

Catching the big fish

a lesson in crime fighting

[By Federal Agent Andrew Warton]



Federal Agent Andrew Warton balances his working life with fishing and says policing and fishing have similar skill sets.

I've always said that fishing and policing have more in common than meets the eye – the thrill of the chase is more than half the fun, understanding the environment is essential, and thinking like the other side usually gives you the final advantage.

Policing and fishing are both personal passions. Both demand an ability to read and anticipate the operating environment, the target, the barriers, and above all, the actions required after the target has actually been caught. In both cases it is difficult to catch the big fish without looking for clues, and without a doubt, fishing and policing sometimes result in stories about the one that got away.

As an Australian policeman I am fortunate to have worked and fished in some great locations from the southern states through to Darwin and surrounding Northern Australia, East Timor, and the magnificent Solomon Islands. The purpose of this article is simple – to share some fishing experiences afforded to me by working at several AFP posts. Underlying these experiences is the thought that fishing and policing are not that different.

On arrival in the Northern Territory, I quickly worked out that intelligence-led policing and intelligence-led fishing were both alive and well. Having squared away in the Darwin office and recruited some confederates, on my first day off we left the centre of Darwin before dawn and

drove 20 minutes to the outskirts of town to a place a fishing informant had guaranteed that I would catch my first barramundi – an exciting and popular target for anglers in Northern Australia.

Shoal Bay has been closed to commercial barramundi fishing since the late 1990s and on this occasion, I set out with a couple of local brothers in search of the prize species. The brothers warned of massive tides, hazardous sandbanks and a steady population of saltwater crocodiles – all of which I would have some close contact with over the ensuing three years!

We headed up the narrow saltwater inlet carefully looking for likely hideouts for these elusive and inherently lazy fish. Submerged rock bars, colour changes in the water and solid snags all provide perfect cover for barramundi who thrive on the three things – sex, sustenance and shelter. As with policing, considering what motivates your quarry makes for a good start.

It wasn't long before the end of my fishing rod began to bend with the weight of a decent sized barramundi. I let the fish run a short way, regained control and landed the shiniest, biggest, fittest looking fish I have ever seen. The rest of the day was spent trying to catch the rest of the barramundi syndicate. A few got away, but we knew where they were – for next time. That night we cooked our first barramundi in a lemon butter and coriander sauce on a barbecue beside a swimming pool. In all, not a bad start to a new AFP posting.

The next week at work was a baptism by fire. People smuggling vessels were arriving in Darwin having entered Australia at Ashmore Reef. It wasn't long before a colleague and I were boarding a Customs vessel to spend a week at Ashmore Reef intercepting and processing people smuggling vessels. A highlight came when I was fortunate to catch a small black-tip shark on a gold coloured lure, and 20 minutes later arrest four Indonesian people smugglers after boarding a vessel entering Australia – my two passions all in the same hour!



Federal Agent Andre Lenz, Federal Agent Ross Hinscliff and the author after the team caught the winning fish at the Northern Territory AFP/Customs fishing competition - a 108cm Jewfish.

Between the joint intelligence patrols and social camping trips with fellow police and fisher people from the Darwin office, we were fortunate to explore Cape Don (where we caught over 15 large Spanish mackerel in two hours) and the magnificent Coburg Peninsula and some of Australia's largest rivers in the Roper, Alligator, Daly, Adelaide and Towns Rivers, not to mention many weekends at Kakadu National Park, where fishing is permitted in certain designated areas.

If a day-long fishing trip is equated to an AFP response job, then the long term investigation of the Northern Territory fishing scene was the annual Barra Nationals fishing competition. I competed in three of these during the Darwin posting. Each competition involved a six or seven day stint of barramundi fishing for up to 11 hours a day. Held on the absolutely spectacular Daly River, the competition attracted up to 40 teams comprising anglers from all around the country. Each day produced stories about crocodiles, boating mishaps and of course, the one that got away. All the competitions saw barramundi well in excess of 1 metre long being caught on a regular basis. However, as with many long-term police investigations, some days simply produced nothing but frustration.

In all, the most satisfying part of policing and fishing in the Northern Territory was the mateship and common interests we all enjoyed. This culminated in the AFP winning the local agency fishing competition over our Customs competition. Darwin proved a varied and continually interesting mix of police work, and a varied and continually challenging mix of fishing experiences.

