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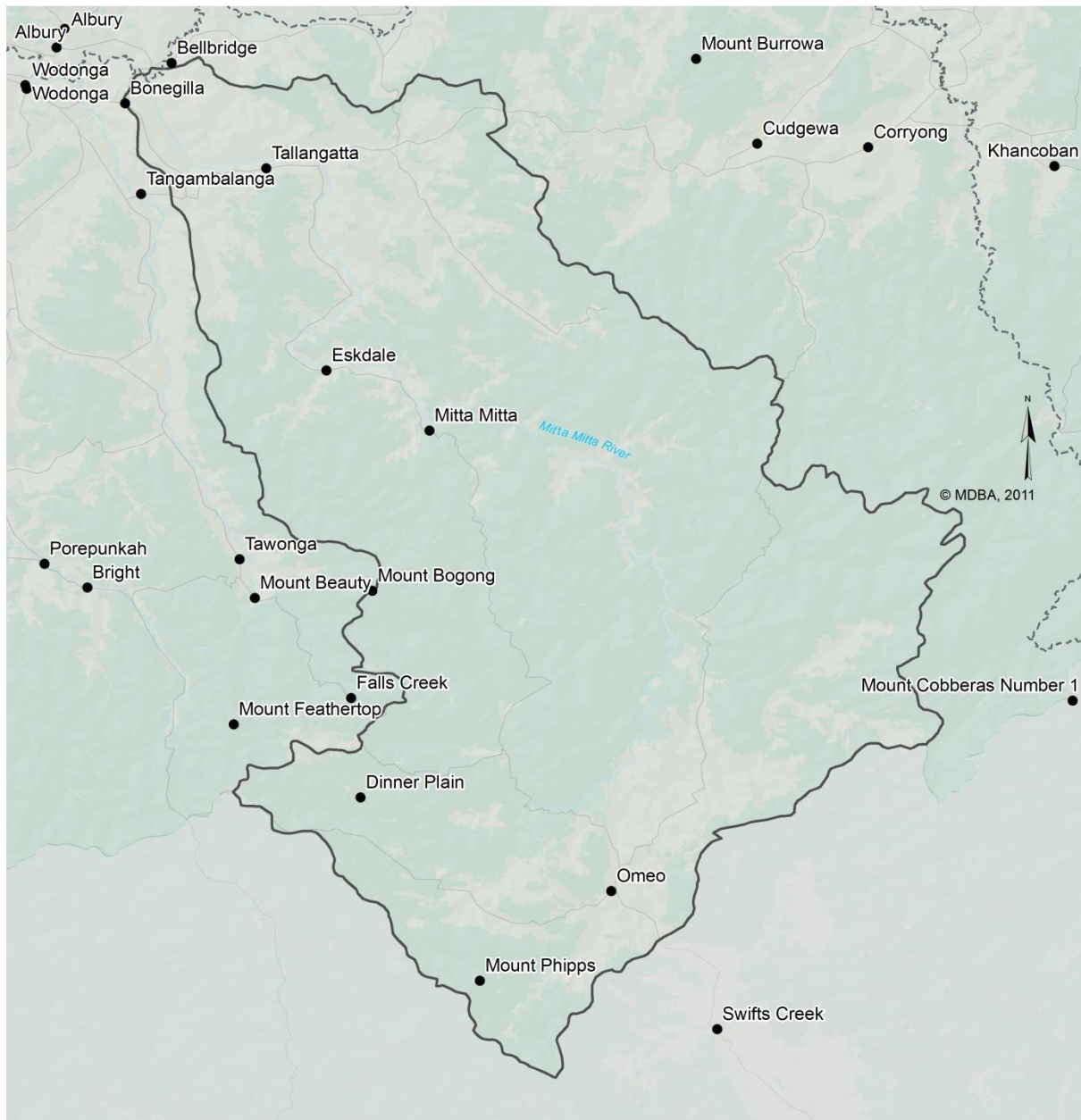
Omeo Standard, 2 December 1902

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Omeo Standard, 2 December 1902

Figure 9.1 **The Mitta Mitta River Catchment showing major waterways and key localities**



9.1 Early European Accounts

The first European to sight the Mitta Mitta region was probably Johann Lhotsky in 1834. He recorded the existence of a wide plain containing a lake near the present Benambra, which was called by the indigenous people 'Homeo' (Lhotsky, 1979), though the term may have been the name of the local people (Clark, 2000). Modern historical publications state that the name Mitta Mitta means 'flowing flowing', the origin of which can be traced back to William Hughes' *Australian Colonies: Their Origin and Present Condition* (Hughes, 1852) a popular early work on Australia. The earliest detailed description of the lower Mitta Mitta comes from Lawrence Struillby who drove cattle into the lower valley in September 1842. Struillby provided probably the earliest origin for the name Mitta Mitta:

The river Mitta Mitta takes its name from the marshes (Mitta Mitta – marsh marsh) through which it flows. One of these, five miles long, lay on the side of the river opposite our hut. It was separated from another of about three miles long by a sand-dyke or bar' (Graham, 1863).

Struillby described his stay in the region at length, providing much detail on the pristine environment and aboriginal practices. He recorded the breathtaking abundance of bird life that existed at the time:

Swans, in the hot months, abounded on the river; for they came in from the dry lagoons to the water. Along the river, up towards the Snowy Mountains, you would find the finest water-fowl shooting in the world, I think. Ducks of all kinds, teal and native companions (a great large crane), geese and swans abounded in flocks; / Along the river you would see the great high-piled stick nests of the swans, so built on branches that they could rise or fall with the river. Their eggs were large and good; but very hard to get at, on account of the thorny scrub, the many serpents that infested them, and the deep water-holes over which they were built (Graham, 1863).

Struillby went on to provide the first account of the fish of the Mitta Mitta, describing the prolific nature of the fishery without actually identifying the species, and recalling fishing trips in a log canoe: 'There was fine fishing in the Mitta Mitta; It was most pleasant for Selina, Bobindi, and my-self to sit in it of evenings and haul up fish as fast as lines could lift them' (Graham, 1863).

In 1835, George McKillop and James MacFarlane travelled from the Monaro district in NSW to settle on the upper Mitta Mitta near Benambra (Andrews, 1920). The first description of the type of fish in the upper Mitta Mitta River is contained in the journal of George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector of Aborigines of the Port Phillip District, who visited the Omeo region in 1844. His journal records that on the 26th of June he travelled to a property called 'Inme munje', owned by Edward Crooke who had acquired 'In-mi-mun-ji' (later Hinnomunjie) Station on the Mitta Mitta River (Clark, 2000). Contemporary sources differ in their interpretation of the meaning of the name Hinnomunjie. It has been widely quoted to mean a lack of fish (e.g., *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 February 2004), though some local historians have disputed this and suggested that Hinnomunjie refers to an abundance of fish or more specifically cod (Max Dyer and Coral Kracke, pers. com.; www.tourisminternet.com.au).

Robinson recorded the name of Edward Crooke's station on the 'Mitte Mitte' River as 'Inme.munje' which he interpreted, along with other localities incorporating the phrase 'munje', as being places where fish could be caught. In his list of indigenous words he defined 'munje' as being fish (Clark, 2000). Evidence presented in court during a trespass case in 1860 included the pronunciation and meaning of indigenous terms for localities inhabited by the aborigines who employed the Yaithmathang (Gundungerre) language of the Omeo, upper Tambo and middle Snowy region. The newspaper reported that 'mungiu' (pronounced mung-yu) was a general

term for fish. The prefixes 'inna', 'tongiu' (pronounced tong-yu) and 'numla' it was stated referred to three specific species of fish. It was testified that 'the inna is the same fish with the Murray cod', but the account failed to identify the other two species (*Argus*, May 23, 1860). It is likely that these terms alone were the names of the three fish species, with 'munjie' possibly added by aborigines in their communication with Europeans to emphasise the type of animal they were discussing (Barry Blake, pers. com.). 'Tongiu' and 'numla' appear to have referred to fish species present in the coastal Tambo River catchment based on the subsequent naming of localities on that river (Clark, 2000; *Gippsland Times*, 10 September 1874). Collectively, the evidence suggests that the term 'Inme' or 'Inna' was employed by the Omeo aborigines for cod. Historical evidence indicates that Trout cod were common in the Hinnomunjie area, and that Murray cod were rare, suggesting that 'Inme' or 'Inna' was probably the aboriginal word for Trout cod near Omeo.

The early geologist and Minister W. B. Clarke published an account of his travels through the Monaro to the goldfields in the Omeo region in December 1851, providing names for a number of localities and features. Like Robinson before him he recorded: 'Mungee, another common termination, means "fish" (Clarke, 1860). Locations identified by Clarke by indigenous names which included the term mungee included 'Jugylmungee Creek' and 'Jugylmungee' Swamp referring to the Morass Creek and associated swamps. These names imply an abundance of fish (Clarke, 1860). Bingomunjie Creek, located between Hinnomunjie and Anglers Rest, appears to be another historical reference to fish in the upper Mitta Mitta catchment (Clarke, 1860; Clark, 2000).

Robinson's journal entries dispel the interpretation of Hinnomunjie referring to a lack of fish. On the 26th of June he recorded: 'stayed with Mr. Nial at Mr Crook's on main branch of Mitte Mitte at Inmemunje / The river at Crook is 29 yards wide is never dry in summer season it rises high. Plenty of cod fish in river'. On the 28th of June he recorded: 'Walked round the plain of Immemunje one and a half mile long half mile broad: beautiful place. Long reach still water / Mr Crook caught cod fish weighing eight pounds. I eat of some'. On Saturday June 29, Robinson made reference to 'perch cod' being found towards the source of the Mitta Mitta River. This implies the presence of cod, and possibly perch in areas of the Mitta Mitta River upstream of Hinnomunjie at the time of European settlement.

In 1851, gold was discovered in the Livingstone Creek and, while initially kept quiet, eventually a rush developed. By the end of 1854, there were at least 180 men working on the Livingstone Creek at a location which became known as Omeo (Flett, 1979). One of the miners was Frank Shellard who recorded in exercise books many incidents, and who described the indigenous residents fishing in the Mitta Mitta River near the Gibbo River junction (Shellard, 1890). The *Omeo Standard* recorded that prior to the gold rush there was an abundance of fish in the upper Mitta Mitta River and its tributaries:

In the early days the rivers and creeks around Omeo were stocked with bream, cod and perch; the streams were so clear and limpid that the fish could be seen in hundreds, disporting themselves in the many huge waterholes, most of which have ceased to exist. Even in the Livingstone Creek, when it was a pretty green-banked stream, in a waterhole which existed just in front of the township, it is recorded that a 13 pound cod was once caught, besides numbers of smaller weight (*Omeo Standard*, 2 December 1902).

In 1922, H. G. Marsden, editor of the *Omeo Standard*, published *Across the Alps to Omeo* to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the shire and to promote tourism. He reported the recent capture of a 9lb. 2oz. cod from the Mitta Mitta River and went on to describe other fishing options in the region:

Another favourite ground with local anglers is on Big River at Coolgardie and at Mitta Mitta River, past Hinnomunjie Bridge, where good-sized cod have been caught. The Morass Creek, both upper and lower, either to the right or left of Benambra township, have been good fishing grounds for many years past, cod and perch being obtained in addition to trout (Marsden, 1922).

After the Second World War, and the progressive harnessing of the Murray's waters for irrigation, the Mitta Mitta became the subject of plans by the River Murray Commission for the construction of a vast impoundment to store its waters just below the Dart River junction. Work commenced on the Dartmouth Dam in 1973, and as part of the work an environmental impact study was conducted. It was found that the lower Mitta Mitta River contained important populations of Murray cod, Macquarie perch and a relic population of Trout cod which had recently been identified as a distinct species (Tunbridge, 1977). During the course of surveys in 1973, a Trout cod was taken from the Mitta Mitta River just upstream of the Dart River junction. Another fish was captured by a local angler several kilometres further upstream, and a third was captured from the Mitta Mitta River just downstream from the Watchingorra Creek junction near the town of Mitta Mitta. In addition, it was recorded that local anglers caught two adult Trout cod from the Mitta Mitta River upstream of the Dart River junction (Tunbridge, 1977).

