

Impressions from the ANGFA 2005 National Convention

Bruce Hansen (photographs by Franz-Peter Müllenholz)

The 2005 Convention was hosted by ANGFA Victoria Regional Group and what a top effort! Any concerns that native fish-keepers and others interested in our freshwater aquatic habitats might be losing interest were soon dispelled as delegates began arriving once more at Cilom's next to the Tullamarine Airport in Melbourne for the weekend of April 22-24. The venue has been the scene of two previous successful ANGFA conventions and once more outdid themselves to cater to our comfort and needs.

Members gathered for a short "official" session on Friday evening instead of the traditional AGM at previous conventions (which no longer coincide with convention dates). This initially began with abbreviated informal regional reports, mostly from unofficial co-opted representatives unprepared for the glory thrust upon them. This was followed by a presentation by Mark Abell on the ANGFA Aquatic Survey Database which will allow members to download the information they have gathered in the field onto a lasting record for the future. There is now also a standard survey recording form on the web-page that can be downloaded. This was followed by a short discussion on publications including news that Matthew Stanton is making ANGFA News "searchable" via Google and has developed an "ANGFA News Directory". The final item was a request from Steve Brooks for ANGFA to consider being involved in an ongoing long-term captive breeding program for endangered artesian spring fishes such as the desert gobies and red-finned blue-eyes.

The serious business being completed, ANGFA Victoria shouted members to a "Happy (Half) Hour" of drinks at the bar to begin the socialising for the weekend and allow the "stayers" to be identified nice and early in the weekend. As usual it was a great opportunity to renew acquaintances with many members one only gets to see at the conventions as well as make new "fish-friends". Tony Tucceri and his tireless talented team got their first chance to relax, even if sleep was in short supply.

Saturday morning saw registrations in full swing from 8 am and attendants got their chance to collect their sample bags and have a good look at the 6 display tanks across the back of the room. These were a tribute to the host club and featured a range of display species ranging from local galaxids and pigmy perch, a spectacular specimen of Yarra Crayfish, a nice long-finned eel, and a selection of Australian and PNG rainbows and blue-eyes performing well in well set-up tanks. One of these (a classy 4 footer with stand, and the works) was the prize for an on-going raffle to be finally drawn later in the year. The trade table was extensive and included most of the aquatic plants supplied for the convention rather than have them auctioned off with the fish. The convention shirts featured the local pigmy perch embroidered motif and were available in a choice of 3; polo, T or chambray. Also on sale were Rainbowfish CDs and the new CD "From the Archives of ANGFA". On a separate table the raffle prizes for the weekend were on display.

The morning programme kicked off with the stunning ANGFA opening audio-visual and a special treat from professional corporate comic – Graeme Bowman (whose previous offering a few conferences ago was so stunning) and his version of the "Attenborough" approach to bureaucratic bungling in aquatic conservation. He had us in stitches most of the time, and nodding our heads the rest of the time. While we recovered, our first session chairman Neil Armstrong introduced ANGFA National President, Dave Wilson who welcomed attendees to the convention.

First speaker was Mike Hammer who is completing his PhD at the University of Adelaide. Mike's presentation, "Get out there and find stuff!" was informative, enthusiastic and expertly underlined with excellent powerpoint visuals. We were advised on range extensions, 3 new species recorded (one may already be extinct), a possible new



grunter in the Cooper system, and sadly five extinctions, and of course a raft of introduced alien and native species in South Australian waters. Finally he showed that new genetic work was helping to define possible species complexes in some of our common native species such as the smelt so even species found at our own back doors may be the “new fish frontier”.

After the first of our excellent morning and afternoon teas, Ron Bowman introduced our next presenter: F r a n z - P e t e r Müllenholz, a member of the IRG in Europe, and a much-loved veteran of numerous trips to Australia and



other parts of the world with his wife Ulli and various other “fishy” friends. FP loves his cameras (Nikon, not Canon) and produces superb audio-visual collations after these expeditions to entertain his friends. This time we were treated to 3 shows – all a tribute to his skills, artistry and love of man and nature. The first (“ANGFA Horror Picture Show”) had us laughing at many faces familiar to ANGFA in some less-than-flattering poses. The next was an “Expedition to Namibia/Botswana” for ten days in 2004 and finally “The Days After” concerned trips they made after the 2003 convention to Brisbane, Tin can Bay, Cairns, Alice Springs and back to SE Queensland. He showed us rarely-seen parts of the world (both near and far) as well as a spectacular array of wildlife including fishes. His good friend Gunther Schmida helped out at times with translation but sometimes it was merely an echo as FPs grasp of the local language (especially swearing) rarely fails to get the message across.

