



Torres Strait new frontier for exotic fish invasion, Cape York under threat

The Torres Strait has become the new frontier against invasive exotic fish into Australia, with the threat coming from two fronts – PNG and Indonesia.

One, the Climbing Perch, already has a foothold in Australia, albeit a small and controlled presence in the Saibai Island reservoir.

The Climbing Perch and the Common Snakehead are from South-East Asia, but found their way into West Papua through the occupation of the country by Indonesia, and subsequently have made their way along the southern PNG coastline, either by boat or their own means.

But there are multiple other exotic fish located in PNG which pose a real and substantial threat to Australian waters, including the Walking Catfish, Pacu (from the same family as piranha), several additional species of Tilapia, Carp, and various Gourami varieties.

Dr Damien Burrows, Director of the Australian Centre for Tropical Freshwater Research, told the *Western Cape Bulletin* that Cape York is free of any exotic fish.

“But it’s under threat as these exotic fish might cross the Torres Strait into Cape York and, once they reach Cape York, they will really spread throughout the region.”

He warns education is the major resource in preventing further infestation.

“The Climbing Perch is a fresh water fish so they can’t cross the Torres Strait by themselves, so the only way to move is if people accidentally or intentionally move them.

“The only way to stop them is by education and for people not bring them.”

Dr Burrows warned the Climbing Perch and Snakefish are “very good” at moving on the land, unlike most other fish and can move between different rivers over land.

– “They have accessory breathing organs, so that they can breath not only from water but

also from the air through this organ.”

The original Climbing Perch on Saibai was found on the tarmac at Saibai Airport, making its way across the tarmac.

“That’s when it first came to our attention.

“There’s just small population on Saibai which has little fresh water, and they’re essentially a freshwater fish.

“They’re not causing any harm as such, but I wouldn’t like to see them on Thursday Island or Horn Island or any of the islands which have freshwater streams.” Additionally, the Climbing Perch also burrow down into the sand when river streams dry up and have the capacity to remain there for up to six months.

Dr Burrows said: “They’re one of the few fish which can do that, but, if they invade Australia, they’ll be quite adept at adjusting to the conditions.”

The threat from PNG is not entirely an act of nature, as the United Nations, in its wisdom, decided to introduce some species into the rivers of PNG as a protein source for the people.

“However, they included carp, tilapia and rainbow trout to name a few which now threaten Australia.

“PNG and Indonesia, as dual sources of possible infestation, remain areas of concern, and they could threaten Cape York which is one of the few regions free of pest fishes.

“Tilapia have been found in Cooktown but no where else in Cape York.”

Dr Burrows said Mosquito Fish, regarded as one of the world’s worst exotic fish, is already on Thursday Island, an exotic one of the world’s worst pest fishes.

The mosquitofish is the most widely distributed exotic fish species in Australia.

A report last year into the exotic fish prob-



lem in the Torres Strait found an established mosquitofish (gambusia) population in both reservoirs on Thursday Island, the first record of this exotic species from Torres Strait.

“They were spread around during World War 2 to help control malaria.”

The report said permanent freshwater habitats on most Torres Strait islands are rare or absent, generally limiting the ability of introduced fishes to establish there.

“However, hardy species, such as Climbing Perch, may survive and there is sufficient human traffic between the various islands and the mainland of Cape York, where freshwater habitats are abundant, that this poses a high risk pathway for entry of serious pest fish.

“Other species of concern, such as Snakehead and Walking Catfish are known from wetlands of the southern PNG coastline directly opposite Saibai Island and nearby Boigu Island.

“New distribution records for several native fish species were also confirmed during these surveys, though given the general lack of reliable freshwater of these islands, some of these, such as rainbowfish, may be translocations as well.”

The report recommended more thorough fish surveys of Torres Strait islands, especially Boigu, Horn and Thursday Islands.

It also recommended public education programs be instigated to focus on preventing the movement of exotic fishes through the Torres

Strait and into Cape York. Consideration could also be given to eradicating Climbing Perch from Saibai Island.



Climbing Perch



Snakehead Fish



Vampire Fish