

SEISIA, CAPE YORK June 19, 2001

Last Tuesday I literally hopped of the Hinchinbrook house boat (now that's another story) and had about half a day to re organise my tackle box and pack my bags for Seisia, a small Torres Strait Island community situated near the tip of Cape York Peninsula. My wife drove us, myself and a Japanese business associate and friend, Masumi, to Erskines Tackle Shop for last minute tackle upgrades and a quick purchase of some lures and snags for our planned trip.

Our guide for the three day charter, Gary Wright, suggested we bring up some "Smiling Jack" poppers but when I saw that they were about six / seven inches long (17cm) decided that we must have heard him incorrectly. They were too big for the task I thought – how wrong was I to be proved.

I had also decided to load my baitcaster with braid for this trip. During my over ten years of guiding I had steadfastly refused to use this line on my charters, inexperienced anglers and braid is not a good mix and some of the tangles I have seen first hand convinced me that I was right in resisting the trend until now. Robert Erskine was happy to oblige and offered to put the new 20lb braid onto my baitcaster – "When are you off to the Tip he asked – In about 20 minutes" was my reply.



"Hell, I had better hurry up and show you how to tie the leader etc" mused Robert but the task was soon completed and we were on our way to the domestic terminal to board our Flight West plane to Seisia.

The 30 seat Brasilia turbo prop soon had us cruising at 20,000 + feet and the trip passed without incident.

I had been to Bamaga previously, the local airport servicing the Cape region, but Masumi was a little surprised to find the terminal building consisted of nothing more than a tin shed. Its functional though as all we needed was to collect our gear and the lovely Rachel (Manager of the Seisia Resort & Campground) soon had us whisked away in the latest Toyota 4WD for the ten minute trip to the coast.

No matter how many times you venture to the Cape, you are not prepared for the stunning vista of pure white sand and sparkling blue seas that greet you there. I instantly felt at home, relaxed but excited and expectations were high for a good fishing experience. Masumi is our new Japanese agent and his primarily goal was to see first hand the accommodation and facilities, check communication links, survey the guides vessels and well OK..... he wanted to do some fishing as well.

After being shown our very spacious and comfortable, fully air-conditioned, self-contained Villa – right on the beach – Rachel offered a quick reconesance trip around the various communities to enable Masumi to get a



handle on things. You guessed it, after a quick drive around and a hasty unpack, we were on the beach in front of our Villa casting chrome spoons into the incoming tide. We didn't score any fish but it was great to cast the arm and get the feel of the new braid.

As the sun set over Prince of Wales Island our guide Gary Wright leisurly strolled down to the water's edge to greet us – as is the way in a small town – everyone knows what's going on. In no time at all we had exchanged pleasantries and made arrangements for our 7:15am pick up from the Villa in the morning.

Now Gary is almost a legend in these parts, having spent the best part of 20 years in the Cape, and we trusted his judgement explicidely. We had no hesitation in agreeing to his plans. As this trip was also a recon. trip for Masumi, Gary wished to take us north to the Torres Strait Islands in the morning, venture to the east coast and the mighty Jacky Jacky system the next day and to travel down the coast to the Jardine River and beyond on the next. This would give us all a good look around at the various waters, enable us to experience a variety of river, estuary, near shore blue water, beach flats, coral reef and rocky outcrop fishing – all within easy boating distance of the resort.



That evening our hosts from the Seisia Resort and Campground graciously supplied company, and some superb wine, to compliment our three course dinner. Its great to know that even in a remote location, good quality food and service is available for those who would prefer a restaurant meal at the end of a hard day rather than cook in the fully self contained Villas, something that Masumi and I did on every occasion.

Hell, we don't cook at home and I wasn't going to start on this trip. I subsequently put on a few pounds on this trip, testament to the good living although I did try to burn some off by backing down the drag on the 6kg spinning outfit – more on that later.

Day 2

Gary arrived right on time the next morning and we were a bit surprised to climb into one of the daggiest, oldest, dilapidated looking Tojo's I have ever seen. "Yeah, I guess I need a new rig soon" was Gary's humorous reply – "she's done over 540,000 k's and I'm thinking of replacing her with the vehicle my wife drives while providing the local taxi service, that's only done around 320,000.!!!" No point having a new vehicle in this location.



We only had to travel about 300 metres to the boat ramp, situated right next to the Seisia jetty, one of the best fishing structures in Oz, so I guess we could accept the ride. I have commented on this superb fishing platform on many occasions and during our visit we heard reports that someone had landed a 25kg cobia and another missed opportunity of a 35kg GT. Not bad from a jetty I can assure you.



The baitfish that hangs around the pylons have to be seen to be believed. With only one cast of his net, Gary had secured enough live sardine baits for our entire trip and gleefully handed a few dozen to the locals fishing from the jetty, their ever beaming smiles testament to a very happy co-existence within their magical natural surroundings.