9.2 The Past Distribution of Fishes in the Mitta Mitta River Catchment

The *Sustainable Rivers Audit* (Davies *et al.*, 2008) divided the Mitta Mitta catchment into a slopes zone (downstream from Banimboola, below Dartmouth Dam), an upland zone (upstream to Anglers Rest, Omeo and Benambra) and a montane zone beyond the latter locations. The river between Banimboola and the town of Mitta Mitta traverses a highly confined valley without a significant floodplain, indicating that upland habitat continues some distance downstream of that nominated in the *Sustainable Rivers Audit*. For simplicity, all habitat zones discussed below match those in the *Sustainable Rivers Audit*.

Much of the information presented below is sourced from the writings of early European settlers, oral history (mainly OH 77-93) and a number of detailed newspaper accounts. A relatively small number of old photographs of catches of native fish in this catchment have been located with at least one being of significance.

9.2.1 The Montane Zone

Macquarie perch ('white eye') and Trout cod ('bluenose') were reported by Jack 'Grandpa' Pendergast to have been common in the Big River at the dawn of the twentieth century where it was sometimes possible to: 'catch enough bluenose and white eye on the first night to be on the way home in the pre-dawn chill of the next day' (Pendergast, OH 77) suggesting that at times good catches were taken. Fisheries Inspector Jack Rhodes obtained a very good description of the cod from Jack Pendergast, and was in no doubt that they were Trout cod (Jack Rhodes, pers. com.). Local advice has pinpointed the location of these captures as occurring in the Big River between Glen Valley and Shannonvale, and clearly in the montane zone (Jack Rhodes, Max Dyer & Sonny Betts, pers. com.). Other oral accounts also record the existence of cod in the Big River further upstream near Glen Wills, and a short distance downstream near Anglers Rest, though these reports do not identify the species (Pendergast, OH 91; Turnball, OH 92). The presence of cod in the Anglers Rest area of the Big River, the upper reaches of the Mitta Mitta River, and the lower reaches of the Cobungra and Victoria Rivers up to waterfall barriers is suggested by two newspaper articles (*Argus*, September 17 1860; *Omeo Standard*, 2 December 1902). Robinson (Clark, 2000) also indicated that cod were found upstream of

Hinnomunjie towards the source of the Mitta Mitta River, and a tourism publication suggested the presence of cod in the Big River at Coolgardie (Marsden, 1922).

At the bottom of the montane zone, in the Livingstone Creek at Omeo, cod and bream were common and could be seen in their hundreds with cod up to 13 lb. (5.9 kg) being taken (*Omeo Standard*, 2 December 1902). Macquarie perch were common in the montane zone of the Morass Creek upstream of Benambra (Hollands, OH 79), and while it has been suggested that cod were not found that far upstream in the Morass Creek (Pendergast, 1968), oral history supported by a written account, indicates that cod had a presence above Benambra (Hollands, OH 79; Dyer, OH 83; Marsden, 1922).

Blackfish were present in the montane zone in the Big River where Henry Morgan recorded catching a 'few', eight miles upstream from the 'Bundarra Creek' (Morgan, 1908). They have been reported more recently from the Bundarra River (Tunbridge, 1977). A newspaper article detailed the capture of a Blackfish from the Livingstone Creek at Omeo and indicated their presence further upstream (*Omeo Telegraph*, 17 September 1895). They had also been common in the upper Morass Creek but not caught in very large numbers (Bill Hollands, pers. com.).

The oral history, combined with a number of written accounts, indicate that at the time of European settlement Macquarie perch, Blackfish and cod had significant populations at the very bottom of the montane zone in the lower reaches of the large rivers and the Livingstone and Morass Creeks. While there is limited descriptions of the size of the catches, the available evidence records that they were regularly captured, indicating that they were reasonably common. Only one account clearly identifies the species of cod as Trout cod (Pendergast, OH 77). An oral account, supported by a photograph, indicates that in the upland zone near Benambra most cod taken were Trout cod, and that Murray cod were rare (Pendergast, OH 78; MMR5). This also suggests that most of the cod in the montane zone were Trout cod.

9.2.2 The Upland Zone

Robinson recorded 'Plenty of cod fish in river' at Hinnomunjie, indicating that cod were common near the top of the upland zone (Clark, 2000). Their presence in the area is supported by a number of other written and oral accounts (Marsden, 1922; Dyer, OH 83; Pendergast, OH 78; Turnbull, OH 92). Near the Gibbo River junction in the 1920s, most of the cod taken were Trout cod, with Murray cod uncommon, and typical catches being three to four fish (Pendergast, OH 78). The presence of Trout cod was confirmed by two specimens taken upstream of the Dart River junction during a scientific study in 1973 (Tunbridge, 1977). A photograph of a cod, while not showing detail in terms of markings, clearly shows head features typical of the fish, notably the lengths of the upper and lower jaws. This photo confirms their presence near the Gibbo River junction (MMR5). Cod were also present in the upland zone of the Morass Creek where it was recorded that one hole was 'full of Murray Cod fish' (Pendergast, 1968). In the lower Gibbo River Trout cod were common (Pendergast, OH 78).

Towards the bottom of the upland zone at the Dart River junction and Banimboola, both species of cod were regularly taken, though Trout cod were originally more common (Walsh, OH 83; Murtagh, OH 85; Franks, OH 89). Until the early 1930s, significantly more Trout cod than Murray cod were caught, particularly fish less than ten lb. (4.5 kg) in weight. Typical catches were two to three table sized fish, with a greater number of juveniles. Cod over 15 lb. (6.8 kg) were unusual, and fish exceeding 10 lb. (4.5 kg) were usually Murray cod (George Murtagh, pers. com.). The collective evidence indicates that in the upland zone Trout cod had been very

common, and in places perhaps locally abundant, while Murray cod varied from being reasonably common to rare - their abundance declining progressively upstream.

Macquarie perch were reported by a number of witnesses to have been caught in large numbers from the Mitta Mitta River near Dartmouth (Walsh, OH 83; Murtagh, OH 85; Scales, OH 88; Turnbull, OH 92) and further upstream huge schools were sometimes seen (Turnball, OH 92). Small fish were considered a pest in the late 1920s, with typical catches including half a dozen fish of table size (George Murtagh, pers. com.). Pendergast (1968) recorded: 'Fish, mainly perch and a small blackfish, known locally as a 'greasy', inhabited most of the streams and, for some miles up most of the larger creeks that flowed eventually into the Mitta Mitta River'. Macquarie perch are recalled in oral history to have been abundant in the Morass Creek (Hollands, OH 79; Betts, OH 82), common in the lower Dart River (Murtagh, OH 85; Scales, OH 88; Turnbull, OH 92) and at times present in Larsen Creek (Walsh, OH 83). The fish were absent from very small streams such as the Soldier and Tokes Creeks (Walsh, OH 83). On one occasion it was recorded that a catch of Macquarie perch from the Morass Creek filled a baby's bath, indicating that they were abundant in that stream (Dyer, OH 83). Overall, the collective evidence indicates that Macquarie perch were abundant in the larger waters of the upland zone.

Blackfish were widespread in the creeks in this zone (Pendergast, 1968) and recorded at a number of locations by Tunbridge (1977). They were caught in good numbers from the Morass Creek downstream from Benambra (Betts, OH 82; Sonny Betts, pers. com.). In the Mitta Mitta River near the Dart River junction they were commonly captured, and in the smaller creeks were abundant (Murtagh, OH 85; George Murtagh, pers. com.). They have also been recorded in the middle reaches of the Gibbo River (Tunbridge, 1977). In the lower reaches of the upland zone near Banimboola, a number of individuals witnessed the capture of small numbers of Silver perch (Walsh, OH 84; Murtagh, OH 85; Scales, OH 88) with reports of the fish as far upstream as the Dart River junction (Murtagh, OH 85). Two people who were shown unlabelled photographs identified the fish concerned as Silver perch. These independent oral accounts indicate that Silver perch were present in the lower reaches of the upland zone and caught at intervals in small numbers. Overall, however, this fish was rare in the upland zone.

9.2.3 The Slopes Zone

Oral history recalls that cod had been abundant in the Mitta Mitta River in the early years, and at times large catches were taken (Yea, OH 86; Franks, OH 89; Turnbull, OH 92). In the 1920s, it was not uncommon to catch half a dozen cod in an evening at Tallangatta (Jack Moyle, pers. com.). Both Trout cod and Murray cod were abundant, but originally Trout cod are reported to have been a little more common near Mitta Mitta (Stan Walsh, pers. com.). In the early 1940s, at the top of the slopes zone between Mitta Mitta and Banimboola, Trout cod were estimated to have been half of the total cod catch (Yea, OH 86). A number of rare photographs depict large catches of cod from the river near Mitta Mitta (THS1; THS5; THS6). While the image quality in these old photos is poor, in one some fish have features suggesting that they could be Trout cod (THS5). Cod were common in the lagoons (Walsh, OH 85; *Argus*, 16 February 1912; 3 January 1922) and on one occasion a 24 lb. (10.9 kg) fish was taken with a hayfork (*Argus*, 25 September 1922). Trout cod were not present in lagoons (Stan Walsh, pers. com.) Cod were also present in the Tallangatta Creek where they were fairly common into the upper reaches (Turnball, OH 92; Alec Turnbull, pers. com.). Trout cod were not present in this area (Stan Walsh, pers. com.).

All oral accounts suggest that Macquarie perch had been abundant in the slopes zone of the Mitta Mitta River, being reliably caught in numbers (Yea, OH 86; Franks, OH 89; Turnbull, OH 92) and at times dominating catches (Moyle, OH 93; Jack Moyle, pers. com.). They were common in the lower reaches of the Snowy Creek (Scales,

OH 88; Turnbull, OH 92), and were present further upstream in the west branch (Yea, OH 86). Blackfish were very common in the river near Mitta Mitta (Walsh, OH 84) where it was not unusual to catch three to four fish (Stan Walsh, pers. com.). They had been abundant in the Tallangatta Creek (Turnball, OH 92), the Snowy Creek (Pendergast, OH 91; Tunbridge, 1977), the Little Snowy Creek (*Argus*, 1 November 1929; Tunbridge, 1977) and in lagoons near Mitta Mitta (Walsh, OH 84).

Many people recalled Catfish being present in lagoons adjacent to the Mitta Mitta River (Franks, OH 89; Evans, OH 90; Turnbull, OH 92; Moyle, OH 93), and their presence is supported by two newspaper accounts, one originating from Bonegilla, and one upstream of Tallangatta, where they were reported to 'abound' (*Argus*, 16 February 1912; 3 January 1922). One of the oldest anglers confirmed that Catfish were taken from the Mitta Mitta River itself during floods (Stan Walsh, pers. com.), and another recalled his father's stories of them being taken from the river near Tallangatta, Eskdale and Mitta Mitta (Franks, OH 89). Overall, Catfish appear to have been very common in the lagoons, but were taken only in small numbers from the Mitta Mitta River.

Oral accounts indicate that Silver perch were regularly caught in small numbers from the Mitta Mitta River near Mitta Mitta, Yabba and Tallangatta (Walsh, OH 83; Turnbull, OH 92; Moyle, OH 93). Some of the anglers were careful to distinguish them from the Macquarie perch, and when shown photographs identified the fish as Silver perch, highlighting a number of features including the forked tail. One individual recalled that they were taken regularly in the Yabba area, and clearly indicated that they were different from Macquarie perch (Turnball, OH 92). A newspaper account distinguished 'silver bream' from 'perch', which were dying in numbers in lagoons near Bonegilla (*Argus*, 16 February 1912), however this account does not conclusively identify the species. The oral history alone is sufficiently strong to suggest with confidence that Silver perch were taken in small numbers with some regularity and may, from the newspaper account, have been fairly common in the lower reaches.

