



Appetite for change

MATT HANSEN'S YOUTHFUL FACE GRINS OUT OF THE PHOTOGRAPH—HE IS CROUCHED NEXT TO A BRAND-SPANKING NEW PORTABLE FRIDGE AND IS SURROUNDED BY A TREASURE TROVE OF GLITTERING FISHING LURES. "THIS WAS THE START OF THE IWRA BACK IN 2008," HE EXPLAINS POINTING AT THE PICTURE, "WE JUST WANTED TO DO SOMETHING GOOD FOR THE RIVER AND THOUGHT THAT THINGS COULD BE IMPROVED WITH A BIT OF EFFORT. SO WE RAFFLED A FRIDGE FULL OF LURES AND RAISED \$16,000 TO PURCHASE FISH FINGERLINGS TO PUT BACK INTO THE RIVER".

SAM DAVIS SHARES MATT'S STORY.



Top: A captive audience, the IWRA at their annual fundraising event. Above: Where it all began, a young Matt Hansen leading the IWRA's first fundraiser in 2008.

And so began the fish habitat journey for mad-keen angler Matt, now a 30-something, highly successful realtor, business owner, family man and president of the Inland Waterways Rejuvenation Association (IWRA) from Dubbo, in the heart of New South Wales.

From that first humble raffle, fast forward eight years to the present. The IWRA was formed by a small group of like-minded Macquarie River anglers and, under Matt's leadership, has now become a tour-de-force in community-driven river rehabilitation.

When asked what the primary motivation was for forming the group Matt said "How could we not? When we learned that native fish numbers had massively declined across the Murray–Darling Basin, the alarm bells started ringing. There was nowhere near enough happening fast enough."

"At the start it was all about fish." Matt emphasised. "We were frustrated that you simply could not go out and just catch a fish any time you wanted any more. We wanted to catch more fish, and the simple solution for us was to buy hatchery-bred angling stock with the funds we raised and just tip bags of fish into the river—job done, problem solved." Or was it?

Matt continued: "We also wanted to start changing the negative culture and attitudes towards fishing and mistreatment of our local river. We were appalled and offended by the illegal fishing practices and amount of rubbish we encountered regularly when we were out on the river. The unattended set lines, the fish traps, the litter—it all has an impact."

Being a community group and not bound by the conventions that government organisations are when it comes to anglers flouting the rules, the IWRA dabbled in some colourful campaigning to shame the 'fish thieves', and injected a degree of humour into otherwise serious issues. As the group matured, they started to seek a more sophisticated approach to the recovery of native fish stocks.

"We started looking for more answers." But as Matt points out "We knew that there was some littering and fishing pressure, but they could not be the only problems affecting fish numbers. We wanted to validate what we were doing and ensure we were making a real difference where it counted."

The group's pursuit of knowledge was a major turning point, with a dramatic change in direction as they developed relationships with fisheries officers, scientists, managers and researchers, and the shift from simplistic thinking to holistic understanding was made.

“IWRA started collaborating with others and finding out all we could about what fish need and what we could feasibly be involved in. We delved into the science. We talked to fisheries managers and researchers. We wanted our dollars to work harder and go further, so we applied for some grants and were successful —in a heartbeat we doubled our money and outputs!”

The IWRA now administers a major annual fixture on the angling calendar, the Lake Burrendong Classic which attracts in excess of 1100 anglers from all over the nation, and raised \$55,943 in 2015. The revenue generated at this yearly catch-and-release event is now mainly spent by IWRA on fish habitat rehabilitation works, including leveraging grant funding for large scale re-snagging projects and removal of willows, and replacing them with native trees along the Macquarie River.

While a start has been made, the IWRA acknowledge there is still a long way to go. “We think there has been a shift away from the ‘kill it and fillet’ attitude,” Matt says with a wry smile “and we see that as a measure of success. It’s so heartening now to see kids talking about catch and release and sustainable fishing, and returning breeding stock to the water. We think this is a sign of cultural change within the society of fishers.”

Matt explained that changing the ingrained culture and habitat repair “Won’t happen overnight, there needs to be a sustained effort to effect change. The damage is widespread and the job won’t be done in our life times, but I want my kids to be in the most natural environment we can possibly maintain and create. I want them to be able to catch a fish sourced from a stable, healthy fish population, and know that the fish will be doing it naturally and supporting themselves.”

Once described by a family member as an ‘oversensitive dog with a bone’ Matt really does wear his heart on his sleeve when it comes to native fish, but has demonstrated his capacity to convert emotion into action—he has embraced the role with determination that is inspirational. “Once you know how hard fish are doing it, how can you not want to act?” He reiterated, “Once you have an awareness of what the fishery once was and what it is today, you need to act”.

While IWRA are leading the charge locally, they have also joined the new national group Ozfish Unlimited (Matt is a board director), emphasising they don’t want to be the ‘lone rangers’ in community-led fish habitat rehabilitation “You don’t have to reinvent the wheel, there’s a lot of help out there.” Matt continues, “Once you have the smell of success, you will want more. After the first goal is achieved, others will come and suddenly you are up to kicking your third and fourth goals, it just rolls on. We want to be an inspiration to help other groups to becoming empowered, self-sustaining entities, generating their own funds and getting good stuff done for fish.”

When prompted, Matt admits he draws some of his inspiration for what a healthy fish future looks like from the diaries of our early explorers. “I would give just anything to be able to walk the banks of our rivers and see what the explorers saw—to see the shoals of fish that were described like birds in the air, that would be truly incredible.”

And if Matt has anything to do with it, one day we just might.



Getting the job done with the revenue generated from the Lake Burrendong Fishing Classic is now mainly spent by the IWRA on fish habitat rehabilitation works which have included collecting rubbish from waterways.

IWRA AT A GLANCE

Founded: 2008

Vision: Working to make healthy waterways for better fishing and a better future.

Major projects: ‘Making Fish Happen in the Macquarie and Macquarie Big Wood’ which includes resnagging, weed removal and tree planting worth \$75,000.

Finest hour to date: Recognition (and rubbing shoulders with anglers and groups from across Australia) at the 2015 National Recreational Fishing Conference.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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The IWRA committee.

