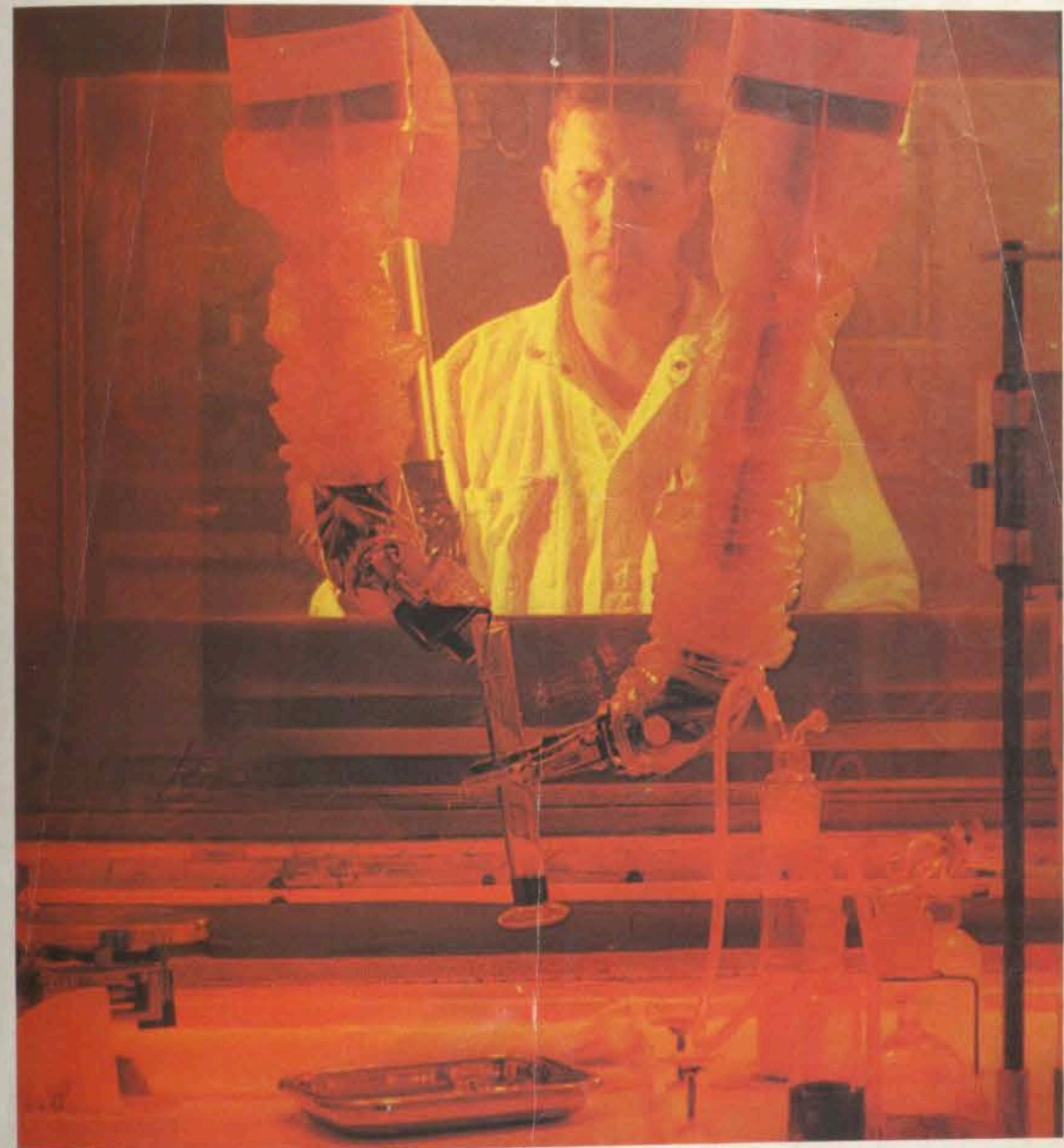


Walkabout

AUSTRALIA'S WAY OF LIFE MAGAZINE

Alienation of the individual may be the fee we have to pay for technological progress, says author **GEORGE JOHNSTON**. See Page five.



FEBRUARY 1970

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40 CENTS

FOR THE MARLIN MEN OF CAIRNS

Four Yards of Fish Is Not Enough

STORY AND PICTURES: VIC McCRISTAL



THEY are commuters, the charter men. They seem so at dawn, with their yellow Land Rover wheeling out from the ice works and past the Post Office, cornering at the untidy aquarium that once was a swimming pool.

