



Ron Dempster Award Recipient 2016

Bill Byrne

In October 2015, recreational anglers were granted three designated gill-net free zones near the regional areas of Rockhampton, Mackay and Cairns. As stocks recover these zones will become recreational angling meccas and a lasting legacy for the fishing community. The policy and subsequent government actions that led to the change in legislation was spearheaded by a fellow by the name of Bill Byrne.

Born in Bundaberg, both of Bill's parents were schoolteachers having settled in the area after his great grandfather, Edward Byrne, sailed his barge from Brisbane to the Burnett River and in the early 1870s and then operated the first barge across the Burnett River. Bill is an electrician by trade, former lieutenant colonel serving in the army for three decades, holds a Marine Coxswain's certificate and enjoys several pastimes - thankfully one of which is fishing!

Bill is the current state Labour representative for Rockhampton, who took seat in May 2012 with Labor in Opposition. As part of the 2015 State Election, Labor announced a Sustainable Fishing Plan, which included the establishment of three net free fishing havens in Central and Northern Queensland. This was formally announced by Bill Byrne and Brittany Lauga in Rockhampton 3 days before the 2015 election.

There is some suggestion that the policy helped provide a swing in some marginal seats to aid Labor taking office with a slim majority. With Labor taking office by forming a minority government in 2015, Anastacia Palaszczuk announced Bill as the Minister of Department of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Rather than burying or prolonging, what was set to be a very difficult policy change, Bill immediately set to work with establishing the three net free zones. Understandably the policy was met with strong resistance by the commercial fishing sector and allied local fish processors. Bill's background in the Army was likely of great benefit during this period. The constant barrage of attack from the commercial sector throughout the campaign would have thrown many off their course. Yet Bill along with the Labor Government held firm and worked methodically to see the net free policy to fruition.

Recreational anglers were slow off the mark initially in terms of responding to the criticisms and false claims run by various commercial fishing interests. In this initial phase, Bill was largely left with the task of defending the recreational fishing industry as well as the policy.

This in itself is a useful reflection. The lack of united front and heavy reliance on volunteer efforts in stakeholder representation is a weak point for the recreational fishing sector and one that needs to be remedied as we move forward for the sake of the recreational fishing sector in Queensland.

Following an extremely rocky start, several recreational fishing groups started to play a more active part in campaigning for the three net free zones including the Mackay Recreational Fishing Alliance, Carefish, Queensland Recreational Fishing Network, along with Keppel Bay Sportfishing Club & CapTag to name a few.

The ANSA QLD affiliated Keppel Bay Sportfishing Club took an early active role in promoting the net free zones, with the famous 'Barra Capital' facebook post one such example. Keppel Bay Sportfishing hosted the "Nets Out Queensland" campaign petition and website proving that local ANSA Clubs can make a difference.

Australian National Sportfishing Association Inc. (Queensland Branch)

ABN: 15 680 672 210

PO BOX 198, LAWNTON QLD 4501 e: president@ansaqlld.com.au

w: www.ansaqlld.com.au

www.facebook.com/pages/ANSA-Queensland/101877629878640





The “Nets Out QLD” campaign provided one of the more successful platforms at the time for recreational anglers to unite in support of the net free zones that countered the barrage of misinformation being spread by the commercial sector and delivered just shy of 10,000 signatures for a conforming parliamentary petition in support of the Net Free Zones.

National bodies like Keep Australia Fishing and ANSA National lent a hand to this cause and recreational fishing publications like Fishing World, Fish & Boat and (of particular mention) Queensland Fishing Monthly lent a hand as momentum grew.

Bill and the Labor government introduced a regulation amendment in parliament. This was met with stiff resistance, resulting in a disallowance motion being tabled by the Opposition. An inquiry into the proposed Fisheries Regulation Amendment was conducted by the Agriculture and Environment Committee and provides useful background to the debate and is worth reading.

The disallowance motion for the regulation amendment to declare three net free areas was brought to Queensland Parliament on 14th October. Thankfully, this disallowance motion was defeated, with Labor sticking to their promises along with the Katter Australia Party and an Independent voting to block the disallowance motion.

