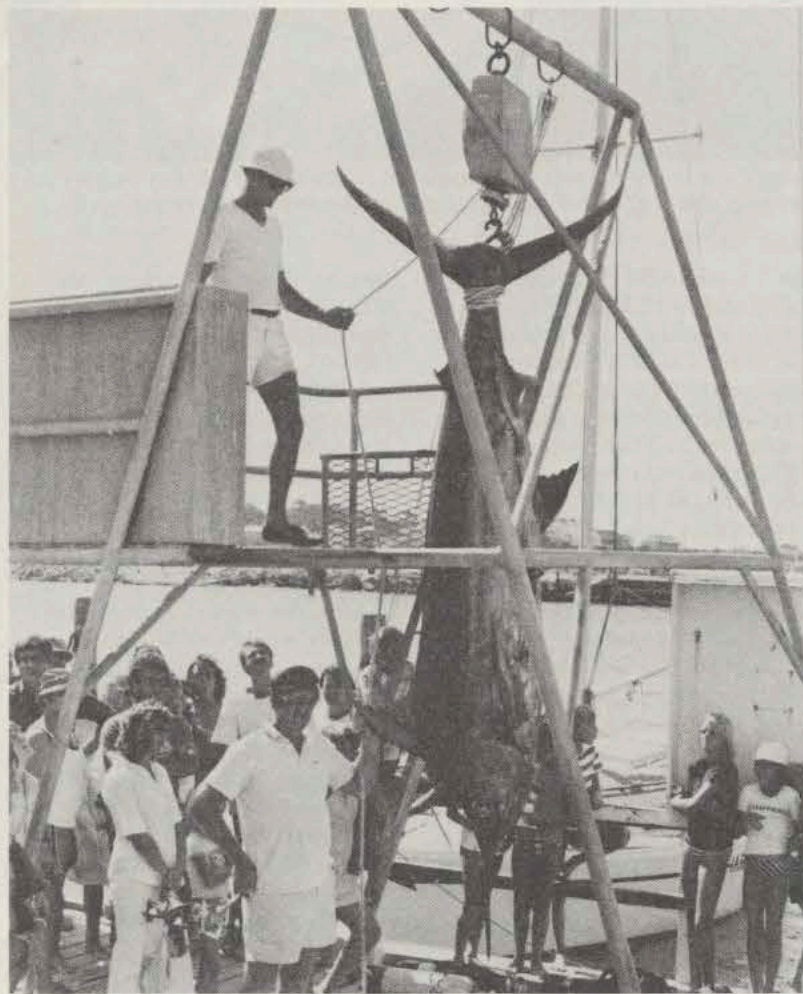


Cairns — another big fish could trigger a boom

by K. E. Owen*

Anglers from all over the world pay top rates to fish for black marlin off Cairns. But the peak black marlin season lasts only three months, not long enough for most game boats to make a profit. If the season was extended by discovering another big-game species it could improve dramatically the economics of the region's commercial game-fishing industry.



Blue marlin like this 252 kg (555 lb) Australian record fish are already attracting international anglers to waters off Fremantle in Western Australia. If the current three-month peak season for black marlin was extended by captures of another species, such as blue marlin, it could trigger a boom in the northern Queensland game-fishing industry. Photo by Graham Watkins, Perth.

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THE commercial game fishery for black marlin (*Makaira indica*) off Cairns is currently the subject of a full economic survey to assess its economic benefit to Australia in general and the northern Queensland region in particular. This analysis has not yet been completed but already one fact has emerged clearly — the benefits that accrue to Cairns are limited by the small number of boats in the game-fishing fleet.

The reasons for the small fleet are economic. Charter boats cannot generate profits solely on the basis of big-game fishing. This may seem incredible to the casual observer who hears of charter fees of \$350 a day but it must be recognised that daily rates of that magnitude are received regularly only during the 'high season' (September to November).

The boats are available for other fishing charters, diving, cruises and, in fact, any type of charter for which their unique characteristics of speed, manoeuvrability and accommodation facilities equip them. But they do not enjoy either these high daily charter rates or uninterrupted charter work throughout the year.

During the brief high season the boats must cover both their running costs and a disproportionate amount of their fixed costs. Running costs will include fuel, wages and incidentals (such as hooks at \$4 each). Fuel consumption depends on fishing strategy but it can range between 220 and 400 litres a day (\$35-\$60). A skipper and two crew will be drawing high season wages of up to \$140 a day. The fixed costs include depreciation (substantial on an asset with a replacement cost in the vicinity of \$140 000), repairs, maintenance and insurance. Having covered all these costs the boat could begin to generate a profit.