Hayles Wharf is a relic, as work-tired as the drab mackerel boats clustered beside it, but two boats there are different. Sharp, white, high bridged, shining with white epoxy and laced with the rigid gleams of chrome and stainless steel. Tall and fragile outrigger poles sway above them, Tennessee and Sea Baby II.

The commuters swing burdens of ice and plastic lunchboxes down to the cockpit of Sea Baby II, climbing down a rusting ladder. A hose runs their smirching footprints from the non-skid decks. As the twin motors throb alive, Tennessee's crew appears. Between the pilings, the boatmen talk — laconic, direct. Game fishing's upper echelon.

"Hi, Bob, Charlie."

"Hi, George. Hi there, Laurie. George, you got a thermometer handy there? I'd like to check the temperature in the harbour."

That voice is Dyer, Pick-A-Box TV compere; shirtless, tanned, and looking fitter than when you saw him at the start of the season. The answer floats back across the water.

"Eighty-three."

"So high? Thanks, George." Bob believes in temperatures; Bransford has less confidence in their effect on marlin, but he still carries a thermometer with him. Fishermen!

The clients arrive. South Australians Johnno Johnson and Keith Waterman. Johnno this day is to tie to a monster. The boat will return four hours late,

but nobody knows this yet. Men have hopes in the morning, and know the truth in the evening.

Three hours later, all is blue except the cockpit of the boat. The purple ocean is slick calm, so deep a hue you could fill a pen beside the boat. Stocky game rods stand rampant in their holders, slack line runs from their tips to the outrigger clips and runs back forty yards, taut, to troll baits of whole fish. Blinking away down deep, swimming with the falsity of life that is a tribute to Laurie Woodbridge's skill with hook and twine.

On the high bridge facing astern is George Bransford—a quiet man, softly spoken, with eyes eternally hawking the ocean. His stillness is that of the hunter, a man as quiet and deceptive as a bear trap.

An hour later. The morning air is somnolent, clients dozing beside their rods, when Bransford's voice raps out. Not loud. Hard.

"Marlin left rigger!"

You see it, a smudge in the lilac, behind and below the mackerel bait, suddenly clearer and rising; blue fumes belch from the exhausts as the motors roar. The big fish is incredibly alight, a luminescent electric purple tail and pectorals sweeping, turning, slicing. The bill skids at the surface, miss, turn, another strike.

"Doggone. He's got it."

There's a wrong note in that somewhere, but nobody else notices. Johnno has the big rod out bent, arced, a live spring in his big hands as he wrenches across to the flat-backed fighting chair, line streaming hard astern. The sea splits, and eighty yards out the head comes out, black bill and

silver and black body lifting and thrusting higher, body clean and then the tail, four yards of fish above the sea, falling back in a boom of spray.

Three times the marlin comes out, and each time closer. You can feel the boat and the angler working together, you notice Johnno edging the drag higher and the arrowed sweep of calm water from the backing boat. It will take them only five or ten minutes to tag the fish. Three times you saw the marlin leap, and suddenly you see it again, this time as a deep and wonderful gleam through the ocean.

That is when the hook pulls out. Johnno expresses no disappointment, and neither does his skipper.

