

Final Report

# The End of an Era

Acknowledging the socio-cultural history and contribution of Australian small-scale fisheries



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**The End of an Era: Acknowledging the socio-cultural history and contribution of Australian small-scale fisheries  
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In submitting this report, the researcher has agreed to FRDC publishing this material in its edited form.

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This project would not have been possible without the help of all the fishermen, current and retired, who so generously gave their time to our team of photographers and the oral historian. Capturing their images and stories in the final year of the Gippsland Lakes commercial fishery was a bittersweet experience and we thank them for their honesty and their openness at such a difficult time. To Arthur Allen, James Casement, Micha Davey, Ross Gilsenan, Mathew Jenkins, Rob Jenkins, Gary Leonard, Harold Leonard, Frank Mitchelson, Harry Mitchelson, Mary Mitchelson, Kevin Newman, Leigh Robinson, Peter Tabone and Andrew Twigg, we give our heartfelt thanks. We are sad that Frank and Mary Mitchelson are no longer with us to see the exhibition launched, but we are glad they lived long enough to know it was coming. R.I.P Frank and Mary. You were the first to be interviewed and remain an inspiration to us all.



*Figure 1 Gippsland Lakes Fishermen at the exhibition launch in Lakes Entrance, April 2021*

The team of photographers who braved the cold, misty and wet, but beautiful environment of the Gippsland Lakes to capture these images includes Leigh Henningham, Donna Squire and Geoff Stanton.

Dr Nikki Henningham, oral historian, is one of the principal researchers on the project and worked with the fishermen to record their stories. She listened to the fishermen as their industry was coming to an end and her tact and professionalism was much appreciated by them.

Our consultants, Dr Tanya King and Dr Kirsten Abernathy, have played an integral role in the background, having worked with the community for several years. We thank them for helping get this project from an idea to a reality.

Lynda Mitchelson-Twigg managed this project from beginning to end, keeping us all on track and dealing with any number of unexpected tasks along the way. It would not have happened without her vision, drive and deep love and understanding of the industry and the community.

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

With little fanfare or attention, commercial fishing in the Gippsland Lakes in eastern Victoria ceased on 1 April 2020. The small-scale commercial fishery, which was crucial to the establishment of the town of Lakes Entrance roughly 150 years ago, was closed by the Victorian State Government as part of its *Target One Million* plan to grow recreational fishing. But this 2018 election promise also spelled the end of an era for many family fishing businesses, specifically the remaining ten licence holders, many of them 'generational' fishermen whose families had commercially fished the lakes for decades. They pulled in their nets for the last time on the evening of March 31, 2020.

There was deep concern within the community that the historical wisdom of several generations could be lost if quick action was not taken. Thanks to a team of fishers, historians, photographers, and anthropologists, the fishers' stories and local environmental knowledge won't be forgotten, despite the closure. By collecting oral histories and through photo documentation in the lead up to the closure (May 2019 – Jan 2020), a multi-disciplinary team of specialists, led by a member of a local, multigenerational fishing family, has created a permanent, historical record of an original Australian small-scale commercial fishery, along with a tested template and method for other Australian fisheries to adopt to help them record their rarely heard stories. Through a series of exhibitions mounted across regional and metropolitan Victoria in early 2021, the team was able to use the collection to acknowledge the importance of the fishermen's legacy and increase public understanding of the contribution of small-scale fisheries in Australia. An online version of the exhibition will ensure the exhibition is accessible into the future.

## Background

The Australian commercial fishing industry, valued at over \$1.5 billion, was built on small-scale fisheries operating in the bays, inlets and estuaries around the nation. However, with increasing population, development, and competition for space and access to resource in recent decades, these original fisheries and the associated ways of life are disappearing all around Australia.

In Victoria, eight out nine Bay and Inlet fisheries have been subject to closures over the past 20 years. The Gippsland Lakes commercial fishery is the most recent to face closure. The fishery began in the 1870s and formed the basis and beginning of a number of fisheries which now operate from the largest fishing community in Victoria, Lakes Entrance. In 2018, the remaining ten Gippsland Lakes commercial licenses were informed they would be compulsorily acquired, ending a multi-generational and historically significant fishery which would be closed on 31 March 2020.

Fearful that this important history might be forgotten a project team was formed, in the lead up to the closure, to document and present the social-cultural history of the last ten Gippsland Lakes fishing families, their journey and stories, their connection to the land and sea, and their contribution to fishing communities and the Australian fishing industry as a whole.

## Aims/objectives

The primary aim of the project was to record this important pioneering fishery for the East Gippsland communities and Victoria's social and cultural history before it disappeared in acknowledgement of those communities' vital contribution to the state and national economies. In doing so, the project team hoped to offer public acknowledgment of the importance of small-scale near-shore fisheries around the whole of Australia. In methodological terms it aimed to provide tested template for other fisheries to

follow as a form of encouragement for them to tell their rarely heard stories.

## Methodology

The foundational methodology used was the collection of oral life history recordings with the last ten licence holders and selected key community members, so that the stories could be heard in the voices of the fishermen themselves. Working in cooperation with a major collecting institution, the National Library of Australia, the team was able to ensure that the majority of those interviews were collected and curated in perpetuity for a national audience. Documentary and portrait photography was undertaken to accompany the interviews, many of those to be collected by the National Library of Australia. Through successful networking across the Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM) sector the team organised and curated three public exhibitions during a global pandemic impacted by lengthy lockdowns in Victoria. The exhibitions offered public opportunities for validation and education.

## Results/key findings

The project team has created a suite of recorded data and adjacent cultural artefacts documenting the stories of the final ten Gippsland Lakes fishing licence holders in the lead up to the fishery's closure on 1 April 2020. This material has been on display in three different locations around Victoria in a curated exhibition. Work is still being completed to make this material available on-line. A selection of oral history interviews and photographs has been selection for curation by the National Library of Australia. (Please see the list of assets below in the Project Outcomes section). A template for other communities to refer to and gain guidance from is available as an Appendix to this report.

Beyond the assets created, the project has created knowledge in relation to the successful completion of collaborative research and documentation projects involving academics and community leaders, thus providing guidance to other researchers interested in working on their own 'witnessing programs'. Unsurprisingly, *community engagement/community buy in is key to the success of the recording and documentation process*. While the actual *work* of documentation and recording can be done by experts external to the community, they must be in lockstep with the community representative and project manager (if not the same person). This project was successful, despite all the challenges created by a global pandemic, because all members of the team respected the knowledge and expertise of each of its members.

The success of this project offers value and provides insights into/for the following groups:

- The community of fishermen – who felt valued because their knowledge of the industry and environment has been recorded and curated for posterity by one of the key repositories in Australia, the National Library of Australia.
- The local community, who got behind the project and used the launch as an opportunity for celebration of the community as a whole. The Lakes Entrance arts network, for instance, were extremely supportive and helped the project team to organise the local launch.
- The broader public in metropolitan and regional communities, through the exhibitions at Melbourne and Geelong, were introduced to a story about the environment and an industry that was unfamiliar to them. Some had their views challenged and changed. This type of project has the potential to breakdown the urban/rural divide through storytelling.
- Historians and other HASS (Humanities and Social Science) researchers who will use the archived and curated qualitative data in the future. Their engagement provides the potential to extend the public profile of this project, beyond the life of project.

## Implications for relevant stakeholders

The implications for the various stakeholders include:

- For industry:
  - o Industry bodies should build goodwill and networks with their members and constituents by taking a pro-active approach. Document the industry's history and cultural heritage before it is gone. Understanding the value of an industry can actually help to promote its preservation.
- For Communities
  - o Communities should take a proactive approach to encourage and facilitate community members to keep records and record your history.
  - o Reach out to relevant historical academics and cultural heritage professionals to help you to tell *your* story
- For managers or policy makers
  - o Fund and promote these projects!
  - o Understand the value of HASS projects to promoting community health and wellbeing through a celebration of local identity. This has important implications for the mental health of community members.
- Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museum (GLAM) sector
  - o Work with local communities to commission this type of work. They create excellent opportunities for improving your own collections while you transfer skills and information to local volunteers and enthusiasts.
- Academic institutions
  - o Encourage academics to be involved in this sort of community led project by recognising their value and accommodating these kinds of projects in Non-traditional Research Output (NTRO) metrics as per Excellence in research in Australia (ERA) rankings.

## Keywords

Small scale fisheries, Gippsland Lakes, oral histories, photography, exhibition, community, cultural heritage, fisheries management, coastal ecologies, community-led academic collaboration, black bream, flathead, luderick, tailor, mulloway, whiting, perch, salmon, prawns

# Introduction

In Victoria, eight of nine bay and inlet fisheries have been subject to closures over the past 20 years. The Gippsland Lakes commercial fishery is the most recent to face closure. Beginning in the 1870s, this fishery formed the basis of the largest fishing community in Victoria at Lakes Entrance. In 2018, the remaining ten Gippsland Lakes commercial license holders were informed they would be compulsorily acquired, ending a multi-generational and historically significant fishery.