Fortunately Gunther Schmida was able to get his voice “warmed up” ready for his own presentation which followed; “Uncle Gunther’s Aussie Fish Show”. Gunther has been in Australia for 40 years and loves photographing our wildlife and especially our fish, frogs and reptiles. It was vintage Gunther as



superb image after superb image flashed up accompanied by snippets of information from his encyclopaedic knowledge on our native fishes. Nobody takes better fish photos than Gunther who has his own unique techniques and tries always to make each shot as true to natural habitat as possible. He showed us an A-Z of species and included an array of colour forms and local varieties. He also included a new series of shots of the Queensland lungfish from egg through to 120 days old. All too soon his time-slot was finished and we were left wanting more.

After a very pleasant lunch and a chin wag with old and new friends the next session was chaired by Glenn Briggs and his first duty was to introduce our next speakers, husband and wife team, native aquarium fish breeders, Steve and Aimee Brooks from



Queensland. Because he knows what’s best for him in the long run, Steve played the strong, silent “straight man” role despite his extensive qualifications and experience while his “better half” entertained us with “Kiss the Fish”. Fortunately it was not illustrated with osculatory performances on their “finny friends” but was an informative and enjoyable overview of the simple but effective methods they use to keep, breed and raise for sale a range of some 90 lines of rainbows, blue-eyes, gobies, grunters, etc.

Our next presenter was Jim Rabba who loves to travel especially to places with interesting wildlife and has kept a wide

range of native and exotic fishes, amphibians, reptiles and birds. Jim's slideshow took us to the Americas and Borneo and we were treated to an array of habitats, landscapes and locations and their equally fascinating inhabitants. Included were numerous underwater shots of fishes and aquatic gardens taken while swimming in the crystal clear waters of mineral springs. He also visited fish markets wherever he went and what better place to see the more edible denizens of the waters our aquarium fish come from.



Again the time passed quickly and then we shared a superb afternoon tea before we returned for Neil Armstrong to introduce the ultimate way to finish the presentations for the day, "the freshwater Jacques Cousteau"; Heiko Bleher.



It was vintage Heiko, who even dressed up for us in leather jacket and hat, complete with croc teeth in the band. His "Voyage and Collecting on the Southern Mollucas with New Discoveries in 2004" was



classic Heiko entertainment. First he made a slight "detour" to South America to show us some colourful local customs associated with aquarium fish, then onto previously unexplored tributaries of the Xingu River, with new fish species, plants growing on the rocks of cataracts, hordes of flying ants and so on, all accompanied by Heiko's observations as we raced through hundreds of images. Then we moved to the elevation of Lake Titicaca in Bolivia, the highest navigable lake in the world. Here we met the local people and delved into aquatic mysteries such as the reported local

seahorse as well as wonderful fishes, frogs and fruits of the forests. Then in a blink of an eyelid we were off to Ecuador for another smorgasbord. Finally it was across the Pacific to a sea voyage in the Arafura Sea visiting several islands of the Southern Moluccas lying between East Timor and Irian Jaya. Some of these groups of islands such as the Aru Archipelago consisted literally of hundreds of islands and islets. Heiko explored where he could and shared local customs and culture with us as well as the wildlife, including the aquatic ecosystems, and landforms. You have to hand it to Heiko; he had us in the palm of his hand once again with image after image of these wonderful tropical places and inhabitants.

Instead of an exclusive special ANGFA convention dinner on the Saturday evening, we simply enjoyed the excellent normal buffet offered in the dining room at Cilom's before moving on with anticipation to the traditional auction in the convention room. Our expert auctioneers Glenn Briggs and Andy Wattam started off at a great rate and maintained it through a mountain of offerings of desirable species. Superb organisation and support from the team of "runners" and "recorders" helped considerably as did the superb colour slides of the fish being auctioned from Neil Armstrong. There were some bargains as well as some "duels" and for many the performance of Andy Wattam as he auctioned empty styrofoam boxes, spare children and anything else within reach raised the humble fish auction to the level of an art form, especially when he recounted the odd collecting anecdote. By comparison with previous years the auction was completed in record time and allowed everyone to socialise over a convivial drink until the "wee small hours".

