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The ANGFA Conference Darwin June 8-10 2007

by John Cousins

As is often the case, if a project starts off with a bit of a hiccup, it turns out brilliantly. That was the way it worked out for the ANGFA Conference in June in Darwin, there were problems with the accommodation which were sorted by a move to the Crowne Plaza, and from then on, from a participant's point of view, it was a great event. There were about 70 attendees with a lot of the "grey nomads" heading north to make a real trip of it. Not just the oldies either, some of the younger ANGFA Vic members took the opportunity to test the rivers and water holes around the north of Australia. Some of the stories of fish seen made us really envious, whereas some of the reptile encounters would have been an acquired taste.

But back to the Conference, there were some registration, formalities and conviviality on the Friday night, then the lead speaker on Saturday, **Dr Helen Larsen**, gave us an overview of the Fishes of the Northern Territory. She specializes in gudgeons and gobies, those (usually) little fish that scoot around the lower parts of the water column

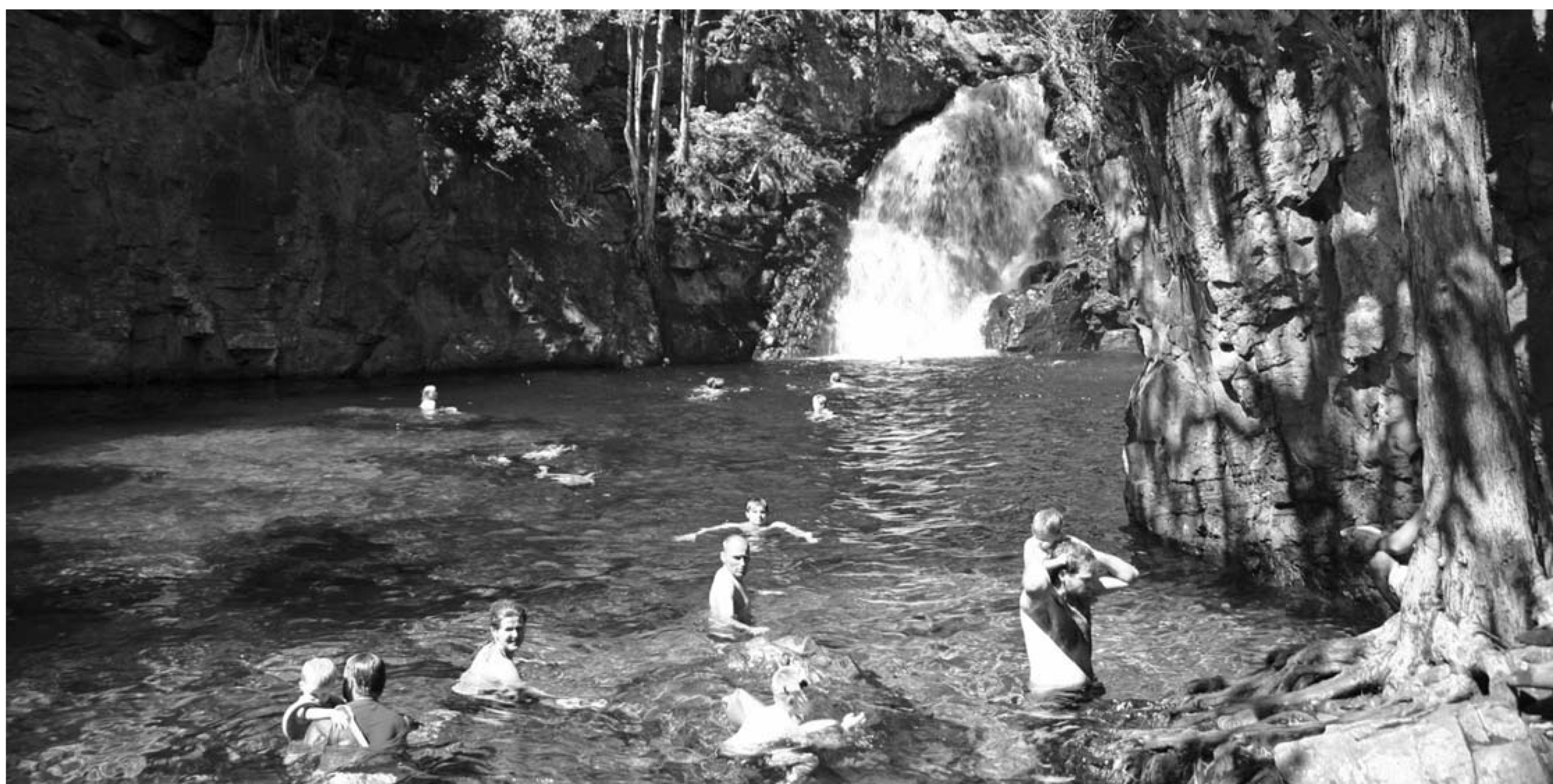
with generally muted colours and disproportionately huge mouths. As was the case with all speakers at the Conference, the slides, videos etc were captivating and the stories interesting and amusing.

