**Ron Dempster Award 2018 – Dr Ben Diggles**

Ben Diggles grew up in Brisbane in the 1970s and was introduced to the fundamentals of fishing at an early age by his Dad George and grandfather Ken Diggles. Ben spent these formative years fishing around the Brisbane River mouth where his father was working as a draftsman and project manager developing the international wharves at Fishermans Island and while holidaying at Inskip point near Fraser Island.

Ben is great grandson of Silvester Diggles, who arrived in Brisbane in 1855 and was a founder of the Queensland Philosophical Society, the predecessor of the Royal Society of Queensland and helped establish the Queensland Museum. Silvester studied natural history in his spare time and is still well known by historians for writing the Ornithology of Australia containing 325 plates illustrating some 600 Australian birds. Ben has continued this strong family tradition as experts in natural history, be it with a slight deviation away from bird identification and towards fisheries sciences influenced by the many fond memories of fishing in his formative years. There is no doubt that the recreational fishing community has been the winner of this sea change.

Like many young lads finishing school, Ben’s initial plan was to fly jet fighters, but eyesight crossed this option off the list and with a keen interest in fishing decided upon a career as a marine biologist. When Ben finished his degree, job opportunities for marine biologists were scarce. There was emphasis on diseases of fish in aquaculture at the time and so Ben initially gravitated towards this, which had the benefit of instilling a fuller understanding of both the fish with along with their environment in order to understand the associated diseases. Going fishing to collect the specimens was an added bonus!

Since this time Ben has amassed over 200 [publications](http://www.digsfish.com/publications.html), including more than 50 peer reviewed journal articles. The topics are varied and range from hooking mortality, to fish disease and parasitology, to Ecology and Welfare of aquatic animals in wild capture fisheries, to Saddleback deformities in yellowfin bream to Fish and pain studies and shellfish distribution, habitat and status studies. What sets Ben apart from many other researchers however is his commitment in translating and communicating this scientific information to the fishing rank and file through writing of regular columns in sportfishing publications.

About the same time Ben finished his PhD in 1996 that focussed on fish health he also began writing a fish biology column for [Fishing World](http://www.fishingworld.com.au/) Magazine as a way to extend interesting fish related scientific information to fishers. Ben continues to write articles for Fishing World, the monthly Queensland fishing publications and Sportfishing Magazine more than 20 years later, with a tally approaching 500 articles. Topics covered have even greater variety than his research publications and all are designed to try and raise angler awareness on interesting things about the fish they catch. Ben is a firm believer that if people understand their fish more, they will be less likely to do the wrong thing and more likely to recognise the need to conserve the fish and in turn conserve and restore the habitat these fish are dependent upon.

Ben was a big fan of the late [Vic McCristal, our second Ron Dempster recipient](https://www.ansaqld.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Ron-Dempster-Award-1997.pdf) who received the same award some 21 years ago. A much younger Ben penned a letter to Vic in 2005 after reading the book Rivers and the Sea. Vic’s insight into man’s exploitation of fisheries resources and his thoughts of improving ethics on fishing which helped spark the sportfishing revolution in this country struck a strong chord with this young man at a time when the burdens of a big mortgage, young family and low income were taking a toll. Needless to say, Vic replied to this letter with positive words as so often was the case and in due course many of the aspirations outlined in this heartfelt letter from a young professional with a passion for fishing came to fruition.

Ben’s involvement in the development of the fish attractant know as S factor is in itself worthy of this award. Many anglers across Queensland rub a bit of ‘lipstick’ on their favourite lure and swear by the improved hook-up rate. Put simply, the stuff works!

But it doesn’t end there! Ben is responsible for developing [NEATFish](http://www.neatfish.com/), the worlds first Environmental Standard for Fishing Tournaments and preparing [www.ikijime.com](http://www.ikijime.com), a world first information portal for humane dispatch of finfish. The ANSA QLD [Insightful Anglers](https://www.ansaqld.com.au/insightful-anglers/) Best Management Practice self-assessment includes many practices identified and promoted by Ben and even includes recommendations on use of circle hooks based on findings from his first paper hooking survivability. This kind of work centres on angler education and shoring up our long term social licence to operate as the clouds begin to form over the horizon in the form of vegan extremists veiled as fish welfare activists.

Ben Diggles, ANSA QLD and many others in our sector can see the writing on the wall and are proactively working to knock the wind out of the sails of this argument using facts and science paired with advocacy and awareness raising. Ben sees habitat restoration as one of the keys and has recently taken a keen interest in the value of oyster reefs and the work with both [OzFish Unlimited](https://ozfish.org.au/) and [www.restorepumicestonepassage.org](http://www.restorepumicestonepassage.org) with values that strongly align with the ANSA QLD’s central tenement in the Sport-Conservation-Integrity triad of values. The understanding is that working on fish habitat equates to the best way to preserve our social license to fish, increases fish numbers, and combat the new upcoming challenges to fishing.

The good news is that Ben is still only halfway through his career and has plenty more time to continue advancing recreational fishing in Queensland before hanging up the gone fishing sign. Ben recently provided some insight on how he intends to address the current issue of applying traditional welfare definitions used for farmed animals to wild fish. Ben explained that these definition simply don’t work as all fish are part of a food chain and they eat each other and so it is impossible to weigh the welfare benefits of the top end predator like a shark against the welfare benefits of the baitfish and secondary predators. In a healthier the environment, there are many more fish but there is also more death of fish as the fish eat each other. Ben perceives there is a need to develop and promote a more accurate welfare definition for wild fish and believes there is no better way humans can improve the welfare of wild fish than to try to fix the environmental problems affecting them by giving them clean water and providing fish homes to live in by restoring natural reefs and creating artificial reefs to replace those previously destroyed homes while protecting and restoring nursery areas for their offspring to feed and grow. This is a noble goal and one of many we will work with Dr Ben Diggles in the years ahead.

Nathan Johnston, President

Australian National Sportfishing Association, QLD Branch

25th September 2018

**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 steadying 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.

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 honoured 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.”