Golden perch were present in the Mitta Mitta River, with a single individual recalling catches in the 1920s downstream of Tallangatta (Moyle, OH 93). Their presence is confirmed by a newspaper article recording the capture of a large specimen from a lagoon near old Tallangatta. This article also implied that it was not an isolated incident (*Argus*, 4 July 1924). The available evidence indicates that they were rare and confined to the lower reaches of the slopes zone.

9.2.4 Estimates of Native Fish Abundance in the Mitta Mitta Catchment at European Settlement.

Presented below are the rarity scores used in the *Sustainable Rivers Audit* (Davies *et al.*, 2008) which were developed by an expert panel using historical evidence available prior to 2008. They indicate the probability of capturing a particular fish species using standardized survey techniques such as electrofishing. They are compared to those developed in the *True Tales* Project using more recently obtained historical evidence and are based on the typical size of angler catches in the oldest accounts.

Table 9.1 Mitta Mitta River Catchment Rarity Scores

Species	Slopes (Murray River to Banimboola)		Upland (Banimboola to Benambra, Omeo & Anglers Rest)		Montane (Upstream of Benambra, Omeo & Anglers Rest)	
	SRA	True Tales	SRA	True Tales	SRA	True Tales
Trout cod	3	5	3	U3	0	L3
Murray cod	3	5	1	U1	0	L1?
Golden perch	1	L1	0	0	0	0
Silver perch	0	1	0	L1	0	0
Macquarie perch	5	5	3	5	1	3
Catfish	0	U1	0	0	0	0
'Blackfish'	3	U3	5	5	5	U3

Key

0 = Absent: no credible account reporting the species former presence

1 = Rare: a few individual fish could be expected to be taken by a resident angler each year

3 = Common: regularly taken by a resident angler in small numbers

5 = Abundant: frequently taken by a resident angler in good numbers

L = abundance at the lower end rating

U = abundance at the upper end rating

Ratings in bold type are supported by multiple accounts or lines of evidence e.g. oral history, newspaper accounts, photographs.

Figure 9.2 **Historical Records for Murray cod and Trout cod in the Mitta Mitta River Catchment**

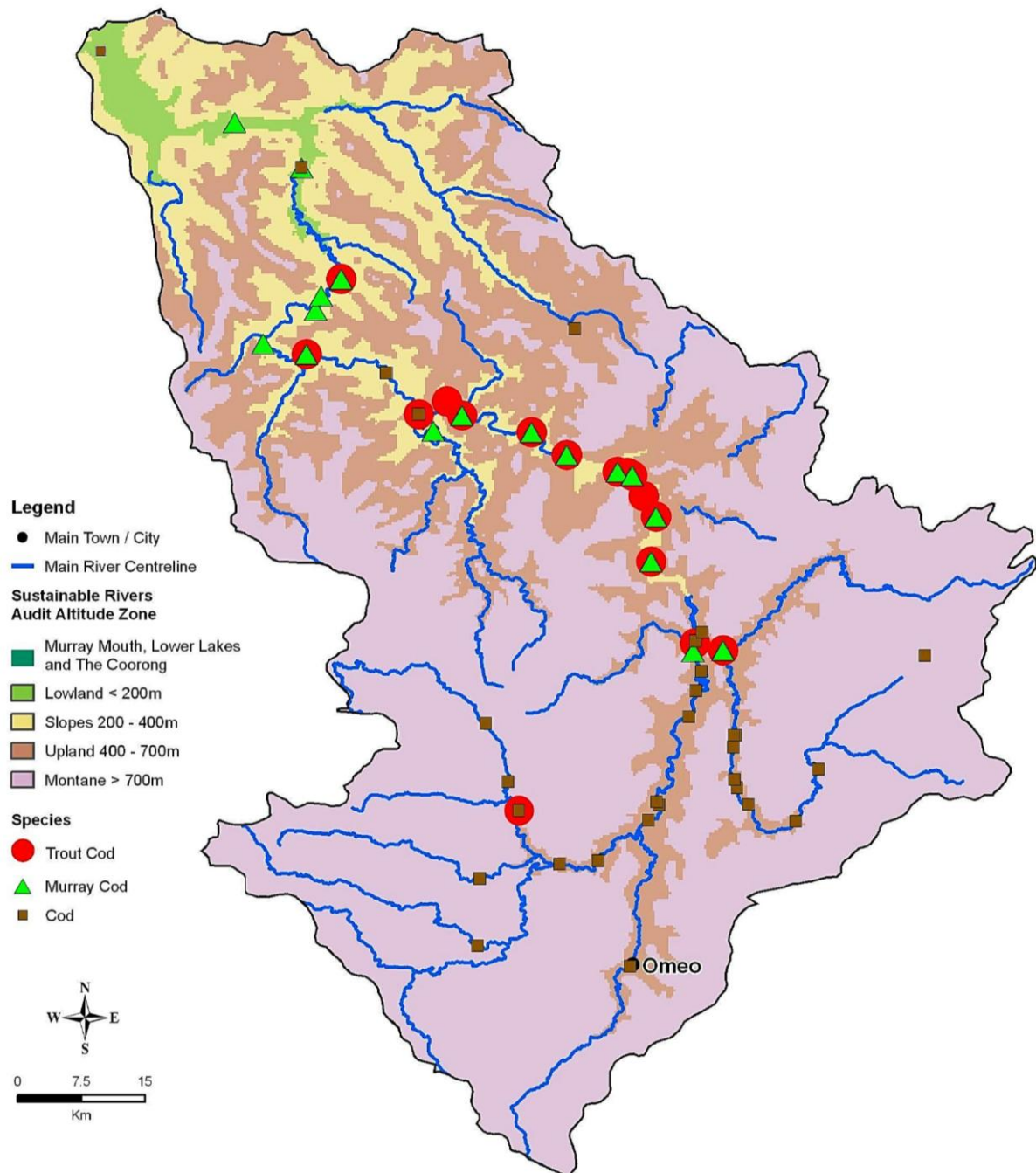
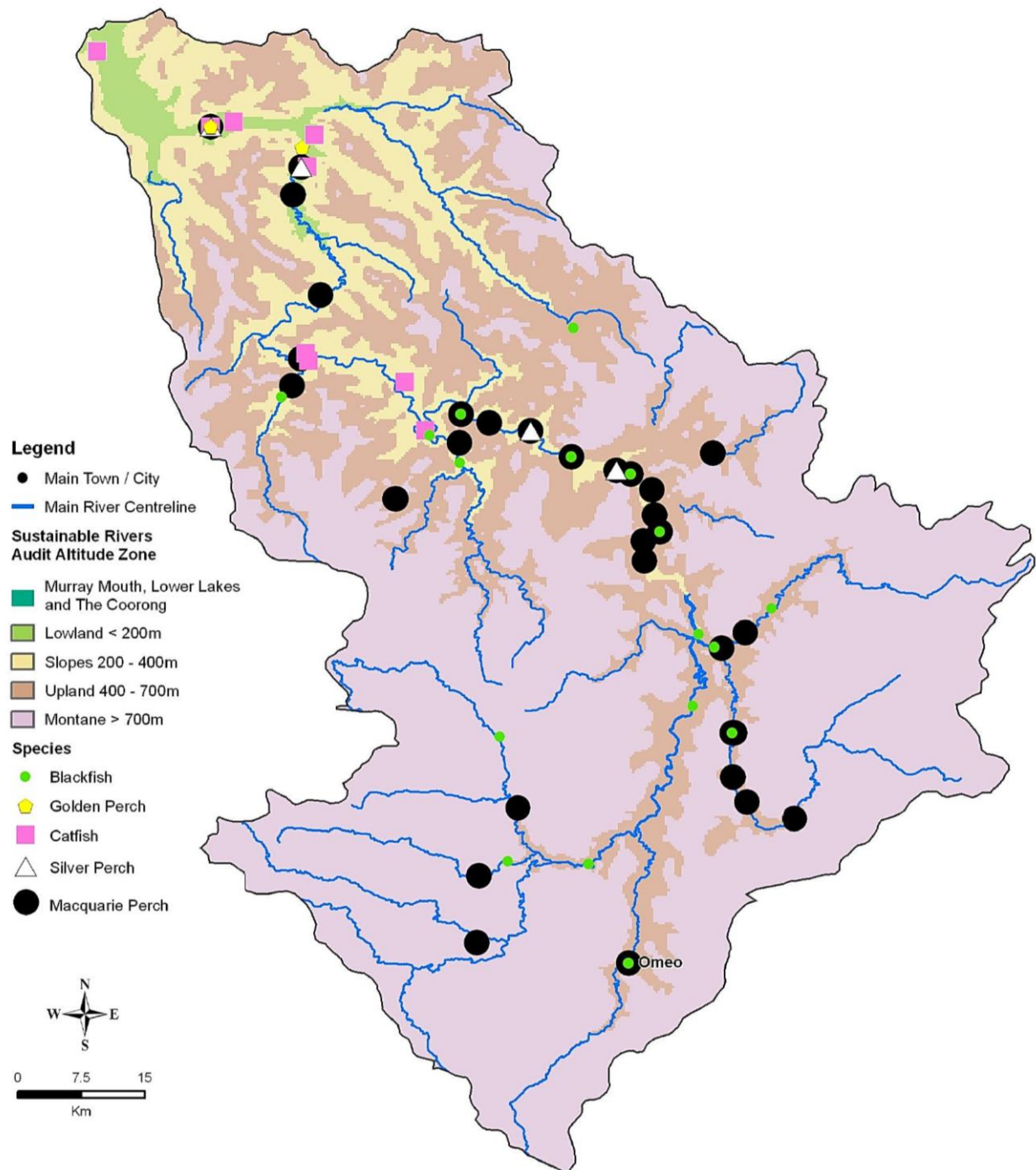
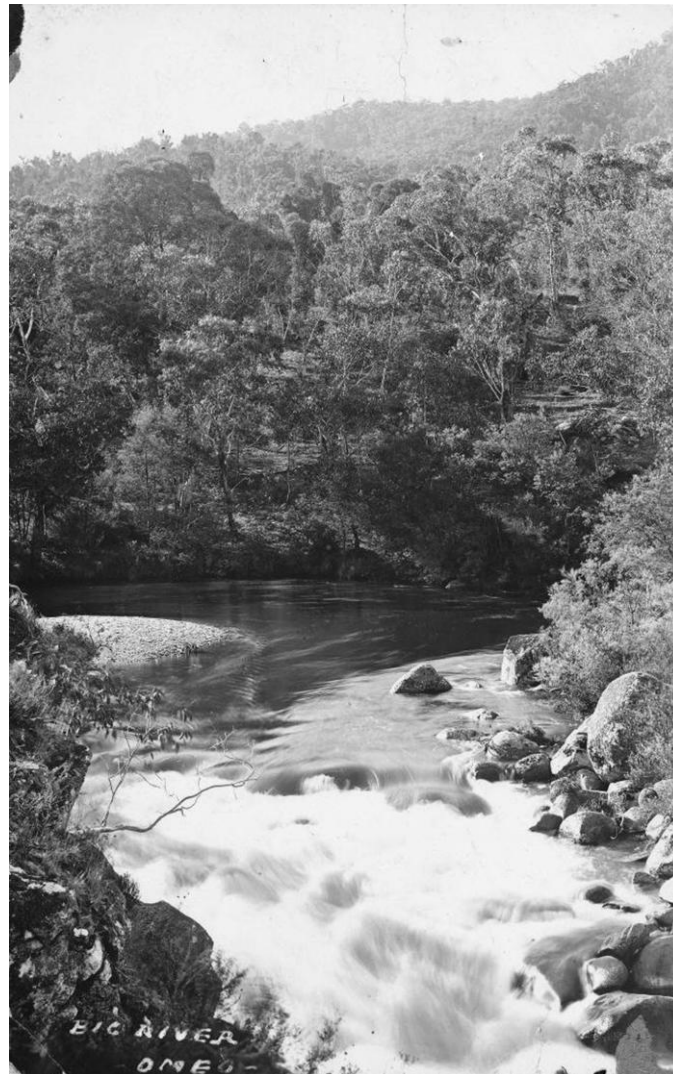


Figure 9.3 Historical Records for Native Fish Species other than Cod in the Mitta Mitta River Catchment.



