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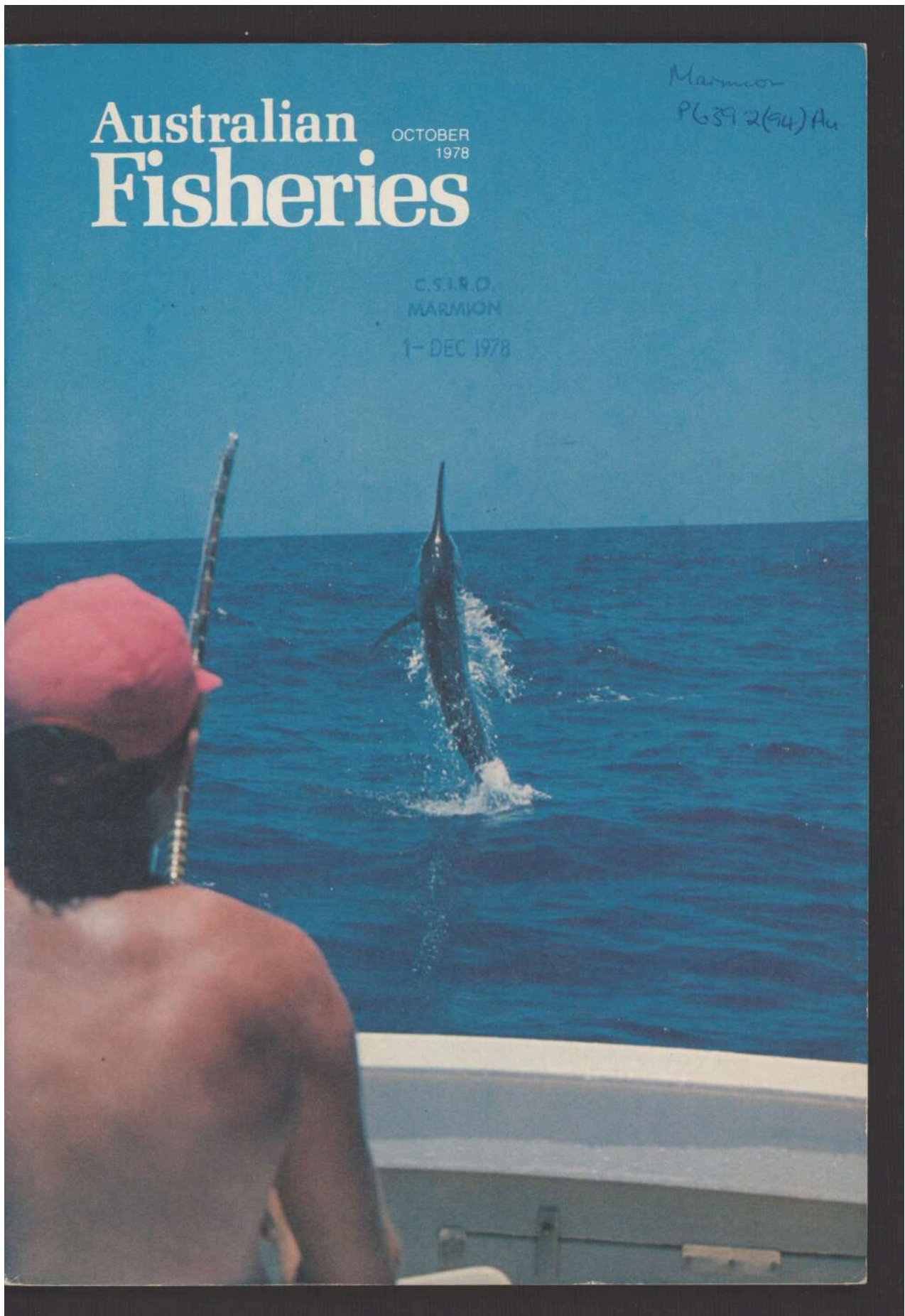
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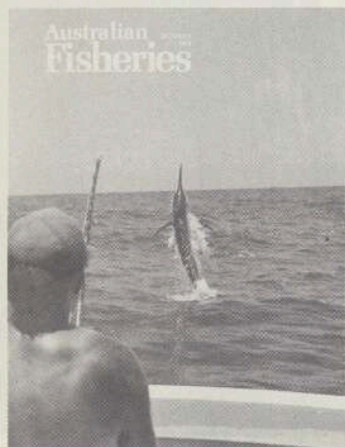
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# Australian Fisheries

Volume 37 Number 10 October 1978

## Front cover



A leaping black marlin hooked by an angler off Cairns. Gamefishing has become important to many Australian ports in recent years, as local and overseas anglers have discovered the potential of grounds right round the coast. (See article page 2.)

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# Marlin — big fish, big money

\*by Martin Bowerman, Assistant Editor.



Four vessels from the Cairns gamefishing fleet; many are built and serviced locally.

