

Reef Therapy

By Brett Craik

When the hustle and bustle of city life starts to grind you down, sapping away your time and energy the mind and body become tense, never fear I have found there is a very good cure for this ailment, I call it reef therapy. Ahhh yes the reef, Australia's greatest treasure such a pleasure to dive, we had neglected it for far too long, the time was right for another visit.

Heading north we decided to hit some of the old haunts we had not been to for a couple of years now. The long time between drinks had faded our memories of the specific areas where we would in the past collect crayfish, spear trout and Mackerel, so the trip was going to have a touch of the old pioneer in it, adding to the whole experience. After Doug had somehow managed to get everyone lost on the way north taking several detours and leading the convoy astray through some corn fields, the band finally made it and settled in for the night.

We arose around 4am on day one a little groggy but full of energy and spurred on by the anticipation of diving in 20 plus metres of crystal clear visibility on spectacular coral reefs surrounded by tons of marine life, that is enough to force any serious diver out of bed. Down at the boat ramp we quickly realised that a northerly overnight wind had created quite a pain in the arse chop which we were going to have to punch straight into for the next two hours or so, not an ideal preparation to eight hours of diving, but no pain no gain. I would say the trip flew and we leapt over as soon as we got there but that would be a blatant lie, the trip didn't fly by it was long and draining, but on the plus side it may have temporarily fixed a few sore backs, who needs chiropractor just come diving with us. As we pulled up behind the reef it took the team quite a while to get ready, we normally take pride in our efficiency but on this morning things were a little slow.

Straight away there were fish underneath us, but they were hanging below a drop off so the boys had to go 15 – 20 metres right up, not particularly easy for a crew whom were all having sinus problems. Dougie was having the most difficulty, throughout the day he would routinely return to the boat time after time with his face covered in blood, never a good look. To combat this Doug altered his technique adopting a less is more philosophy which entailed a much slower descent phase adding about 20 seconds to his total dive, by employing this approach he was able to regain some control over his sinuses.



I was dragging the video camera around and had filmed the lads nail a few trout, when the current pushed me up in the shallows. Quickly I became distracted with the spectacular marine life around me especially the turtles they allowed me to jump on their backs, I thought why swim around the reef when you can get a guided tour. They were swimming right up to me no doubt thinking 'that's a strange looking fella'. There were literally dozens of them in one area, probably due to the large school of jellyfish I had seen drifting through the area. Just when I had finished with the turtles I happened to come across a sea snake feeding in amongst the coral, he allowed me to get extremely close like they often do, I suspect they don't have very good eyesight, the snake did not even notice me as it came to almost within licking distance of the lens.



The current began to take our drift off the end of the reef into the deeper water so we all clambered back in the boat to get ready for another take. As we slid over the pontoons we were greeted by a very large tuskfish lying on the deck, Daniel Skinner had sniffed him out around a shallow bommie up in the sand flats. The fish had gone hard up into the bommie causing him some dramas but miraculously his spear somehow survived, its always good to see quality fish in the boat it has the effect of raising the enthusiasm of the other divers, success breeds success.

Jumping back into some deeper water the clarity enabled us to easily find some fishy areas, without having to scout dive too much we continued to come across small nests of trout. It was quite strange we were slowly drifting over a vast area of structure which looked identical to me yet for some reason unknown to us they seemed to gather at these random points on the reef. At this depth they were completely oblivious to the dark clouds assembling above them, in one swift act the dark spectres began falling from the sky unleashing their weapons of "selective" destruction bringing an end to their little parties in a matter of minutes.

All of these trout had great colouration, you can tell when you have speared a coral trout on the reef at depth based on their colour, the deeper they are the more vibrantly red they become at the surface while those living right up in the shallows tend to hold a browner colouration.

By this stage our exploits underwater had attracted a fair amount of attention from some hungry sharks, they were hanging back on the edge of our vision waiting for an opportunity. Fortunately we had been stoning most of the fish with our Rabitechs that was until two fish in a row holed up. When a trout gets holed up and is still kicking it normally becomes an exciting time for the boys and I as the activity often brings in all manner of life to the area from all over the reef. Like vultures suddenly all the lads

were around anticipating the need for steel, it is important to take advantage of these situations when they arise as it beats the hell out of trying to find them in bommies and on the drop offs. Five or six other trout had appeared within minutes plus a few other reef fish but they were quickly followed by some whalers insistent on getting a feed.