Photograph 9.1 The Big River



A Photograph of the Big River near Omeo at the dawn of the twentieth century depicts the habitat where Jack 'Grandpa' Pendergast recalled fishing for bluenose and white eye at that time. Photograph from the Shirley Jones collection of Victorian Postcards, reproduced with the permission of the *State Library of Victoria*.

Photograph 9.2 Upper Mitta Mitta Trout Cod



Photo MMR5: Gordon Toland at 'the goat farm', Gibbo Park, holding a Trout cod caught from the Mitta Mitta River just upstream of the Gibbo River junction c1935. The overhanging upper jaw is quite apparent, the snout is large and pointed and the animal has a very long caudal peduncle. While the image is too grainy to record most markings an eye stripe is visible. Stories from the Tolands and Pendergasts recall that Trout cod were once very common in the upland Mitta Mitta and Gibbo Rivers near Benambra and Murray cod rare. Photo courtesy of Margaret Pendergast.

Photograph 9.3 Mitta Mitta Cod Catch

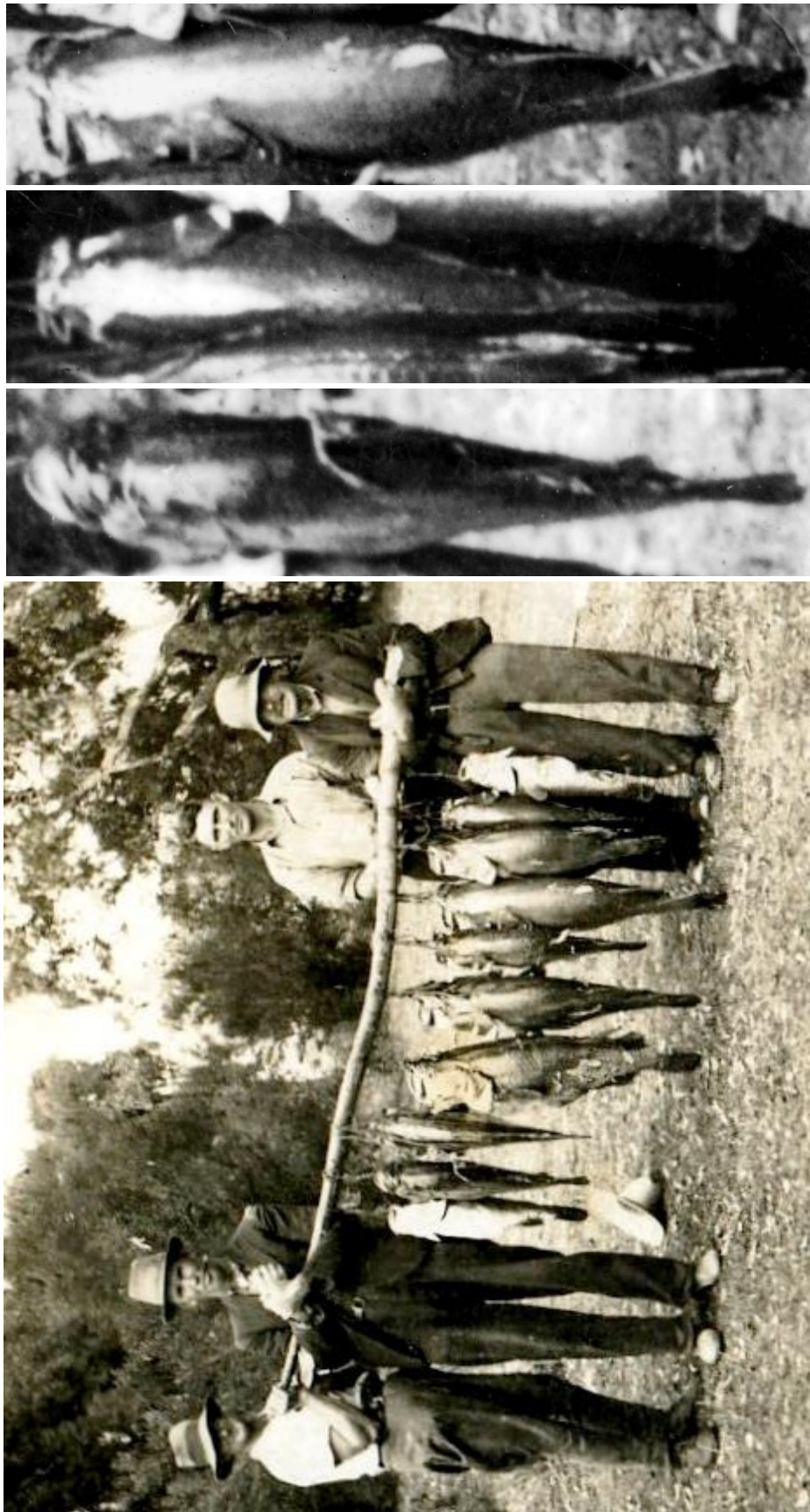
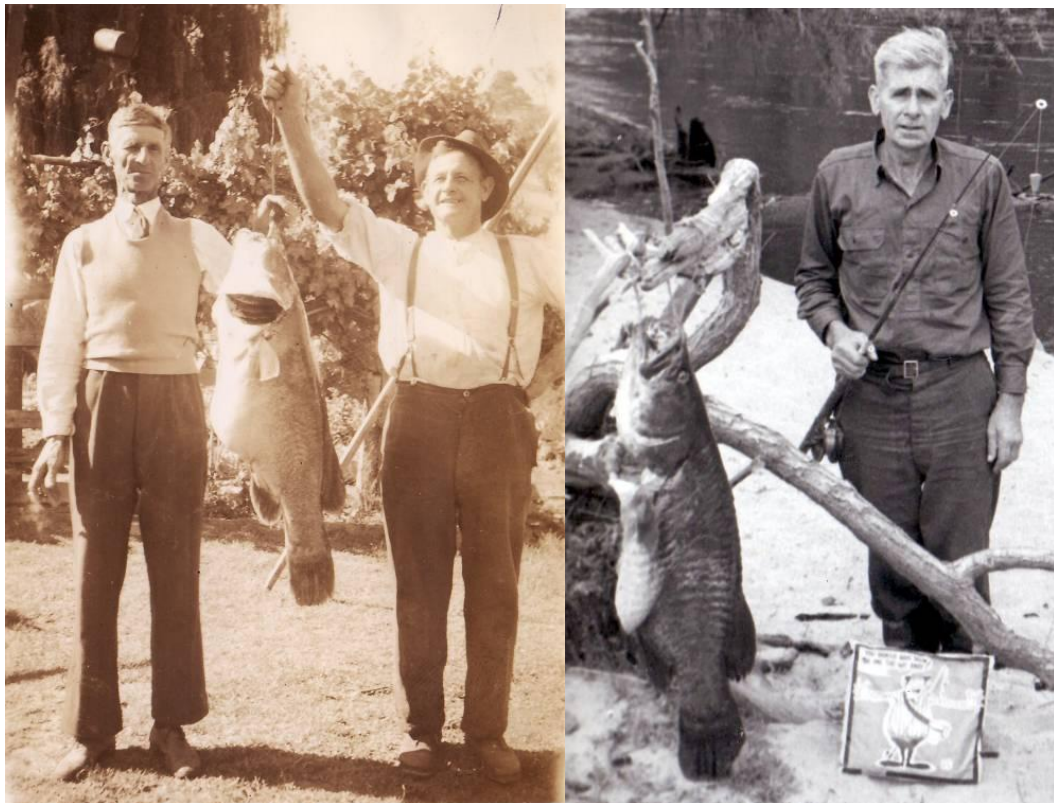


Photo TH55: A catch of cod from the Mitta Mitta River near Mitta Mitta c1930. Though not conclusive differences in the shape of the heads and other features suggests that both Murray cod and Trout cod may be present in the catch. On the far left of the original photo is Arch Campbell. The photo demonstrates that cod were abundant in the slopes zone of the Mitta Mitta River. From the collection of Joe Campbell, reproduced with the permission of the Tallangatta & District Historical Group.

Photograph 9.4 Big Cod from the Mitta Mitta



Left, Photo MMR14: A Murray cod captured from the Mitta Mitta River near Old Tallangatta c1940. Left is Ben Butler and on his right Ern Butler, both keen fishermen. Photo courtesy of Beverly Stewart.

Right, Photo MMR13: By the 1960s native fish populations in the lower Mitta Mitta River were a shadow of the past. Sizeable Murray cod were still being caught along with occasional Trout cod and Macquarie perch. Jack Franks here is depicted with a 40 lb. (18.2 kg) Murray cod caught from the Mitta Mitta River near Tallandoon 19 December 1964. Photo courtesy of Les Franks.

9.3 The Changes

9.3.1 Changes to Native Fish Distribution and Abundance

Trout cod and Macquarie perch populations had disappeared from many areas in the montane zone by the end of the nineteenth century, with reasonable numbers existing in the more isolated areas (*Omeo Standard*, 2 December 1902; Pendergast, OH 77). Macquarie perch were still present in small numbers upstream of Benambra until the 1930s, (Bill Hollands, pers. com.) but the species had disappeared earlier from the Mitta Mitta River and tributaries upstream of Hinnomunjie, with no one recalling their presence (Pendergast, OH 91; Turnball, OH 92). Isolated captures of cod continued in the Big River and near Anglers Rest, until the end of the 1950s (Pendergast, OH 91; Turnball, OH 92).

Early in the twentieth century, native fish populations in the upland zone of the Mitta Mitta River appear to have been in reasonably good shape. The lower Morass Creek was still producing good catches of cod and Macquarie perch (Pendergast, OH 78; Hollands, OH 79; Betts, OH 82; Dyer, OH 83), and in the lower Morass Creek as late as 1926, cod from one to 25 lb. (11.36 kg) were taken (*Camperdown Chronicle*, 14 January 1926). Until the early 1930s, the Mitta Mitta River in the Dartmouth area contained an abundance of Trout cod, Murray cod and Macquarie perch (Murtagh, OH 85). As late as 1923, a catch of 70 lb. (31.8 kg) of bream and cod was reported as being taken from 'some of the less frequented fishing grounds' near Omeo (*Argus*, 5 February 1923).

By the late 1930s, the cod population in the upland zone was in serious decline with catches having become rare in the Morass Creek, Gibbo River and the Mitta Mitta River above Tokes Creek (Pendergast, OH 78; Hollands, OH 79; Betts, OH 82; Dyer, OH 83). During the 1930s, at the bottom of the upland zone at Dartmouth small cod were less common, and Trout cod significantly declined (Murtagh, OH 85; George Murtagh, pers. com.). The Macquarie perch population also reduced (George Murtagh, pers. com.). By the Second World War cod were rare upstream of the Dart River junction, and Macquarie perch rare above Larsens Creek (Murtagh, OH 85; Walsh, OH 84; Dyer, OH 83; Pendergast, OH 91).

In the slopes zone of the Mitta Mitta River during the 1920s, good populations of Trout cod, Murray cod, Macquarie perch, Catfish and Blackfish were still present, with regular captures of Silver perch taking place (Walsh, OH 84). Major changes to fish populations are apparent by the end of the 1930s. Catfish disappeared (Evans, OH 90; Turnball, OH 92; Moyle, OH 93), and there are no further accounts of Golden Perch and Silver Perch, indicating that they had also vanished. There was a reduction in catches of both cod species, though the cod fishing was still considered to be good in the late 1930s. It was noted however, that the large numbers of juvenile cod in past years had declined near Mitta Mitta (Stan Walsh, pers. com.). By the 1950s, the fishing for large cod was still good, but they were nowhere near as prolific as in the past. Trout cod had dramatically declined in abundance, being only occasionally caught, and Macquarie perch had become scarce throughout the slopes zone (Yea, OH 86; Yea, OH 87; Franks, OH 89; Evans, OH 90; Stan Walsh, pers. com.; Jack Rhodes, pers. com.).