Given the rate with which fisheries such as the Gippsland Lakes are disappearing all around Australia, along with the associated ways of life and community, there was an urgent need to document and acknowledge the contribution and socio-cultural history of Australia's oldest small-scale commercial fishery, before the memories and stories disappear with the community and the licence holders. The Australian commercial fishing industry, which is now valued at over \$1.5 billion, was built on these original small-scale fisheries operating in the bays, inlets and estuaries. Their histories are important and recording the stories of their generational fishermen ensures they are not forgotten.

The *End of an Era* project was established to document and present the social-cultural history of the last ten Gippsland Lakes fishing families; their journey and stories, their connection to the land and sea, and their contribution to fishing communities and the Australian fishing industry as a whole. The project used oral histories, audio recordings and photography, some of which is permanently curated by the National Library of Australia (NLA) to mount public exhibitions in Lakes Entrance, Melbourne, Geelong and online. While it was important to record this important pioneering fishery for the East Gippsland communities and Victoria's social and cultural history before it disappears, in acknowledgement of those communities' vital contribution to the state and national economies, the project offered public acknowledgment of the importance of small-scale near-shore fisheries around the whole of Australia. In methodological terms it aimed to provide tested template for other fisheries to follow as a form of encouragement to tell their rarely heard stories.

## Background<sup>1</sup>

The Gippsland Lakes system covers an area of approximately 360 square kilometres and has been a source of nutrition for local communities for thousands of years. Situated behind an ancient but slim sand barrier that separates the oceanic waters of Bass Strait from the inland waters, the lake forms a complex waterway having both wide expanses of water and more contracted spaces where mazes of islands, sand bars and tiny bays create more secluded spots.

The Gunaikurnai people were the first to fish the Gippsland Lakes using spears, nets and canoes. In the 1840s it was estimated that 3,000 Gunaikurnai people were living in the Gippsland lowland coastal area.

The Chinese fish-curing trade dates back to the early 1860s. These innovative producers would keep the fish alive until they could be processed, stabilising the supply of seafood products. As early as the 1870s Chinese fishermen set up drying racks at the place now called Metung.

Europeans came to fish the Lakes, living along the shores in tents crafted from ti-tree boughs and thatched with reeds. With them, reliable transport links followed. The railway line opened in 1878 thus securing a safe land-based link between Gippsland and Melbourne. Steamers were still vital, transporting fish in huge ice chests to the nearest rail connection.



By the late 1892 there were around 100 fishing boats operated by 200 professional fishermen of European and Chinese descent, along with their families, who were an integral part of the industry. The Australian commercial fishing industry as we know it today and which is now valued at over \$1.5 billion, is built on small-scale fisheries such as those in the Gippsland Lakes district, operating in bays, inlets and estuaries around the coast, building communities like Lakes Entrance, the largest fishing community in Victoria, to service other industries across regional Australia. Descendants of these early fishing communities continued to raise their families on the Gippsland Lakes, supplying the local and Melbourne markets with fresh seafood, up until April 2020.

The lakes fishermen used environmentally benign forms of fishing with minimal emissions, using mesh nets and seine nets, stake nets and pots to catch fish, including black bream, prawns, crabs, flathead, tailor, silver trevally, mullet, and garfish.

Mesh nets were set on the bottom of the lake, waiting to catch fish as they swim past. Nets were set overnight and picked up in the morning. Seine nets were shot in an arc anchored to the shore. Both ends of the net were then gradually pulled together and fish were ushered into a bag in the middle of the net. Selected species were scooped out while others released back into the Lakes. Stake nets were used to catch prawns, the net being set by anchors in the tide. The prawns travel down the tide and into the net. Crab nets are a trap set with bait, to which the crab is attracted and then becomes trapped in the net. Fish were delivered to the co-op and prepared for transport either to local suppliers or to Melbourne and Sydney for distribution to restaurants and fishmongers.

With increasing population, development, and competition for space and access to inland waterways increasing in recent decades, these original fisheries and the associated methods and ways of life are disappearing all around Australia. In Victoria, eight out nine Bay and Inlet fisheries have been subject to closures over the past 20 years. The Gippsland Lakes commercial fishery is the most recent to face closure. In 2018, the remaining ten Gippsland Lakes commercial licenses were informed they would be compulsorily acquired, ending a multi-generational and historically significant fishery.

The closure of the Gippsland Lakes fishery came as part of the Victorian State Government's *Target One Million* policy, which involves increasing annual recreational fishing to one million participants. Despite their best efforts, commercial fishermen were not able to convince the government that the commercial and recreational fishing industries could continue to co-exist, that the seafood resources could continue to be managed sustainably for the benefit of everyone, including consumers.

Numerous challenges continue to threaten our waterways including climate change, terrestrial and marine pollution, plastics and invasive species. While some may assume that recent fishery closures have been introduced to combat overfishing, this is not the case. The Victorian State government has been careful to note that their decision to close sustainably managed state fisheries has been on the basis of the purported 'social and economic' benefits of prioritising recreational fishing tourism over primary production.

This has not stopped some loud voices continuing to deny—contrary to the scientific evidence—that well managed, small scale commercial fishing is an environmentally sustainable service that supplies healthy food options for the community. Perhaps reflecting justifiable concerns about large scale and unregulated fisheries, targeted campaigns by recreational fishing lobby groups to remove small inshore fisheries on the basis of environmental concerns is a trend mirrored both interstate and internationally. In small scale fisheries where sustainable harvesting has been carefully managed, as is the case in Victoria, the key driver of fisheries closure is human conflict over access to the resource.

The closure of the Gippsland Lakes fishery was not the first casualty of the *Target One Million* campaign. The Port Phillip Bay and Westernport Bay fishery was removed as a 2014 election

campaign promise, while the Gippsland Lakes fishery was closed as part of the 2018 election package. While it is not the purpose of this project to report upon this trend, for those close to the issue it will implicitly carry a message about the impending closure of the last Victorian coastal fishery—Corner Inlet—which may be targeted in future election campaigns. This scenario should be of concern to those who love to eat fresh, locally and sustainably caught seafood.

The fight to stop the fishery's closure to commercial fishing proved unsuccessful, but the historical stories of the industry will not be forgotten. The *End of an Era* project was established to document and present the social-cultural history of the last ten Gippsland Lakes fishing families; their journey and stories, their connection to the land and sea, and their contribution to fishing communities and the Australian fishing industry as a whole.

# Objectives

1. To collect and preserve oral life histories of the Gippsland Lakes Fishery, the way of life and connection to place and people
2. To collect and preserve photos documenting Gippsland Lakes Fishery, the way of life and connection to place and people
3. To exhibit an interactive display of the Gippsland Lakes Fishery locally, in Melbourne and online
4. To provide a template for other Australian fisheries to showcase publicly their fishery
5. To write a report that captures the history of the fishery from inception, with a focus on how the fishery has adapted and changed over time

The objectives have either been achieved or remain works in progress. Fortunately, the interviews and pictures were completed prior to the onset of the global pandemic in March 2020, however, lockdowns and travel restrictions created delays to the scheduling of exhibitions and created challenges with regards research for designing the template and writing the historical report.

We were delighted to include another location for the physical exhibition at Geelong.

# Method

## 1) The Project Team

This project began as an archiving initiative, driven by the community. It was vital that the project be led by a community member who was embedded in the industry and who understood the local environment; industrial, ecological and emotional, that project team members from outside the community would be working in.

Key team members appointed to the project were:

- a) Team Leader (TL) Lynda Mitchelson-Twigg. Lynda is from a multigenerational fishing family from Lakes Entrance who have been operating there since 1888. Her husband was one of the last ten licence holders. She is still very much involved in the family business and has been involved in a number of research and development projects over time.
- b) Oral Historian (OH) Dr Nikki Henningham. Dr Henningham has conducted nearly 200 interviews on behalf of the National Library of Australia (NLA) across a wide range of projects.
- c) Three photographers - Leigh Henningham, Donna Squire and Geoff Stanton - brought a range of skills and experience to the task of capturing operational shots and portraiture for archiving and exhibiting.
- d) Consultants Dr Tanya King and Dr Kirsten Abernethy, having worked with the community for several years prior to this project, provided expert advice in the area of socio-cultural and historical features of small-scale fishing communities, from an anthropological perspective. Dr King was also able to use her Deakin University connections to find gallery space for exhibitions in Geelong.

## 2) Foundational Purpose

The project's foundational purpose was to record interviews with the last ten licence holders working the Gippsland Lakes fishery in the lead up to its closure as a commercial enterprise. With funding support from the director of the NLA (NLA) Oral History Unit, who believed the project to be of national historical significance because it recorded the contribution of the fishery to Australian food and fibre production, the team undertook to collect oral histories of Gippsland Lakes fishing families and community members in order to create an audio archive.