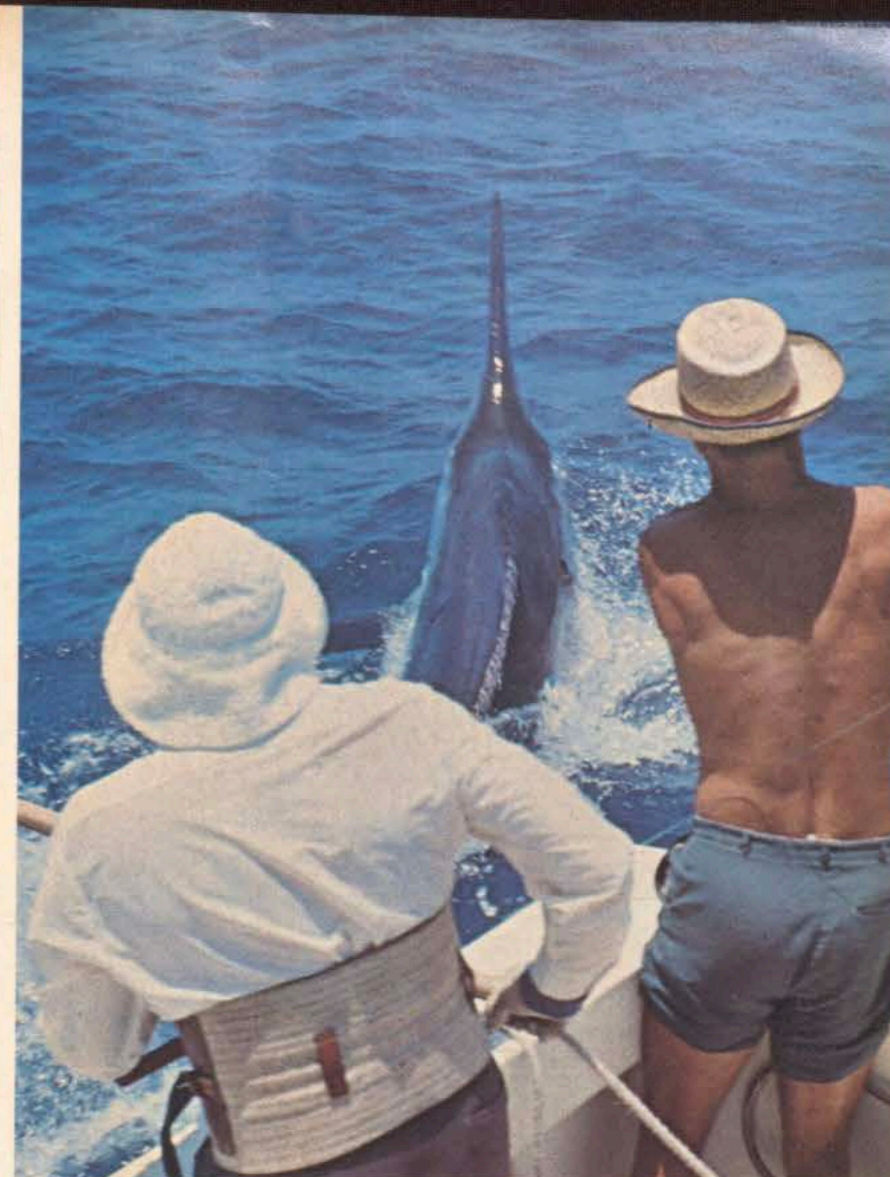
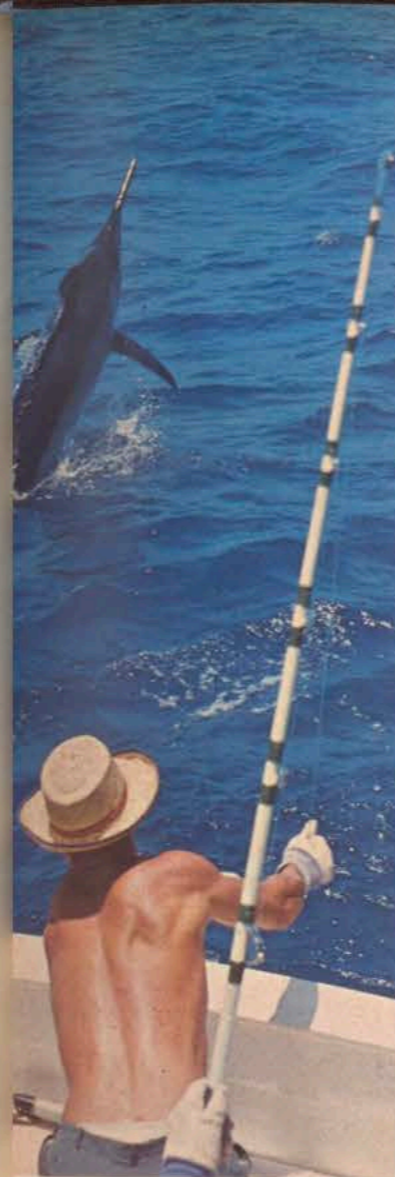
"Five hundred, George?"

"Four, five. Doggone. I tried to scare him off with the motors but he already had the hungry colours switched on. Oh, well."

ANY OTHER gamefishing ground on earth, game anglers swap their souls for 500 lb. marlin. It's only at Cairns that dodging such fish is a fact of life on the top boats. Marking tags have been lanced into the shoulders of 800 pounders, but the figures don't transmit the full story.

Look, I've been fishing all my life and I still don't know how to tell about Cairns marlin. One way is to mention Zane Grey and Ernest Hemingway, because people have read what they wrote about billfish. Well, off Cairns you see marlin three and four times the size Zane and Ernest sought adjectives for.