Sunday morning once again was warm and sunny to the surprise of all and after a repeat of the opening sequence chairman Damian Walsh introduced our first speaker, Kwai Chang-Kum and his presentation "Frogs and Microchips". Kwai, a keeper at the Werribee Open Range Zoo, told us of a research project he is involved



in at the zoo to try and help the survival of the critically endangered growling grass frog *Litoria raniformis* (once the most common frog in western Melbourne). The population of these frogs at the zoo has been surveyed for seven years, and last year the microchip technology was added to the project. Kwai discussed a range of factors considered significant in the decline including habitat loss, infection by the chytrid fungus, thinning of the ozone layer and others such as damage by *Gambusia* to the tadpoles.

Phil Littlejohn was next to the podium with "A layman's encounters with the genus *Euastacus* of Victoria". Phil is an experienced professional at aquarium husbandry and is especially interested in freshwater crustacean.



This presentation included all the known Victorian species of these spiny crayfishes with information on their identification, distribution and habitat. Since Phil has been able to collect and photograph them all, we were treated to a rare and comprehensive range of habitat photos as well as the spectacular full-body and portrait shots of the animals themselves. He also shared with us some tips from his vast personal experience of keeping and caring for these fascinating creatures.

After another sumptuous morning tea Heidi Rubin introduced our special guest speaker, John Seygjayat from The National Aquarium in Baltimore USA. John had already endeared himself to most of us by spreading himself around and meeting many attendees during the convention. His enthusiasm for all things Australian and his Trinidadian accent soon had us eating out of his hand and talking cricket as well as wildlife and that was even before his presentation. His spectacular contribution to the programme allowed us a preview of the breathtaking new exhibit that is soon to open at the aquarium. This is a recreation of a tropical river gorge in northern Australia complete with vegetation (including full-sized trees) and a representative selection of freshwater fish, reptiles, birds, mammals and invertebrates. The budget has grown from 10 to 70 million dollars over the four years

of the project and John described many of the problems that had to be overcome along the way. When open the display will feature seven different fish habitats including a 65 feet (20 metre) tall waterfall and an array of carefully selected combinations of animals. John really surprised us (not just a little) when he announced that the freshwater crocodiles on display would be trained and would answer to their names! Many of the species in the exhibit will require ongoing breeding programmes to maintain their display. John also advised that the aquarium will be involving itself in conservation-oriented projects in Australia as part of an ongoing relationship between his institution and this country. If you are going to the USA this is one stop you will have to consider.

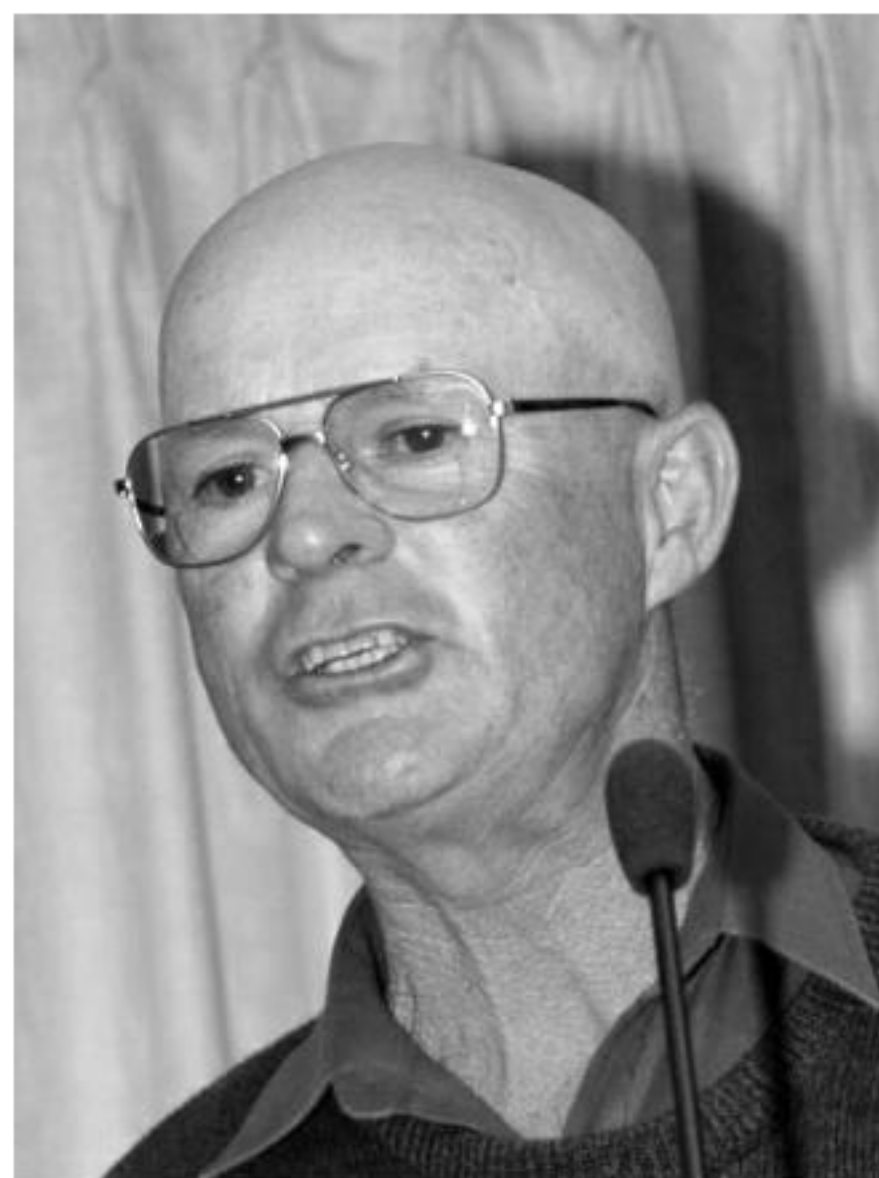
After John answered numerous questions ANGFA took time out to pay tribute to 3 special long term supporters. The first, Franz-Peter Müllenholz, from Cologne has regularly entertained us with beautifully crafted presentations of the fish-related travels he has made with his wife Ulli and has made friends all across Australia. He was presented with a beautiful framed Neil Armstrong print of *Mugilogobius wilsoni* by ex-president Bruce Hansen. He then called up Heiko Bleher, international traveller, collector, raconteur, entertainer extraordinaire and long-time friend of ANGFA and presented him with a framed Neil Armstrong print of *Scleropages jardini*. Finally Ron Bowman paid tribute to ANGFA Patron Rick Datodi who has supported the



