Seeing red in the Brisbane River
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These days, most anglers associate the Brisbane River with a healthy population of snapper that can be targeted all year round, but back in the day when City Cats were non-existent and there was only one Gateway Bridge, consistently catching snapper in the Brisbane River was not a common occurrence.

This brief historical journey is based upon personal experience mixed up with some statistical evidence to back up what I have seen come and go over the past decade or so.

In this article, I’m going to talk sportfishing with artificial lures and the different techniques that have evolved around this fishery, and how they have shaped the way we target all the sportfish species that inhabit this historic southern Queensland waterway.

Shaping The River

The Brisbane River is the longest river in the South East region of Queensland, and before European settlement, the river was spiritually important and a vital source of food for the Aboriginal people of the Turrbal nation, primarily fishing in the tidal sections of water towards the mouth.

Historically, the Brisbane River contained upstream rock bars and shallows that had a natural tidal limit of only 16km, and today the current tidal limit now extends 85km upstream due to extensive channel dredging. Throughout much of the 20th century, large quantities of sand and gravel were extracted from the river for navigational purposes, and also used in many of the extensive reclamation projects from Pinkenba across to Fishermans Island.

The constant extraction of river bed material by dredges has had a considerable effect on the river. These impacts include increased turbidity, bed and bank erosion and changes in tidal hydraulics. Over the years, water quality in the river has significantly deteriorated.

Environmentally, the river is in a poor condition and has been so for many years. At times, the Brisbane River estuary did not meet the national guidelines for environmental standards and the lower reaches received very poor ratings in Healthy Waterways reports.

The major causes of pollution are excess nutrients, hydrocarbons, pesticides and bacteria, which become concentrated in the river and its sediment after flowing off the surrounding lands. Thankfully, the dredging stopped, and although the river is still a shadow of its former pristine days, the fishing is as good as most anglers have seen it in their lifetime.

Boom and Bust

Over the years, you hear stories and rumours of how good the fishing was, and my understanding is that even back in the day before over-fishing and the endless netting of the river, it still experienced times of boom and bust.

Times of plenty came due to extreme flooding events that aided breeding cycles and natural recruitment. It is these extreme flooding events that have always benefited the fish populations of the river, and either dispersed populations for a period or drew them back and concentrated them depending on the river’s cycle.

Well-known movers are species like mulloway, and we have seen populations boom since the floods that started in the late 1990s and continuing up to the big floods in 2010 and 2011.

Snapper movements are not as black and white as this, and most movement appears to be governed by size and prime locations that suit the size and age of the fish. Snapper may appear as a boom and bust species, but in reality, it’s not as drastic as other species in the river. Long-lived snapper may show up in numbers for periods of time, but this is due to their movements rather than quick influxes in numbers due to booms rather than busts.

In the Brisbane River, tagging data shows that juvenile snapper have been detected moving out of the region rather than in, though the data shows that these movements are still likely to have juveniles coming into the system.

In terms of larger snapper, the movement is mostly inbound, suggesting that the Brisbane River environment is suited to larger snapper. Larger snapper are found in similar locations to juvenile snapper, but they have less larger movements recorded, which are likely to be between habitats, indicating that as they age they tend to stabilise in their selection of habitat. When they do move, it tends to be more localised.

The majority of recaptures in the Brisbane River are local, indicating a relatively static and stable population, relative to other parts of the bay, where there is less movement detected in and out of the system. Data movements are wide ranging, depending on the year and conditions, though there is a lot of movement between neighbouring reefs and bay islands and there is also movement between the reefs off the Gold Coast and Moreton Bay. In terms of larger movements, they range across the bay, both north and south, using specific corridors for movement in a northerly and southerly direction between the different habitats.
Targeting Snapper

The early days

There was a steep learning curve I encountered when I first ventured into the domain of rive-dwelling snapper. One of the earliest reports I read was of anglers fishing the tug boat docks and getting consistent numbers of snapper. At the time, the stories of big snapper being caught on bream gear were enough to entice any angler in the region to target snapper in what appeared to be a new fishery just waiting to be exposed.

My first experience took place under the original Gateway Bridge whilst fishing out of my canoe. I only owned bream gear at the time, and after being smoked by something that left me scratching my head, I really gained a love for fishing the Brisbane River. That same trip, I landed my first snapper of around 40cm, and decided that the thing that smoked me was a massive mulloway.

In the years that followed, I would come to learn the true power and speed that snapper have, experiencing snapper shred my leaders and destroy my terminal tackle in the blink of an eye. Once I had half of an idea of how to successfully target river snapper, I still hooked way more of the bigger specimens than I would land.

My first go-to spot was the dredged ledges of Claras Rocks, which is a industrially sculpted structure carved out of an old coffee rock formation spanning the river. Here, my growing group of keen mates and I would fish before and after work multiple times a week with greater success after each trip. As my understanding of the species and their environment evolved, my methods moved away from what I classed as heavy bream gear to dedicated snapper gear that after time, still proved to be light snapper gear at best.

Soft plastics

Those initial encounters stemmed from accidentally letting light 1/20-1/16oz jigheads sink a little too far beyond the realm of the bream and into the domain of the snapper. Like most bream anglers back then, 2-3” single tail grubs were the lure of choice, and I’m reminded of the first time I found what would become one of the most productive snapper spots for so many years to come. I was fishing the silos for bream and as the little grub descended between the upper and lower zones of the water column, these seemingly unstoppable fish would eat the plastic.

It wasn’t until I stepped up from 2-4kg rods running 4-6lb braided mainline with 4-8lb fluorocarbon leaders to the 3-5kg range of rods running 10-12lb braided mainline with 12-16lb fluorocarbon leaders that I started turning and steering a few clear of the structure that they always try and get back to. The years to follow saw the introduction of dedicated snapper outfits and a more common presentation of bigger soft plastics like 4-5” models.