The view across the calm waters of the Torres Strait to the north revealed a nasty looking cloud bank stretching from horizon to horizon. Although unseasonable, strong southeast winds at this time of year can bring heavy rain patches to remote Cape York and as our planned journey would include traversing some open water, a hasty rethink had us skimming south west along the coast to the Jardine River region.

Gary's vessel, a superb riding "Stinger" long boat soon has us cruising past Mutee Heads, a renowned big black jew spawning area.



There is currently a self-imposed moratorium on the capture of these much sought after fish

as their numbers are in serious decline. Several year classes are missing from their aging mix, and to their credit the locals are committed to rebuilding stock levels to a more healthy state. Visiting anglers are strongly advised to support this initiative.

Gary's trained eyes soon picked up wheeling birds and fish breaking the surface out wide – "tuna" was the cry! In no time flat Gary handed Masumi a 2m spinning outfit loaded with 20lb Platypus and one of those monstrous "Smiling Jack" poppers. Now all the usual writings explain how tuna are very fussy feeders, single mindedly focussing on their prey to the avoidance of all other offerings, how they must be approached cautiously, always upwind and well..... these bloody big poppers won't catch tuna...will they!

We zoomed towards the school, Gary brought the boat off the plane and Masumi struggled to cast such a big offering. No sooner had he started to crank the handle when hungry longtail (northern bluefin) crashed all around us. He was on, first cast, and it was a good fish too. Gary had not realized before that first cast that Masumi was a right hand winder, and it was quite humorous watching our Japanese companion struggle with the hard fighting quarry, the biggest fish he had ever hooked up to.

It was smiles all round though as Gary netted the 8kg fish, and Masumi held it for a quick photo before spearing her back into the briny. He managed another similar sized fish before the schools suddenly disappeared. "It's a bit early in the season" offered Mr. Wright. "Next month will see schools of feeding fish hundreds of metres wide" – we'll be back!

The action had shifted towards the shore where wheeling terns and surface crashing gave away the fishes obvious presence. They were queenfish this time, not the monster metre long oceanic variety we had hoped for, but superb fighting fish of the smaller 6kg tackle variety. We had a ball casting, cranking as fast as we could go (the faster you wound the more hits you had), watching the numerous surface strikes, hooking up to hard fighting fish and enjoying the release. And again those bloody big poppers did the trick. I was starting to have some faith in Gary's judgement!



We switched to chromed spoons and sliced lures, not the usual 5/6cm models we were used to, but monstrous 15cm chunks of metal. Bet you can't guess what happened next – yep, we landed some nice blue salmon from the shore breaks and again I was surprised at the size of the tackle we were using. A few nice lowly trevally were mixed in with the salmon and queenies landed at the mouth of the Jardine. "The fishing will be better here when the tide drops a bit more" suggested Mr. Wright, so we headed down the coast to Crab Island.



This region has so many fishy looking places - islands of all sizes dotted the horizon, sand bars strewn along the near shore zone while the white sandy beaches and flats held promises of excellent fly fishing opportunities. During our trip there was a strong wind warning current for the east coast but being on the gulf (western) side of the Cape meant that we were fishing in relatively calm offshore winds. A real bonus for fishing in the tropics I can assure you.

Lunch was partaken sitting under some shady she-oak trees on the beach as we waited for the tide to concentrate the activity at the mouth of the Jardine. Gary filled us with stories collected from his many years of fishing and exploring the Cape. His knowledge is astounding, his communication skills enlightening and we thoroughly enjoyed his charming company. But we had come to fish and the urge was too strong to wait much longer.

A quick troll around Crab Island, an all year round turtle breeding zone, yielded a few nice GT's, a golden, and the sighting of numerous crocodiles.

"This region has the largest breeding population of turtles in the world" stated Gary and together with the other wildlife, the birds, crocodiles and unique flora and fauna make it an absolutely superb eco-tourism destination.

Back into the mouth of the Jardine and conditions were ideal. The tide had dropped concentrating the activity on the facing sand gutter. The receding river water was flowing over this natural drop off and we were soon into trevally and queenfish. This river has a fresh water flow all year round and the tannin stained waters are a very visible contrast to the azure blue waters of the Gulf. Current lines, tide lines, massive sandbars and gutters abound – it was very fishy indeed!

There were three very satisfied occupants of the "stinger" as we cruised back up the coast to the ramp at Seisia. A visit up into the river proper was also on the agenda but this had to wait for a few days when tide conditions allowed an early morning journey up-river, and plans were soon set to tackle the massive Jacky Jacky estuary system in the morning.

