

Cray Hunt

By Brett Craik

Crayfish have always been somewhat of an enigma to me, no matter how much diving we do and how many times we encounter them we just don't seem to fully understand their behaviour, I cannot help to feel that we probably never will fully grasp what they are about unlike many of the somewhat predictable fish we hunt.

On a previous dive trip we had come across several large crayfish on shallow reef areas where we had not seen them for quite some time, the water temp probably did help as it had finally cooled after a relentless summer and maybe the cyclonic swells that had pounded the coast the few weeks prior had assisted in clearing out a lot of sand thus providing more habitat for them to thrive in. With this information in hand the next trip just had to include a fair amount of time allocated to a cray hunt, its not



easy but I guess we could give the mackerel and wahoo a rest for this time.

Our Central Qld connection Daniel Skinner was back in town for the weekend just in time for the hunt, crayfish were always his speciality as he would often find them when we would not, I think he just loves getting stuck into those tight cracks.

First up in the morning prior to hitting the crays we decided to dive a deeper spot just to have a quick look for Kingies as we could almost guarantee we would see a couple in this area and the water looked very clear and blue, so why wouldn't ya give it a go. Upon entering the water first up the water didn't just look clear it was clear, almost 30 metres vis and a nice colour with very few particles too, such a pleasure to dive when it is like this. Doug, Dan and Skinner joined me with guns while I held the camera, Doug dropped first to shoot a large drummer at about 20 metres this was to provide some burley to bring in the

kingies, as he pulled it up the activity aroused the attention of one kingie around 10kgs but none of the guys were loaded so that one got away, not to matter we knew more would appear once the burley got down there near the reef.

The burley slowly made its way down and a few juvenile snapper could be seen having a bit of a chomp plus a couple of nice spangled emperor but they were playing hard to get as per usual. Then as I followed Dan down we had seen nothing when he suddenly lurched to his right and let fly, it happened too quickly for me to react and I did not get the action on film which was disappointing as the kingie which had snuck up on us was now out cold a steel piercing through the brain will do that! Dan returned with that to the surface while Doug prepared to give it a crack, I dropped down with him probably giving him about 5 metres head start, as he began to level out at 20 metres from my elevated position at 15 metres I could see a large school of kingies approaching him, he was unaware as he was looking in the opposite direction. Knowing full well that one of these kingies was about to meet its end I hurried my descent to get down in time, although upon seeing the kingies Dougie decided to take his sweet ass time so I had to take evasive action to avoid landing onto of him. It proved to be difficult to film there



were at least 50 kingies circling us down at 20 metres and I was having trouble trying to work out which fish he was going to nail, Doug was waiting to see if one of them was going to stand out as a little bigger but they all seemed to be of similar size. Eventually Doug got a shot away which I luckily captured and the fish ran off pretty hard, it was a struggle keeping him off the reef, on the



way to the surface I could hear another gun go off as Skinman took down one of the others which were circling the wounded fish, plenty of action going on. While everyone was handling their fish I knew the reef would drop away soon so I had to get a few dives in myself quickly, armed only with the camera the best I could hope for was to locate a ledge to check for crays, this proved to be easier than I thought as I hit the bottom twice next to good structure in 27 metres of water alas I could not find any antennae but then again I did not have a great deal of time at this depth so perhaps there were some there but the crays could wait till I got into some shallower water.

With three kingies now in the boat from the first drift we didn't really see the point hanging around here, unlike New South Wales kingfish are not that highly regarded up here, Spanish Mackerel and Wahoo are where its at besides we were here for crays today. After

a quick run we headed into some shallower waters to begin foraging the reef.

The water was a little dirty first up but we managed to find some of our spots then marked them with a rigged up gun, we rotated the dives with everybody conversing at the surface as to where the structure and the crays were 'not here move on' etc until something like 'two on the ledge beneath me'. Often we would chose not to slam one first up when we had sighted them there is a good reason for this as we have discovered that if one is shot the others within a few metres will begin to run for cover and it only takes them a couple of minutes to disappear completely even when it appears that there is just nowhere to hide they still find somewhere, little bastards! Once located we will try and shoot the crays which are further off to the side from the main group this is sort of a stealth attack as we can eliminate them before they have a chance to warn the others. If there are a couple under a ledge we may see it fit to send two divers down at once, either both will shoot one each or the other diver will have a chance to grab one that is fleeing. It did not take long for the crew to secure a few nice crays, our method proving more effective than in the past when we did not have a strategy. Within a couple of hours we had reached our maximum limit and they were all a nice size we were going to have a great feast tonight. Before moving on to the next location we spent some more time exploring the area our plan was to find some more cray holes, we could easily put the boat exactly above the spot and take useful G.P.S. marks for upcoming weekends. You can never fully predict just where the crays will be on any given day, they seem to appear and disappear from one place to the next that is why it is very advantageous to have several localities in the bank after all you don't want all your eggs in one basket. By spreading out and covering a fair amount of ground we located three or four new hotspots/nests they were quickly marked, one of which had at least 50 juveniles under one small undercut it looked like school was in. I even found a nest of crays that were only as long as my finger, a whole new batch is on its way through there should be plenty of crays in the years ahead.

With a nice catch of crays we raced off to our next location just to get a few quick dives in before going home. The water was a nice 25 metres visibility here and appeared to have a few fish, so we upped the ante and set about running some burley, at first we only managed to raise the attentions of a couple of sand bar sharks and also a few large bull sharks but they stayed down fairly deep. It was not until we began to drift out the back of the reef where we had some jobbies and spangled emperors come into the burley, Dan was able to approach one spangled of nice size placing a good shot as I filmed him, unfortunately for me as Dan let



go of the gun and rig the fish ran underneath me causing the rig to drag up and tangle against me, so I was forced to fight the fish and drag it up while holding the camera in the other hand, this was most taxing. The jobbies were very large but also very smart so we couldn't close in for a shot, it's a real shame as I estimated one of them was pushing 15 kilos, now that's a big jobbie.

A new wave of burley fell down midwater so I levelled out amongst it to film a sandbar shark whom had been drawn to the taste,



he was not feeding just having a look the pieces of fish which were probably a little too small for him to worry about. As I was filming the shark a Spanish mackerel suddenly appeared next to me in the burley also having a bit of look, I turned the attention to the mackerel when suddenly a shaft came crashing down from above and slid down the side of the fish without penetrating, I later learned the shaft came from Dan his rig was tangled and he was having trouble getting down had to take a long shot which would have worked had his spear tip been sharper. The Macky startled and all shot away before astonishingly making almost a 180 degree turn as if it wanted to see what the hell had just touched it, that was to Doug's delight as he happened to be half way down at the time and was able to change course extend and let fly claiming the fish with a good holding shot. Upon being boated we could clearly see the mark from not only Dan's spear but the flopper too, it's a fine line sometimes between success and failure.

Now that we had tipped off the day with a brief pelagic play we were happy to head home, it was time to invite the neighbours over, cook up some crays and sink some brews, life is really tough sometimes.