And the clean-cut, hard-built charter crews make it seem as normal and regular as commuting to the office, a



FACING PAGE: Top angler Bob Walker, with Bill Chapman holding chair and Peter Wright giving advice. LEFT: A yard long bill and half ton body, hooked marlin in the open sea. RIGHT: Beaten after 100 minutes of spectacular fighting.

kind of overtime when, as to-day, a giant would be hooked and broken off after five hours' fight. Otherwise, you leave the dock at 7 a.m. and return at 5 p.m.

George Bransford was already a famous international charter skipper when he brought his family to Cairns from Florida in 1963. He came because he had seen the Barrier Reef as a paratrooper back in World War II, and had an educated idea there would be very big marlin outside it. His long odyssey with the biggest fish ever caught by men has almost ended there several times, but each time the unstoppable monsters have broken free.

These past few years have seen changes in the world record books for the ultimate and toughest in fishing, and most of the changes have come from Cairns. Of billfish over 1,000 lb.

being caught anywhere, a substantial majority comes from Cairns. Bransford's experience, and the sophisticated methods he uses, have passed a rich heritage to the local crews and boats. The standard is high and competitive, the formula brutally simple. Black marlin equals clients. No fish, no business. A skipper must be good enough to learn fast and improve his catch rapidly if he is to enter the field, because game fishermen know the skilled from the others. Theirs is a tight-knit international fraternity. They can pick a comer amongst skippers.

Bransford is an established great amongst charter men, but he brought in fewer fish in 1969. His protégé and friend, Allan Collis, of the Cairns boat building family, brought in more fish on his little 32-foot Marlan.

And Blue Ray, skippered by George

White and the irrepressible Peter Wright, brought in many big fish. Sea Baby I, under Dennis Wallace, a former Gulf country prawner, cracked the magical four-figure mark. So did the Lucky Strike, a New Zealand boat — with a world record claim for 50 lb. line of 1124 lb.

Game anglers understand exactly why Bransford brought back less fish. Almost to a man his clients are those who seek an encounter with just one fish, known variously around the world as Mr. Big, Kananui, or Old Broken Nose. They dodge away from marlin after marlin, avoid areas where "small" ones live — fish of 200 to 500 lb. — or if a fish can't be avoided and hooks up, it is brought to the boat as fast as possible, tagged, and released.

Their dedication is in many cases so total that they prefer avoiding fish to

wasting time tagging them—in a world where a marlin of any kind is a status symbol. That the monster they seek is many times more likely to escape than to be caught is beside the point.

THE MIDDAY radio sked from the bridge of Sea Baby II. The voice is young and clear.

"Marlan calling Sea Baby II."

"Sea Baby II back."

"George, you want to hear a fish story?"

Bransford grins with his eyes preoccupied by the sea.

"Go ahead, Allan."

"We just saw your Horrible Monster, mate. God. I know now what you meant. Three feet across the back..."

George chuckles, listening. "He's all shook up." Then pressing the microphone switch, speaks again. "Hey, that's

great. Old Broken Nose himself. We saw two like that last year, you can't tell the weight except it's gotta be three or four thousand. Hey, you guys SURE you saw him?"

Allan yelps at the needle, and Bransford chuckles again.

"See it? Everybody saw it — Ern Palmer, Alf Wadham. I was dead scared we'd hook him."

"Well, send him down thisaway. We've been looking for him long enough. I know what you mean about that size, nobody could hold him. Oh, man." His eyes haven't left the sea. They don't, all day. If you see 100 marlin with Bransford, he will see 98 of them first.

The sked over, he suggests that Old Broken Nose is actually in the pay of the Tourist Bureau, swimming up and down outside Cairns picking at a

smorgasbord of wahoo, dolphin, mackerel, bonito, tuna, mullet and runners, and scaring fishermen half to death — but never getting caught.

Bransford is a rare man. His habit of understatement has caused many to under-guess him. He's hard of hearing, and this can make him seem remote and withdrawn. His standards are rigid, because he never settles for less than top human performance, especially from himself.

I've seen him make mistakes, like the day he banged a prop on the coral on a spring low tide, but Bransford was so embarrassed he stayed red from the neck up for hours. It's this implacable perfectionism that draws his clients to him and extracts their total confidence and friendship.

They range widely in style, average income executives to wheeling million-

aires, but on board they're part of a team. Bransford and Laurie Woodbridge, his mate, become crew, friend, guide, coach and confidante. You get the feeling of rapport going against the big fish, and it counts. You can feel it in the air. There's no other way to do what they're attempting.