Vibration baits

Soon to follow was the domination of vibration baits, which made us re-think the way we fished once more. Fishing lipless cranks and soft vibes with spin gear presents a few new obstacles that can only be overcome by using baitcast gear. Trying to punch out long casts with vibration baits on spin gear results in fouled baits long before they even break the waters surface. Cast underhand on baitcast gear and these baits have a more controlled flight path and trajectory, which results in more time fishing and less time cranking a fouled bait in.

Once I started fishing with what was basically heavy bass gear at the time, I had to overhaul the system once again to 20lb braided mainline and 20-30lb fluorocarbon leaders, but with this came a new set of obstacles.

Stock vibration baits straight out of the pack came with hooks suitable for their intended quarry, but were no match for the crushing power of a snapper’s jaws. Initially, we straightened trebles like nothing, then we upgraded the trebles and started opening split rings with ease. Next we went to 25-30lb set ups, but then we just got smoked hard core as the terminal tackle held up but the brute power of these fish became more apparent and when close to structure, these encounters were brief.

Once we had heavy duty split rings and 6X trebles, we needed the stopping power that came with using barra gear, like 40-50lb overhead casting set ups with 40-50lb leaders, and then it was like having a big dog on a short leash. They were on, but without taking drag they still had enough line to carve sideways and reach anything close enough to sever the connection. This eventually became un-sportsman like and inappropriate to effectively fish certain baits. So, a happy medium was reached and we started to take the good with the bad and accepted that sometimes you win some, and sometimes you lose.

As other river dwellers started to populate the system, these vibration baits proved irresistible to our whiskered adversaries, the king threadfin, but we soon realised the HD trebles tore large holes in soft mouths and would suit certain applications revolving around species specific situations.

With the vibration baits really taking off, companies start bringing miniature versions, bream size baits, like the VX range by Ecogear. These little vibes, packed full of fish calling vibration, soon proved irresistible to everything including snapper. With a similar process to the early plastics days, we started off chasing bream with blades and continually had trebles destroyed or just got smoked altogether. We had found a new bait destined to become a proven snapper catcher.

We quickly moved away from VX35 to the larger VX50 model, which soon showed us just how important vibration is to predators like snapper and the like, and the correlation with their lateral line and feeding behaviour. The jellybean theory comes into its own when fishing these baits, as big snapper love engulfing a small vibe in every situation. In low light or deep water situations, the vibration put out by these baits drew bites when the the more visual aspect of plastics failed to. Back then and still to this day, there is no easy fix to beef up small vibes other than running small singles, but the problem with this is that to effectively fish small vibes, a relatively light set up is required and
that just gives snapper a clear advantage when fishing this technique.

**Jigging**

The next snapper targeting option came along with the massive micro-jigging and light jigging craze. This technique suits the Brisbane River so well, with deep water and strong tidal movement. The ability to present a jig straight down to schools of baitfish and feeding predators has never been so easy.

Typically, jig weights are determined by a simple equation, 1g per foot of water, so there is no real need for a jig over 60g in the river, and you can easily fish jigs as light as 10g’s depending on location. The most effective way to fish the micro stuff is with a dedicated micro-jig combo spooled with light braid from 8-15lb and leaders up to about 20lb that suits jigs up to 20g, but this is best used on fish schooling well away from structure.

Light jigging with jigs 30-60g again is best done with a dedicated combo spooled with 20-40lb braid and leaders from 30-40lb. One of the major advances in our arsenal is the sounder technology that is above and beyond the tech of my old grey scale 2D Lowrance. Nowadays, we have basically a 360° view of the depths below us with 2D, Structure and Down Scan and forward facing Sonar, that offer an undeniable advantage when it comes to finding structure, bait and fish.

These tech options fall right into place with not only the jigging aspect, but all these snapper techniques. When fishing the river these days, quite often I’ll just sound out the depths and my usual spots and have at least one of each of the aforementioned lures and techniques ready to go at all times, ready for when the bait and fish are located.

**The highs and lows**

Since I initially started fishing the Brisbane River, I have seen the booms and busts and experienced the highs and lows of success and failure that go hand in hand with sportfishing. I have seen changes in the environment from reclaimed areas and the continual expansion of the man-made Port of Brisbane venture to the aftermath of natural disasters like the ‘100 year floods’ that seem to happen more frequently than the name suggests.

I’ve had rules and regulations implemented and changed and been forced further and further afield. I have watched the Tangalooma Flyer go past more times than I could count and seen ships come and go that dwarf the ever-present container ships. I have seen plagues of blue jellyfish choke the river and had an ongoing relationship with a dolphin and her calf for many years.

I watched species that seem to appear from nowhere explode onto the scene, making the river their own stomping ground, meanwhile others bide their time, waiting for favoured conditions to roll round again before they produce the next generation of river dwellers.

All I can hope for is the chance to see it all happen again, and to be there when my kids experience what the river has to offer just like I have.

**Images**

Vibration baits are a fantastic option for the Brisbane River’s population of resident snapper.
Micro-jigging, while a fairly new technique for Brisbane River snapper, is an effective way to work schools.

Snapper aren’t the only predators you’re likely to encounter in the river with mulloway generally being more than just an incidental by-catch.
Early on in the author’s Brisbane snapper obsession, plastics were his go-to.

Snapper of this size when hooked away from structure usually aren’t an issue. However, when they get bigger, it can be like walking a big dog on a leash.
King threadfin are another common by-catch when chasing snapper in the river.

Snapper are often beautifully coloured in the river.
These maps show snapper movements throughout the bay.

Modern vibes have proven very effective on Brisbane snapper.