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2009 Hamar Midgley



THE POSSIBLE DREAM

Condensed from Vic McCristal's book "The Rivers and the Sea"

No story relevant to Australian rivers is adequate without reference to the pioneering labours of Hamar Midgley.

Although his work was directed at the river and dams of his native Queensland, what he did was representative of the needs of every State in Australia.

The rivers changed, and deteriorated sharply with erosion and siltation as a result of white settlement. The environment changed too, with heavy losses to fishermen, but Hamar was one staunch soul who would never throw up his hands in horror. Instead, he aimed at using the new environment to better advantage.

"There is more water in dams than in the original rivers", he would say, "so we must use the dams. Multiple usage is logical and profitable. Where we can't adapt suitable native fish species, we must evaluate imported varieties."

His clarity of vision attracted support from men of all stations – industrial leaders, politicians, fishermen, scientists. The goal – to have a functioning sport fishery in Queensland dams. It was an attractive goal and practical.....but knowing Hamar's dedication, it was also inevitable.

When I first met Hamar, his enthusiasm and energy were his most distinguished features. Almost instantly I found myself being driven to a nearby water supply dam into which he had been transferring bass for the Maroochy Shire Council.

"Just imagine that lot, McCristal, with fish in it. Real fish! Something that would fight like hell and let you know you're alive." I could indeed imagine it. "What about the bass you've been releasing?"

"They might take, maybe not. There's only one way to find out. Australia's overdue for research into native fish."

Agreeing with him, I fingered other problems. That's a lot of work and it means

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money – and if I know Queensland, where do you get money for fisheries research?

The reply was typical of the man I was to come to know. "Some where or another I'll have to do it myself".

To speak of changing the face of fishing was improbable enough, but what happened in the following years was incredible. Because he did it.

Single handed, and by Herculean labour coupled with a great deal of private sacrifice, he brought the issues of fish-barren dams to the notice of the public, to private enterprise and to State and Federal Governments. In the process, recognition came from fisheries' scientists both at home and overseas, many of whom utilised his encyclopaedic river knowledge and specimen collecting ability.

Within a year of our meeting, he had abandoned his private joinery business to sustain himself on the chancy proceeds of fish stocking contracts with various shire councils, govt departments and private enterprise.

I went with him on his historic first collecting trip to the Dawson in pursuit of saratoga, with which he later stocked Borumba. Later I journeyed with Hamar to both sides of the Gulf country; on collection trips to the Burdekin drainage; across the Upper Herbert to the Atherton Tablelands and down the coast. I have estimated that all those thousands of miles collecting with Midgely add up to less than one percent of effort on behalf of recreational fishermen.

Go figure it yourself. Enter a piscatorial dynamo like Midgely in a State plagued with de-natured, silting and polluted rivers – with a program for intelligent recreational use of proliferating dams. His efforts tapped a pressure head of latent need within the community. To his cause flocked fishermen, farmers, cattlemen, miners, labourers, executives. At their own expense, and using their own labour and materials, they built an irregular but effective network of experimental ponds and dams, and provided him with a base for research and experiment.

Where Hamar went – and he went everywhere rivers flowed – his disciples learnt the basics of fish handling, transfer, observation, and many of them recorded their physics of the rivers too.

A massive amount of data gathered on his files, on water heights, temperatures, pH factors, dissolved oxygen reading and growth rates.

They learned also about fishing. Hamar's skill with rod and line was beyond ordinary imagination, and in fact was the cornerstone of his collecting success

Recognition of his dedication and ability was inevitable. In 1968 he was awarded a fellowship with the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust to study Nile Perch, and so spent three months in Uganda working with their Fisheries Department and the East African Freshwater Fisheries Organisation.

Nile Perch *Lates niloticus* and Giant Perch, *Lates calcalifer* – better known as Barramundi are kissing cousins with one vital distinction. The Nile perch breeds freely in still water dams, whereas the local fish do not. The barramundi had substantially decreased in numbers in its native habitat at that time due to the multiple pressures on the river system, coupled with poor land management. Researching a species that could survive in the very dams that had contributed to retarded movements of the native perch was, in Hamar's opinion, vital.

Midgely's report to the Trust was published in full – a rare honour. History shows that the introduction of Nile Perch into Queensland dams was vetoed, however the research undertaken and the dedication of the man was widely recognised.

He continued to travel rivers and streams, documenting, studying and researching native freshwater fish and their habitats

In northern Australia there are dozens of rivers that most of us have never heard of. They contain huge volumes of fresh water, and what little we do know of them is due to Hamar and his wife Mary. The Midgelys were self-taught experts on fresh water and freshwater fish, and for many years they went to the remote northern rivers to study them for the Northern Territory and Queensland governments. Such was their contribution that the ABC's 'A Big Country' visited the Midgelys on the Limmen Bight River, which flows into the Gulf of Carpentaria and broadcast a feature story on them.

Hamar received an honorary Doctor of Science for his contributions in the fields of fish biology and ecology. He was appointed member of the General Division of the Order of Australia for his studies of native freshwater fishes.

Success for Midgely meant nothing more than enriching the lives of others. Through success or failure; apathy or fund strangulation, fishermen have cause to remember Hamar, and thank him.

His outstanding contribution to recreational fishing in Queensland mirrors the criteria for the Ron Dempster Award and therefore it is with gratitude, appreciation and pride that we honour Hamar Midgely with this Award. As a lover of the freshwater, Ron himself would be very happy with this decision.

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