IN A QUIETER and more permanent way, Bransford's skills and methods have had tremendous impact on Australian game fishing. Without him, it is difficult to conceive of any of the numerous thousand-pounders of Cairns having been taken. Other game fishermen knew marlin were off the Barrier, with small ones inside it, but the specialised techniques and boats were not then available.

The changes in a few short years are reflected in more than new world records. Allan Collis was Bransford's mate for two years, before building Marlan. Allan is now no stranger to four-figure fish, and his mate of the 1968 season, Jim Harvey, returned from the Bay of Islands in 1969 with a group of top Kiwi sportsmen. They went home in triumph with an incredible black marlin world record of 1124 lb. on 50 lb. line, a fitting reward for their enthusiasm.

The record on 80 lb. line is held by Dick Obach, on Bransford's original boat, with a figure of 1064 lb. The big figure on 130 lb. tackle, the heaviest allowed, is 1560 lb.—a black marlin caught off Peru in 1953 by Alfred Glassell, Jr. The closest figure to this at Cairns was set by Basil Mitchell, again with Bransford, with a fish of 1208 lb. It was mere inches smaller in size than Glassell's.

Other great fish have been caught on other Cairns boats, so that anglers are now less dependent on a hard-to-get booking with Bransford or Collis. George White on Blue Ray, Peter Wright, and Dennis Wallace on Sea Baby I, are amongst those with the experience vital to the job.

Peter Wright, Miami University graduate and billfish fanatic, talking about a 1969 fish: "When Brazakka (Wallace) said he was bringing in one about 450 that they hadn't been able to haul into the cockpit, we all knew it was no goddam 450. He had it figured for six or seven, and he wanted his wife down there to see it. It went 1062! Man, he was so lit up! I'll tell you, he doesn't cop Brazakka any more. We christened him 450, and he's stuck with it."

THE GROUNDS on the continental shelf off Cairns are becoming increasingly well charted even in depth down to 200 fathoms. The boats have their own local jargon. Mother Ludlow and

450 were both in the Gobi Desert this morning without seeing a fish; the Old Fox gave up diddlin' about the ridge where Allan saw Old Broken Nose, and has mooched on down to the Ole Fishin' Hole.

"Ecstasy calling! Ecstasy calling!" The voice is young, urgent, even desperate. "Would one of you big blokes stand by, we've just hooked a hell of a thing here and if it jumps in the boat we're gone!"

"Marlan back. How big?"

"I dunno. Awful big. My God, look at it go..."

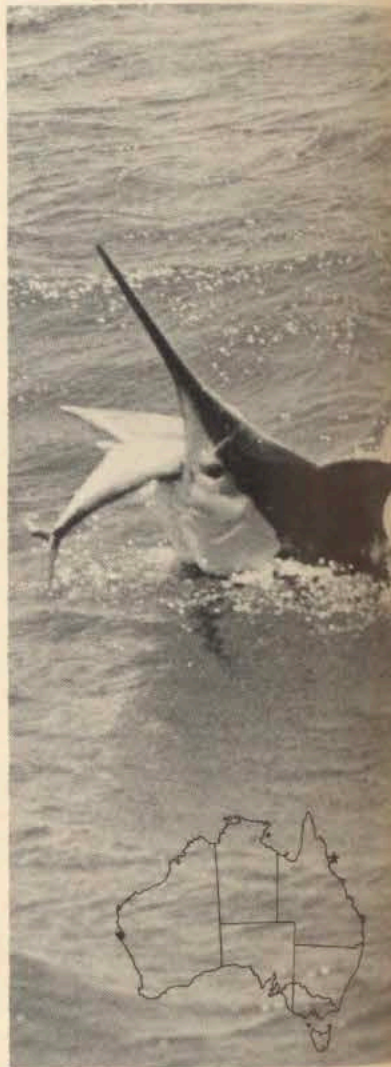
Across 20 miles of ocean, the scattered charter crews are grinning. Ecstasy is a 20-foot outboard from Brisbane, and this is their first black marlin, three young fishermen who'd made the journey on a relative shoestring. The charter crews had showed

them how to rig gear and baits and given them a shove in the right direction. If they were fishermen, they'd need no more.

They lost the fish. And the next, and the next. But they were hooked, and they were fishermen.

They were new recruits to the world fraternity, a highly competitive fraternity of incredible dimensions in the United States. The ethics and standards are laid down by the International Game Fishing Association, and they're not easy. Black marlin are the largest and scarcest of the marlin family, and to master half a ton of the sea's fastest predator — which catches and feeds on dolphin fish, oceanic bonito and wahoo, amongst others — on a fragile nylon line, calls for more than a mere boat and a crew.

