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Ron Dempster Award Nomination for Les Kowitz - 2008

Les Kowitz is one of our own, he's a member of the Kingaroy Sportfishing Club and has been since it was called the Broadway Sportfishing Club – and that was a long time ago.

Les has been to our annual conference here at Yeppoon many times so a lot of you will know him as a quiet bloke with a passion for freshwater fishing. Les isn't the kind of person to blow his own trumpet, so I'm going to have to tell you that for many years he's been one of the real movers and shakers in Qld's freshwater fishing scene.

Quiet and modest he may be, but the facts are that we wouldn't have the freshwater fishery we have in Queensland today if it wasn't for Les Kowitz. His contribution has been and continues to be enormous - and multi faceted - so please bear with me while I tell you about some of the things he's been involved in, and why he's a deserving recipient of the Ron Dempster Award today.

Freshwater fishing politics first heard of Les in the early nineteen eighties when he was one of the members of the Broadway Sportfishing Club involved in a lobby against the commercial netting of bass in the Noosa River.

By the time the Noosa bass rescue package came into effect in 1985, the ill fated Nile perch project was on its last legs and people were thinking about stocking the fishy deserts our dams were in those days with native species instead of Nile perch.

Les and a few other locals around Kingaroy and Nanango, got together to see what they could do with the nearby Bjelke Petersen Dam – which was still under

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construction at the time. This led to the formation of the BP Dam Fish Management Committee and Les has been on their executive, serving as president or secretary ever since.

Just to rewind for a moment, by the time the original three million dollars over three years Recreational Fishing Enhancement Program was announced in 1986 a few people from within ANSA had seen the need for a statewide "umbrella" freshwater fishing organisation to deal with an ever increasing number of issues associated with all the fish stocking that was getting under way at the time. So the original Anglers Fish Stocking Association of Qld (AFSAQ) was born. Les was one of the earliest supporters of the old AFSAQ and the BP Dam Fish Management Committee was one of the first to join up.

The original version of AFSAQ became FFSAQ, the Freshwater Fishing & Stocking Association of Qld, which, as some of you will know, foundered in 1993. This occurred mainly because people involved in fish stocking all over the state in those early days were quite busy enough doing their own thing and I guess it's not too unkind to say they were pretty naïve about what happens when bureaucratic decisions are made without input from the grass roots.

With the demise of the original FFSAQ in May 1993, ANSA Qld picked up the freshwater fishing ball and for a few years there in the nineties, we had to run with it as best we could. We created a position for a Freshwater Officer on our State Executive, and our QSRFC Delegates became the voice of freshwater fishing at a statewide level through the body we know as Sunfish today.

By 1995 at a DPI freshwater workshop in Gympie, the fish stockers had finally realised they needed a statewide umbrella organisation to represent them and FFSAQ was reformed. It was then that Les took on the always demanding job of President. He remained FFSAQ's president until 2005 when he stepped sideways into the role of Executive Officer he holds today. It's hardly a less demanding job.

While FFSAQ was getting back on its feet, Les also took over from Lloyd Willmann as ANSA Qld's Freshwater Officer and he stayed on the State Executive until responsibility for freshwater fishing could be passed over to the new FFSAQ.

Over the years Les has put in unbelievable amounts of time running FFSAQ. He's worn out two Hiluxes driving all over the state and running backwards and forwards from Nanango to Brisbane. That's when he's not flying off to Canberra or Darwin or Karumba or somewhere. Les often attends several meetings A WEEK on FFSAQ business.

Any time there's a boat show or fishing workshop Les is there for days on end on the FFSAQ stand spreading the word. In terms of time alone, what this man gives to freshwater fishing in Qld is just amazing.

One of the most important jobs Les has done though is as a fish stocking and recreational fishing spokesman on Freshwater MAC. As any of the people here who have served on any of the various MAC's will tell you, most of them have enjoyed minimal success at best, but the exception has always been Freshwater MAC, which functions well.

In FFSAQ and at Freshwater MAC our quiet bloke from Nanango matured into a knowledgeable, astute, and far sighted spokesman for freshwater fishing in Queensland.

Which is not to mention determined. When nomination for this award came up this year and we were researching a suitable recipient, we spoke to two previous Dempster awardees, John Mondora and Warren Steptoe, who sit on Freshwater MAC with Les. They both remarked that when he believes in something Les is known for never conceding a point lightly.

That he sticks to his guns and knows what he's talking about has brought Les universal respect amongst the departmental bureaucrats and fisheries managers he deals with. Mate we need more people like you...

Listing people's achievements is fraught with danger of missing something so in mentioning some of the things Les deserves credit for I hope I don't miss anything important.

When Freshwater MAC began there never had been a Freshwater Fishery Management Plan in Qld. You'd better believe Les had plenty of input into the first one, and into several subsequent reviews since. This has been another a huge job in itself.

Neither when the MAC began had there ever been any policy regarding the translocation of fish. It took several years and the odd "firmly presented argument" from Les before a Translocation Policy was acceptable. Today Les still sits on a MAC sub-committee overseeing applications to translocate fish in Qld - and translocation remains a particularly difficult and controversial topic to deal with.

Fish stocking in the early days was funded by government grants and a lot of very hard work by fish stocking groups raffling chooks and running fishing competitions. The need for a user pays system became obvious quite early on and Les was one of the most vocal advocates and hardest workers for a lobby that took over a decade to get our SIP (Stocked Impoundment Permit) in place.

SIP is clearly one of the biggest wins we've ever had in fishing politics and while everyone from the Fisheries Minister to the Department itself claims credit for it now, the facts are that SIP happened thanks to a huge effort over a very long time by a few people. Always prominent amongst them was Les Kowitz. Another Freshwater MAC sub-committee administers the \$600,000.00 odd SIP raises each year, and Les sits on that too.

Les' interest and influence in freshwater fishing extends well beyond fish stocking. As one of FFSAQ's leaders he's been a guiding light to their involvement in conservation issues; some of them critical issues if freshwater fishing in future is to resemble anything like what we enjoy today.

Water allocation has been and still is a massive problem Queensland and for that matter Australia is yet to come to terms with. Thanks to our continuing drought, who gets what water is delicate and difficult to deal with to put it mildly. History records that Les has gone in to bat for fish in water storages managers have decided to drain to keep the irrigators off their back several times already.

Mary River and Murray Cod are endangered species and Les is deeply involved in their conservation. Jungle perch are another species in trouble that Les is working on as are tandan catfish and silver perch.

The list goes on while our bureaucrats busily develop strategies, formulate plans, and seek funding, usually unsuccessfully, and while we're presenting Les with an award that's very close to our hearts in recognition of his contribution to recreational fishing in Qld today, we probably should also give him a medal for sitting through so many meetings and conferences. Now that's a real guts effort!!!

On second thoughts maybe we should just buy him another dark and stormy at the BBQ tonight to dull the pain.

But Les we know you're far from just a committee sitter and I have it on good authority that a few weeks ago you were down on the Dumaresq (pronounced "Dewmerrick") River catching, tagging and taking genetic samples from the local Murray cod population.

We've seen your face on the cover of Modern Fishing too so you're apparently as

good at pulling a few fish out (and I'm told promptly putting them back again) as you are at stocking them in the first place; looking after our threatened species in the wild; and the all important habitat they depend on.

On the Ron Dempster Award here it says, "for exceptional contribution to the future of recreational fishing in Qld," and there's never been a more worthy recipient than Les Kowitz.

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