With the funding support from the FRDC this foundational purpose expanded to include more interviews and a broader, public facing outcome - a physical exhibition. Photographers were commissioned to take operational, documentary and portrait photographs, with the purpose of digitally archiving the collection for posterity as well as curating the collection for exhibitions in Lakes Entrance, Melbourne and Geelong.

TL Mitchelson collected archival material (including photographs and videos) and objects from local families for display during the physical exhibitions. When the curatorial specialist commissioned to curate the material for exhibition was unfortunately unable to complete the task TL Mitchelson stepped in to do so.

## 3) Oral histories

Oral history is a qualitative method of conducting historical research through recorded interviews between a narrator with personal experience of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record. Because it is a primary source, an oral

history is not intended to present a final, verified, or "objective" narrative of events, or a comprehensive history of a place. It is a spoken account, reflecting the personal opinion offered by the narrator, capturing their experiences and opinions as a measure of the way they make sense of their lives and, as such, is a subjective account. Oral history testimony may be used together with other primary sources and secondary sources to gain understanding and insight into broader historical narratives. It needs to be recorded, documented and archived to professional standards. Only then can we be sure that recordings will be preserved and made accessible for current and future generations. Unless we collect and preserve people's memories then they can be lost.

Oral history has multiple roles and benefits, including:

- filling gaps in historical evidence and secure history at risk
- bringing new perspectives and challenge our view of the past
- giving voice to those people excluded from traditional historical records
- documenting traditions and stories passed down from generation to generation
- recording the changing and enduring culture of a place or community, or shifts in everyday practices
- contributing to the preservation of customs, dialects and ways of speaking

Everyone, irrespective of their background, has a unique story to tell. Oral history allows people whose voices might not otherwise be heard to share their experiences. The act of retelling life events can help people understand their lives and often contribute to a sense of wellbeing and identity both for individuals and communities. At their most powerful, oral histories can explain, enrich understanding and encourage empathy with others.<sup>2</sup>

Given its suitability for this context, oral history methodology underpinned the whole project. Between May 2019 and January 2020, under the guidance and leadership of project TL Mitchelson-Twigg, OH Dr Nikki Henningham undertook recorded life history interviews with consenting Gippsland Lakes fishing families and significant Lakes Entrance community members.

The interviews focused on their personal experiences of being part of the industry, how their families connected to the community, their connection to the land and sea, and the connection to, and contribution of, the Gippsland Lakes fishery to the Lakes Entrance community. In some cases, the interviews recorded the emotions and feelings of the fishermen and their families as the fishery's closure approached. NLA recording methodology does not include 'ethnographic' recording, mainly due to the studio quality recording gear used, therefore no recordings of the fishermen at work were attempted. In any case, the principal purpose of the project was to record the fishermen's narratives of the social-cultural history of the region in their own words, so studio recordings were adequate for this purpose.

Once the interviews were completed, sound files were forwarded to the NLA for processing and copies were sent to the interview subjects. OH Henningham created timed summaries of the interviews and TL Mitchelson edited the interviews to create extracts for the exhibition.

#### 4) Photography

Photographs were taken by professional photographers (both Melbourne-based and local) and included portraits of interviewees and others, as well as the day-to-day activities of the Gippsland fishing families and their way of life in the community. Portraits were taken on the same day the interviews were conducted, while operational shots were set up at different times. Each photographer processed and edited their own digital files, which were then uploaded to the TL for review and curation. The bulk of the photographs were taken in the second half of 2019.

## 5) Collection of archival materials

TL Mitchelson-Twigg facilitated the collection of archival materials from the community, past fishers, and current fishing families, for the purpose of the exhibition. They included historical documents, photos, film, and small objects of significance.

## 6) Exhibiting the collection

The exhibition narrative was one that showcased the journey of the Gippsland Lakes fishery and the last ten fishing families. The combination of photography, audio stories, information panels, home videos and objects captured the traditions, activities, way of life and connection to place of the community, as well as the feelings and emotion that accompanied the end of the 150-year-old traditional commercial fishery. The decision to exhibit in two locations was intended to serve two purposes. Firstly, it was important for the local community to see the exhibition as a tribute and reflection of their own worth and contribution to the socio-cultural and historical development of the East Gippsland region. Secondly, it was vital for a broader Victorian public audience to have the opportunity to see this important exhibition and better understand the Victorian fishing industry, and how the fishery's closure would impact them.

Originally scheduled for a Lakes Entrance opening in April 2020, followed by a Melbourne season at Library @ the Dock in Melbourne in May 2020, the exhibition schedule was disrupted due to the impact of the global pandemic. This meant that the closure of the fishery on 1 April 2020 was well in the past by the time the exhibition finally opened, at Library @ the Dock in February 2021. After finishing its three-week season in the middle of March 2021, the exhibition moved to Lakes Entrance over Easter in the first week of April 2021. It then opened for three weeks in Geelong during May 2021.

An online version of the exhibition remains, in August 2022, a work in progress.

## 7) Toolkit Development

Throughout the project, OH Henningham maintained a journal documenting the oral history project and process, and aspects of the photographic project, incorporating meeting notes from steering committee meetings held through the year. After the last exhibition was bumped out, she circulated a questionnaire to all the team members so that they could provide feedback. The journal, meeting notes and questionnaire responses were used in combination with theoretical guidance published in Marella Hoffman's *Practicing Oral History to Improve Public Policies and Programs*<sup>3</sup>, and online by Oral History Australia the peak body for oral historians in Australia to develop a plan for others to use.<sup>4</sup>

# Results

Results are presented in relation to the intended outputs and outcomes outlined in the application:

## A) Project Outputs:

• ***A collection of oral histories and accompanying photos of the Gippsland Lakes fishery for curation at the National Library and Local Historical Society.***

The following fishermen and community members were interviewed and the majority of the recordings (as indicated \*) are housed in the NLA Oral History Collection. Interview subjects provided informed consent prior to being interviewed and gave their permission for further use (beyond archiving) in exhibitions. Copies of interviews that were not collected and curated by the NLA are held by the TL and the OH interviewer.

- Arthur Allen \*
- James Casement
- Micah Davey
- Rob and Matt Jenkins\*
- Gary and Harold Leonard\*
- Frank Mitchelson\*
- Harry Mitchelson\*
- Kevin Newman\*
- Peter Tabone
- Andrew Twigg
- Leigh Robinson and Ross Gilsenan\*
- In addition, for the purposes of the exhibition, an interview undertaken previously on the behalf of the NLA with Mary Mitchelson was linked to the project. Mary had worked commercially with her husband and brother-in-law (Frank Mitchelson) and her son (Harry Mitchelson).

A total of just under 16 hours of unedited interview material was collected, the bulk of which remains archived in the NLA, in perpetuity. Details can be found here: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn8052122>  
Additionally, TL Mitchelson edited the sound files to create extracts for use in the physical exhibitions. These are available on a temporary project website: <https://gippslandfishermen.wixsite.com/endofanera/gallery>

All interview subjects were photographed, either at work in operational situations or in portrait style. Between them, the three photographers provided approximately 700 images for consideration by the project team for curation as part of the exhibition. 50 were chosen for physical exhibition and will be included in the online version of the exhibition. The following examples demonstrate the range of portrait and operational styles exhibited.