How are such fish caught? In the



ABOVE: Client leans out to bring the cruel looking gaffing hook into use. RIGHT: Gaffing marlin of about 300 lb. attempts to throw the bait it had taken. Fish was released. The fishermen are after bigger things.

Angler Basil Mitchell, at left, is congratulated by George Bransford of Sea Baby II on a catch of a "small" 699 lb. black marlin. Bransford's skill and methods have had tremendous impact on Australian game fishing.

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effort to throw the stinging hook in their jaw, they jump. And dive, and swim, many times faster than the sharks or whales. They can be made to exhaust themselves, or can even be driven to death. They greyhound across the waves in blue and white patterns of raw power, burning their strength while skilled anglers work man's latest technology against them. A game reel is a muscle computer, and, with the rod, may cost \$1000.

The bottom formations around which they live are located by careful navigation and electronic echo sounders.

Most of the truly big fish outlast both tackle and man, and escape. At Cairns, the vast majority of smaller marlin are tagged or chased away, and only a minority end up dying in the cruel and remorseless minuet of flying gaff and heavy rope.

The reasons few boated fish are brought in are a blend of conservation, ethic and necessity. There's no future in coming back with an average marlin caught at 11 a.m. when you might find Old Broken Nose later — so the first is released unharmed and the angler fishes on.

Another and controversial factor is disposal of the great fish. Take a case where Angler X brings home a typical good fish of 800 or 900 lb. Weighed, photographed, measured and recorded, it hangs from the gantry on the wharf in the late afternoon light, the crowd moving away. Angler X decides against having any part of the fish preserved as a trophy, so ownership reverts to the skipper.

A bystander asks if he wants the bill, and he answers no, you can have it on the usual condition. You take the bill, you gotta take the whole fish. The bystander blinks, a little hurt, looks at the fish, changes his mind. What can you do with it? The following morning the skipper tows the marlin back to sea, half-hitches roped around the bill. Far out, it is dumped.

It's not considered tactful to mention the dumping, or what happens on a flying gaff, but it is as much a truth as an ox in a slaughterhouse or a trout gasping to death in an angler's creel. The waste? Cairns Game Club has tried repeatedly to dispose of the catch, with limited success. The supply of black marlin is sporadic and seasonal, and so doesn't suit a commercial market. Efforts to export the flesh to Italy, where it is an expensive delicacy, came to a stop when the Department of Primary Industry ruled that the fish had been left too long for processing. Smoked marlin with white sauce is a gourmet's dish, yet the current situation is that if someone could be found to accept the fish, he would be more than welcome in Cairns.

The waste and cruelty, however real, are in fact a tiny corner of the bigger picture. Black marlin fishing is a sport of unbelievable spectacle, power and drama. It attracts the rich and powerful because in that blue arena the fish can defeat the man. And often does.

To Cairns, it means visitors who can afford anything up to \$1000 a week in boat charters and accommodation. Many bring wives and families. I calculated direct cash income to Cairns of \$20,000 a week during the busy season of four months, September to December, with decided slackening during the rest of the year. The international publicity and prestige attached to marlin is something that cannot be bought.

It has brought in train a boom in boats and motor sales; a chain reaction in smaller craft light tackle fishing for wahoo, Pacific sailfish, Spanish mackerel and other gamefish.

Oddly, game fishing doesn't need publicity. Big game men have a highly developed grapevine, and they live in a world apart. I recall once asking George Bransford how Prince Charles stacked up as an angler.

"Who?" asked George.

"Prince Charles. You took him out a couple of years back."

"Oh, sure. Yeah, he caught a few mackerel. Oh, he seemed a decent enough young feller. Laurie, how many mullet you want for to-morrow?"

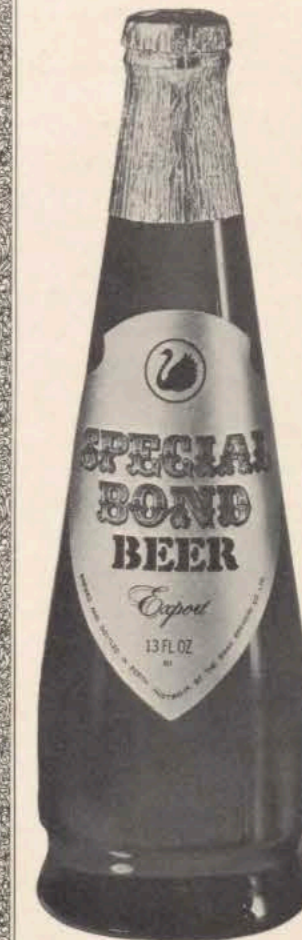
To-morrow. Always to-morrow. It could be the day to defeat a great and beautiful monster of the size which has already beaten some dozens of the best game anglers in the world. As an eagle is to birds, a marlin is to fish. Hooked, it can swim at 50 miles an hour, leap through the surface, dive to 200 fathoms; the fight may cover 20 miles and last for hours.