By the 1970s, Blackfish survived as small populations throughout the catchment. Macquarie perch were present in numbers near the Dart River junction, but were rare elsewhere. Murray cod were found in numbers downstream of Eskdale, and present as far upstream as the Dart River junction. A relic population of Trout cod existed in the Mitta Mitta River between Larsen Creek and Mitta Mitta (Tunbridge, 1977). After the filling of Dartmouth Dam, Macquarie perch initially flourished in its waters, as well as in the Mitta Mitta as far upstream as the Livingstone Creek junction. In subsequent decades they have declined, and are now caught in comparatively low numbers from the dam (Douglas *et al.*, 2002). While one or two cod captures occurred from the waters of Lake Dartmouth, it appears that too few fish were present to make use of the favourable

conditions. Downstream of the dam the populations of the larger native fish species have almost disappeared (Koehn *et al.*, 1995).

9.3.2 *Changes to Habitat*

The 1850s gold rush caused massive destruction to the aquatic environment of some waters in the catchment. Mining activities seriously impacted water quality and this is implicated in the decline of fish populations (*Omeo Standard*, 2 December 1902). Disturbance of the sediments, along with land clearing, allowed the serious flooding of 1870 to shift large volumes of sediment into and down the river, filling in holes in the upper Mitta Mitta River (Flett, 1979). In the early part of the twentieth century, bucket dredging occurred in the Hinnomunjie area and near Mitta Mitta, turning over large volumes of gravel in the river (Flett, 1979). By 1915, sluicing and dredging operations near the town of Mitta Mitta area led to the creation of a three mile long sand slug just downstream of Tallangatta (Victorian Government, 1915). The alluvial workings in the lower Mitta Mitta River impacted upon water quality from time to time, with effects observed downstream in the Murray River at Albury (NSW Fisheries Report, 1907).

After unsuccessful attempts at acclimatising Atlantic Salmon, Brown and Rainbow trout were introduced to the Mitta Mitta Catchment near Omeo, Anglers Rest and Benambra in 1902 (*Omeo Standard*, 2 December 1902). Three years later a newspaper article described how in the Victoria River the trout 'were thriving, thousands of yearlings and a large quantity of spawn present' with the fish being fed by locals (*Omeo Standard*, 21 November 1905). Periodic trout liberations from government hatcheries occurred up to 1969 (Tunbridge, 1977). Trout dispersed downstream reached the Dartmouth area during the 1920s (Murtagh, OH 85; Moyle, OH 93), and by the 1930s were abundant in the Mitta Mitta River, its tributaries, and lagoons as far downstream as the Eskdale area (Walsh, OH 84; Franks, OH 89; Stan Walsh, pers. com.). Their arrival at Dartmouth caused apprehension amongst anglers who believed that they would have an impact on native fish (Murtagh, OH 85).

Redfin perch were first reported in the catchment in 1917 (*Argus*, 23 January 1922), and became common as far upstream as Banimboola by the early 1930s (Murtagh, OH 85; Moyle, OH 93). They penetrated upstream into the lower reaches of the Dart River (Alec Turnball, OH 92; Tunbridge, 1977) and are recorded as having been present as far upstream as the Razorback Spur area (Tunbridge, 1977). Great concern was expressed by anglers at the time. The arrival of Redfin perch in the slopes zone was associated with a decline in native fish - particularly Catfish and Macquarie perch (Murtagh, OH 85; Yea, OH 86; Jack Moyle, pers. com.).

It is uncertain when Goldfish first arrived in the catchment, but in 1922 'vast numbers' were stranded by a flood near Tallangatta (*Argus*, 7 July 1922). By the 1930s, they were present in the slopes and upland zones, and were widely used as bait by anglers (Franks, OH 89). English roach were recorded as present near Tallangatta in 1922, but failed to establish a significant population (*Argus*, 3 January 1922). European carp were first reported in the slopes zone at the end of the 1970s (Les Franks, pers. com.). They appeared in Dartmouth Dam at the end of the 1980s where they became abundant, and have been sighted in the Livingstone Creek near Omeo (Author's pers. obs.). Their arrival near Tallangatta was associated by one person with a decline in water quality (Turnball, OH 92; Alec Turnball, pers. com.).

In 1919 and 1926, bushfire events followed by storms, are reported to have killed large numbers of fish (*Queanbeyan Age & Queanbeyan Observer*, 28 February 1919; *Argus*, 15 January 1926). The 1939 bushfires are recalled to have affected fish populations in the slopes and upland zones, with large fish kills taking place (Murtagh, OH 85; Betts, OH 82; Sonny Betts, pers. com.). After the kills, cod which were already rare,

disappeared from the Morass Creek. Macquarie perch, still regularly caught, did not recover (Betts, OH 82; Sonny Betts, pers. com.). Subsequent to the fires there was a noticeable decline in native fish populations in the lower Mitta Mitta (Murtagh, OH 85, George Murtagh, pers. com.). The construction of the Hume Dam during the 1920s isolated the Mitta Mitta Catchment from most of the Murray-Darling Basin, creating a barrier to upstream fish movement. During the 1950s and 1960s 'river improvement' works, carried out by government agencies, removed snags and logs from the river destroying habitat considered important for cod (Franks, OH 89; Tunbridge, 1977).

Work commenced on the Dartmouth Dam in 1973 (Tunbridge, 1977), filling of the storage commenced in 1977, and construction was completed two years later. Downstream of the dam the natural flow regime has been altered and cold water releases have greatly depressed summer water temperatures with impacts felt downstream to Lake Hume (Ryan *et al.*, 2001). The lowered thermal regime has been suggested as responsible for the extinction of the downstream populations of Murray cod, Trout cod and Macquarie perch, whilst enhancing the trout population (Koehn *et al.*, 1995). However, by the time the dam was constructed, Trout cod and Macquarie perch were already rare in the slopes zone.

9.4 The Current Situation

The Sustainable Rivers Audit concluded that 'the Mitta Mitta Valley fish community was in Extremely Poor Condition. Alien species were 92% of total biomass and 50% of total abundance. The community had lost most of its native species richness and was dominated by alien fish' (Davies *et al.*, 2008).

Today the Mitta Mitta catchment is recognised as one of the best trout fisheries in Victoria. Blackfish are widespread, and in some areas are relatively common. During the filling phase of Dartmouth Dam, Macquarie Perch flourished, creating a fishery for the species on a scale not seen anywhere else for several decades. The population declined after the lake stabilised, but persists both in the lake and the Mitta Mitta River as far upstream as Hinnomunjie. Cod all but vanished downstream of the dam, though in recent years, when water levels in the dam have been low and irrigation releases warmer, some isolated catches have taken place. Occasional catches of Golden perch have also occurred in the lower reaches, probably originating from fish stocked into Lake Hume. Catfish and Silver perch have not been reported for over 70 years.

'Inme-mun-je' or 'Inna-mung-yu' are probably historical references to Trout cod being common in the area now known as Hinnomunjie. Once prevalent in the Mitta Mitta River, but scarce after the 1950s, they became extinct in the catchment after the completion of Dartmouth Dam. During the early 1990s a program commenced for five years to stock Trout cod in the dam, and the Mitta Mitta River near Taylors Crossing, however, the stockings were discontinued after two years to concentrate resources on re-establishing the species in the Ovens Catchment. There are ongoing reports of occasional captures, but a population has not as yet been established.

9.5 Newspaper Highlights

Omeo Telegraph, 17 September 1895

It was reported that a local Omeo resident caught a blackfish a foot in length and 8 ½ inches in girth in the old upper race near his house. This particular race, one of many within the Omeo township, had its beginnings at the upper Livingstone some 6 km from Omeo. It would seem that the fish entered the race at this point.

Omeo Standard, 2 December 1902

Omeo Fish Society

It is easy to distinguish a visitor from Omeo at a Bairnsdale or Melbourne hotel dining table by the constant demand he makes for fish; he asks for it for breakfast, dinner and but the small waiter who is looking after his capital welfare makes it his business to see that a portion of the much coveted luxury is kept back for his customer. The tinned varieties and occasionally during the winter some fresh fish at some of the Omeo hotels is all that the Omeoite knows of the succulent food until he goes down the Tambo Valley. In the early days the rivers and creeks around Omeo were stocked with bream, cod and perch; the streams were so clear and limpid that the fish could be seen in hundreds, disporting themselves in the many huge waterholes, most of which have ceased to exist. Even in the Livingstone Creek, when it was a pretty green-banked stream, in a waterhole which existed just in front of the township, it is recorded that a 13 lb. cod was once caught, besides numbers of smaller weight. But the advent of the miner changed this; the streams were rendered turgid and muddy with the hundreds of sluice boxes and cradles that were winning the gold from the wash, and the fish were naturally checked in their abundance by the muddy waters in which they had to live.

From that time the fish have been decreasing until there are only a few left in the Mitta, the Morass and the upper waters of the Victoria, Cobungra and Wentworth rivers. Some thirteen years ago Mr. Easton tried to restock the streams by getting some salmon ova, but there was difficulty in getting them up with sufficient care and placing them in the streams. But still, some of them survived as one was caught at the outlet of the race from the Omeo Park to the creek and some tourists caught a couple of dozen at the Cobungra bridge about two years ago. However, the attempt now made by the Omeo Fish Acclimatisation society is likely to meet with more success, and after two or three years are over there may be a chance of seeing a nice dish of locally bred trout on the breakfast table.

Omeo Standard, 21 November 1905

They are in a hurry to commence fishing for cod in the Morass, not waiting for the season to open on the 1st of next month. If the local constable kept his eyes open he would get a good haul – not of fish but of men.

Argus, 16 February 1912

Mortality Amongst Fish. Mr. P. Newman, honorary inspector of fisheries and game, writes from Bonegilla: — “I am curious as to the probable cause of a heavy mortality amongst fish here. Myriads are succumbing in many of the lagoons, the waters in which have, I presume, been fouled from overheating and evaporation, due to exposure to excessive sun’s rays. Mortality is not confined to shallow waters, as in crystal clear lagoons from 6ft. to 8ft. in depth, and half an acre in extent, with apparently plenty of food, dead fish in large numbers are floating. The majority are silver bream, from 1½lb. to 2lb. in weight, although perch and cod of much larger size have also been observed. A notable feature is that catfish, in which the lagoons abound, appear to be weathering the conditions. Today I saw a cod 3ft. 6in. in length by 31in. in girth, and weighing 40lb., that had perished under similar conditions”.

Argus, 23 January 1917

English Perch. A very excellent colour sketch of a fish caught in the Mitta Mitta River is sent by Mitchell Canning, of Tallandoon North S.S. It marks the stranger without any doubt as an English perch, a very undesirable fish, in my opinion, and likely in the long run to prove a pest in any stream to which it may unfortunately have found its way.

Argus, 26 December 1917

Cod And Catfish. "A big lagoon in the Mitta Mitta Valley, a few miles above Tallangatta, abounds in catfish and cod, but, according to the local evidence, they have no liking for each other's society. It is stated that you will always find codfish at one end and catfish at the other, and that never, or hardly ever, is a fish of one species caught in the 'territory' of the other." ("T.D.," Elwood).

Argus, 3 January 1922

Roach. Although my belief is that some fish sent to me by a Tallangatta boy are English roach, I am by no means sure about it, because many of the English pond fish are much alike, and one must go to fine points in comparison before being at all sure as to the species. With the help of some scales sent by an adult angler from the same stream, I may be able to offer later a more positive opinion about them. In the case of roach colour is not a reliable guide, although the contrast of red fins with shiny silvery scales, larger than those of a carp or tench, make them, when freshly caught, a very handsome fish. The fact that some of the fish caught at Tallangatta were alive 2½ hours after they had been taken out of the water makes it certain that they are not native fishes, and rather suggests the carp family.