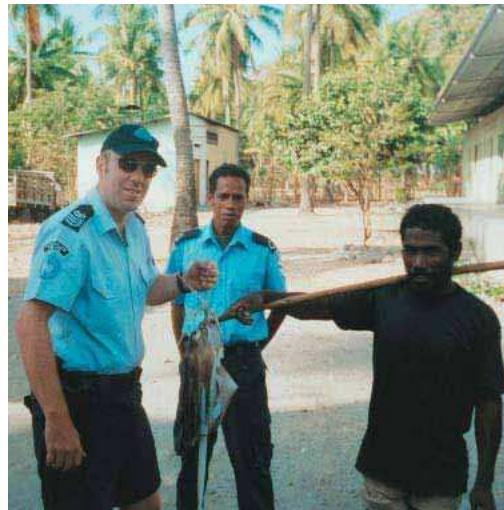
East Timor

Working in the United Nations Mission to East Timor (UNMISET) on Atauro Island, north of Dili, one would think that a fishing enthusiast would be well rewarded. About 8000 East Timorese lived on the naturally beautiful, but remote, Atauro Island, and as with all Australians in the mission, our task was to train the local police and establish their police station practices.

As with policing, fishing is enhanced through acquiring the right equipment, and on Atauro Island, my first purchase was a recently caught giant squid for which I paid US\$5. With the assistance of some island locals who would regularly gather around our front verandah at the end of each day, we cleaned the giant squid, cut it into small bait size pieces and methodically filled small freezer bags to be stored in a freezer for daily use.

At the end of most working days I would fish from what was left of the Atauro Island pier at a village named Beloi. Each day groups of local kids would gather around and watch. The fish were there – I had seen them snorkelling, but unfortunately each day my ability to tell the locals, in their local language, that I had not yet caught any fish, steadily improved.

The day I left Atauro Island I waited at the pier with a blue UN trunk and a case of fishing rods. The boat from Dili was running late so I thought I would give it one last try. I took a rod and reel from the truck and starting casting a small silver lure off the pier. Believe it or not, a fish took the lure and line, headed for the bottom and eventually broke the line. It was hard to believe the one that got away would do so in the last ten minutes of my time on Atauro Island. Although I left the island fishless, I was not short of friendships or experiences – the people of Atauro Island are absolute survivors and truly incredible people.



Although purchased for an ongoing supply of bait, this giant squid provided one good meal on the open fire.

Back in Dili I was determined not to leave East Timor without having caught at least one fish. I've always said that 99 per cent of success is persistence, this is certainly the case with fishing. As luck would have it, I ran into an old fishing mate from the Darwin days who happened to be in Dili working as a tradesman. I found myself trolling large red and white lures across the underwater sea mountains that sit directly off the Dili foreshore.

Before long we both had Spanish mackerels more than a metre long in the boat. I felt relieved and my immediate action was to send the odd text message to all those mates who bet I'd return to Australia fishless! That night we cooked the mackerel at the Aussie compound after cutting it into thick mack steaks. The fish fed more than 10 Aussie policemen and was as fresh and tasty as they come. My mission in East Timor is one of the most incredible policing and life experiences I have been fortunate enough to be part of, and a return trip is planned to visit those we assisted, and balance up the fishing side of the equation!

Solomon Islands

There was no real look of surprise in the eyes of my fellow Australian police officer when he met me late one evening at Honiara's International Airport and loaded the luggage, including a six foot fishing rod holder, into the back of the truck. Nestled amongst the usual police paraphernalia was the trusty barra rod and reel, a more sturdy game rod, and a new



The kids of Atauro Island, East Timor in 2002

edition to trial – a newly released five-piece travel rod. A handful of lures from the Darwin days and some larger, brighter lures also made it into the luggage.

We were in the Solomon Islands conducting a criminal investigation as part of Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). While the principles of policing and fishing were essentially the same, the ability to adapt to a warmer, less developed and in some instances, remote environment, was essential. While I had come to the Solomons Islands with fishing gear in tow, our investigations were designed to catch a big fish of a different kind.

As fishing luck would have it, investigations led us out of the capital Honiara to Gizo, an island located in the Western Province of the Solomon Islands. From Gizo it was a one-and-a-quarter hour local boat trip to an isolated island called Lola. Once the police work was complete, it was out with a line on the boat journey back to Gizo.