There is one substantial blot on the marlin picture at Cairns, and it is drawing increasing rumbles of protest from both visitors and boatmen. The boat facilities of Cairns Harbour are shabby or non-existent, in incredible contrast to the skilled crews, top-grade accommodation, well-run Game Club and hospitable locals. The fishing may not be enough to hold top boats in Cairns, because skilled game crew command a premium overseas, and good facilities are a substantial lure.

In January George Bransford was in Tahiti researching both the fishing and the facilities which could be provided there in the event of his transfer. The loss of a recognised international charter skipper would be a severe blow to the local industry.

Further, it was reported that Allan Collis was negotiating with U.S. businessman Bill Chapman about a permanent position skippering Chapman's new boat at Cairns. This would take Collis

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A Marina would catch Fishermen

"Everything else here is so good that it makes the facilities seem even worse. It doesn't figure. An opportunity to develop fishing like Cairns has — and nothing happening. Nothing." — **Bill Chapman, New Jersey game angler and regular visitor.**

"Quote me if you like, but it's whipping a dead horse. I've been trying to get something moving about the facilities in Cairns all the years I've been coming here. And the position is still that I'm fortunate to be able to tie up to

a mooring beside the wharf, though they tell me it's due to be replaced soon. A marina is big business, and it brings the overseas game fishermen AND their boats." — **Bob Dyer, TV personality.**

"It's pretty rough. You don't know how much extra work it makes until you run a boat. Scrambling around to moor out in the harbour after a long day outside is a drag. It's embarrassing when you notice clients being polite about it; the modern angler is used to something better." — **Allan Collis, skipper of Marlan.**

"No, I won't discuss the facilities. No comment. The people here in Cairns have been wonderful to us, so I'm not going to talk about the harbour facilities. We're indebted to too many people here." — **George Bransford, skipper, Sea Baby II.**

—**"Snooks" Fuller, skipper of visiting New Zealand boat Lucky Strike.**

"All the boats are unhappy about it. I've had some good overseas offers and I know other skippers have too, and you reach a point where they start to sound pretty good. The position is now that if a few boats leave Cairns, the whole thing is killed. Hell, game boats are a big investment. Every time a boat goes past, Sea Baby II gets bashed against the dock, which is so darn rickety it's hardly safe for the public. And I'm one of the lucky ones, because I at least have a mooring. The only way we can progress is to get a marina, and it's being blocked." — **George Bransford, skipper, Sea Baby II.**

from the ranks of the charter skippers. Peter Wright also indicated that he might return as crew for Chapman — who is one of the men dedicated to seeking just one fish.

