

Impressions from the 2001 National Convention

Report from Bruce Hansen

For those of you who couldn't make it here is my overview of the premier annual event on the native fish-keepers calendar. This year the convention was hosted in Adelaide by the South Australian Native Fish Association (SANFA) Inc. I would like to congratulate Graham Walker and his team, they made a great job of their first conference - I hope to attend more down there in the future. The venue was "The Haven Inn" at beautiful beachside Glenelg and the facilities were comfortable and service excellent. The conference room was cosy and comfortable while 2 tanks of local freshwater fishes added considerable interest to the entrance. The weather was a little on the "cool" side for me but I guess we can't hold SANFA responsible for that.

The AGM on Friday evening was a very quiet affair as these things go. President Mark Chettle was unable to make it due to apparently last minute work problems so the Vice-president (yours truly) and ex-secretary, Doug Collom deputised. The usual financial, regional and publications reports followed, Port Macquarie was accepted as the locality for the 2002 Convention and the current Committee was re-elected with a couple of changes - most notably a new secretary. Welcome to the job, Heidy Rubin. General business included a discussion of problems with the current communication system between committee members and the new Commonwealth Bio-diversity legislation and its implications for the aquarium hobby. This will need careful evaluation by all regional groups. The meeting closed reasonably early and was followed by convivial discussions over drinks.

The convention proper got under-way on Saturday morning after final registration and the packages of "goodies" were handed out - included amongst the samples and local tourism information were 2 superb posters

on local freshwater fishes. The convention was opened by SANFA's President, Robert Marshall with a thoughtful and thought-provoking address followed by a spectacular slide-show from Andrew Bock featuring images of South Australia - from urban to outback. This was to set the tone for the next 2 days of an excellent mix of conservation, surveying and husbandry presentations - all of a very high standard. During each break, the raffle stewards did a brisk trade in tickets and high quality items found new owners.

The first presentation of the program was to be Neil Armstrong and the full version of his Arafura Swamp expedition. Unfortunately health problems prevented "the Budgie" from being there but his show went on in the person of Andy Wattam, who spoke to the slides and entertained us all with his impressions of morning activities at the Armstrong household. The slides took me back to that special place where few are privileged to go and highlighted some of the beauty and unpredictability of such expeditions. One of the slides emphasised the delicate beauty of the Threadfin Rainbowfish from that locality.

Next came Steve Clark and "The Ecological Aquarist". Steve has a background in aquaculture, fish breeding in captivity, sustainable issues in freshwater ecology and ecological wastewater treatment. He used a combination of overheads and slides to illustrate the importance of food chains and the relationships of fish with other organisms in their environment. He stressed the value of research into each species and the value of experimentation by the aquarist to find the "trigger" for each species. His background involvement with Anabantids provided some of the examples but certainly he sparked a lot of interest also with practical information such as the use of rhubarb extracts for the treatment of "white spot".

After a short break for refreshments and a quick visit to the trade room, which was well-stocked but initially a little difficult to find we were treated to a "gem" of a presentation by Mike Hammer. Mike is a local researcher, conservationist and native aquarist and is abundantly qualified and experienced in his field. His talk which concentrated on Pigmy Perches and Carp Gudgeons opened our eyes to the fascinating genetics and species radiation of these interesting groups and the current work being done on their systematics. He also gave us some appreciation of the habitats and conservation challenges ahead.

Ray Leggett, another "Grand Old Man" of ANGFA then took us on a "Cooks Tour" of some of the rivers of Cape York and the Kimberley. This slideshow was a collation from several of Ray's many excursions and survey trips over a couple of decades. As Ray said in his introduction, he was there to show us the habitats and the regions and he would leave the pretty fish pictures to others – however he did manage to squeeze in a few "pretty bird pictures" (the feathered kind) to show us that fish aren't his only interest.

