The new Broughton Island

With the new marine park zonings, this famous lump of rock off Port Stephens opens a new chapter in its rich history.

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Apart from being a great fishing destination, Broughton Island is rich in history, from the timeless evidence of Aboriginal people to the early Italian lobster-trappers based on the island in the 1890s.

Greek fishers and lobstermen followed, building a small settlement behind the sand dunes on North Beach, a base from which to trap and explore the relatively untouched reefs and deep water.

A kilometre away, to the east, early Australian professional fishermen erected rugged huts and shelters in Esmeralda Cove. Over the years, with the improved reliability and efficiency of modern boats and motors, the professionals no longer needed to base themselves on the island. The 14km trip from the safe waters of Port Stephens can now be made in 30 minutes in good conditions, a far cry from the occasional four-hour struggle against wind and sea.

Little evidence remains of the Greek settlement but the tiny Esmeralda Cove community, now under the control of National Parks and Wildlife, has become a valued part of Australian history.

The magnificent scenery, the boating and camping experience and the peacefulness attract an increasing number of visitors to the island but it is the lure of sensational fishing opportunities that has the greatest attraction.

The island is famous for snapper with remarkable fish to 12kg reported swimming through the whitewater that boils around the rocky headlands and over the shallow reefs. The deeper reefs wider of the island are equally productive for bait anglers and plastic-tossers.

Fishing for snapper with plastics continues to grow in popularity which must be pleasing to those concerned for the welfare of the grey nurse shark. The most popular reefs for snapper close to the island include Cod Rock, Sisters and the drift between North Island and the main island known as The Gutz. Wind and sea conditions dictate which face of the island to target. Snapper can be caught all year round.

Kingfish and jewfish are targeted with enthusiasm from Esmeralda Bommie with lures and on the wider reefs, where live-baiting is preferred. Teraglin can be taken over the full moon from January to April on the wider reefs.

The snowy beaches on the island are homes for thumping whiting and cracker dusky flathead, which are keen to bite during the warmer months. Sea worms are the best bait on a rising tide while the flathead are keen to attack pilchards on ganged hooks or lures tossed under their noses.

THE MARINE PARK

If Port Stephens was the target for habitat protection in the recently declared Marine Park then Broughton Island was the bull’s eye. To put it simply, Broughton has everything from magnificent beaches, rugged inter-tidal rocky foreshore to surrounding reefs alive with a wide selection for recreational fishers.

The effort to retain the island as a recreational fishing haven was always going to be a battle. Fortunately for all stakeholders, the final outcome has been accepted as a fair and reasonable solution, thanks to the willingness of those who know and fish the island better than others.

The Broughton Islanders, a hardy group who base themselves on the island and know its waters, were prepared to compromise and work with park authorities, realising that potentially the island could have been lost entirely to the forces of excessive conservation.

The zoning of Broughton satisfies all criteria in that it protects endangered species and sensitive habitat yet still provides sensational fishing, boating and diving to regulars and the increasing number of day-trippers.

FOUR ZONES
Four zones have been put in place around the island which, over time, will be recognisable. Copies of the Port Stephens-Great Lakes Marine Park Zoning Plan User Guides are freely available throughout the region and it is certainly advisable to have one in your tackle box. The guides give a precise location of the zones and the relative co-ordinates.

The sanctuary or no-take zone stretches roughly from the Looking Glass in a semicircle around Little Broughton to the rocky shelf near Flat Rock on the north-eastern aspect of the island. The zone is defined on the island by the presence of white poles and prominent landmarks.

Around the outer limit of the sanctuary, approximately 1.5km off the main island, a recreational seasonal trolling only region has been established to cater for the game fishing season and is operational from December to April inclusive. During the remainder of the year the region reverts to sanctuary zone.

Further protection of vulnerable species has been considered with a zone which allows fish to be taken only with artificial lures or speargun. The lure-only area extends from Looking Glass to the southernmost tip of East Head, enclosing popular sites The Steps, The Caves and Esmeralda Bommie. Additionally, fishing is not permitted while anchored in this area.

The habitat protection zone, which has no restriction to recreational fishers, is extensive and permits all types of fishing controlled only by the Fisheries bag and size limits. Esmeralda Cove is included as part of this zone.

All of the beaches and the vast majority of rocky platforms, shallows and deep reefs that have made Broughton a famous destination for recreational fishers remain accessible. Prized hot spots which remain free of any restrictions to fishers and divers include Coal Shaft and North Beaches, Cod Rock, The Sisters, all the surrounding rocky outcrops including North Island, West Island and the Little Gibber on the mainland plus the deep reefs, Gibber and Mungo.

To me, Broughton is a fishing paradise and it will remain the home of snapper which are keen to bite all year round. Other species that call Broughton home in season are magnificent flathead and whiting on the beaches and sand flathead on the expanses of deep water sandy flats.

Under the whitewater fringing the rocks and shallow breaking reefs, fish gather in very healthy numbers including snapper, huge groper, drummer, luderick, bream, kingfish, bonito, leatherjacket, jewfish and growing numbers of emperor.

The deeper reefs continue to produce teraglin, pearl perch, snapper, kingies, jewfish, leatherjacket and morwong. Game fishers chase marlin, tuna and sharks.

Next time you fish these waters, spare a thought for the Broughton Islanders who, through knowledge and logic, negotiated to protect this fantastic island and its surrounds for generations of recreational users.

Facts

PLAY IT SAFE

Travelling to Broughton requires planning and a fair degree of caution as the journey in the open sea can be treacherous and lives have been lost. You are strongly advised to register with Coastal Patrol or Coast Guard on 27.88MHz or VHF Channel 16 on your departure from the port. Make contact again on your arrival on the island and again on your return.

For any problems on the island a public radio is available in Esmeralda Cove and the island regulars are always willing to lend assistance.

Play it safe and take all your rubbish with you as the island experience is one that you will never forget.

Images
Despite new marine park no-fishing zones, there’s still plenty of water around Broughton Island where fish like Mick Fair’s can be caught.

Rowen Blanch is one of a growing band of fishos whose first choice for snapper is a soft plastic.

Chris Blanch from Boat Harbour with one of the snapper Broughton is famous for.
With the suicidal climb down and the chance of seas like this, maybe it's a good idea that The Steps is now out of bounds to bait fishers!

Under the marine park zonings, rock fishing off The Steps with bait is no longer permitted on the new Broughton Island.
Once the realm of Greek lobster fishers, North Beach these days is a great swimming spot and home to some big whiting and flathead.

Looking Glass and East Head loom over Broughton Island from the east.

The moorings at Esmeralda Cove are safe in most weather apart from a savage easterly. There is an emergency radio on shore.