It was fairly obvious that we needed to shoot and retrieve these fish very quickly, so that is what we did everyone speared and pulled the fish to them on the same dive as the other divers positioned themselves to fend off the sharks if need be. This strategy initially worked quite well however you could see in their behaviour they were getting really pissed about not getting a chomp.

We were holding the front line quite well our excursions onto the reef were well guarded by our support divers and no prey was left unattended on the floor. It was very exciting diving with sharks is fun but competing with them is something else, it keeps keeps you sharp and gives you something to talk about over a beer that evening.



We had racked up some excellent fish in quick time when suddenly it happened, one of the sharks broke through our defences and took a fish off the spear probably a lack of concentration on our part, but the important thing was that our lines had been broken! When one of the guys dropped down to the bottom to pick up the half remaining of the fish left behind (still some good flesh there) the sharks responded swiftly with a lightning flanking manoeuvre to a couple of fish on the surface while we were still down. They charged in grabbing the fish in their mouths dragging floats in all directions and tugging on our guns before the rigs cut in their mouths. The tide had turned so we gathered up what we had and climbed in the boat ready to move.

It was now getting a bit late in the day as we had a long trip back to consider, one more drift would be it, just the perfect time for a school of Spanish Mackerel to come marching in we just couldn't have scripted it better. Doug took immediate action dropping quickly and slamming his fish with a secure shot. The remainder of the school tried to flank us but I just managed to fin into range and squeeze off a shot. As the spear penetrated the fish I almost screamed out underwater for the shot was too high, he took off in a hurry disappearing from view before doing a 180 and coming back past me, it was then I could foresee the danger, the spear was trailing fully out the other side of the fish probably a metre or two past the tail. The fish itself was running only a metre off the bottom when suddenly the flopper hooked up on a plate coral, immediately sensing the urgency of the situation I rapidly plummeted down on the fish in an attempt to release the tension. Alas I was too late and had to go

through the pain of seeing it tear free and swim away, that continued to play over in my head all the way back to base camp.

Rising again the next morning the crew was lacking the enthusiasm of the previous morning, today we decided to try a different reef system; it's just more interesting to vary the trip that way. Thankfully the weather was a little kinder enabling us to pick up some time, less time travelling equals more time diving. Beginning the dive near the exposed reef we quickly found some deeper water in 20 metres which appeared to hold good fish. It was a little bit dark as the sun had not really had much of a chance to turn itself on yet so it was difficult to spot the fish until about half way down, the trout were once again a bright strawberry red at the surface after we had plugged them, ya gotta love the deep ones.

We then moved to a nearby drop-off continuing to work it for the next couple of hours. There was plenty of life in this area, including several sharks sleeping on the bottom which I was actually able to film myself cautiously petting them, got to be careful where you put your hands.



The current slowly moved us down the reef taking us away from the drop and over some fairly plain and lifeless terrain we were just ready to get back in the boat when a fresh ledge appeared in front of us, slopping down from a flat coral area in 6 or 7 metres to sandy rubble in about 25 metres what a lovely sight that was. Most of the life appeared to be half way down the slope where the hard coral gave way to more broken and scattered coral formations.

Dan was all breathed up and rearing to go, I followed him down on his shoulder eager to capture some action on film. Upon hitting the deck Dan selected a 3 – 4 kilo that was looking right at us, Dan waiting patiently until the trout turned, to shoot the fish head on is a low percentage (small target, and can slide off) and its also an inefficient shot as often the spear will go right through the flesh and may take a while to get back out. The very second the fish turned Dan plugged him right through the gill plate region, I stayed down and watched the fight which lasted all of three seconds before

turning around to see a further three or four even larger trout looking straight at me and behind them were a pair of Maori Wrasse observing the show from a distance like they usually do, there certainly was plenty happening. Upon returning tho the surface Dan and I discussed a plan, time to blanket the area in burley. I promptly called over the boat to collect a trevelly we had been holding for just this cause. While I worked hard to creating a good trail, the boatie gathered up some reinforcements to join the party.