*Figure 2 Mary Mitchelson, Lakes Entrance, June 2019*



*Figure 3 Frank Mitchelson, Lakes Entrance, June 2019*

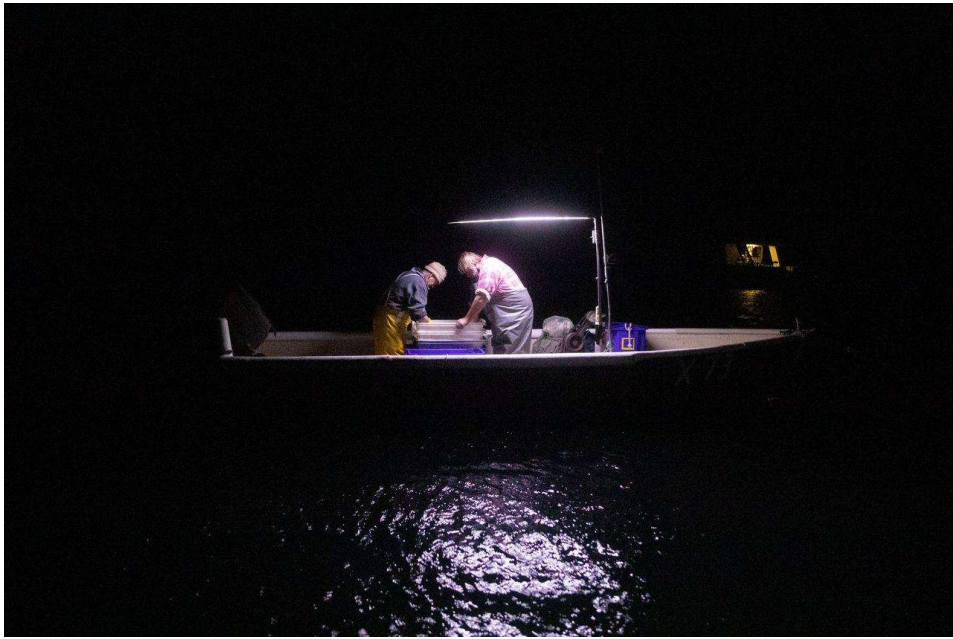




*Figure 4 Gary (right) and Harold Leonard, Lakes Entrance, June 2019*



*Figure 5 Gary Leonard, Lakes Entrance, June 2019*



*Figure 6 Prawning*



*Figure 7 A cool morning on the lake*





*Figure 8 Mitchelson fishermen hauling the nets*



*Figure 9 Boots at work*

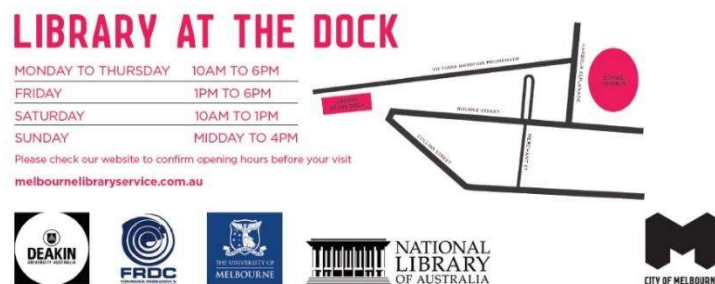
More examples of the work of the three photographers can be found here [www.leighhenninghamphotography.com.au](http://www.leighhenninghamphotography.com.au); <https://www.linkedin.com/in/donnasquirephotography/>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeoffStantonPhotographer/>

- ***A curated exhibition of photos and audio stories shown locally in Lakes Entrance, Melbourne and Geelong***

Despite the interruptions and challenges posed by COVID 19 Lockdowns, a curated, physical exhibition was developed that was based on the assets above, but also included physical objects and video donated by the Lakes Entrance Community. Information panels explaining the development and historical origins of the fishery, as well as a QR system that gave visitors the opportunity to listen to extracts on interviews on their mobile devices. Audio was also played on a loop via audio devices at venues.

The project was exhibited on the following dates at three locations:

- 1) Melbourne - Docklands Library @ the Dock – 24 February - 18 March 2021.
- 2) Lakes Entrance Slipway – 1-8 April 2021.
- 3) Geelong - Deakin Waterfront Campus, Alfred Deakin Prime Ministerial Library - May 6 – 26 2021



*Figure 10 Promotional material for exhibition at Library at the Dock*



Figure 11 Visitors to the exhibition at Library at the Dock



## END OF AN ERA: THE LAST GIPPSLAND LAKES FISHERMEN

AUDIO AND PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION AT THE  
HISTORIC SLIPWAY SHEDS LAKES ENTRANCE

1st april 2021- 8th april 2021  
Free Entry

# WATERFRONT

## 26 MARCH — 5 APRIL 2021

Celebrating and re-imagining our waterways during Melbourne Design



## SLIPWAY

LAKES ENTRANCE

Figure 12 Promotional Material for the exhibition at the Slipway in Lakes Entrance





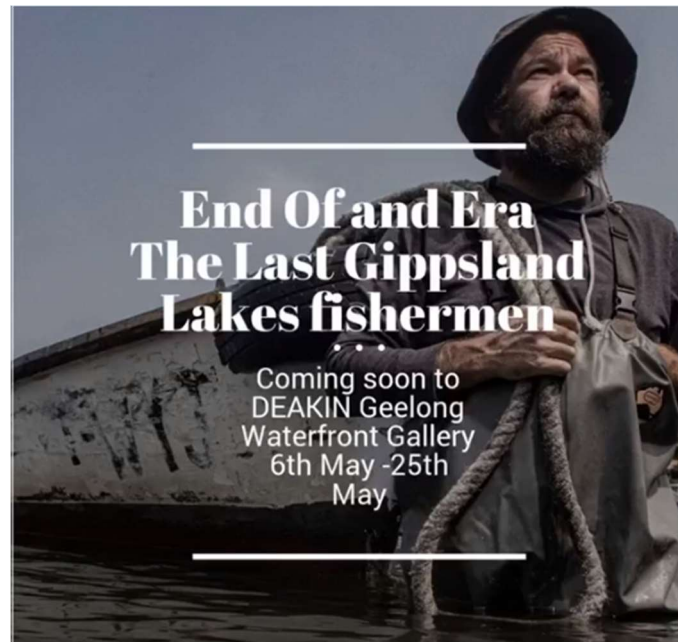
*Figure 13 Outside the Slipway, Lakes Entrance*



*Figure 14 Visitors at the Lakes Entrance launch*



*Figure 15 Enjoying the exhibition at the Slipway*



*Figure 16 Promotional material for the exhibition at Deakin Waterfront*



*Figure 17 Objects on display at the Geelong exhibition*

A planned exhibit in Paynesville in March 2022 as part of a festival was cancelled due to the uncertainty about the impact of COVID lockdowns on public events. The team has not given up hope on an exhibition there in 2023.

- ***Website of the exhibition***

TL Mitchelson created a website to support the exhibition

<https://gippslandfishermen.wixsite.com/endofanera>.

This website will continue to exhibit and host items of interest, including a PDF copy of a print-on-demand book based on the exhibition that, in July 2022, remains a work in progress.

- ***Final report will detail the process in detail so that it may be used for other fisheries to archive their history and develop an exhibition***

Please see Appendix 1 for a report on the process as a template for future use.

## **B) Project Outcomes:**

- ***The permanent historical recording of an original Australian small-scale commercial fishery***

- 16 hours of oral history interviews, with associated exhibition images (mainly portraits) will be curated in the National Library of Australia's collection in perpetuity, thus ensuring this unique historical recording of an original small-scale fishery will exist for public use well into the future.
- A publically accessible, print-on-demand book is a work in progress at the time of finalising the report (July 2022).
- Documentary video filmed during a walk-through at the Geelong exhibition in May 2021, hosted by Deakin University museum studies expert, Professor Andrea Witcomb, and featuring Nikki and Leigh Henningham, will be used as teaching material. Final edits remain a work in progress.
- The project was recognised with a 2021 Victorian Community History Award for best Oral History Project, thus enhancing the team's opportunity to engage with the public through interviews and presentations.

- ***Increased public understanding of the contribution of small-scale fisheries in Australia***

The exhibitions were well attended in all three venues, but just how well it is difficult to gauge, and at a time when COVID safe limits were placed on numbers in most public venues, it is difficult to offer any meaningful quantitative analysis. Some qualitative analysis is offered in the discussion below.

- ***A tested template and method for other Australian fisheries to tell their rarely heard stories***

An important lesson from this project is that while there are general principles that can be applied through a template approach about working with communities to record their histories, each project and community has unique characteristics that will require some flexibility of approach. Appendix 1 will provide information about a general approach and the discussion, below, will offer some observations relating to this particular project.



# Discussion

The project was funded in April 2019 and documentation through interviews and photographs began in May of that year. A pre-established relationship between TL Mitchelson-Twigg, OH Henningham and the consultants, Dr King and Dr Abernethy, as well as the partnership with the National Library of Australia Oral History unit, meant that the team was able to hit the ground running. ***A key to the success of the project was, firstly, the quality of the community leadership. TL Mitchelson-Twigg called upon pre-existing relationships to build a team that was able to hit the ground running. She was able to use her knowledge of the industry and community to encourage fishermen to participate.***

While identifying the intended interview subjects, the last licence holders permitted to fish the lakes, was relatively straightforward, recruiting them to be interviewed required a certain degree of time and tact. While all of them agreed with TL Mitchelson-Twigg that their stories needed to be recorded, the final months leading up to the fishery's closure was an emotional time for them. It was very important for the project team to tread carefully and allow subjects to tell their stories on their own terms. We learned that for some, this was a very difficult thing to do. ***A key lesson from the documentation process was that the interviewer and photographer must spend time developing relationships of trust with the interview subjects. This particular project was therapeutic for contributors because it made them feel heard. But for a minority it was also unexpectedly distressing. The team needs to be comprised of people who can recognise and respect this.***