First fishing spot was indicated by a flock of birds hovering and diving on bait balls in this tropical paradise. Although a wet and overcast day, the bait balls were boiling and we trolled straight through the middle. Almost immediately beneath the circling birds I was hit by a large fish on a medium weight game rig. After 15 minutes of fishing, dinner was caught and it was time to return to Gizo for the traditional Australian barbeque at the Australian police residence high on a ridge behind the main village.



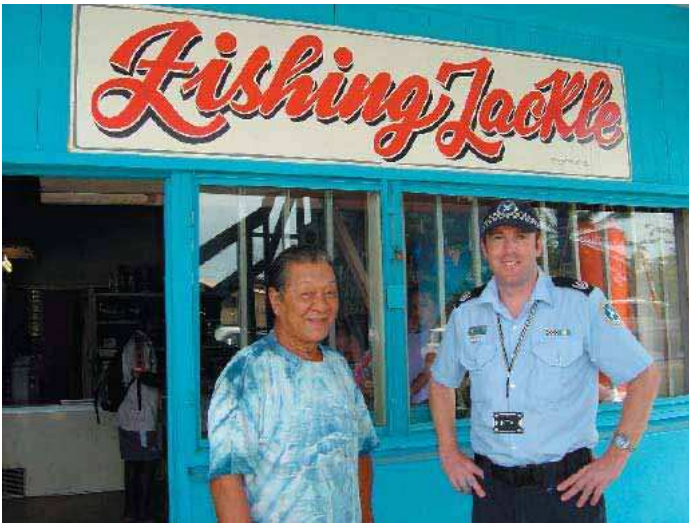
A moving blend of fishing and cultural experience catching Trevally during a tropical storm in Gizo, Solomon Islands.

The Gizo Hotel sits two stories above the main dirt road and clearly overlooks the market place. Against a backdrop of the ocean, the hotel overlooks a series of jetties and the main wharf. It is a brilliant snapshot into the daily lives of the islanders, and a window of observation for the keen fisherman. The following night I sat at the bar watching a tropical storm brewing. Suddenly the water at the jetty began to boil. A non-fisherman colleague likened the noise to an audience clapping hands. Feeding on the bait fish were larger unidentified fish making that all too familiar surface smashing sound of a pelagic at a seafood smorgasbord. I left a beer half full on the bar, ran to my hotel room, changed clothes and collected the brand new five-piece rod and reel. As I arrived at the jetty the bait fish continued to boil, the larger fish smashing them up on the surface. Rain water was rushing out of a pipe and merging with the salt water to produce an artificial colour change and an immediate feeding frenzy. The local kids were crowding around (just as they used to in East Timor) – I later discovered the combined cost of my rod and reel alone would have fed a family on Gizo for three months.

Once the adrenalin settled I began casting against the jetty pylons and along the edge of the colour change caused by the muddy water running off the main dirt road and through the pipe into the sea. I hooked up but lost the unidentified fish under the jetty. A few minutes later I hooked up again and broke the rod at join number three, but managed to land a 1.5kg trevally. The kids were ecstatic, and I was even more so as a mixture of fishing excitement and cultural experience blended into one of those uniquely unforgettable moments. After a quick photo I selected the youngest member of the local kid's group and gave him the fish to take home. I threw the lure to the eldest for safe-keeping. It was a truly unforgettable experience.

Later that night at a going-away party put on by the locals for one of the Australian police, I shared the story with the Solomon Island officer-in-charge (who had just spent a week on leave at the jetty fishing and had no luck!) He said, "Tonight you have blessed a family" and humbly told me a fish like that would have cost a family up to \$20 in Solomon Island currency – the average Solomon Island constable can take a day to earn that amount. The perspective you acquire when working for the AFP in foreign countries is another great advantage afforded through a mobile career.

I've always believed that the benefit of going on a fishing charter in a new fishing destination extends well beyond the fish you catch or the sights you see – it buys you local knowledge and provides a real feel for the area. The good fisherman and the good policeman both treasure the value of local knowledge. With this in mind I set out with the fishing guides from the *Solomon Connect* at 5:30am. Just over 20 minutes into the day and the first big hit resulted in a species of tropical fish I had not seen or caught before – a blue fin trevally. My first reaction was to unhook the lure, photograph it and get ready to release it – mistake number one! The prospect of releasing a fish



Local businessman and fishing legend H M Long at his fishing shop in Honiara with Federal Agent Andrew Warton.

didn't seem to be an option with the local boat charter. Thinking back to what I was told about the cost of fish being about the same as a day's pay for a local constable it became pretty obvious why. Naturally we kept it.

