

A History of the Mary River Catchment

The Mary River, situated in South-east Queensland, stretches from the Bellthorpe-Maleny region in the south and flows north entering the Great Sandy Strait at River Heads, northeast of Maryborough. The catchment is 9595 km² in area. The Mary River has several major tributaries including Obi Obi, Yabba, Little Yabba, Six Mile, Amamoor, Kandanga, Tinana, Deep, Munna and Wide Bay Creeks.

The Mary River valley has a rich history. Before Europeans ventured into the region a very large population of Aborigines occupied the area.



Tall ship at Maryborough wharf

One of the first white people to live in the Mary River Catchment with the Aborigines, was James Davis or Durramboi (Kangaroo Rat) an escaped convict from the Brisbane settlement. After spending 14 years with the Mary River tribes Durramboi returned to Brisbane and became a storekeeper.

In May 1842, Andrew Petrie and a small crew sailed for three days up the Mary River, or Moonboola as it was then known, a distance of 80km as far as Tiaro. Here they could go no further. Petrie named the stream the Wide Bay River and it was known by this name until 1847 when Governor Fitzroy decided that the river should be called Mary in honour of his wife, Lady Mary Fitzroy. Thus the lower Mary was explored and settled.

At the same time the upper Mary was being scouted to determine boundaries of the Bunya Country - this being an area which Sir George Gipps Governor of New South Wales, had designated to the Aborigines, stating that there would be no licences granted for settler occupation or the removal of timber. The expedition began at Brisbane and travelled to Kilcoy (which was then a sheep station) before crossing the Conondale Range and then following the Mary to the sea. An account of the journey is recorded in the diary of Rev. Eipper, a German missionary who travelled with Dr. Stephen Simpson, four mounted policemen, James Davis, Bracefield (another escaped convict who had lived with the Aborigines in the region) and four men with a dray.

By the late 1840's both the upper and the lower Mary were under pastoral occupation, the runs being established for wool production with Maryborough being the port for the export of this product. With the advent of the pastoralist, the upper Mary River also became known for its timber wealth.



Clearing the land

The vegetation that covered the Mary River catchment before European settlement ranged from dense rainforest in the upper reaches to open Eucalypt forest in the lower valley and to the north. The tall rainforest cover of Maleny and the surrounding region grew many large trees including Beech, Maple, Black Bean, Silky Oak, both White and Red Cedar, and many other valuable timbers.

Timber was a major industry in the region with mills being set up from the upper reaches of the Mary to the lower. The river played an important part in the transportation of the timber down the river to where it could be used or exported.

*The MRCCC gratefully acknowledges the support of
The Sunshine Coast Regional Council, Gympie Regional Council and Fraser Coast Regional Council,
the Burnett Mary Regional Group, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, the Worldwide Fund for Nature,
the Department of Environment, Heritage, Water and the Arts, the Department of Main Roads, Powerlink
and landholders throughout the Mary Catchment.*

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The river, today, reflects the land use changes that have occurred in its catchment. In the words of Stan Tutt, a local historian, 'Trees went, sand came'. This statement simplifies, yet, to many, sums up the changes that have occurred in the river system.

The discovery of gold in 1867 by James Nash in Gympie had an enormous impact on the Mary Valley as well as Queensland. The gleam of gold brought excitement, adventure and many settlers to the clear creeks and lonely bush of Gympie and the surrounding country-side. All water courses from Gympie to Jimna were worked by prospectors in the hope of finding gold.

The valley landscape and vegetation have changed. Towns have grown, connected by roads and railways.

Around 75000 people now live in the Mary River Catchment. Many people outside the Catchment also rely on it for agricultural products, water supply and building materials (timber, sand and gravel) and for recreational opportunities.

The gaining of this wealth has come at a price. It is hard to talk about the health of the Mary River overall as some sections are in good condition whereas other areas are needing attention. Local historian Stan Tutt writes that the Mary is –

A river changed beyond comprehension of those who knew it even 50 years ago. Changed from a deep clean stream guarded by shaded scrub (rainforest) which reached back to the ranges, or by the open forest flats saddle high in the native kangaroo grass, to a sand clogged watercourse fighting for its life between eroded banks held by thinly scattered trees.



Deep Creek during gold mining late 1800



Mary River Cod - once common in the Mary River

While only around 1% of the catchment is maintained in a natural state, a further 5% is largely intact and a further 39% that has only experienced limited clearing. With just over 400,000 ha of remnant vegetation, open forest is the dominant cover class, with closed forest and sparse woodland occupying 10–15% each. The remaining 55% is extensively to completely cleared.

Along the 2947 km of waterways in the Mary Catchment, remnant freshwater riparian communities of national conservation significance contain habitat for a number of rare and endangered freshwater fish, frogs, turtles and a number of riparian vegetation species.

Of particular significance is the Mary River Cod (*Maccullochella peelii mariensis*), one of Australia's most endangered fish, which now only naturally occurs in isolated remnants along the Mary River and tributaries (Simpson, 1998). Simpson and Jackson (1996) discuss the earliest official counts of the Mary River Cod. Including a report from the Voyage of the H.M.S. Challenger

during the years 1873-76 with a record of a fish caught near Tiaro. Habitat fragmentation and impoundment of streams has isolated remnant populations, which are now estimated to occur in only 30% of their former known range. The loss of remnant vegetation and the removal of snags to try and improve water flow, reduced the habitats where cod lived and bred. Water storage impoundments that lack appropriately designed fish ways are thought to restrict migration and dispersal of cod and limit the amount of stream habitat available to them (Queensland Government 2002).

Growing community interest in preserving our rare and endangered species and issues regarding water quality and river and catchment problems has in recent years seen the formation of several resource management groups, landcare groups and a range of major congresses and seminars to discuss shared issues.

At a workshop of the Mary River Catchment Coordinating Committee the elements of a 50 year vision and 10 year goals were identified. The following lifetime vision was also expressed: *In our lifetime the community will be enjoying the natural bounty of sustainable agricultural, fishing and recreational activities flowing from a healthy river system. Native forests growing on stable streambanks will shade the length of the river and all its creeks, where pools, riffles and snags interplay, to create diverse habitat for a myriad of life forms.*



Mary River, Moy Pocket