had so little monetary value, anglers sometimes had to go above and beyond even to give them away. Jim Longstaff recounts:

*I'd ride my bike back from the Wreck with a sugar bag of crays on my bag while balancing another one on the handlebars. The spikes from the rays in the bag would be sticking into your back the whole way home. I'd fill my mother's copper three parts full, light a fire underneath and cook them up. I'd then go up and down the street asking if anyone wanted a Cray. 'Oh yes, we'll have one if they're cooked' people would say. If they had to cook it themselves, they didn't want one. [...] The going rate was gratis; I never sold a cray in my life. I gave them all away. I even cooked them beforehand.*⁷

⁴ Jim Longstaff interviewed by Joe Chambers. Wonthaggi & District Historical Society, Oral History Recording OH-0077, recorded 12th August, 1987.

⁵ Hayes, The Golden Coast, p.63

⁶ Eddie Harmer cited in Chambers, J. & L. Out To The Wreck.

⁷ Jim Longstaff interviewed by Joe Chambers. Wonthaggi & District Historical Society, Oral History Recording OH-0077, recorded 12th August, 1987.

My aunt Susan has a telling story about the Wonthaggi schoolyard in the 1950s. The children of fishermen (many of whom worked out of San Remo) used to turn up with crayfish sandwiches for lunch. Making yourself, or your kid, a crayfish sandwich today would likely set you back fifty dollars at least. But back then, no one wanted a bar of it. Those poor kids were forced to spend their mornings trying to swap their cray sandwiches for Vegemite or peanut butter.

While they may not have been hugely profitable, fish, crayfish and even abalone were particularly important during the hard times. This was especially true during the mass lay-offs of that took place at the State Coal Mine in the early 1930s. Young mine employees were routinely sacked on their 21st birthday to avoid paying full adult rates. Those same men weren't even eligible for the meagre 'susso' payments if they lived at home. This saw large numbers move into the huts along the coastline. That way, they were eligible for the dole, lived rent-free, and had ready access to fish, crays and rabbits.



Another tall tale involving craying at Harmers Haven occurred in the hut eventually owned by Eddie Harmer. It was the only formal dwelling in the area back in those days.⁸ Johnny Harrison once recounted a particular incident to Bill Hayes:

The hut could sleep four people, two in the bunks, one on the table, and a forth on the floor. One evening, two of the group returned from a 'craying' trip and tipped four for five of the crustaceans out on the floor. One crawled over the face of the man asleep on the floor. He awoke in fright, grabbed a rifle and opened fire on the offending creatures.⁹

Wonthaggi locals, hut-dwellers and regular anglers got to know the places they fished and frequented intimately. They learned the intricacies of every ledge, kelp bed, fishing hole and hot spot in and out.

⁸ The hut had started its life a powder magazine at the State Mine but had been "obtained" in the depths of the night. It was taken by cart out to Wreck Beach by Johnny Harrison, Bill Burgin and Nig Undy. They reassembled it in the dunes.

⁹ Hayes R. W., The Golden Coast, p.36.

Long-time Kilcunda resident Alan Hart once told me about the cray holes he'd leant off the rock platforms at Kilcunda. He was so confident of catching his haul that he just set a couple of lines off the end of the rocks, sneak off up to the pub for a few cheeky ones, before coming back a few hours later to collect his bounty.

The fact that crays weren't worth that much didn't mean they weren't highly sought after. Rows constantly erupted between the Calders and the Perrys over access to the best cray holes at Shack Bay. The two families had huts there in the 1960s. The arguments usually ended in compromise, with the two parties agreeing on the demarcation of their boundaries until the next blow-up.¹⁰ A bloke once told me that one of the more heated arguments ended up in a fistfight over access to a cray hole. Apparently, both men ended up in hospital and the police were informed.

Shifting our focus to modern-day crayfishing and abalone collection along the Bunurong coastline shows how radically things have changed. Attitudes about the desirability of abalone in particular have changed dramatically. The rise of spearfishing and SCUBA diving through the 1960s into the 1980s as well as the international commercialisation of both abalone and crayfish fishing, has meant there is a lot of pressure on fish stocks. Both crays and abalone are far less abundant these days.

Many of the old-timers I've talked to blame spearfishing and skin divers for the scarcity of fish, crays and abs. I get that; there certainly have been many instances of overfishing by recreational divers. I've seen photos and heard stories of carloads of crays being hauled out in a day. That said, and in my opinion, their activities simply continue a long-held trend of overfishing dating back to the early days of the town.

At times, I've been pretty keen on chasing both crays and muttonfish. The current rules for diving these days are very different. It's highly regulated, but the basic rules are:

- ⇒ It's a maximum of 2 crays person and/or 5 Abalone per person per day per;
- ⇒ There's a closed season for both species each year and both have to be taken by hand;
- ⇒ For crays, many anglers dive on compressed air, although you can still get them free-diving;
- ⇒ There's definitely an art to diving for crays; you need to be pretty fit, and you certainly miss more than you catch;
- ⇒ You usually have to dive to 5m+ to find and get crays while abalone are a fair bit easier picking, they're pretty plentiful once you know what to look for and where to dive;
- ⇒ On really low tides, you can still pick abalone off the rocks without getting wet.

Now, if you'll indulge me, I'll share a personal cray fishing yarn. It's about the twelve-pounder I once caught freediving at Coal Point. I wrestled the big bull with consummate ease until it punctured my dive float while I was trying to bag it. The fact that I caught it before my mate Kevin could get to it made him

¹⁰ Hayes R. W., The Golden Coast, p.63.

furious. Buy me a beer one day, and I'll tell you all about it. I'd then leave it to you to decide how much I'm bullshitting you.

This brings us to the end of this tale, but no story about the history of fishing can slide by without mentioning the biggest fish of them all, the Wonthaggi Whale. There have been numerous wonderful tales about that leviathan, so I'll just tip my hat to our 'Big Fish' by citing the Chambers' wonderful poem:

“Wasn't That a Fish”

*“Oh! who hasn't heard of Wonthaggi's
great whale?*

*Its length and its and the width of its
tail.*

*No “monster”, no earthworm, no
wombat, no camel*

*Can replace in our hearts that
malodorous mammal.¹¹*



By Rees Quilford

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¹¹ Chambers, J. & L. Out To The Wreck, p.24