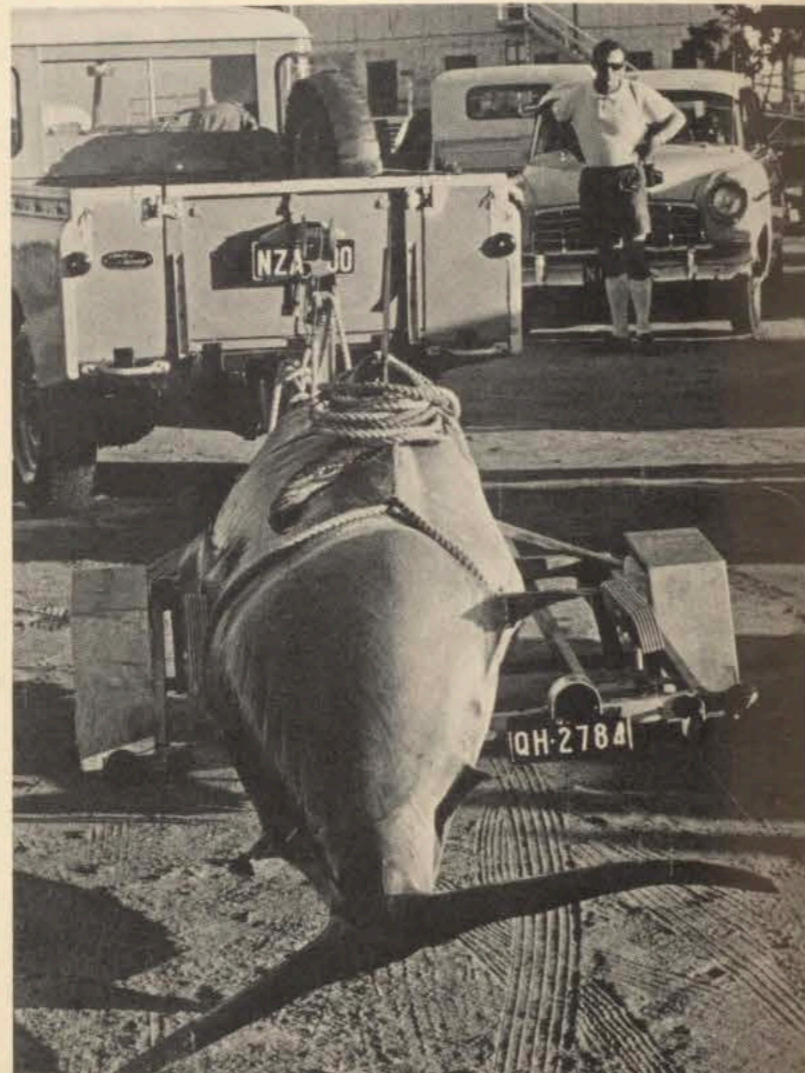
So — no facilities, no top crews. No top crews, no game fishing industry at Cairns. The great billfish are there, but the dead hand of the authorities appears to be a stumbling block to development.

It's a disturbing insight into the way Australians may be caught napping by the pace and power of modern tourist development.

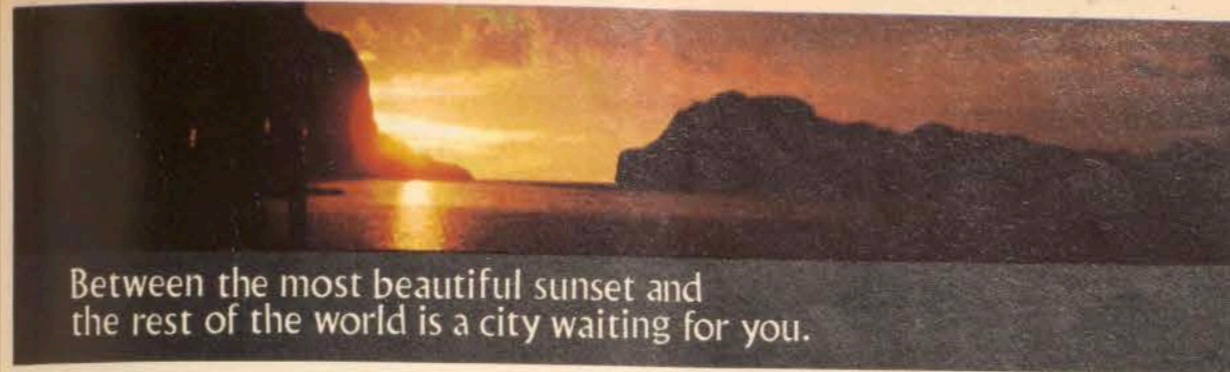
Game anglers are accustomed to adequate marinas, and Cairns is worse than archaic by modern standards. With the tide out, the harbour is a slum, festooned with garbage and stinking with effluvia from Perfume Creek. Pollution stems from many sources, including the local brewery and bitumen depots. The situation was sharply criticised by visiting scientists from Brisbane University, but no action has resulted.

Private enterprise, stemming from game fishing interests, wants to build a modern marina at Cairns. The responsible authorities oppose the idea of a commercial marina. Meantime, visitors and locals alike scramble down the rotting pilings of Hayles Wharf or paddle out across the mud and debris in a skiff.

The inertia of the authorities is a visible, smellable, tangible truth at Cairns, and it's choking the growth of a multi-million dollar industry. ▲



WALKABOUT



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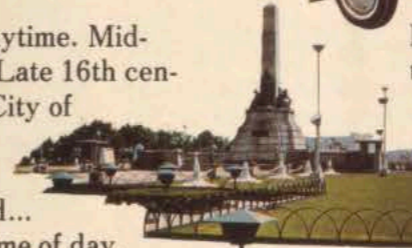
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