*The 2 000-pound black marlin, the two-grander, is out there, lurking off Australia's Great Barrier Reef. Catching it is only a matter of time—and skill, danger and a substantial amount of money. In what may be the world's most expensive brand of fishing lies the grandest challenge of all. It is the experience of a lifetime. Stu Apte, US Sports Afield, April 1978.*

THE 'experience of a lifetime' is luring increasing numbers of local and overseas anglers to Australia's game-fishing grounds every year. At the same time it is supporting a significant and growing fleet of professional charter boats.

The boats are sleeker, the catching gear different and the work superficially more glamorous than most

commercial fishing operations. But game chartering is a commercial fishery all the same—and one that is rapidly becoming an important money-earner for many Australian ports.

These same anglers will probably spend almost as much again on air fares, accommodation and other expenses.

Cairns is not Australia's only internationally-known gamefishing base. The country's

## Cairns mecca for Australian and international anglers.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than at Cairns in north Queensland. In 1966 just one game boat was listed as working out of the port; this year up to 30 will fish the area, backed by at least six larger service vessels.

Many of these boats are locally-based, others come from as far afield as Brisbane, Sydney and Fremantle. All will call at Cairns. Between July and December—the marlin season—they will earn from anglers some \$1.25 million.

first marlin was caught near Port Stephens on the central New South Wales coast before World War I, and since at least the 1930s Australian fishermen around Bermagui have been taking anglers from the United States and elsewhere to the marlin grounds off the NSW south coast.

Marlin and other gamefish also support local fishermen and boats at Townsville, Heron Island and Brisbane in Queensland; Sydney, Greenwell Point and



Narooma in New South Wales; Lakes Entrance and Port Fairy in Victoria; Eaglehawk Neck, Port Arthur and Coles Bay in Tasmanian; Ceduna and Port Lincoln in South Australia; Fremantle, Shark Bay, Rosemary Island and Exmouth in Western Australia; and Darwin in the Northern Territory.

But it is Cairns that has attracted the limelight in recent years. Until the 1960s it was a base for light-tackle gamefishing only: small marlin, sailfish, mackerel, tuna and other pelagics. That changed in 1966 when a black marlin of 1 064 pounds was weighed at Cairns. As far as most gamefishermen are concerned, 1 000 pounds is the magic figure for marlin, and the word soon spread. The following year three boats worked from Cairns, six in 1968, 10 in 1970 and 25 by 1974. And the biggest black marlin landed weighed 1 442 pounds—only 120 pounds short of the 25-year-old open world record. (The record of 1 560 pounds was set by American Alfred Glassell in Peru in 1953.)

The attraction of Cairns is simply that its waters offer more big marlin than any other. More world records for black marlin—the main species caught—have been set there than anywhere else, and the International Game Fish Association acknowledges it is probably the most productive marlin fishing ground in the world.

The Cairns grounds in fact stretch some 120 miles north to beyond Cape Flattery. Some small marlin are caught in inshore areas, but the big fish are all taken in deeper water outside the outer edge of the Great Barrier Reef.

Although some of the game boats can operate at sea for extended periods, most are 'day boats' only, fishing during the day but returning at night to port, or to a 'mother ship'—a floating motel—anchored in



What Cairns is all about—a world-record-sized marlin. Like many overseas anglers, this US fisherman makes repeated annual trips to Cairns. Photograph George Lisha.

sheltered water behind the Reef.

During the height of the season—September to November—most work too far from Cairns to operate out of there daily. (The nearest outer reef to Cairns is 32 miles.)

Most boats are fully-booked for these three months. Charter rates vary. This season cost of a day-boat, averaging 10 to 14 metres in length, is about \$300 to \$350 a day. The rate for the larger game boats, up to 20 metres long, ranges to \$750 a day. Chartering a mother ship

will cost a further \$350 a day, with a surcharge of \$25 a head for anglers and game boat crew (all paid for by the angler).

Many of these game boats have been built by north Queensland yards, at an average cost of about \$5 000 a metre.

This year's fleet of mother ships include the largest aluminium vessel built in Australia—27 metres l.o.a.—and a 30-metre steel catamaran.

The aluminium *Melita* was built by Striker Boats in Brisbane at a cost of \$1.2



million. Completed in July, the vessel has a six-metre beam, two-metre draught and cruises at 13 knots.

The catamaran, *Reeftel*, was built in Cairns and cost approximately \$500 000. It is owned by local businessman and fisherman Bernie Smith, who operated a similar boat *Coral Seatel* as a mother ship in previous seasons. *Coral Seatel* now operates a daily tourist passenger service from Cairns to Green Island.

Also the former coastal cargo vessel *Paluma* has been converted at a cost of about \$100 000 to operate as a mother ship this year.

And on Lizard Island, 60 miles north-east of Cooktown, a \$700 000 luxury resort was completed in late 1974 to cater for anglers. The advantage of Lizard Island is that it offers protected anchorages only 10 miles from some of the most productive fishing areas, and accommodation that doesn't rock during the night.

There has been little work on the economics or biology of the northern marlin fishery. The only estimates of the value of the industry are those compiled by the Cairns Game Fishing Club and individual fishermen, and catch rates could only be compiled from fishermen's diaries or tag cards.