All interviews and photographs were completed by late January 2020. The team, which at that time included a postgraduate student in Museum Studies from Deakin University, was preparing for an exhibition opening in late April 2020 in Lakes Entrance, followed by a two-week opening at Library @ the Dock in May 2020. In March 2020, the full impact of the global COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic hit Australia and our project was not immune. All physical exhibition planning was put on hold. Hoping that society would open up sooner than it did, the team took the decision not to have a soft launch of the exhibition online. The team believed that launching an exhibition physically, in a way that included the whole community of fishermen, was a vital part of the project, because it provided an opportunity for the interview subjects to gather together in collective tribute. ***We believe, based on the success of the physical exhibitions held in early 2021, especially in Lakes Entrance, that this decision has been validated. The physical gathering of project participants over Easter 2021 was a highlight for them, the broader Gippsland Lakes community and the project team. Whilst the project was designed to archive and communicate stories of the end of an industrial era, an important consequence was the sense of validation that the fishermen and their families experienced as a result of seeing and hearing their stories presented back to them. This experience would have been diluted had there been a soft launch prior to the physical launch.***

Exhibition planning was put on hold for approximately six months while Melbourne was in lockdown. Needless to say, this was frustrating. For various reasons, the curator was no longer able to commit to the project, so TL Mitchelson-Twigg stepped into the role, which she performed superbly. In retrospect, there was a definite silver lining to this perceived set back. As a member of the community that was being represented, TL Mitchelson-Twigg was able to make curatorial decisions that were informed by a deep understanding of the historical and emotional stories being exhibited. Whilst the curatorial process was informed by the expertise of the entire team, the narrative drive came from the community. ***This is crucial to the exhibition's success. Regardless of whether a professional curator is available or not, the task must be completed in partnership (not just consultation) with a member of the community. A community member is best suited to editing sound and video extracts to support the narrative and should be funded for their labour to do so.***

There were other 'silver linings' associated with the pause to proceedings brought about by COVID-19 lockdowns, in that they gave TL Mitchelson time to gather together community sourced objects, photographs and videos for inclusion in the exhibition. It also gave the team time to negotiate new opportunities for exhibitions. TL Mitchelson networked with members of the Gippsland Arts Community, the ultimate result of which was that the *End of An Era* exhibition was included in the Open House Melbourne program, thematically linked to the idea of 'Waterfronts', over Easter 2021. While this meant that the Lakes Entrance opening would not be the premiere showing (this took place in Melbourne in February-March), it was a wonderful opportunity to maximize visits and community participation at a time when high volumes of foot traffic would pass through the exhibition. The pause in planning also provided time for Dr King to arrange for exhibition space at Deakin Waterfront Gallery in Geelong. For a three-month period between late February and late May 2021, TL Mitchelson-Twigg managed to transport, set up, exhibit and pack up in three different locations across Victoria, an extraordinary effort during a tumultuous time, from a woman with fulltime family and employment responsibilities. ***A key lesson from the project is that budget should be set aside for a project management/officer role, with that person to be sourced from the local community. The project team was fortunate that TL Mitchelson-Twigg was able to find flexibility in her schedule to complete an array of tasks that should be designated to a formal employee, who could also be the community team leader.***

Despite the delays and disruptions to the project created by lockdowns, the project team produced outputs and outcomes that were meaningful, important and consistent with those proposed in the application. A permanent archival collection of interviews and photographs has been created. A template for communities to refer to in the future has been provided. Three different locations resulted in different reception and feedback and the following observations provide evidence that a key outcome, to inform the public of the importance and contribution of small-scale fisheries to the fishing industry and socio-cultural development of regional communities, was achieved.

Unfortunately, hard qualitative data (foot traffic through the exhibition) was not kept at any location. The Library @ the Dock recorded 6,295 visitors while the exhibition was on, a figure well down on the previous year due to COVID-safe venue capacity restrictions. There is no way of determining how many of those visitors stopped at the exhibition but if we allowed for only 25% then that is an impressive figure across the three-week period. Of more interest is some qualitative feedback a team member received from the public.

"I read about the impacts on the fishermen at the time the fishery was closed but this exhibition really brought home the message. I am about to write a letter of protest to the Premier and Minister about it as I noted they intend to also close Corner Inlet. What makes it worse is that the number of recreational fishing licences issued is falling so the strategy has failed." 10/3/21

Similar feedback was received through forms provided to visitors at the Deakin Waterfront exhibition, from people who had not heard that the fishery would close, or who weren't aware of the type of fishing done there:

"Amazing to see how the fishing has changed and terrible to know it will end. We want to know WHERE are we going to source OUR LOCAL fish from??"

"Wasn't aware of the closures. Recreational fishing is much worse - more emissions, more rubbish, more alcohol, more accidents, lost money in search and rescue."

Feedback reflected the aesthetic appeal of the photography and recordings.

"Very interesting and the photography is spectacular!"

“I enjoyed multiple mediums (photo and video) and the installation materials (net/white box) the sound/video is very captivating and initially beckoned me!”

The Lakes Entrance exhibition season, held at the Slipway on the Esplanade from April 1 – 8, was very well attended and received positive feedback via local and social media. Typical of the commentary was the following, from the Federal Member of Parliament for the Gippsland region, Darren Chester MP (whose sentiments were echoed by the State Member for the region, Tim Bull):

“Terrific exhibition at the Lakes Entrance Slipway describing the end of an era ‘The Last Gippsland Lakes Fishermen’. It’s an outstanding collection of photographs by Leigh Henningham, Donna Squire and Geoff Stanton which is on show until this Thursday.”

The general public were equally impressed:

“Well done to everyone involved. We really enjoyed the display and listening to the oral histories.”

“Very impressive especially the audio great testament to a proud tradition.”

“The exhibition is a good reflective collection of photos... photos with a depth of stories behind them.”

Many of them commented upon how wonderful it was to see their community and its history reflected back to them:

“Great effort on displaying an important part of Lakes Entrance history. I took my aunt and uncle in today and they loved it - plenty of familiar faces for them!!”

An event launch was held on the evening of 1 April 2021 which was attended by all the fishermen (except for Frank and Mary Mitchelson who had passed away in 2020) and their families. It was a wonderful celebration and tribute to them, made more special by the speeches from one of the fishermen and his granddaughter.

***There are a number of lessons learned from the exhibition process, but care should be taken in generalising them across other contexts, given the extent to which this project was so severely impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns. Temporally, it’s possible that the delays and the passage of time from closure to exhibition (a year) made it easier for the fishermen to reflect and feel more comfortable with seeing themselves and the industry reflected back at them. It would be interesting to ask them, and I would recommend that future projects build a feedback mechanism for the interview subjects into the process. Informal feedback has been positive, but some formal feedback would be useful too.***

***More practically, the team needed to implement a mechanism to get accurate attendee numbers. There were also some limited concerns about accessibility at the Lakes Entrance venue. While these were addressed, we are nevertheless concerned that some regional venues might need to address these issues as part of their forward planning.***

# Conclusion

The project team is very proud of what it has achieved given the real problems we encountered to complete this project during a global pandemic. As per the project application we:

- collected and preserved oral life histories of the Gippsland Lakes Fishery, the way of life and connection to place and people,
- collected and preserved photos documenting Gippsland Lakes Fishery, the way of life and connection to place and people,
- exhibit an interactive display of the Gippsland Lakes Fishery locally, in Melbourne and Geelong, including an online version that connects all the resource,
- provided a template for other Australian fisheries to showcase publicly their fishery and tell their rarely heard stories,
- Increased public understanding of the contribution of small-scale fisheries in Australia.

In 2021, FRDC granted permission to the project team to produce a hard copy, publicly accessible book based on the exhibition materials, instead of the proposed report documenting the history of the fishery. They agreed that the unique outcomes achieved by this project would be better presented via a 'catalogue type' publication, similar to Jenny Shaw's *Seeing Change: A photographic story from Abrolhos fishers*<sup>5</sup>. This task remains a work in progress but completion is expected in the final quarter of 2022.

Finally, in October 2021, the project team were very proud recipients of a 2021 Victorian Community History Award, for the best Oral History Project. An extract from the citation reads as follows:

*"The interviews and images capture the life histories of the men and women of the Gippsland Lakes fishing industry, and its profound significance for each narrator and for their community. The interview collection is archived at the National Library of Australia where it will be available for future research. The project team curated a travelling exhibition which has been enjoyed in Lakes Entrance, Geelong and Melbourne Docklands...A beautifully produced website represents the exhibition and visitor responses, and showcases the photographs alongside twelve of the interviews. Each narrator brings the world of commercial fishing to life, from the intricacy of meshing and seining, to the habits of different sea creatures, to the sounds, smells and sights of an environment they love and know so well."*



# Implications

Assessing the impact of qualitative research such as this on the various stakeholders and end users is challenging enough without factoring in the impact of a global pandemic on the impact of outcomes that were, essentially, public events. For TL Mitchelson to have successfully organised three exhibitions during a period of extended lockdown was an extraordinary achievement. Unfortunately, it is difficult to assess just how extraordinary that achievement that was in any statistically significant way.