Within minutes a school of jobfish moved in underneath us, but as each diver descended on them they would consistently move away we were like two magnets of the same charge, frustrating stuff. Eventually they grew tired of the constant hounding and moved away completely. With the focal fish gone we quickly realised that there were some sizeable spangled emperor hanging around also another difficult fish to spear in clear water, they too held their distance and could not be tempted in even by some oily trevally. After these elusive species avoided us we decided to follow the “when in doubt nail a trout” philosophy as there were plenty of them hanging around too.

Just as we turned our attentions to the trout, in came the rat pack again, yep the sharks were back the burley obviously alerting them to our position, their timing was impeccable arriving only seconds before the first trout was shot. I thought to myself here we go again nothing comes for free in the Neptune’s kingdom. Fortunately nobody got a fish stuck over the remainder of the drift and we hauled them up quickly so apart from a couple of quick rushes towards a fish the sharks didn’t get close enough, I suspect the burley may have saved our fish as for the most part they were distracted snapping up the larger pieces, just like a cat burglar feeding a guard dog we did our business then slinked away unnoticed.

Next we moved along the reef about 500 metres to dive an area of shallow finger/branch or staghorn coral as we call it. There were very few fish in this area, I was surprised just how damn quiet it was eventually, after an extended search I spied a couple of squid, difficult to pick up as they held the same colouration as the reef itself, I yelled to Doug whom had a gun to ‘get over here!’. While he was making his way over I had the chance to observe the squid from a distance, they were working in pairs one going right into the coral to find food while the other watched, they must work a buddy system too. In-fact they were so focussed on feeding in the nooks and crannies of the coral that they did not see Doug coming at all, moments later there was ink everywhere and we had some delicious calamari for an on tray later that night, Doug managing to pick up three of them before they worked out what was going on.



The current slowly ran us off this part of the reef which I was quite glad about as apart from the school of squid there was literally nothing else around. The water once again growing deeper and typically there appeared to be more life, so Doug prepared while I watched from the surface. He hit the floor and aimed in the direction of what I could tell was a trout, not bad being able to see that from 20 metres away. Just when it appeared he had steadied himself into a good position to take the shot he made a 90 degree turn and plugged a larger cod, I don’t know where these fish come from sometimes they just seem to appear from nowhere, I guess Doug had speared enough trout and wanted something different. He had sent the shaft straight into its head and what followed was chaos. The cod ran straight forward smashing Doug before shooting past him, Doug had only just avoided being stampeded by the rampaging fish when the rig line became hooked up. Suddenly he was being dragged backwards across the reef as the cod aimed for a nearby cave. Realising the gravity of the situation I had positioned myself directly above the action and I began my descent, the thought going through my head was “I wonder if my knife is going to be sharp enough to cut the rig?” Fortunately my efforts were not required as Dougie managed to free himself by the time I had hit 5 metres, I dropped a little deeper to follow him up as he was obviously rattled by the experience. After some ferocious panting at the surface he was fine, an example of another thing that can go wrong on a dive.

After all that drama we decided it was time to head in but Dan & I though we might just have a quick look at a local wreck and see if anything is going on. The wreck was happening alright on the first dive Dan found himself cocooned in amongst large barracuda and trevelly, he took down a tea leaf trevelly and told me to have a look. Descending down through the barracuda to find a large school of trevally I then decided to find out what else was around so I made some noise with the gun, this must have worked I instantly felt a presence and when I turned around I was greeted by a 100 kilo plus Queensland Grouper which had swam up through the schooling pelagics, looking towards this massive prehistoric beast with a background crawling with large fish truly was a remarkable sight.



The current had moved us off the reef so we went back up for another go, it was hard to relax as we were a little excited at seeing so much life plus the sea was also very rough in this exposed section of water, we were constantly getting smashed at the surface, not what you want when you have to get down to a wreck in deep water.

The very next drop Dan nailed a Spaniard, excited by this I dropped down quickly to spot a second Spaniard moving at the back of the schooling barracuda. I tried to get a little closer but he moved beyond my range. I little disappointed I turned to surface and looked over at the wreck to see an entire school of Mac Tuna holding almost motionless hard up against the top deck, I had never seen this fish stationary before. As I swam a little closer they all began to turn on their sides to look at me, this action created a silver shimmering effect like a Venetian blind catching the suns rays in the morning.

So much life in such a confined area, it was a great way to finish the day and the trip. We all felt great the reef therapy had certainly worked wonders, I would recommend it to anyone.