Argus, 4 July 1924

Large Golden Perch. While Mr. W. M. Paterson and Mr. A. Trasker (Tallangatta) were fishing a lagoon at Tatonga recently, and using an aeroplane spinner, they landed a golden perch weighing 9¼lb., and they wish to know whether in the experience of other anglers the size is unusual. They hear of them up to 5lb. in weight, but seldom larger. On the lagoon, and spinning from a boat, they still get a few cod, though so many people think it too late in the season for them.

9.6 Mitta Mitta River Catchment Oral Histories

The following oral histories (OH 77-93) mostly discuss the Mitta Mitta Catchment.

OH 77

Jack Rhodes has kindly provided permission for these paragraphs from his book (Rhodes, 1999) to be republished. The oral history was provided by 'Swampy' Jack Pendergast of Wodonga, formerly of Benambra.

"Grandpa" Pendergast was over ninety years of age when I called to talk to him in Wodonga. I was greatly encouraged to be told that I would find him down in the shed making something, as I have always been able to talk to people who make things. This man was no exception. I had expected that we would talk, if he was a fisherman, about the west side of the mountains and reinforce what others had said. How wrong I was, Grandpa Pendergast had fished out of Omeo in the Big River or headwaters of the Mitta Mitta River, to the eastern side of the mountains. The expeditions in his youth had been by horse-drawn vehicle in an area where even summer temperatures at night can produce 'brass monkey' conditions. He said they would get to the river on the first day and sometimes catch enough bluenose and white eye on the first night to be on the way home in the pre-dawn chill of the next day. He said, as any old white eye or cod fisherman might say, "You know they bite best at night".

Although I had never caught many bluenose, I had as a youngster, fished for white eye with my brothers by the light of a hurricane lantern in the Yarra River at Heidelberg. When I left Grandpa Pendergast, we had re-lived some of his youth and, figuratively speaking, he had a fair heap of scales to clear up before he got on with his job.

Footnote: 'Grandpa' Pendergast has been identified as 'Swampy' Jack Pendergast by relatives including Graeme and Reg Pendergast and historian Max Dyer. He is believed to have been born in 1879, arriving in Benambra in the 1890s and married around 1906. He spent the latter years of his life in Wodonga with his son Reg Pendergast Snr. He eventually moved from Wodonga to Bairnsdale where he died.

OH 78

Margaret Pendergast of Benambra was interviewed in December 2006.

My mother, Doris Gould, was born and grew up at Gibbo Park. Mum was born in 1920 and talked about the stories of her childhood in the 1930s while my grandmother, born in the 1880s could go back a lot further. Mum said the boys would go out fishing and usually catch trout or cod. The cod were not the normal Murray River cod; they were called a Trout cod. Granny said the only real cod was the Murray cod, they were much nicer to eat, she always referred to the local cod as a Trout cod. Mum always said the same thing; the better eating cod were the Murray cod. Granny said the Murray cod was a big, pot-bellied fish that just laid under a log and ate the tucker as it went past, while the Trout cod, in the swifter rivers, he had to chase his food. She said "the Murray cod is much better to eat than these local things, these Trout cod, which are just too dry". Whenever we went to Albury we had to have a feed of Murray cod, my mother and grandmother loved the fat in it. I only had it once, I couldn't stand the fat!

I was told how the boys used to go out fishing and the Trout cod they would sometimes get 3 or 4, up to 20 pound. My uncle, Gordon Toland caught the Trout cod in the photo near Gibbo Park, down in the Mitta, I think about 1935. They were nearly all Trout cod, though apparently a small Murray cod was caught occasionally I was told. That was in the Gibbo Park area in the twenties and earlier. They were more common in the Mitta than the Gibbo. I was shown, just above the junction in the Gibbo a ledge or fall, a large drop, which the cod and bream could only get past in a flood, it was after a flood that the cod were apparently caught in any numbers above this fall. In later years Granny talked about how the boys would ride for miles to try to catch a

cod, off to Italian Point or Port Cirelle, by then the cod weren't caught much above the junction, that is the Mitta and the Gibbo. That would have been by the late 30s or early 40s.

OH 79

Bill Hollands of Omeo was interviewed in July 2006 at an age of 90 years.

I can recall as a 3-4 year old on Boxing Day my family catching cod and black bream in the Morass Creek. The cod went a long way up the Morass, well up to McKinnon's, in the big holes, up past "The Brothers", 6 to 7 miles north of Benambra. The cod were still being caught in the Morass at Uplands in the 1920s. I used to fish the holes in the Gibbo for the Macquarie perch in summer and autumn; if you caught one you'd throw in again and always get more. I once saw 'Swampy Jack' Pendergast in a buggy, catching greasies for bait, and then coming back in the buggy and having a big cod in the back. He'd been down to the Mitta, near where the Gibbo comes in, where the Wombat comes up. He used a light to attract the cod. I used to catch big Blackfish up near the head of the Tambo River, sit up all night catching Blackfish. They were commonly 13 or 14 inches long, sometimes bigger. My father was involved in the first releases of trout in the Benambra area.

OH 80

Vince Pendergast of Benambra provided these comments in April 2006.

There was a series of deep holes in the Morass Creek in which cod were caught before World War 1. After that they silted up from the cattle. Cod were caught in the Toke-Gibbo area of the Mitta Mitta by cattlemen on their drives from the 1920s to the early 1960s.

OH 81

Graeme Pendergast of Benambra provided these comments in April 2006.

The 'cod hole' was about 6 km out from Benambra on the Tableland Crossing Road, just below the bridge over the Morass. Years ago a dead roo was hung on a wire over the hole so that the maggots would attract the cod. A 20 lb. cod ended up being caught on maggots.

OH 82

Hughes 'Sonny' Betts, formerly of Benambra, was interviewed in July 2006 at 90 years of age.

There was lots of cod in the Gibbo in the late 20s to 30s. Lots of small ones, around 2 to 3 pound was common. The 1939 bushfires went all through Omeo and Benambra. By then they had got scarce, but that seemed to finish them off. The bream, what they called the Macquarie perch, well there was heaps of them in the Morass. Any of the deep holes had them. The biggest were up to 3 to 4 pound though I did see a 5 pounder. They pretty well had disappeared around the war, by 1945. I used go up the Morass at Beloka, it was in a valley but all scrubby. You couldn't fly fish it. I used to cast a bait up into the holes, that would be where the trout were waiting. Or a silver or gold spoon, something like that. Used to catch lots of trout up to 12 lb. That was a brown. The best rainbow was 7 ½ pound, caught that in the Morass up at Beloka too.

Charlie Boucher hung a dead sheep on a wire over a deep hole in the Morass Creek below his house. All the maggots fell into the stream. Well he eventually got a 20 lb. cod on maggots. That was the biggest cod caught in the district. Everybody was talking about it. I can remember "Swampy Jack" Pendergast used to go out the back of Omeo, right up, and catch the cod and bream. He moved back to Benambra, caught cod down below in the Mitta. At the time there were a lot of greasies around. They did get used for bait.

OH 83

Max Dyer, formerly of Uplands, was interviewed in December 2006 at an age of 78 years.

I grew up on the Morass Creek at Uplands. The only cod I ever saw was one that I saw feeding in "a big fish hole" above Taylor's Crossing. It gave me quite a shock. I didn't know what it was. This thing was swimming

around, a cod of ten to twelve pounds, a dark greeny colour with a head a lot darker. Although I didn't catch any cod, I was told many stories about them by my family and friends when I was young. I was told when my brother Steve was about six years old; he caught a big cod in the Mitta. My dad used to laugh about how my brother used to thread the worms; he was so young he didn't know any better. Well the one he caught was too long to go in a sugar bag. That was out in front of Fisher's Hut, two miles below Taylor's Crossing about 1927. There were cod caught out of the Morass at Poulson's old place. There was an eighteen pounder caught out of it by Dave King on Good Friday about 1908-9. The fish was caught by Dave just below the old "Wombat Crossing"; it was a crossing on the Morass Creek that the miners used when they were going to "The Wombat".

Gordon Toland's father, Johnnie Toland spoke of catching cod near Springvale Homestead. Springvale was one of the first homesteads built on the Morass Creek; it was about three miles upstream from Murphy's Waterhole. He used to catch cod near where the bridge was eventually built. There is a hole on the Mitta Mitta River known as "the big fish hole". Will "Weary" Pendergast went down there with a horse and gig down to the Mitta and called in on the way back to show dad what he had caught. He had a cod that wouldn't fit in a flour bag. Actually he had trouble fitting it on the floor of the gig. Dad said it was over three feet long. Its tail was bent up a bit on the floor of the gig. He had the head preserved at "Leinster". That was about 1928-29. That spot became known as "The Big Fish Hole", below Taylor's Crossing, half a mile upstream from Chinaman's Spur. Below Ben Buckley's place. It's roughly two thirds of the way between Hinnomunjie and the Gibbo River junction.

My dad used to go down to the mouth of Toke's Creek. Tom Toke had the first store on the river there, opposite Italian Point. He was killing Chinamen and selling it to the miners as "Pork". But they never got him for it. Later on old Cirelle moved into the store. It was later known as Port Cirelle. About a mile and a half above Tokes Creek Junction. Tom and Violet Stevens used to go to school with me and they told me how they used to catch cod there. They used to reckon that it was the highest point on the Mitta where you could reliably get the cod. That was about 1935-36. Just above "The Wombat" is a long hole with a limestone bluff. They were still catching cod there at the time too.

I was told about the day when dad went down to the mouth of Tokes Creek and didn't catch any cod. An aboriginal woman lived there and she told him he would do no good; that the best time was in a few weeks and she told him the date the moon would be right. Well he went back and fished when Black Annie told him to and he filled his sugar bag with cod. Black Annie lived with Jack Forest and was well respected by everyone. She acted as a midwife for many of the local women, kept his house as clean as a whistle. One day she got wet after falling in the river. This brought on a chill that turned to pneumonia and she passed away in the Tallangatta Hospital.

An old Omeo Standard of 1904 tells us that a lot of fish were dying at the mouth of "Ferris Creek" and that Mr. Tom Ferris had captured a 12 pound cod from the sick ones.¹ My three sisters aged 14, 12 and 8 went fishing for perch just above the Morass Bridge on the Corryong Road. They caught enough to fill a baby's bath. The last perch I saw come out of that creek was caught by Fred Sergeant in the corner hole below that bridge. That was in 1937. There is a "Cod Hole" on the Morass Creek and it is in Alan Rundell's paddock a good half mile below the Tablelands Bridge. This cod hole was where old Uncle Ned Clarke always opened the Duck season. What a wonderful old fellow he was! He never shot any more than four ducks, and was well satisfied with those. What a pity there weren't more like him.

Alex Fraser lived beside the Mitta River at what was known as the "The Dog Fence" on a property owned by the late Pat Kelly. He was a complete alcoholic, but kept himself and his hut spotlessly clean. He had the best stack of wine bottles that anyone in the district had ever seen. One morning in 1949 we met him walking up the road

toward the Kelly home. We were on horseback and on our way to Quart pot to muster cattle. Alex was carrying a rolled up sugar bag under his arm, and in that bag was a huge fish. He was using a long thin stick for a walking stick. This was in his right hand and the bag containing the fish was under his left arm.

We stopped and talked to him for a few minutes and Alex in his old peculiar lisping voice said, "I've got a blooming nice fish here that I'm taking up to Mrs Kelly. You know she's an invaleed (invalid)." We rode off and dad said "That was a codfish that old fellow had in the bag. Didn't you see the rounded tail that was sticking out of the bag?" It appears that Alex used to have set lines in the big hole in the Mitta behind his hut. This is about a mile and a half below Hinnomunjie Station or two miles below Hinnomunjie Bridge. The last place the locals talked about being sure fire for cod was at Port Cirelle, they were caught there into the 1940s. Odd fish turned up after that. I can vaguely remember that there was a cod caught I think by Bob O'Dea from Swifts Creek up in the Beloka in the early 50s, it was considered very unusual at the time.