Day 3

Gary was right on time again and our trip across the Cape from the west to east coast only took twenty minutes, even in Gary's over worked, soon to be retired towing vehicle. One of the big pluses with fishing the remote Cape York region is the fact that such a trip to different waters, depending on prevailing weather conditions, ensures superb angling conditions are available in all but the worst of wet season monsoons.

The Jacky Jacky system is huge, seven times the size of Trinity Inlet (Cairns Harbour), and it offers a variety of mangrove fishing for the likes of barra, jacks, trevally, cod, salmon etc to fishing the more open entrance sand flats for marauding trevally and queenfish to even some near shore coral bottoms where reef species including coral trout, red emperor, nannygai and sweet lip can be targeted on a regular basis.

After launching from the all-weather, all-tide boat ramp we were surprised at how flat and calm the estuary appeared as we rounded the last bend prior to entering the estuary proper. Gary decided to whisk right down to the mouth and fish some rarely hit northern creeks before conditions deteriorated later in the morning. A couple of fruitless trolls and some casts to structure produced a few half-hearted follows from school trevally. The wind came up and we raced across the wide expanse to the sheltered southern side. Gary had already noted that the system appeared to have shut down, an observation made after only fifteen minutes fishing and we hoped he was wrong this time.



Prime barra snags were pelted with gold bomber lures, mangrove points were similarly attacked but all we could raise was a small gold spot estuary cod. We did see a few barra lazily swim away from our lures, not a good look, and decided to try our luck with some live bait. Even the mullet, whiting and sardines we needed to present as livies were very difficult to find but after about ¾ of an hour stealthily working some sand flats Gary declared that he had had enough.

We cruised through the myriad of mangrove channels and gutters and somehow Gary didn't get lost as he motored to another favourite bait fishing location. This is where another secret was unveiled. Gary uses a short length of 50lb single strand wire on **ALL** of his terminal rigs. Yes, on his trolling lures, his poppers, his barra tackle and even his live bait rigs. Who was I to argue, after all I had only had ten years of guiding experience behind me and would never consider using wire for anything but toothy critters like mackerel. You could say that I was a little skeptical as I tossed the livie towards the bank side mangrove snag in about two metres of ebbing tide.

There was almost instantaneous action, a slight twitch of the rod tip, some slack line; a bit of a heavier bite and it was all over. Try again, that rig is no good I thought to myself. What self-respecting estuary fish, with their finicky bite and cautious approach to a feed would tackle a bait hung up hard on a piece of wire leader. Well just about anything that swims I was soon to find out as bream, king and blue salmon, cod, black jew and trevally fell to the rig.

Even though conditions were a bit slow, the luck was with yours truly and quality and not quantity was the order of the day. I had a ball with some of the biggest salmon I have seen. In one session I landed a big blue to 70cm that snaffled a whiting bait as I retrieved the line and it proceeded to zoom all over the deep hole. Next a monster King of 85cm swallowed a mullet bait and best of all, after seeing all this activity, I decided to try my luck with a lure.

Casting right next to the shallows with a 6 inch Leeds Lure, another monster king, the twin of the one before, decided that he'd try his luck against a pumped up southern angler. It was all whoops and screams as that third salmon hit the deck. **I was excited!**

Masumi struck it lucky at another deep hole with a couple of blue salmon on those monster chrome spoons that I mentioned earlier, and some cod and bream on the bait rigs, but it was still my day.



We started to retrace our tracks back to the ramp and had a few casts at likely looking barra snags along the way. I did manage one legal sized barra from a small gutter mouth but apart from that encounter the barra were definitely off the chew. Masumi was desperate to land one of these highly prized sport fish and as we traveled back to Seisia, hoped tomorrow, our last day of fishing, would do the trick.

Day 4

An assault on the salt water arm of the mysterious Jardine River was the order for the day, and a chance to target barra early before the ebbing tide made us make a hasty retreat or be forced to spend the next eighteen hours trapped within the shallow system. Hmm – now was that a threat or a promise?



The trip down the coast was another relatively smooth one but the exposed east coast was being buffeted by 25/30 knot winds. I can't help saying it but this location offers some of the best all-weather fishing available in Australia, and there is nearly always a fishing option easily accessible and readily available in all but the worst conditions.

Upon nearing our chosen destination the lure of wheeling birds and surface crashing fish was just too much for us to resist. We motored a few hundred yard offshore and found the queenies; monster metre long silver streaks, the prime oceanic speedsters we had been searching for on day one, and on the job of harassing bait schools. Another guide and some recreational anglers were already hard at it and we enthusiastically entered the fray. Masumi and I cast those bloody big poppers as far as we could and cracked them back as fast as we could.

There were surface boofs and crashing strikes, there were screaming drags and hard won line, there were whoops of excitement and screams of delight. And every now and then some extra excitement, or should I say anticipation, surged into the equation. An over-anxious leaping queenie usually signaled the arrival of the gentlemen in grey overcoats.