After a lunch of tasty sandwiches, a minor change to the program introduced Bruce Hansen and his talk on Australian Blue-eyes. This slide show was aimed at the aquarist rather than the conservationist and included basic information on keeping and breeding this delightful group as well as illustrating the species, some of the major local variants as well some of their habitats. The excellent fish shots were by Gunther Schmida and Neil Armstrong.

Then came the "entrée" from Heiko Bleher. What can we say about Heiko that hasn't been said before? We are fortunate that he regularly makes himself available to us for our conventions and brings hundreds of his slides to show us his travels to exotic places in search of new fishes. Every time we are amazed at his persistence, endurance and single-mindedness as he overcomes a myriad of obstacles before returning with a few pre-

cious specimens that are then carefully pampered and multiplied to make them available to the aquarium world. This first presentation was of his trip to find the "true *Melanotaenia misoolensis*" and his exploration of both major river systems on the island. We shared his difficulties trying to arrange transport in Irian Jaya and his fascination with and love of the natural environment.

After the break, Heiko brought out the next show – the "main course". His adventures collecting his "fish of the millennium", a new *Glossolepis* species that he feels will surpass the popularity of such "gems" as *M. boesmani* (the fish of the decade) and *M. praecox* (the fish of the century). This spectacular large rainbowfish, the "Zigzag Rainbowfish" combines the beauty of *G. multisquamatus* with a colour pattern reminiscent of *M. rubrostriata* but with more intense colour. This amazing fish was collected from Lake Kali Biru not too far from Sentani. This is apparently one of a series of floodplain lakes in the region. Heiko collected a few specimens, this time he included a female for the first time. Apparently he had only been able to collect males on his previous visit and had tried in vain to breed from specimens with short and long first dorsal fins. We also were treated to an array of beautiful habitats and other fishes and progress reports on the breeding successes so far.

That Saturday evening the Convention Dinner was held in the dining room of the Motel and featured superb local cuisine - I enjoyed my Calamari entrée and Boarfish main. All too soon we were hurrying off to the Annual Convention Auction held in the conference room and over 250 lots were expertly disposed of by Auctioneers Andy Wattam and Glenn Briggs and their helpers. Many rare and beautiful fishes, plants, live food cultures and equipment went under the "hammer" in a surprisingly short time. From memory top price for fish went to a bag of four *Pseudomugil connieae*. Even I bought a couple of bags of fish to bring back. After a

long and eventful day, as well as few night-caps, sleep was ever so good.

Sunday morning started well with Andrew Bock opening the program with a great idea that I would like to see used at future conventions – he proceeded to re-run the opening slide show that introduced us to South Australia but this time also telling us about the images – in other words putting names to his "South Australian Pictorial". I loved it!

Next came Rodney Wubben who was originally booked as a duo with Barry Crockford, and he competently advised us on the origins, formation, aims and progress of the "Specialist Rainbowfish Species Group" over the past 2 years. Rod was able to show how they scratched around virtually all of Australia to get initial broodstock of many species and have been able to mostly establish species tanks of most in more than one location. It has been a good effort overall and it is to be hoped that it will result in more species being available to enthusiasts in the future. A lively question time followed.

This was followed by Dr Stephen McLeod from ESL's (Earth Sanctuaries Ltd) famous Warrawong Sanctuary. His address included information on their unique Platypus habitat and their continuing efforts to save threatened wildlife using eco-tourism to fund conservation. He mentioned almost in passing that they are also maintaining a conservation population of Pigmy Perch and made us more aware of the difficulties of displaying aquatic creatures in their habitat. His talk concluded with an interesting discussion on the various ways of valuing wildlife based on rarity, listing and other features such as "visitor appeal".