A couple of hours passed as we chased flocks of birds hovering above boiling bait but it was fairly quiet on the fishing front. Eventually the drought broke and I was hit by the most promising hook up this trip. The fish ran immediately then kept running making me think it was not a mackerel (or kingfish as the Solomon Islanders refer to them), but rather, a tuna or perhaps bigger trevally. The latter was the case and at just over 9kg, it was a definite keeper in anyone's books. After a good 10 minutes it was on the deck after inducing a fair smile from our Solomon skipper. Next to be landed was a barracouta by one of the boys.

The lure fishing had gone quiet, so it was time to change strategy by using conventional strip bait and fishing on the bottom of the reef. With the barracouta as bait we anchored off a reef against one of the many tropical islands. While the weather was still overcast and rainy, the place still felt like a fishing haven. My feelings were quickly confirmed as the first bait was taken by a coral trout before it hit the bottom! I'd tried my hardest to find a coral trout during my time in Darwin and only managed to land one by fluke in a crab pot. This fishing was just fantastic in the Solomons – blue fin trevally, a huge giant trevally then a coral trout. And that's the way it finished up on yet another great fishing adventure.

Back in Honiara we drove past a fishing shop every day on the way to our makeshift office. Each time we passed I knew I should go in and seek out some more local knowledge and eventually I did.

HM Long's tackle shop is one of three in the Honiara and is well stocked with an abundance of name brand lures, game rods and reels. I met the owner, and local fishing legend H M Long and after chatting for a while, he suggested we go for a fish one Friday after

work. The deal was simple – he would take me fishing, and any fish I caught would be his to keep!

Having spent most of the working day interviewing people and furthering the investigation, I took an early mark and arrived at the tackle shop right on four o'clock. HM Long is from a family of Chinese builders and an extremely personable and well humoured character. His father built most of Honiara's Chinatown precinct.

I boarded his 10-foot custom built aluminium boat with a 30hp outboard. He assured me it was seaworthy.

As we left from an extremely polluted creek and crossed the sand bar into the swell. HM Long had that serious 'need to catch a fish' look on his face and as we trolled small pink squid plastic lures around the ship wrecks for baby bonito, he talked about the Solomon Islands before and after the 'tension' as the locals all call it.

Again, flocks of seagulls and other birds hovering above the bonito bait balls were a text book indicator that fish were present. HM Long let a lure out and within minutes he was on. He hooked a magnificent yellow fin tuna by the tail and managed to land it.

"Looks like Mr Andy brings good luck to the boat!" he said.

Well the luck was certainly with the boat, but not with me. HM Long managed a barracouta, lost a metre plus kingfish and had plenty of hits as we trolled across some wrecks not far from the main military and police base at Guadalcanal Beach Resort (GBR). It got dark quickly and the journey back was just as interesting despite a close call with a boat full of locals. I'd had a great cultural and fishing experience with HM Long and I paid him a visit before returning to Australia only to receive an invitation to come back next time for another fish.

Time was ticking on the work clock for me though and the investigation continued to take me through the part of police work I enjoy the most – talking to people from all walks in an

attempt to establish the facts, but naturally talking to people during this investigation often ended up with a discussion about fish or fishing!

Through another fishing talk with someone at a pub somewhere back in Honiara I hooked up with a local Australian expatriate fishing guide who was kind enough to arrange a quick afternoon fish out of the yacht club at Honiara. We boarded his custom built 100hp Yamaha outboard charter boat. For a four-hour tour this was quite an experience as we headed out to the *John Penn*, an American transport ship attacked and sunk by torpedo in 1943. The Solomon Islands waters are home to an abundance of military wrecks and relics from the World War II.