This begs the question that if operating a charter boat does not constitute an economic proposition, why are there any

charter boats at all? The explanation is that in many cases the acquisition of a game boat is motivated by non-economic considerations.

Owners, most of whom are dedicated fishermen themselves, are prepared to forgo profit for the satisfaction of owning a charter boat and being involved in game fishing; charter fees represent a means of offsetting costs rather than of earning a livelihood.

Of course these game boats also provide a major portion of annual income for the fishermen crew. But although the vessels represent commercial operations (in as much as they do earn income) they are not necessarily profitable for the owner.

Unfortunately there is only a limited number of people with the necessary finance and desire to run what at best might be a break-even enterprise. It is unfortunate for Australian and overseas game anglers because during the high season there are not enough boats to meet the demand. It is unfortunate also for the providers of ancillary services (motels, car rental agencies, airlines etcetera) because their facilities are not fully utilised for the remainder of the year. It is in this regard that the full economic potential of game fishing in northern Queensland is not being realised.

It is realistic to assume that over time the size of the fleet will continue to grow but with owners mainly the type referred to earlier: dedicated fishermen for whom the profit motive is secondary to the non-economic benefits. But the brevity of the season will prevent the fleet becoming profitable unless there are significant increases in daily rates (which, frankly, the market would probably accept).

Of course one solution would be to extend the high season.

The migratory habits of the black marlin preclude an extension of the season for this species: by late November or early December most of the big

fish have left the areas accessible to Cairns-based boats.

However, many experienced skippers and anglers believe that a fishery for Pacific blue marlin (*Makaira nigricans*) will soon be identified. Such a fishery would almost certainly be farther out to sea but with the availability of 'mother ships' (larger vessels, perhaps 30 metres long, whose function is to provide meals, accommodation and social contact for anglers) fishermen from Cairns might be able to employ the charter boat fleet for another three months.

The implications of doubling the season's duration are wide-ranging. They affect not only fleet size and fleet structure but also the entire range of industries in the region that cater for anglers.

First, the charter boats would be able to spread their fixed costs (depreciation, insurance etcetera) over a longer period while their gross takings would be increased substantially. Even average fuel consumption could be expected to decline: fishing to a mother boat allows a high proportion of actual fishing time — that is, time spent trolling at low speeds — giving total fuel consumption of about 220 litres a day. Fishing out of Cairns involves a greater proportion of travelling with resulting fuel consumption rising to around 400 litres a day.

Consequently the running of a charter boat could become an economically-viable proposition, the decision to invest being based on hard financial facts.

The benefits to the other organisations that service anglers would probably be even more significant. For instance motels, car rental agencies and airlines operate at very low marginal costs; that means their costs in providing service for one more customer are negligible. As an example, the costs of running a motel will be very similar with a 60 per cent occupancy rate or a 90 per cent rate; the cost of flying an aeroplane to Cairns is the same whether it is full or

only half the seats are occupied. However marginal income (the receipts from one more customer) is significant.

In short, the extent to which Cairns benefits from game fishing is limited by the lack of availability of charter boats. This in turn is a result of the short duration of the big-game fishing season, at present based on black marlin alone. There is every reason to believe that if the length of the big-game season could be doubled, the benefits that accrue to Cairns would be more than doubled.

But the critical question is one for fishermen to answer: does a fishery for another big marlin species exist?

Already local skippers are searching for Pacific blue marlin. In January last year two Cairns-based boats — *Sea Venture* and *Yanu III* — found blue marlin wide off the Great Barrier Reef north-east of Cairns. After taking part in that trip, Mr Gary Wright, editor of the newspaper *Fish and Boat*, reported: 'This might be the beginning of a whole new fishing season on Pacific blues that could place Cairns at the forefront of world angling attention for at least another three months every year.'

There would be problems developing a game fishery for blue marlin off Cairns during the mid-summer period when they are thought to be most common. It is the wet season, and the cyclone season, and bad weather could pose problems for boats operating far at sea. Also there is some concern amongst biologists that blue marlin in the Pacific Ocean might be over-fished already by long-line and game boats in other areas.

But the fact remains that if the Cairns big-game fishing season can be extended significantly, it could result in a disproportionately high increase in the benefits enjoyed by the Cairns region, bringing more boats into the fleet, more work for local fishermen, and more customers for local businesses. ☞