1. Ferris Creek was on the Morass Creek at Tom Ferris' property, later known as Poulson's. Poulson's Hole was located about 400 meters above the Morass Creek Bridge on the Benambra-Corryong Road. Many thanks to Mr. Brett Lee of Gibbo River for identifying this location.

OH 84

Stan Walsh of Tallangatta, formerly of Mitta Mitta, was interviewed in September 2006 at 84 years of age.

In the early days the Murphys¹ used to fish with poles. They had a thick line. They used for bait worms, bardie grubs and yabbies. The marrow out of the middle of a bullock's back was a good bait. Parrots and small birds were used for the cod. Greasies were used too, in my time; a good bait for cod. The biggest greasy I've seen is about 9 inches. They are nowhere near as common as they used to be. Oh I know about the bluenose alright! It was James Murphy that showed me my first bluenose. A lot of the locals called them a rock cod. The bluenose had a different shape. It had high shoulders, was pointed in the head. The colour was different too. Often it was a lot darker on the head, a black or blue. The bluenose were a lot drier to eat too. James said in the early days there was plenty of bluenose, they were very common. More common than the normal cod in the Mitta. The cod was always considered special by the settlers. They only took what they needed. They were so common that James said they could catch one anytime. James said the bluenose used to spawn earlier than the normal cod.

By my time the bluenose were less common, though I did catch quite a few when I was very young, up till I was 14 to 15, then they became scarce. Mr. Murphy told me that the Murray cod had taken over from the bluenose. As the bluenose got caught the Murray cod being bigger was the boss. He moved in, took over. James said that the Murray cod ate the spawn of the bluenose as he was bigger. I agree, I think the Murray cod took over. The Murphy's were religious people. I saw James Murphy catch a 70 pound cod and release it. He let the bigger breeders go to keep the river stocked. Kept the smaller ones of 12 to 15 pound. Just what he needed.

I used to catch plenty of cod in the Mitta Mitta, mainly Murray cod, though I did catch bluenose as well particularly around Banimboola. Just before the dam was built maybe 1 in 50 or 60 of the cod was a bluenose, you knew straight away as they were very good to catch. They were a much faster fish in the water than the Murray cod. You mainly caught the bluenose in the ripples just like you catch rainbow trout in the ripples. The moving water at the top of the hole or near the rocks. Cod were caught up to about 80 pound further down the Mitta; the biggest bluenose which I caught weighed about 20 pound. At Springpole there were lots of big rocks and I would dive under the rocks and see up to nine cod at a time. Sometimes they were in pretty shallow water. I saw cod caught up as far as the Wombat but after the war they were mainly caught up as far as the Dart River.

There were some silver bream (grunter) in the early days, I saw a few when I was very young, and plenty of the Macquarie perch bream. I know the silver bream. I once fished at the Junction of the Lachlan and the 'Bidgee. Caught 15 in a half hour around dark on worms, all about 2 pound. Could have caught a lot more. Never heard of a yellowbelly in the Mitta Mitta in the early days. Hear of a few now in the river coming out of the lake (Hume) as they are stocked. There were some Catfish in the lagoons. The lagoons that stayed connected to the river from Mitta Mitta downstream were full of cod and greasies. Also had lots of trout too, in the lagoons.

Up to the 40s there were plenty of Macquarie perch in the area. I once saw a shoal of bream that might have been 2-3000 moving up the Larsen Creek on their spawning run that turned the water black, with their backs nearly out of the water. On one occasion about this time I saw a bream taken by the local doctor on a fly at the Dart river junction. I had never thought about using flies for them. Mostly the bream were around the 2-3 pound mark.

The Soldiers and Tokes Creeks had the native Loch Levin trout. They are a solid little fish up to about 10 inches. Real deep, with the most beautiful round red spots. Never saw Macquaries in those two creeks, they were just too small for them.

1. James Murphy, an original settler, and his son, Jack, provided Stan with instructions on angling from an early age. Stan knew James Murphy whilst a child, James passing away in 1954 at an age of 89 years. His son Jack died from cancer in 1945 and Stan spent a great deal of time with him in his last months. James and Jack Murphy passed on to Stan stories of how things were in the past.

OH 85

George Murtagh of Mudgeegonga, formerly of old Dartmouth, was interviewed in October 2006 at an age of 90 years.

The big water race from the mines was in front of our place, at Dartmouth. We kept the fish alive in the old water race, until we needed them. We lived off the fish and the rabbits. The river was full of cod and bream. You could catch them all year round, though they bit in some months better than in others. We used to catch a lot of cod between Murphy's place and where the dam is now. Anything was used as bait for cod back then. Livers and kidneys out of rabbits. I've seen them shoot sparrows for bait for the cod. I used worms, just roll the logs over and get the bush worms, no digging. If the cod and bream were biting, you could catch all you wanted. You would get sick of eating them. There was one old fellow working with my father. Well we were all sick of the fish; he was the only one that would fish for them. Eventually he got sick of them too, he threw all his rods in! I reckon I've got here by eating all that fish!

Back in the twenties, when I was young, we used to get both types of cod. The second type was darker and longer, usually thinner without the gut of the normal cod. It had a pointed head, often black on the head. Didn't have the patches on it like the normal cod. It was marked finer, like a trout. We called them "rock cod" though some called them "Trout cod". My father called them a rock cod. Haven't heard them called a "bluenose", that would have been before my time. They were pretty common, when I was young more common than the normal cod. They were often in the same places, the two types together. In other places the rock cod was more common, particularly around the rocks. They always seemed to be feeding in those places around the rocks. The biggest was about 12 pound, most were about 8 to 9 pound. Most of the cod I caught, both types, were about that size at Dartmouth. The biggest Murray cod I caught was 15 pound. The rock cod, they were the first fish that started to disappear. Later on you would put lines in and get one of each type, early on you would get more rock cod. The rock cod seemed to disappear during the 1930s, certainly by the 1940s. After that they were less seldom caught, mainly the normal cod. One now and then.

There were big cod caught in some of the deep holes around Mitta North. The best was close to 100 lb. I caught good cod at Tallandoon, put crosslines in and got 10 pounders. I saw one out of the Hume Weir that was over 100 lb. In the early days I heard of a few grunter caught in the river. I heard of the Catfish in the Mitta Mitta area too, in the lagoons and the river. All the little creeks were full of the greasies. The creek here (at Mudgeegonga) too had them, though I think all of the spraying for the blackberries may have got rid of them. About twenty years ago I saw two 6 pound trout come out of the creek here.

I've certainly caught cod and bream in the Mitta up as far as Eustace Creek. Used to run cattle up through the hills. The bream I caught up to Tokes Creek. I used to fish a lot at the Dart River junction and in a hole about a mile downstream where there was a whirlpool. Caught a lot of cod at both places. The Macquarie perch would come on the bite for a while about ten in the morning, and again about four in the afternoon. You got sick of catching them. I've caught the bream 8 miles up the Dart River; they were up to 2 pound in weight. In the Dart River I was shown how to tickle trout, my brother was the tickler, though I didn't have the touch. I saw one trout tickled that was 3½ pound. The biggest bream I saw was about 5 pound, down below where the pondage is. I always caught them on the bush worms, though I know others have caught them on the spinners.

The first trout was caught at Dartmouth when I was about 6 years old. The locals didn't think much of them, they thought they were killers; they didn't have a high opinion of them. I saw trout used as bait for the cod. Later, when the cod and bream got scarce people started fishing for them. I remember in the late 1920s, certainly by the early 1930s big shoals of hundreds of redfin coming up the river, all 6 inches long. The locals went mad about the redfin as they thought they were eating all the other fish out. The 1939 bushfires killed a lot of fish. A big storm washed down all the charcoal, washed down all the fish. You could see all the dead cod and bream on the bottom, and washed up on the ripples. Then afterwards there was a drought, the water became so shallow, it killed cod, bream and trout. After that they never really came back in the numbers.

In the 1950s I moved over to here, to Mudgeegonga. Do you know Boyd's Bridge, on the Kiewa? Used to fish it a lot for about a mile downstream. I caught a lot of cod, the normal cod. You were very unlucky if you didn't get at least one. They were mainly 6 to 7 lb. My son got one here that was 47 pounds. I saw one cod caught that was hanging over a man's shoulder touching the ground. For its length it was pretty poor. It only weighed 70 pound. I never saw a bream caught out of the Kiewa. In the Kiewa the cod were inside the hollow logs. Some of the locals used to go belt the logs with a hammer to wake up the cod. They reckoned that sometimes they would sleep for days. Then the river was snagged which wrecked things for the cod, plus the big dams for the irrigation. In the Mitta too, the cold water for irrigation. When they were snagging the Kiewa, they pulled out the logs. A couple of times they could hear a flapping inside the logs. There were cod in them.

I fished above Myrtleford in the Buffalo. Went right into the hills, very steep and hard to get into. My knees are no good now. Went into this rough country at Abbeyards. I caught the bream, lots of them, only small, up to about a pound and a half. I didn't catch any cod though others spoke of them up there. That would have been over 25-30 years ago, maybe longer.

The way things were in the past are gone. Those times won't be back. But people should know how it once was.

OH 86

Tom Yea of Wodonga, formerly of Mitta Mitta, was interviewed in June 2006 at an age of 79 years.

As a 5 year old we used to fish around Springpole, between Dartmouth and Mitta Mitta. Used to catch stacks of cod and white eye. When I was young we caught Macquarie perch in the west branch of the Snowy Creek. In the perch hole at Springpole there was a rock bar in the river which the perch could not get over till it flooded. You could see hundreds of white eye; this small fall blocked their way. The Macquarie perch were common at

the Possums Point beach until about 1950, then they disappeared. About that time swarms of millions of redfin were seen in the river, about the time the Macquaries disappeared. The trout may have affected them as they moved down the river too.

We used to catch the cod up to about where the wall of the dam is now, maybe a bit further. Between Possums Point and Coleman's we used to catch cod from about 12 to 18 pound on spinners. Coleman's gardens were about where the Dartmouth pondage is now. We used to catch the cod at Springpole in a backwater on rabbit head. 18, 14, 12 pound were common. In the faster water we caught the Trout cod. I've caught them in recent years below Yarrawonga. They are also now doing real well above Hume. Back then when I was young in the faster water in the Mitta maybe half the cod we caught were Trout cod. Magoora Gap was a great spot for cod. Some of the locals used to roll rocks into the river to wake up the cod before fishing. Back then I used to use a carbide light at night to attract the trout. The trout would come to the light.

OH 87

John Yea of Mitta Mitta provided these comments in June 2006 at 70 years of age.

There was heaps of cod between Mitta and Dartmouth, up to the 6 mile Creek near the Dart River Junction. There was heaps of them 50 to 60 years ago, even up to 40 years ago. They were common from 10 to 30 pounds. The greasies in the Mitta were great bait for cod. You could catch 3 to 4 cod a night up to 30, even 40 pounds. The aeroplane spinners were tops too. By then the Macquarie perch were scarce.

OH 88

Collin Scales of Dartmouth was interviewed in July 2006 at 80 years of age.

Billy Yea shown me the other type of cod. It was longer and sleeker fish, bluer in colour and spotty. They were caught up to about 12 pound. Maybe 10% or more of the cod caught were these "Trout cod". Forty years ago we'd used to catch cod up above the junction of the Dart, right through down past Possums Flat. That was its correct name. The biggest cod I caught was 35 pound on a red carp, though they were caught up to 80 pound down Eskdale way. When we were kids we used to get lots of cod about 4 pounds as well as the bream. We also caught a few grunter when I was a kid. I caught the Macquarie perch in the Snowy Creek and the Dart River years ago. The Macquarie perch were up to about 3 pound in the river in the 1950s.

OH 89

Les 'Brickie' Franks of Tallangatta was interviewed in December 2006 at an age of 67 years.