Pumping and winding, screaming drags and excited leaping fish – and in a boil of foam it was all over – the shark had won this battle and feasted. Re-rigging with trembling fingers I decided to try one of my smaller popper varieties with the now mandatory short length of wire. Gary located the feeding schools again and we soon had the poppers flying towards the action. My right shoulder was aching; I could realistically get in three good casts and frantic winding before I had to have a few seconds rest. The poppers did the job, the fish would eat my smaller offerings after all and the fight was on again. But again the sharks had their way, just tantalizingly out of Gary's reach, but he was not going to try to tail those fish with all those sharks around.



The action did settle down, we did collect our thoughts and Masumi had experienced the fishing of his dreams. I was fairly pleased too I might add. Well, as for Gary, all he could say was that you should come up in "X" month and see it then. Wow, what a fabulous healthy vibrant fishery.

As we entered the Jardine, the waters changed in colour. The azure blue gave way to tea-colored but still very clear water and our mood reflected this change. We were on a mission; we just had to catch Masumi a barra or two (or four or six). Gary motored upstream as far as he dared in the ebbing tide. We still had a few hours up our sleeve, but we needed to be out of the system by at least 1:30 pm.

This river is relatively shallow but the deeper channels are fairly easy to navigate in the clear waters, and the sandy bottom makes a pleasant change to the muddy tidal reach of the Cairns Estuary system so familiar to me. It was so strange to pull up the anchor and find it clean and without a ton of thick oozing, smelly mangrove mud.

Gary powered down and came to a stop close to some overhanging mangrove trees. I quietly slipped the anchor over the side and allowed the boat to settle back on the rope. I pulled my baitcaster outfit from the rod holder and secured a 6 inch Leads lure in pink and gold to the snap, cast to the opposite bank (just to be different) and commenced the retrieve. I had

not turned the handle three turns when I had a good strike and the barra was on. Hell it felt good! It wasn't a big fish but there is something very special about catching barra in pristine country with newfound friends. The pleasure meter would have registered about an 8.5 right then.

About then I decided to join my fellow anglers and fish the preferred snag closer to the boat. I think Gary may have already caught one barra and Masumi missed another so I thought I should again trust his judgement. Nearly every cast received some form of action. This place was so fishy with thick overhanging mangrove leaves, solid timber in the water and precise ambush zones within relatively easy casting distance.

The two main ingredients for successful barra fishing - accurate casting to structure, and a subtle twitching retrieve - were proven here in no uncertain fashion. My casts were sometimes greeted with three fish following simultaneously. Sometimes I would twitch the lure and just leave it sit for a few seconds before barra would materialize below my offering. Sometimes a retrieve of a metre or so followed by a dead stop would see the barra hit the lure as soon as it floated to the surface. Sometimes the strike was almost instantaneous!

These barra were not monsters but aggressive little fighters and every now and again a bigger fish would take drag and bury me in the sticks and it was here that the strength and lack of stretch of the braid line truly shone. I was able to monster these fish back out to clear water, feel every surge, and once hooked to structure, able to flick the lure off without having to up anchor and upset the fish or my companions. Was I converted? In this situation you bet I was.

Whenever the action slowed a bit (remember this is wintertime even in the tropics) Gary just motored downstream to some new location and we started all over again. I had a ball and Masumi landed his first ever barra. The contented smile on Gary's face mirrored our enjoyment and he glowed in the contentment and satisfaction that comes from putting clients onto some great fishing action. I was very pleased for them both.

These barra were not record breakers, but I landed 15 fish and saw and had chances at possibly another 40. Masumi landed 3 while Gary was content to stir them up with a hooked fish every now and again. This system is alive and obviously a very healthy one as we saw possibly at least 3 different year classes during that morning. We were very relaxed and contented as we left the river and settled into a well earned lunch.

We tried a few spoons for salmon, trolled a few poppers for trevally and cast and landed a few more metre long queenies that afternoon but it didn't really matter. We had already had our fix; our fill of what this marvelous fishery can offer, a taste of the variety it can throw up, and the variables and true brutality of life in the wilds. The trip back to camp was a time to reflect.

Masumi had had the best fishing trip of his life, I had re-kindled my love of remote Cape York and re-discovered the enthusiasm that had deserted me after years of guiding. All the while Gary was like a giant sponge, soaking up the conversation and companionship while giving up so much knowledge and history when lightly squeezed.

I can't thank him enough for his sincerity and professionalism and have great faith in his ability to look after our clients – even though he uses wire leaders and huge poppers for catching tuna.



Footnote: At the time of writing Flight West Airlines, the carrier we have been using for our Cape York packages, has entered voluntarily liquidation. The Queensland Government together with Australia's major domestic airlines are currently under negotiations to resolve transport options for this vast area of the state. All parties hope to have reinstated reliable services within a few weeks.