The regulation amendment introducing three recreational fishing havens is and will continue to result in the enhancement of recreational fishing in Queensland. As a by-product of the situation, political parties are taking a renewed interest in recreational sector as a voter bloc worthy of consideration.

It is fitting that Bill Byrne, the individual who spearheaded the introduction of these recreational fishing havens, be recognised for his outstanding contribution to the enhancement of recreational fishing in Queensland and is our worthy Ron Dempster Award Recipient for 2016.

*Nathan Johnston, President
Australian National Sportfishing Association, QLD Branch
3rd September 2016*

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About Ron Dempster (by Marina Hoare)

There is written an old adage, "That our God does not deduct from the span of a man's life the hours spent fishing". This would go some way in explaining the long and fruitful life of our friend, our mate, and our mentor – Ron Dempster.

Affectionately known to many as just "Demo". Fishing was one of Demo's greatest passions and as one of his long-time associates and close friend said "Demo was a fisherman's fisherman" Many within the fishing fraternity were first introduced to the man though his writings and musings in national fishing magazines under the name R.K. Dempster, very formal in those times but back then a statement. His writings, watersheds of the mighty Mitchell and Walsh Rivers with his father and cousin Stanley chasing sooty grunter, barramundi and of course his beloved "spotties" (Archer Fish).

Many of these stories were to later appear in précis form in what came to be known as "Demo's Diaries" a segment in the publication "Queensland Fishing Monthly". This title itself a statement highlighting over time the acceptance and endearment of a man within the broader fishing community. But Demo not only wrote about fishing experiences, he was in turn written about. Not so much for his fishing skills for as he would freely admit he was "just an average fisherman" but for the principles and beliefs he held regarding the sport of fishing.

It is well documented his relationship with the likes of Gerald Cook, Hamar Midgely and Vic McCristal and their successful endeavours in raising both the importance and conservation. However Ron was a statesman and every opportunity he passionately pursued the principles of the pastime he loved. The dedication plus his wealth of practical fishing knowledge and the ability to express this knowledge in logical terms was to see Ron represent fishers at both club and state level, both within and outside of the Sportfishing movement.

Ron was invited to sit on the committee which overviews the Burns Inquiry into recreation fishing and was known there for logical lines of reasoning for what were quite often complex situations. Many of today's fishing regulations governing recreational fishing can be attributed to Ron's persistence in his beliefs and the ability he had in demonstrating those principals. He may not have actually written the word, or coined the phrase, but he did influence those at an early age who would later become decision makers of the future.

But everyone had to start somewhere, and Ron's official sportsfishing started in 1971 with the Marybrough Sportsfishing Club. From details of those early years given by his mates Ron Kinghorn, Bob Colishaw and Don Boneham, Demo made major contribution to the club by bringing both experience and wisdom. He was a steady hand. Ron and his good mate Col Kinbacher (the BBB) owned an island in the Great Sandy Straits on which they build the now famous "Humpy". Many a Marybrough Sportfishing Club outing and ANSA State Executive Meeting has been held there, and those who were fortunate enough to visit the Humpy with Demo would know just how much he loved the place.

Many ANSA members first met Ron at the State Wide Meeting held in Yeppoon. This event was one of Demos strongest wishes and he lobbied hard with fellows like Dave Donald and Bill Sawynok to see such a meeting come to fruition. It did and has been held every year since 1979.

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Of course, there have been some epic challenges of wits at these meetings between Demo and the likes of Porter, O'Sullivan, Theofanes and Nissan.

Demo would always score a point's win with verses from his beloved Omar Khayyam

"ah, fill the cup: what boots it to repeat, How time is slipping underneath our feet Unborn tomorrow and dead yesterday Why fret about them, if today be sweet!"

Ron has been honored by ANSA with a Life Membership to the State Branch. The Ron Dempster Memorial Award, for outstanding contribution to Sportfishing, is named in his honour. Ron's physical presence has left the rank of ANSA but his principles are ageless, and instilled in everyone with whom he came in contact.

As he wrote in one of his last articles "The moving finger writes and having writ... The time has come to this old scribe to quit."

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