In 1975 Club president Mr J. H. Izatt calculated that in the seasons from 1966 to 1974 anglers spent some \$3 250 000 to fish at Cairns. This figure included \$800 000 for overseas travel, \$480 000 for domestic travel, \$600 000 for accommodation and \$1 360 000 for boat hire. Mr Izatt also estimated that boats had used almost half-a-million gallons of diesel fuel, and had cost \$350 000 to maintain during that period.

In 1974 payments to crew averaged a little over \$11 000 for each boat. Most game boats have a skipper and two deckhands. The mother ships also



Local fisherman Ron Duce with a Japanese long-line float. Although glass floats are now rare, the more common plastic floats are often found along the Reef. Colour transparencies by Martin Bowerman.

have a skipper, cook and at least two deckhands.

Catch rates for Cairns boats are difficult to estimate at present. Only about 5 per cent of marlin brought to the boat are killed and weighed—

usually an angler's first marlin, some over 1 000 pounds and potential record fish.

Anglers release the remaining 95 per cent. Many of these are tagged but increasing numbers of anglers are refusing to tag

*Australian Fisheries, October, 1978*



these marlin because they believe Japanese long-line fishermen, who operate in the same area, benefit by recapturing most of the tagged fish.

(A 'catch and effort' form has been suggested and may be adopted by the Cairns fleet; such forms are completed by skippers in parts of the United States to indicate variations in the availability of fish in different areas from year to year.)

Local fishermen are concerned about the catch of marlin by Japanese long-line vessels in the area. Mr Vince Vlasoff, president of the Cairns-based Professional Game Fishermen's Association, which includes the full-time charter skippers, said the Japanese vessels were catching marlin from the same stocks as the Australian boats.

In view of the impending declaration of a 200-mile fishing zone by Australia, the Association had recently written to the Prime Minister, Mr Fraser, expressing its concern at Japanese catches.

The Japanese long-liners fish primarily for tuna. However the main tuna season in the north-western Coral Sea—October to December—coincides with the peak of the marlin season, and the Japanese vessels do take high incidental catches of marlin. Figures published in Japan indicate that in at least one year the number of marlin caught off North Queensland exceeded the number of tuna. (Japanese fishermen record their catches of tuna and billfish not by total weights but by the number of individual fish.)

The main species of tuna long-lined in the area are yellowfin, with some bigeye and albacore; the main species of billfish are black marlin, with some blue and striped marlin, sailfish and broadbill swordfish. Figures for the years 1965-70 published by the Japanese Far Sea Fisheries

Research Laboratory in 1973 showed the average catch for each long-line set in those years was 18.1 for yellowfin (bigeye 1.9, albacore 1.7) and 11.5 for black marlin (other billfish totalled 1.6).

Catch and effort statistics on the Japanese long-line fishery by area (5° by 5° grids) are published annually by the Research Division of the Fisheries Agency of Japan.

These show that in the Coral Sea region—145 to 155°E, 10 to 20°S (approximately Torres Strait to the Solomon Sea and south to Frederick Reef and Bowen)—the total number of black marlin caught from 1970 to 1976 was more than 24 500. However some 19 000 of these marlin—or almost 80 per cent—were taken in the grid 145-150°E, 15-20°S. This is an area from Cape Flattery east to the Willis Reef and south to a point level with Bowen—the area fished by the Cairns game fleet.

Cairns skippers say the 1977 season was the best ever for the number of big black marlin available. However with the growing conservation ethic amongst anglers world-wide, and the strong move amongst local fishermen to release most marlin hooked, they will be watching the Japanese catch figures closely. ⌘

## Rich reward for 2 000-pounder

IF anyone can catch a 2 000-pound black marlin out of Cairns he stands to make a great deal of money—in fact \$100 000.

A contest sponsored by QANTAS, TAA and the Tradewinds Hotel in Cairns offers \$100 000 for any angler (plus \$10 000 for the boat crew) who catches a black marlin of 2 000 pounds or better off Cairns between July 1 and December 31 this year, provided certain conditions are met.

Entry forms are available through TAA and QANTAS, or the Tradewinds Hotel, PO Box 396, Cairns, Q. 4870. ⌘

## Long-line marlin released in US

REGULATIONS imposed under the United State's new 200-mile fishing zone require all billfish caught on long-lines to be released.

These regulations apply to foreign fishermen working off the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico coasts and came into force in February, under a preliminary fishery management plan implemented by the US Commerce Department's Marine Fisheries Service.

Under this ruling foreign fishermen will have to release any marlin, spearfish, sailfish or swordfish caught within the 200-mile zone. A Marine Fisheries Service spokesman said these fish were often caught on long-line gear used for tuna, a species not under the jurisdiction of the country's Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976.

He said foreign fishermen would be required to obtain permits if they were using gear that could catch billfish. If billfish were caught, they would have to be released by cutting the leader to the hook, or by other means, without removing the fish from the water, regardless of the condition of the fish.

Also these foreign vessels must file weekly reports on the numbers and types of billfish released. An annual report will also be required. ⌘

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