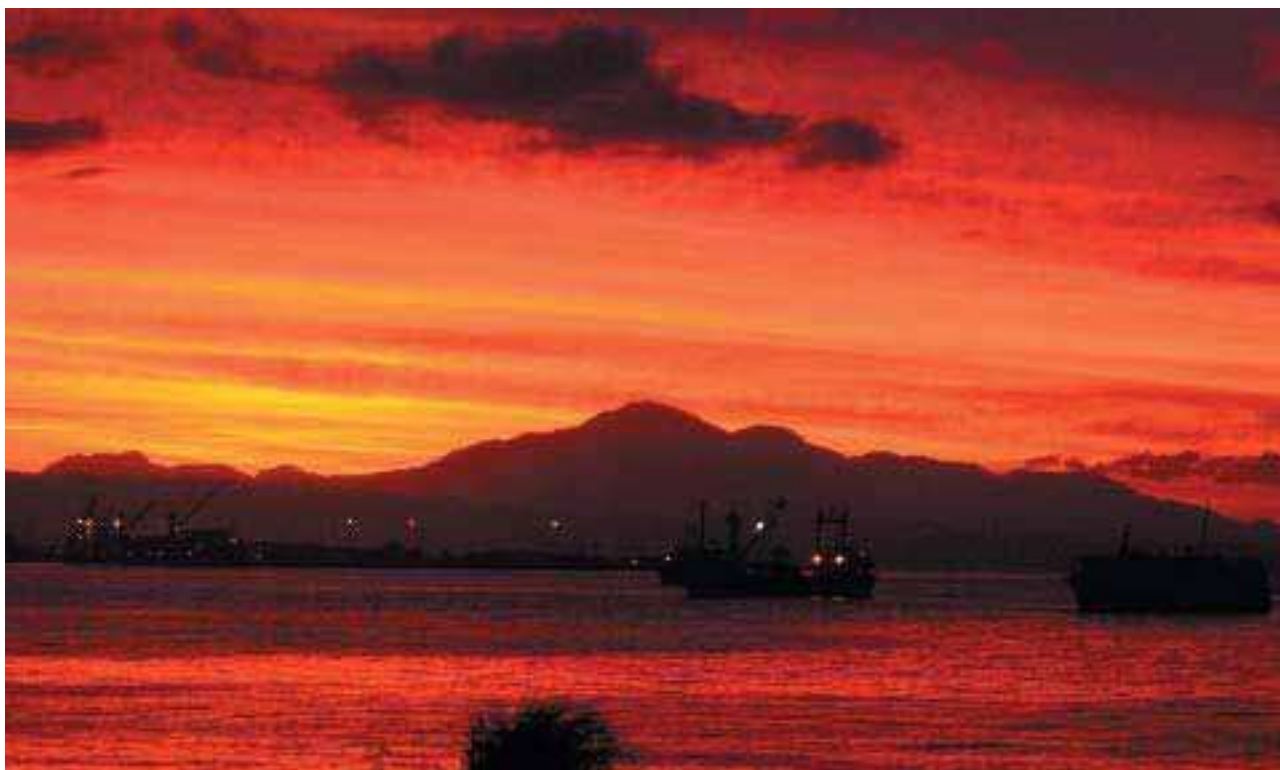
The south-easterly weather had strengthened since the HM Long journey the night before as the driver took us head on into a two to 3-metre swell. All on board got soaking wet but we still managed to keep a daring set up of six lines running out the back. The fishing was very slow despite the usual flocks of birds, baitfish running from a large fish in a group like synchronised swimmers, and a

turtle coming up for a curious look at the boat. In the first indication of action, the head of a huge mackerel smashed one of the lures but failed to connect with the hook.

The waters calmed a bit just on sunset and at last it was my turn to take a reasonable hit on a deep-diver lure. I wasn't sure exactly what sort of fish it was. It was not a mackerel, tuna, trevally, or even a coral trout. It was a species new to my experience. A species commonly called sweetlip was my best guess. What ever it was, just on sunset it was a welcome addition to the boat.

The charter captain boasted his track record of always catching fish was intact – the fish had saved some embarrassment. I was told a few days later that the Solomon Islands security guys, who help guard the GBR base, had the fish on a cooking fire within five minutes of receiving it and a few beers and stories back at the yacht club afterwards ended another great afternoon on the water.

My investigation was almost complete and I had only a few days before returning to Australia. As I sat packing the fishing gear overlooking the water I could only think that there is a significant difference between holidaying in a foreign country, and working as an Australian policeman in a foreign country. The latter takes you deep into the community and provides you with the privilege of stepping into other people's lives and assisting them in solving problems. In many ways, I suggest fishing is the same. It's all about common interest. In policing and in fishing, taking a moment to talk to the locals about themselves will usually result in rewarding relationships, and if you're lucky, catching the big fish.



Honiara sunset