One of our oldest members, the venerable **Ron Bowman** has recently published a series of documents relating to the early years of research into Australian fresh-water fish biology in general and the rainbow fish hobby in particular. One of the themes of the conference was conservation and sustainable development and the next three speakers looked at aspects of that. **Brad Pusey** and **Mark Kennard** from the Australian Rivers Institute of Griffith University; **Lizzie Sullivan**, an indigenous woman from the Wagiman group, spoke of the Daly River Fish and River Flows Project. **Blair Grace** looked at how sustainable the NT fishing industry is; **Chris Humphrey** used the study of fish communities to measure the impact of mining in Kakadu; **Keith Martin** did a similar thing for the Batu Hijau mine in Simbawa Indonesia.

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ANGFA Vic Members and families at Berry Springs Northern Territory – "A distraction on the way to the Convention"

Photograph by Justin Mulquiney



The ANGFA Conference Darwin

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One of the few speakers to always get a billing at an ANGFA Conference is **Heiko Bleher**. He is one of those rare individuals you could call a modern day explorer. He manages to get himself into the most remote parts of the globe where there are freshwater fish to be found. Some of the stories he has to tell of how he gets around places where there aren't airports, roads or even tracks have you gasping and the one where he was trapped inside a mud hut in Ethiopia with a woman coming at him with a machete made me glad I just look for fish in my local Aquarium! However this time he was looking for fish closer to home, in the Aru Islands and Kalimantan of eastern Indonesia. Again he had a strong message about the destruction of habitat and a consequent loss of fish species.

Glenn Schipp looked at the issue of the use of fishmeal in fishfoods; **Graeme Sawyer** discussed the impact of the cane toad in its march across NT to WA. (At this stage it seems the impact of the toad is more heavily felt on reptile species than fish. Vale the frilled neck lizard).

Mike Hammer found new gobies on Adelaide's doorstep and **Binh Thai** gave us some insight into the genetics of the carp (if the genetics of a fish that's been known for so long as the carp is still being debated, what hope have newer discoveries got of being definitely classified?). The last speaker for Saturday was **David Lawson** who now works for TRAFFIC and he was looking at issues of sustainable and non-sustainable use of wildlife resources. His story of what is still available via the illegal trade in wildlife in Asia was sickening.

Saturday night dinner was at a local outdoor restaurant, the highlight being **Eddie Tootell** doing a belly dance. Good job the lighting was dim.

Sunday morning **Dion Wedd** from the Territory Wildlife Park talked about the new ideas of zoos in education and conservation. He brought with him the original albino carpet python from the NT and then got the ANGFA Treasurer, **Tony Tucceri** up to handle it. When you understand that Tony was (still is) petrified of snakes and (as Treasurer) he was worried about dropping such a valuable animal, you will realize the level of interest in that little activity. I don't think we've ever seen anyone so scared remain conscious!! Just to make him feel good, our national secretary **Heidi Rubin** then had the snake draped around her and she took it around the audience with great aplomb.

On a more serious note, **John Humphrey** told us about diseases that have been introduced and spread by fresh water fish, sometimes hobby fish. You wouldn't think there'd be a lot to talk about with fishes of Central Australia but **Angus Duguid** did a survey there and shared it with us. It wasn't all fish and conservation, **Shaun Winterton** took us into The Secret Life of Aquatic Plants and his website (Google: Aquarium & Pond Plants of the World) is well worth a look. **Bruce Sambell** had a very humorous look at the growth of his fish-breeding business in Queensland: a

hobby gone mad and **Andrew Lo's** talk: A fish lover's search for ecological sustainability was a very engaging collection of art, poetry, history and environmental action.

At the previous ANGFA Conference in Melbourne in 2005 **John Seyjagat** showed us the plans for a unique display of Northern Territory fauna at the National Aquarium in Baltimore (US). This year he showed us the finished product, complete with the very positive public reaction. The display looks like a NT river gorge and even the 'rock strata' look and feel authentic. There were crocodiles, barramundi, rainbows, reptiles and birds including a great shot of a flock of the black-headed Gouldian finch drinking.

Sunday night's dinner was a barbeque at the Territory Wildlife Park, complete with a look at a really wonderful freshwater and marine aquarium. Here the plant growth was spectacular below, through and above the water. The size of some of the *Melanotaenia trifasciata* had to be seen to be believed. It's rare to see the freshwater stuff so well presented and such a wide range of animals present.

Worried about what your spouse would do over the two days of the conference? There was a fish widow's tour of the sights of Darwin too. I had a friend ask me 'How can you fill an ANGFA Conference for 2 days?' I guess we could have gone on a lot longer and of course the informal contacts of old and new friends always gives us new stimulus and ideas. On the Monday most of us headed out to the recently retired ANGFA President's plant farm to have a look at aquarium plant farming NT style.

The next ANGFA Conference will be in Sydney in 2009. I'm starting to save the pennies already.

See you there. Cuz

PS congratulations to the organizing committee.

*Below: "Two Plant experts and an imposter" at Aquagreen Plant Farm (Dave Wilson's) on the Monday
— photograph by Jan Cousins*