After morning tea, the intensity stepped up a notch. The first presentation was a comprehensive overview by Darren Niejakle of the Mound Springs systems associated with the Great Artesian Basin and their various assemblages of plants and animals. I am indebted to Darren for a vastly increased

understanding of why we have to conserve every drop we can of this precious water that takes a couple of million years to travel from its entry point in Northern Queensland to exit in South Australia. It also seems so outstandingly simple when he says that water pressure is due to elevation. The large number of endemic species of plants and animals (vertebrates and invertebrates) makes the conservation of these Spring Wetlands a high priority. Sadly, already, over 50% of springs in Queensland and NSW are extinct. Hopefully the capping program to close open bores and stock control programmes will help in the longer term. His talk was well presented and well illustrated.

Bryan Pierce, one of Australia's most respected Fisheries Scientists, was next to the podium and his listed task was to tell us about the Flinders Range Purple Spotted

The Perfect Fish Tank *from David Skop*



Gudgeon in one hour (including the three quarters of an hour presentation he was unable to deliver yesterday). Fortunately he didn't. What we got was a refreshing hard-hitting personal perspective on most of the problems facing freshwater fishes especially - both nationally and globally. We saw a little of the "soul", the love of fish and fishing that is still there in full measure, handed down through the generations interspersed with some of the practicalities and the science involved in his attempts to understand why *Mogurnda adspersa* became extinct in a significant part of its habitat and also in his efforts to re-establish the species. The major message that still needs to get through is that habitat not harvest needs addressing. He also gave ANGFA some future directions to consider.

The lunch break for me included a dash up to the trade room to get the latest issues of *"Aqua-geographia"* and *"Aqua"* as well the beautiful new Rainbowfish poster from Heiko's sales table. However it didn't quite prepare me for the next presentation. Professor Michael Tyler is without doubt Australia's foremost "frogologist" and he was listed to talk on "Amphibian Interaction with Fish", a subject he immediately dismissed since fish eat frogs and therefore are not worth talking about anyway.

He then went on to amaze and entertain us with his enthusiastic and comprehensive involvement with "frogs as the hub of his universe". They are being used as environmental indicators. They are supplying experimental compounds from their secretions that show promise as glues in orthopaedic surgery, as therapeutic compounds in medicine and even as mosquito repellents. It was an address not to be missed.

Next came Steve Clark's second presentation on "Organic Aquaculture". He showed us details of the integrated biosystem project featuring organic aquaculture that he was involved with in the UK with innovative components such as vertical flow reed beds and watercress plant filters for pond filters in

the native fish breeding facility. The importance of using the low tech and corresponding low cost (in money and resources) alternatives was illustrated as well as the implications for developing nations with huge populations. Many of the principles are applicable to our smaller scale backyard fish breeding efforts.

The final presentation of the convention was of course Heiko's – the third course, the "dessert". But of course this was no "trifle" – we travelled with him to central Asia, to fish markets, to fish enthusiasts, to see how people there keep their fish, and the equipment they use. It was fascinating. There was one incredible aquatic plant grower who grew his swordplants in plastic vodka cups and used the cash from their sale to finance his major hobby – painting fantastic artworks, including surreal discus. There were plants growing everywhere – as Heiko said, "Even Lance Smith would have been impressed!" After that he took us to the huge aquarium display that is held every 10 years in Belgium - what a massive undertaking! The local brewery loaned the aquarium clubs approximately a quarter of a million cases of beer to use as stands to support the huge plywood tanks with glass fronts. The tanks varied in length, and each was decorated either as biotopes or in styles to suit the taste of the exhibitor. The biotope tanks set up by Heiko to represent the various habitats he has collected from were magnificent. Finally he spoke to us from the heart about his sadness at the loss of aquatic habitat around the world, the need for conservation and the future of the aquarium hobby. Thank you once again Heiko!

All too soon it was all over again – for another year. There was still the post-convention tours to SARDI and Warrawong to come for those fortunate enough to be able to stay on for a day or two and all the delights of South Australia if able to stay even longer. For many, this was the best one yet! Make sure you get to Port Macquarie in October 2002, it will be a beauty – *possibly the best one ever!!*