From the visitor information we received, we know that attending the exhibitions made a difference to people outside the industry. They understood the industry differently and were concerned about the impact of closures on their access to locally harvested fish. In that sense, the project has had an impact on the public's understanding of the role and contribution of small-scale fisheries in Australia.

The impact of recording and preserving oral histories of the Lakes Entrance fishermen cannot be overstated. To our knowledge, this is the first such collection to be preserved and curated at the National Library of Australia and is, therefore, of great significance. It means there is a permanent, sustainably curated historical record of Australian small-scale fishing, existing for public use well into the future. The Gippsland Lakes fishermen's unique contribution has become part of the broader, national memory and narrative and, barring cataclysmic disaster, will not be forgotten.

Furthermore, the impact of both the oral history program and the exhibitions on the local community, in particular, the people inside the industry, was profound. At a time of great stress and significant trauma, story tellers felt listened to. Some said that having the opportunity to record their stories helped them to process the sense of loss they were experiencing. While the project team never set out to be therapists, through listening and recording the important stories of this 'cancelled' community of workers, they nevertheless performed an important function for members of a community under stress. Men who felt they didn't have a say in their futures were given a voice. To be heard and recognised at this time made a difference, albeit one that is impossible to quantify.

The team hopes that the template and method provided to help other communities to tell their stories will also be useful to communities beyond the fishing industry. An important lesson from this project is that while there are general principles that can be applied through a template approach about working with communities to record their histories, each project and community has unique characteristics that will require some flexibility of approach.

# Recommendations

The most important recommendation to come from this project is that industry leaders and management recognise the importance of funding HASS projects, in order to strengthen and promote the communities that have been, or will be, impacted by major changes, including closure. Social science based Social Impact Assessments (SIA) should be conducted *before* management makes major changes, to capture the kinds of cultural heritage that are lost when these fisheries are closed. This project came about after the decision to close had been made, and only through the will and determination of a member of the community who could not bear to see the fishermen and their history ignored was it started before the fishery closed. If not for that person preparedness to reach out to their established networks in academia, the snowball effect that created the collaboration that led to these successful outcomes would not have taken place.

Furthermore, we recommend that this type of HASS project not be discounted because it is small and local. Tight collaborations provide an excellent opportunity to pilot how academic social science and cultural heritage organisations can engage with community to create knowledge, which can then be reflected back to the community. Telling local stories is important, not just for the benefit of the immediate community, but because they add rich texture to our national story. The loss of their industry has taken a heavy toll on the last Gippsland Lakes fishermen and this project and exhibition, designed to honour and celebrate the men and women of the Gippsland Lakes fishery, provided an insight into their world and created a legacy for them, their families and the broader community. It's too late to fully understand the legacy if you don't start collecting and recording until after the industry closes.

## Further development

Explore how cultural heritage can be incorporated into SIA preceding management changes.

# Extension and Adoption

The project was essentially an extension project, designed to build capacity within the industry for participants to connect with each other and the public to tell their stories. The main activities included:

- A fishery collaborating together to work on the collection of stories, photos and artefacts.
- A fishery collaborating with the community on the collection of stories, photos and artefacts.
- A fishery, via public exhibitions and an online presence, showcasing who they are, what they do, and their connection with place, the sea and the community, both to the local public and wider public, to build greater understanding and public knowledge.
- The final report of the project includes a separate appendix, detailing how we went about the process of creating an archive and an exhibition. Other fisheries can use this project as a template for their own activities which may help to build community support.
- The project has been promoted through the Victorian community of professional and academic historians as a result of it being shortlisted for a 2021 Victorian Community History Award.
- A short film of a walkthrough of the Geelong exhibition has been developed for use in conferences and presentations in the future.
- Images from the exhibitions were to be used in Geelong as part of their 'White Night Festival' light installation in November 2021. Unfortunately, this has been held over until a date in the future due to COVID related disruptions.
- A print on demand book based on the project is a work in progress.

## Coverage

The project received significant coverage in the lead up to the exhibition launches in 2021 through industry and news publications:

Melissa Marino 'The end of a long era', 1 December 2020, *FISH*, Vol 28(3)  
<https://www.frdc.com.au/fish-vol-28-3/lake-tales> [accessed 2021-09-13]

Nikki Henningham 'The Life Stories of Gippsland Lakes Fishers', *Pursuit*, 2 April 2021,  
<https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/the-life-stories-of-gippsland-lakes-fishers> [accessed 2021-09-13]

'Capturing the end of an era', *Lakes Post*, 8 April 2021, p. 9.

Jessica Coates, 'Snapper Fishes For Great Images', *Geelong Advertiser*, 12 May 2021

Various organisations communicated with their networks via social media:

- a) Open House Melbourne <https://www.openhousemelbourne.org/event/end-of-an-era/>
- b) Melbourne Design Week <https://2021.designweek.melbourne/events/ocean-scenes/>
- c) Deakin University Blog <https://blogs.deakin.edu.au/article/end-of-an-era-the-last-gippsland-lakes-fishermen/>
- d) Melbourne Maritime Heritage Network <https://www.mmhn.org.au/event/a-rare-look-into-the-fishing-community/>

- e) *The End of an Era* Facebook page documented positive commentary from the federal Member for Gippsland, Darren Chester, on April 5 and the Victorian State member for Gippsland East, Tim Bull, on April 3. This, in turn, generated interest from their followers.

Importantly, the project won a Victorian Community History Award in 2021 indicating both the quality and broad appeal of the project outcomes. <https://prov.vic.gov.au/community/grants-and-awards/community-history-awards>. Winning this prize is a significant achievement which recognises the importance of the story and the appropriateness of the way it was told.

Furthermore, the project team were honoured to give a presentation on the project methods and outcomes at the Annual General Meeting of Oral History Victoria in October 2021. This gave us an opportunity to amplify the fishermen's voices even further and promote the importance of working proactively to make records – be they audio-visual, text, objects or images - before it is too late.

An online presence is available via the project website, and the project will link future publications to this as they are produced.



# Project materials developed

## Archival materials created for curation, publication and exhibition.

The following fishermen and community members were interviewed and the majority of the recordings (as indicated \*) are housed in the NLA Oral History Collection. Copies of interviews that were not collected and curated by the NLA are held by the TL and the OH interviewer.

- Arthur Allen \*
- James Casement
- Micah Davey
- Rob and Matt Jenkins\*
- Gary and Harold Leonard\*
- Frank Mitchelson\*
- Harry Mitchelson\*
- Kevin Newman\*
- Peter Tabone
- Andrew Twigg
- Leigh Robinson and Ross Gilsenan\*
- In addition, for the purposes of the exhibition, an interview undertaken previously on the behalf of the NLA with Mary Mitchelson was linked to the project. Mary had worked commercially with her husband and brother-in-law (Frank Mitchelson) and her son (Harry Mitchelson).

A total of just under 16 hours of unedited interview material was collected, the bulk of which remains archived in the NLA, in perpetuity. Details can be found here: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn8052122>  
Additionally, TL Mitchelson edited the sound files to create extracts for use in the physical exhibitions. These are available on a temporary project website: <https://gippslandfishermen.wixsite.com/endofanera/gallery>

All interview subjects were photographed, either at work in operational situations or in portrait style. Between them, the three photographers provided approximately 700 images for consideration by the project team for curation as part of the exhibition. 50 were chosen for physical exhibition and will be included in print on demand book due for publication in late 2022.

## A Template for Community Heritage Collecting Projects (Oral History)

(See appendix 1)

# Appendices

## Appendix 1 – A Template for Community Heritage Collecting Projects (Oral History)

### The End of an Era: A Toolkit for Community Cultural Heritage Collecting

#### Introduction

The importance of community-led heritage preservation initiatives cannot be over-stated. Australia is built on the energy and activity of communities of all types, be they voluntary associations, cultural organisations, sporting clubs, charitable groups, religious, indigenous and ethnic groups or workplaces. All these groups have stories to tell relating to various aspects of Australian history, culture and identity. Telling these local stories is important, not just for the benefit of the immediate community, but because they add rich texture to the Australian national story.

These important stories, however, are often locked away or even in danger of being lost forever. People move on or pass away, documents change hands or become forgotten in the attic, garage or shed, the oral traditions can be lost with the death of the storyteller. The next generation may not realise that personal papers, photographs and ‘shaggy dog’ stories of their grandparents are in fact an important part of Australian heritage. In order to ensure that these stories are not lost to future generations, community organisations need to work proactively in their communities to seek out, collect and preserve their documentary heritage. They need to think imaginatively about the things that they collect, not only records of the important public events and people of the past, but items that reflect the reality of ordinary people’s lives, personal views, concerns and aspirations at a particular point in time.