aquarium societies of Melbourne for over 30 years and ANGFA since its inception. Rick was presented with some impressive

silverware for the sideboard. Then it was time for another super lunch.

Ken Smales introduced our first presenter of the afternoon session, Mal Davidson who is the only commercial producer of "blackworms" in Australia. Mal was able to grab the attention of the audience with his clear and enthusiastic presentation style and it is easy to see how he has been able to develop his business from nothing to 12 tons of aquatic worms per year. It was significant that the principal species he produces is the blackworm (*Lumbriculus variegatus*), an aquatic "earthworm" not the classic Tubifex worm of aquarium literature that has developed such a worrying record of possible disease risk. Mal finished up by donating a large amount of his latest product; freeze-dried blackworms, which allowed us all to bring home a sample to try on our own fish.



Next Ken introduced Dr Paul Sinclair to tell us about "The Murray River" and what is happening to it. Paul loves the river that he grew up on and it shone through as he told us how it is with the Murray, and a little about how it was. He told us about the "Murray Cod Skin Map Story", how the flood plain is the "supermarket" for the river system, about the irrigation problems and how in 2004-5 around 75% of the Red River Gums are dead or dying. Then he looked at some of the



things suggested by "The Healthy Rivers Campaign" that we can do to turn things around so in the future children can again enjoy growing up on the river while it still supports sustainable communities.

After another spectacular afternoon tea, Andy Wattam introduced our final session of the convention; Heiko and "Collecting fishes in Kyrgyzstan at altitudes up to 4000m!" This time Heiko, in more conventional garb, transported us over to Central Asia to Kyrgyzstan a part of the former USSR, roughly between China and Kazakhstan. Heiko and Natasha drove the Heikomobile (a specially adapted Unimog) all through this fascinating and rarely travelled country all the while appreciating the landscapes, customs and lifestyles and searching all the waterways for fishes. He always seems to get invited to dinner everywhere he goes! However this was another special from Heiko, a place nobody else in the audience was ever likely to visit, with lovely happy people in their traditional special hats, and living in their traditional special tent houses (Yurts?). The aquatic wildlife was a relatively small part of the visit and of course there was the usual touch of drama when the Heikomobile tipped over on to one side in the middle of nowhere.

All too soon it was all over once again and it was time for "thank-yous", see you in Darwin for the next convention in June 2007, group photos and pats on the back all round for a job extremely well done. All I can say is that I have been to them all and this was probably the "best one yet"! If you haven't been to one yet, then start saving up for Darwin; it will be a beauty. That evening some stayed for dinner, others were off home while still others were resting up for the post-convention tour of the Melbourne Zoo the next morning.



Australia New Guinea Fishes Association
*Promoting the conservation, study, keeping and propagation
of the native fish species of Australia and New Guinea*