My father was Jack Franks and we used to fish the river a lot, around Eskdale. My old man used to say there used to be plenty of Catfish, around Mitta, Eskdale, in the river. They used to get them above Old Tallangatta. Then he said they just disappeared, I never saw one. The rock cod, they were common around Banimboola, with odd ones further downstream, when I was fishing. The old timers reckon they could get the bream any time. There was one hole this side of Banimboola and they used to call it the 'bream hole'.

The old man said when he was young they'd tie lines to 4 gallon drums and find them way down the river. Another trick was they used to put an old rabbit in a tin full of holes and the maggots used to fall in the river and attract the cod. Years ago every cocky had wire drum nets in the river; they pulled them out with the tractor to check them. And a fair bit of cross lining went on too. One day I was in the boat with the old man and he had his lines rolled up under his shirt. We saw this boat coming up the river and it was Jack Rhodes, the fishing inspector. He talked to us, but if he had asked the old man to stand up they would have fell out of his shirt and he would have got us!

February and March was the best time for the cod in the Mitta with the old aeroplane spinner, that's all they used. We would put parrot feathers on the hooks on the spinner. The feathers was to cover up the hook, they

were tied on with cotton. We used to catch them up to 20 to 30 pound on the spinners. Andy Boran, out at Yabba found one dead that was 90 pound. The biggest the old man caught was 64 pound out of the river, on the aeroplane spinner. And heaps of trout, there was a lot of trout around then. The sand was white like snow and the rocks and stones were nicely coloured in the river.

Number 2 was the size of the aeroplane spinner. If the water was a bit dirty we would use the copper one. All this spinning was done by hand and even though my dad had bad arthritis he did all the rowing. If a lightning storm came up we would pack up and head for the other car. It used to take us about four and a half hours to spin from car to car. If we lost one on the spinner we would give him a week and go back and set a line and catch him. Most of our fishing was done around Noorongong and Tallandoon. Them days there was plenty of snakes, you could not put your hand on a log to push the boat off, there'd be a tiger snake on it! When setting lines bardie grubs was the best bait.

Later on the river trust pulled the logs out of the river, the old man went mad about it. But once the green slime got into the river from Dartmouth, well the old man said it was bugged, the sand used to be white. I could write a book about the things we did and saw in the river. It was a beaut river years ago and brings back many memories.

OH 90

David Evans of Yea, formerly of Mitta Mitta, was interviewed in October 2006.

In the Little Snowy Creek I used to get lots of trout. I can just remember the Catfish in the lagoons around Eskdale. They went a long time ago. There were certainly cod caught in the Mitta, Paddy Walsh used to catch them. In the Mitta was the odd bream, off the sandbanks. I heard of the bluenose being mentioned at the time. Apparently they had been common, but by that time they were an unusual catch around Eskdale. I can remember as a kid my dad catching what he called a 'Trout cod' in the Murray at Gunbower on a mussel. Back then, in that spot, we used to get ten to a dozen cod a day, 6 to 7 pound in the Murray. I can remember it was long, he pointed out the bluenose, and different markings to a cod. It was an unusual catch for that area, but my dad knew what it was.

I arrived in Yea in 1950. Jacky Tosh had the Shell service station in Yea. He used to talk about the Catfish, how in the past around Yea you could hear them chomping at night in the lagoons. They used to talk about that at Eskdale too. I never saw one at Yea. At that time in the Yea you got the odd little bream and the slimies. About 1950 it was known that there was a good cod hole in the Goulburn at Woodlands, down near where the King Parrot comes in.

OH 91

Reg Pendergast of Wodonga was interviewed in September 2006.

My old man was Reg Pendergast, he was born up at Benambra in 1906, died in 1983, and my grandfather was 'Swampy' Jack Pendergast, he come from Benambra. There's been a few fishermen in my family, my uncle 'Cor' (Cornelius) Pendergast he was fishing crazy, he knew all about the fishing up the top of the Mitta Mitta. And George Murtagh, he's an uncle. Johnny Yea's old man used to catch cod between Eskdale and Mitta, at Easter, every Good Friday morning; he would go down and catch a cod, 20 to 30 pound, up to the late 1950s. Then they got scarce. The Mitta (Snowy) Creek back then was absolutely full of the greasies, they were only about 6 to 7 inches long, I was only about 10 at the time, I'm 67 now. You could catch them like buggery, then they just disappeared. Old 'Lightwood' Bill Pendergast, he was out at Khancoban, he used to come home with these eels, out of the creek at Khancoban. When I was a kid he had them for tea, he'd come home with these eels, as well as the trout and the rainbows. Then they disappeared too.

I can remember the bream that we caught at Banimboola, there was 'the perch hole' at Springpole, my old man owned that, they were caught there up to maybe the early sixties, they were still there in the fifties. There was some caught further downstream but they had got pretty rare upstream. My old man talked about years ago catching them right up through 'the Wombat', and the cod they were right up through there. They were caught up to 40 pound up that way. There was supposed to have been cod and bream in all the rivers up that way, up past 'the Wombat' and through Benambra way.

I worked for the Forestry Commission, we used to go up and look after the houses up through the 'Blue Duck', up to Glen Wills, we used to go up there and paint them. At the pubs there was always fish being brought in, fish heads there, mainly the rainbows and the browns. But there was a few cod caught up there, that was the last of them that were caught, up in the 'Blue Duck' in the 1950s. There was supposed to have been a fair few of them up there a long time ago, but odd ones were still being caught. The ones I saw were about 5 to 6 pound, no bigger, definitely cod, I saw them. They caught the cod just up the other side of Glen Wills in the Big River, odd ones, and I saw some that were caught just below the bridge at Glen Valley, in the 1950s, that was the finish of them up there. I never saw or heard of anyone talking about catching a perch up there, there was only the rainbows and browns and these few cod.

OH 92

Alec Turnball of Tallangatta was interviewed in January 2008 at 84 years of age.

Fishing, I used to do a lot of it! I'll be 84 in a couple of weeks, grew up at Fairyknowe, on the property. I had 2500 acres of freehold and 11000 of lease. In the Mitta there was plenty of cod, plenty of bream the Macquarie perch, the best time to fish for the cod was when the moon comes up, I've got them up to 76 pound and I've had some on that would be close to a hundred or over. I used to fish, round here from down below Yabba more or less to Tallandoon, even Mitta North. The Catfish used to be in the lagoons round Bullhead along the Yabba Road near Fairyknowe. We used to get them up to three, three and a half pounds, I reckon they were still around in the 40s but they went quick. Early on we used to catch a lot of another type of bream the silver one, a good size one was a two to three pounder, or a bit more. I never caught or heard of a yellowbelly down here until recent times.

I used to ride up into the Dart to go fishing, the late 40s, early 50s, ride up to Tokes Creek, go into the saddle between Eustace Creek, even a bit below the Wombat. In the Dart River there was hundreds of the trout there, used to catch a few redfin in the Dart too, catch redfin from 2 to 4 pound, got the redfin about two mile up the river. The redfin went up as far as Eustace in the Mitta and I caught plenty of cod out of Eustace. In the Mitta I've caught the bream six miles up from the Dart River, I got a nice one that far up there were some good holes up there. I heard there used to be good fishing for the bream in the Little Snowy Creek that they were good to catch there and I did catch them there myself once about a mile and a half up. They used to catch quite a few in the river below where the creek ran into the Mitta Mitta River.

We used to ride up to Tokes Creek; we'd leave the truck at Banimboola and rode the horses from there. Old Stan Walsh he worked for me for many years, he'd go fishing too. The track in places was only two foot wide, we'd ride along with a foot out of the stirrup just in case, it was so steep. The Macquarie perch the average one would be a pound or better but we got them up to five pound, we'd get them just on worms, there was thousands of them. I rode a horse up into the Mitta once and there was hundreds of them on the gravel in the shallow water. I know old Tom Coleman rode up the Mitta once and he said to me 'Jesus I've never seen so many fish!' he reckoned he'd seen thousands all together. There was cod through there, we used to catch them but the bream were thick. The cod came in different shapes, there's the Trout cod, I've caught a few of them, used to see them there, round Banimboola.

The cod went right up to the top of the Mitta; there was plenty of them, yes they were still up in the Black Duck Hole. The Black Duck Hole was just a bit down from where the Cobungra flows in, there was cod caught there up to the 50s, even in the 60s odd ones. The biggest up that way I did know about was the 33 pounder, it was caught just below Faithfuls, just after the road swings sharply and you come into the open country, there's a big deep hole there, still is. It's a bit further down from the Black Duck Hole.

There was cod in the Tallangatta Creek; they went nearly to the top of the valley, above where you drive across the creek. They were caught up to 12 to 14 pound, that was way back in the thirties, but I don't know for sure about the bream being up there, they should have been, they were everywhere. There used to be a lot of Blackfish or greasies, there used to be big numbers of them at the top of the Tallangatta Valley Creek, and just after Christmas I was talking to a camper at Pigs Point just up the Omeo Highway from Tallangatta and he said there was a lot of them in the river there. In the small streams in the mountains were what I call the mountain-trout, they are only about three to four inches long. When the streams stop running or go underground they still seem to survive. At Lucyvale there was cod up there too. Just after you cross the Lucyvale Creek there was a reserve and down in the creek that was there they were catching them a long time ago, it wouldn't have been later than the start of the thirties.

In the river here the old cod he's still around. The cod they feed only once a fortnight, that's all they need, so you need to keep at it to catch them. Under weeping willows was the best place to catch codfish. Willows are a native of Indonesia and Australia. My grandfather Robert Turnbull was a foundation member of the Victorian Parliament and the first member for Gippsland and then the North-east Providence which went from Corryong to Swan Hill. He helped draft the Victoria constitution. He said there were weeping willows hundreds of year's old back in the 1850s.

They talk about this drought - well the drought in '45 was a shocker, the worst drought I remember. The pine trees are very poisonous; all these plantations they haven't done any good for the rivers. And fires, I used to work for the department, be pushing roads in, and as we'd go out we would set it all alight, it always used to get burnt. And the wildlife you'd see all the wallabies, currawongs, rosellas, it had always been burnt. They locked it up, now when there's a fire there are flames three hundred feet high, two acres of flame would break off. Nothing survives that, even if you went under the water if you come up there's no oxygen to breathe.

It's a sad sight to see what the European carp are doing to our environment and our river system, the erosion of our river banks and the falling in of our red gums along the banks. This is also happening where they have got into the lagoons also. The department has released thousands of cod into the rivers along with yellowbelly so hopefully they might clean up a lot of the carp. There are big numbers in the Dartmouth Dam now and are moving up the big streams in the Omeo area.

OH 93

Jack Moyle of Spring Creek near Tallangatta was interviewed in February 2008 at 92 years of age.

I'm ninety two years old, I grew up at Spring Creek, a little tributary of the Mitta, and my grandfather too, we've been here since 1880, he selected it. I remember going fishing with my father with a horse and gig and all we caught were bream, that was about 1922. The bream in the early days they were very easy to catch, there was no trouble catching a few bream, two to three pound was the sort of thing we used to catch. We used to get the limb of a particular tree, tie a piece of chord and go fishing for them.

About the cod in the Mitta there's been a lot caught. I've got a photo of me with one caught by my brother Eric in 1981 and it weighed seventy three pound. I haven't heard of one bigger from here. Early on there were some yellowbelly, they were not very common, they were in the Murray more so, not many caught in the Mitta, very

few. I know of one that was three pound caught down here when I was a boy. The grunter they were here too, but there was more of them in the Murray. They used to catch some Catfish in the lagoons all along the Mitta, going back a long way into the 1920s, but for most of my time I can't remember catching many. The only place they got them was in the lagoons, not in the river as far as I know.

We never went trout fishing in any of the trout streams until after the war, they hadn't come into the streams like the Tallangatta Creek much before then. Up in the Dartmouth Creek, they were catching trout in the Dart Creek by the end of the 1920s, my father knew people that lived there and they brought one down, that's when they started catching them up there. And the redfin they came in before the war, and we never went fishing for them here until after the war.