Needless to say, the collecting options are as numerous as the number of stories a community can tell! A very important first step in any collecting project is defining the ‘problem’ that the project is intended to ‘solve’. In our case, the project was intended to give voice and pay tribute to *all* the commercial fishermen of the Gippsland Lakes, past and present, by photographing and recording interviews with the last ten licence holders in the lead up to the 2020 closure of the fishery. Learning about their connection to the land and sea, and their contribution to the development of the Gippsland Lakes fishing industry and communities would provide broader understanding of the historical contribution of the Australian fishing industry as a whole to our national story. Our project needs to be understood through this filter.

This guide, therefore, provides a suggested approach for community groups that want to conduct heritage documentation and preservation projects that focus on oral history interviewing and photo-documentary collecting. For those who are concerned with more archival or object driven projects, we direct you to guides published by the National Library of Australia (NLA) that offer advice of that nature. (See for example <https://www.nla.gov.au/sites/default/files/starterkitcommunity.pdf>)

Also, this guide assumes you have already found funding for your project, and that you have identified an agreed theme to pursue. Without either of those, you really don’t have a project!

Finally, because you are working with the public, in the public it is important to understand your obligations around public indemnity. How will project workers be covered? Do paid staff and volunteers require public indemnity insurance? Don’t forget to tick off your workplace and insurance obligations!

## 1. Identify a community champion.

The most important person in the team is the community champion – the person for whom this project is a labour of love. This person will be crucial when the energy of the group flags, or the team loses focus. This person might be the project leader, but not necessarily. The key feature is that they have authority through their knowledge of the community, and an emotional connection to the stories that want to collect and preserve. They may not receive official pay for this role, but an honorarium of some sort should be offered.

## 2. Assemble your project team.

Depending on the type and size of your project and your budget, there are two types of teams you need to consider. One is a *governance* team, the other is an *operational* team. In community projects there will probably be overlap – members of the governance team might also be doing the work and are therefore members of the operational team. The important thing to note about the governance team is that it needs to be comprised of people who are prepared to make decisions about how many interviews and photographs should be completed, with who, at what cost. The team should be able to meet regularly (in real life or online) to make sure the project is advancing on time and on budget. The governance committee shouldn't be too big, but at a bare minimum, it should include:

- the community champion,
- the project manager,
- the chief oral historian,
- the chief photographer/s,
- co-opted consultants as required.

Depending upon the type of project, this committee could include members of the Local History Society or others with a deep knowledge of the community, who can offer advice and guidance when it comes to selecting interview subjects. Depending on the intended outputs (e.g., an exhibition, a published book, an online exhibition, a digitised archival collection) someone with expertise in a relevant area could be co-opted. For instance, you might want to include an archivist if your project intends to create a collection of documents. Because our intended output was a public exhibition, a museums specialist was involved in our early planning meetings. At the first governance meeting, a draft meeting schedule should be established. Each meeting should have an agenda and minutes or meeting notes. As well as keeping the project on track, these will help with writing final acquittal reports.

You then need to consider who will do the operational work. This may include paid positions and volunteers. For the purposes of planning, consider the skills you need and then, depending upon your budget, work out which you may be able to find volunteers for. Oral history projects demand a range of skills and staff may be needed for a range of roles, for example:

- project manager with strong community links (essential),
- oral historian or oral history trainer,
- interviewers/fieldworkers,
- translators,
- transcribers,
- archivist,
- web designer,
- sound editors,

- graphic designers,
- photographers,
- museum and gallery specialists.

### 3) PLAN!

Please understand when you set out to do an oral history project that **everything will take longer than you think it will!** The interview is the quickest part of the process! It takes time to build relationships with potential partners (including potential curators and repositories), volunteers and participants, and the process of collecting and documenting your interviews can be time-consuming too.

Preparation, research, recording, summarising, transcribing and editing all need to be factored in. For every hour of interview recorded, it is wise to factor in at least 8-10 hours of pre- and post-production. Likewise, preparation and processing time should be factored into any photography project. **If the work you are doing is weather dependent, be sure to factor in time delays. It's better to have time on your hands than to run out of it.**

It is a good idea to plan different stages into your project. **Recruiting** a project manager, an oral history professional and training volunteers might be a first step. The project manager should be a member of the community being represented, or at the very least, have a deep historical knowledge of it. Oral historians and photographers don't necessarily need to be members of the community, but they **must have excellent people skills** and be capable of feeling and expressing deep empathy especially when the topic deals with sensitive matters.

Allow sufficient time to identify and recruit a broad cross-section of interviewees. Be specific in your project brief about the number of interviews you will record, how long they will be, how many will be summarised and/or transcribed and archived into a collection. An *experienced* full-time interviewer can be expected to complete interviews more quickly and efficiently than volunteers, so if you are training volunteers to collect interviews, be realistic about how many they are likely to achieve.

As well as the interview time, also plan for:

- What equipment will I use?
- training, preparation and research,
- building and maintaining relationships with interviewees and/or volunteers,
- travelling to interviews,
- cancellations and postponements,
- uploading and backing-up copies of the recorded interviews,
- documenting each interview (with a written summary),
- transcribing or translating interviews if required,
- getting interviewee recording agreements (ie informed consent forms),
- choosing and editing extracts from the interviews and developing outputs.

Note well that the above generally applies to photographic projects, as well. Although less preparation time is required, and transcription is not required, the principles of relationship building, and post-production are very important. The following list also offers tailored advice for photographers:

- the photographer must have good people skills as well as technical skills. Experience working with people as well as in landscapes is important,

- a photographer with a working with children permit can work with more flexibility in public,
- given the amount of equipment required, photographers should have access to reliable transport,
- the following equipment is the minimum essential to do the job: 2 SLR camera bodies with appropriate lenses and lighting gear. Cameras must be able to take photographs with file sizes that are large enough for print or online publications,
- the photographer and oral historian will need to share files and make photographs and digital recordings easily accessible to other members of the team. This may require the project manager purchasing a professional file sharing program to accommodate large files.

#### **4) Plan some more!**

Once the project appointments have been made and the team has been assembled, the governance team should meet to determine and document the following:

- definition and management of the project goals. The project manager should create a project log-book/spreadsheet/timeline to record milestones and create check lists,
- begin (or continue) discussions with potential repositories for the archival materials that are being collected,
- begin (or continue) discussions with the local arts community to locate potential gallery and exhibition spaces. Do not underestimate the time it takes to find a space.
- if plans include touring an exhibition begin (or continue) discussions with libraries and galleries as required. Do not underestimate the time it takes to find a space,
- if an exhibition is an intended output, begin mining the community for heritage items and objects, as required, to include. Create a list and ledger of people and items on loan,
- if a web presence is part of the output, investigate potential graphic and web designers,
- design a project budget template. Be sure to include all likely costs:
  - wages,
  - software,
  - printing
  - framing,
  - transport,
  - accommodation,
- plan who to interview. Compile a list that includes their contact details, interview appointment details, whether you have given and received their signed consent forms. Project depending, consider choosing from a range of perspectives, e.g., age, gender, ethnic diversity, class. Be advised by the community to ensure that it isn't only the more prominent members of the community who get invited. Sometimes 'observant onlookers' have the most interesting stories!
- design the formal paperwork for potential interview subjects:
  - invitation (n.b., in some small projects, this may be as simple as a phone call from the project champion and or manager),
  - project information sheet,
  - consent and release form
  - list of potential questions/themes to ask narrators about.
- where oral history is being undertaken by community members who are not professionals, ensure adequate training has been undertaken. Include basic interview techniques, equipment training and information about ethical obligations.

## 5. You are ready to go!

There were some unique features of our project team that might not apply to all teams. Most members of the governance committee had worked together in some capacity before this project and the oral historian and one of the photographers were a husband-and-wife team. This meant that scheduling time with the interview subjects was relatively easy to co-ordinate. ***Where possible, the photographers and oral historians should consider working in teams to create efficiencies for the interview subjects.***

Furthermore, the interview subjects were self-selecting; they were the last ten licensees with permission to fish the Gippsland Lakes and closely related family and community members. Because the project champion had deep links into the community, she was able to facilitate introductions between the oral historian and the photographers with efficiency and tact. ***Where possible, initial invitations to interview subjects should come from the project champion. Once agreement has been reached, the oral historian and photographer should contact the interview subjects as soon as possible to talk and arrange appointments.***

***Think hard about how and where you want to conduct the interviews.*** Will they be done ‘in the wild’ with people while they work? Will they be face to face conversations across the table? Our project focused on the latter, which gave us greater opportunity to use equipment suitable for archival quality recordings. Photographers, however, went out on boats to record the work as it was being done. The practicalities of where and how documentation can be done should be discussed with interview subjects as part of the introductory conversation.

Finally, create the content (interviews and photographs) as quickly as possible. As well as our interview subjects a key content creation milestone was self-selecting because the fishery closed on 1 April 2020. All operational photography, by definition, needed to be completed by then. Our team worked hard to ensure that it was completed quicker than that and, given the COVID 19 inspired interruptions that wreaked havoc with all project planning throughout 2020 and 2021, we are more than relieved we did. None of us could have expected the impact of a global pandemic as we set out on this project, and we are relieved we had all our interviews and photographic content created before it hit. While there were still many milestones to achieve to create a successful exhibition, most of the curatorial work could be undertaken online. ***Expect the unexpected and create content and complete all research that requires physical visits to libraries, museums, archives etc. as quickly as possible.***

## 6. Back Everything Up!

This is a very short section. Back all digital files up regularly. Make sure they are held in *at least* two locations, with one of those locations preferably being cloud based, and therefore sharable within the team. Our team had backups in three locations: cloud based, external drives and on laptops.

Create a consistent filing nomenclature so that it is easy for team members to locate materials on shared drives or services. Try to be disciplined about this; file names such as ‘Susans selections’ are not meaningful enough. Even date stamped file name like ‘2021-01-29-Susans-Selections’ is a more meaningful option. ***You will save a lot of time by adhering to an agreed file naming structure.***

## 7. Planning for your outputs.

Not everyone will be planning to exhibit their content publicly and/or online so the following may not be relevant. Regardless of your intended outputs, it is nevertheless important to start thinking early about the story you want to tell with your content, so that the oral historian, photographers and any other content creators are able to direct their efforts to help you to tell that story.

If you are planning an exhibition, the relationship between the project champion, project manager and project curator needs to be close enough to understand the community-driven narrative that the pictures, sound and objects need to tell. Sometimes (as was the case with our project) that relationship will be bound up in the one person. It is important that this person be adequately compensated for the work and responsibility they take on. Their intellectual and emotional labour is vital to the task of creating the narrative, which will then guide the analysis of the interview materials and photographs, with an eye and ear to the themes they present.

Once the story to be told is agreed upon, some exhibition specific practical tasks include:

- understanding the space you have available to you and make decisions about the size and number of items to display accordingly. Take the advice of gallery staff on these decisions!
- engaging a good printer, if possible one who has worked in gallery spaces before. This is not essential, but it is helpful to get the advice of professionals who understand the many print media available, and how your work could be best presented,
- considering how you will make your audio and/or video available. You will need to edit sound files to tell the story; who will do this? Will you use QR codes so that people can listen to interviews on their own devices? These tasks are time consuming and need to be started early,
- most museum exhibitions will need to provide some contextual information panels and labels to help people navigate their way through the story. Be sure to get onto that task early. Writing for exhibition panels is a skilled task so if your budget allows it, engage a professional historian to complete it,
- having clarity about when you need to ‘bump in and out’ and who will be able to help you do this,
- considering how you can get visitor feedback and attendance numbers from your venues,
- understanding your insurance obligations with regards to the exhibition materials, especially if you will be transporting them yourself in a private vehicle,
- If you intend to have official launches and openings, clarify who your speakers will be as early as possible. Make sure you have a budget for catering!

## **8. Promote your work and the exhibition**

Establish social media accounts under the name of your project to generate interest in the lead up to the project and to provide important information about exhibition times and venues. You can share other media (articles, interviews etc) through these accounts. Link to the accounts of the venues to maximize your exposure.

## **9. Consent and ethics**

Just because this section comes near the end, do not think it is the least important part of the project. On the contrary, all oral history projects must be built around ethical frameworks. Ethics are an important part of conducting oral history interviews. They ensure that the rights and privacy of the interviewee are always respected, as well as clearly stating the objectives of the organisation or person undertaking the interview. This requires the interviewee to clearly understand why they have been selected, why the interview is taking place, their rights (including copyright), and how the interview will be used, stored and accessed by others. Oral History New South Wales provides an

excellent resource on their website, describing the principles of ethical practice that we encourage you to read:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a28b78d692ebe8cccef0034/t/5eb2745aff12ff7e089e8130/1588753499990/ethical+practice+guidlines.pdf>

They also provide a very good sample consent form for project teams to base their own forms on

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a28b78d692ebe8cccef0034/t/5ad03d6288251b6316333442/1523596660553/Conditions+of+use+forms.pdf>

## 9. Review yourself

When you've completed your project, take time to reflect on what you could have done differently. Survey your team – the following set of questions helped us to think about what worked, what didn't and what advice we would give to others hoping to start their own collecting projects.

- Why did you decide you had to do this work?
- What were your goals when you first started/got involved in this project in 2019?
- How did these goals change as the time progressed?
- Do you feel that the goals were achieved?
- What did you enjoy about your involvement in this project?
- What most enthused and inspired you?
- What most surprised you about the process/project?
- What did you find hard about the process/project?
- What do you wish you'd known before you started?
- What are some skills you have developed as a result of your involvement?
- How did you manage the relationships within the community?
- What have you learned that would make this easier?
- What did you learn about your own community that you didn't know before you started this project?
- How did you manage the relationships in the project team?
- What have you learned that would make this easier?
- How did this collaboration work to ensure that community led the project? Do you feel like it was a project owned by the community?
- If it didn't work to achieve this, what needs to happen to make it happen?
- What still needs to be done?
- Would you recommend this type of collaborative project to members of other regional and rural communities?
- What would you do to improve things?
- Would you do it all again?

## 10. Conclusion

Our experiences during *The End of an Era* project confirmed our belief that community led collecting initiatives are an important way of building a sense of belonging in small communities, even when they are under stress. The keys to success are community buy in, ethical behaviour and detailed planning. We encourage community organisations of all kinds to reach out to professionals who are keen to help. But mainly, take ownership of your heritage and act quickly to collect it, particularly oral history, before it is too late!



## **Appendix 2 - Project Team:**

- Team Leader (TL) Lynda Mitchelson-Twigg. Lynda is from a multigenerational fishing family from Lakes Entrance who have been operating there since 1888. Her husband was one of the last ten licence holders. She is still very much involved in the family business and has been involved in a number of research and development projects over time.
- Oral Historian (OH) Dr Nikki Henningham. Dr Henningham has conducted nearly 200 interviews on behalf of the National Library of Australia (NLA) across a wide range of projects.
- Three photographers - Leigh Henningham, Donna Squire and Geoff Stanton - brought a range of skills and experience to the task of capturing operational shots and portraiture for archiving and exhibiting.
- Consultants Dr Tanya King and Dr Kirsten Abernethy, having worked with the community for several years prior to this project, provided expert advice in the area of socio-cultural and historical features of small-scale fishing communities, from an anthropological perspective. Dr King was also able to use her Deakin University connections to find gallery space for exhibitions in Geelong.

## **Appendix 3 - Storytellers:**

- Arthur Allen
- James Casement
- Micah Davey
- Ross Gilsenan
- Rob and Matt Jenkins
- Gary Leonard
- Harold Leonard
- Frank Mitchelson
- Harry Mitchelson
- Mary Mitchelson
- Kevin Newman
- Leigh Robinson
- Peter Tabone
- Andrew Twigg

## Appendix 4 - References

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- <sup>1</sup> The background section is informed by the following publications; Abernethy, K., Barclay, K., McIlgorm, A., Gilmour, P., McClean, N., Davey, J. 2020, *Victoria's fisheries and aquaculture: economic and social contributions*, FRDC 2017-092, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, <https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/2020-06/uts-fass-victoria-fisheries-aquaculture-report.pdf> [accessed 2021-09-07], Blair, Simone, 'Shooting a Net at 'Gilly's Snag': The Movement of Belonging among Commercial Fishermen at the Gippsland Lakes', PhD, Department of Geography, University of Melbourne, 2006; Ellis, Jill and Lee, Timothy (ed) *Casting the Net: Early Fishing Families of the Gippsland Coast*, Lakes Entrance Family History Resource Centre, Lakes Entrance, 2002;
- <sup>2</sup> There are numerous collections dedicated to the theory, method and practice of oral history. Those that have best informed this work include: Perks, Robert and Thomson, Alistair (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Routledge, New York and London, 2015 and Abrams, Lynn (ed) *Oral History Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Routledge, New York and London, 2016.
- <sup>3</sup> Hoffman, Marella, *Practicing Oral History to Improve Public Policies and Programs*, Routledge, New York and London, 2018; Oral History New South Wales Website, <https://www.oralhistorynsw.org.au/> [accessed 2021-09-05]
- <sup>4</sup> Oral History Australia Website, <https://oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/> [accessed 2021-09-05]
- <sup>5</sup> Shaw, Jenny (in collaboration with Abrolhos islands fishing community) 2013, *Seeing Change: A photographic story from Abrolhos fishers*, Northern Agricultural Catchments Council, Geraldton, W.A.