

# IN COD'S COUNTRY

In the blue corner, measuring a recorded maximum length of 1.8m and weighing over 113kg is the iconic fish of the Murray-Darling Basin, the 'King that swims', the mighty Murray cod. And in the red corner, ready to rumble with the creator of the Murray River and all its fish, is the combined efforts of riverine degradation, the removal of snags, poor riverbank condition, river

regulation, overfishing and alien fish. **Hardly sounds like a fair fight does it?**

In fact, the only person to come out on top against such a large number of adversaries was Rocky Balboa. But this isn't a movie. These challenges are real, and if the once mighty Murray cod are to return to their former glory they need our help.

The Murray cod is Australia's largest true

freshwater fish and it has been estimated to have been swimming around the basin for at least 26 million years. This apex predator patiently waits for its prey, which includes crayfish, frogs, fish and even waterfowl. But it has recently found itself being ambushed, and the numbers of Murray cod are dwindling, so much so that it is listed as a threatened species.

This is in stark contrast to the observations of our



The threatened Murray cod is Australia's largest freshwater fish, growing to a recorded maximum length of 1.8m and weighing over 113kg.

for us and twenty for the neighbours", and 40lb cod were treated as 'middle-sized' fish.

So, with such a strong pedigree how is it that we are fast on our way to becoming a cod-less basin? Well, much like most animals, Murray cod need a safe, stable home in order to thrive and with over 97% of waterways in NSW modified in some way, the Murray cod home is anything but safe or stable.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the cod home is the snag. Not the type that is burnt on a barbie, but rather the large logs, branches and sticks that fall into the water. Unfortunately, past practice was to remove these pieces

of timber: over 24,000 snags were removed from the Murray River between the Hume Dam at Albury and Yarrowonga during the 1980s alone. This coupled with poor natural recruitment from depleted



Snags offer Murray cod a home, breeding spot and territorial marker, with over 80% of Murray cod found within 1m of a snag.

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riverbanks has had a significant impact on the Murray cod.

Over 80% of Murray cod are found within a metre of a snag, and these pieces of timber offer a whole range of benefits to Murray cod that make them critical for their survival.

In fact you could say that to thrive and with over 97% of waterways in NSW modified in some way, the Murray cod home is anything but safe or stable.

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Snags provide the perfect place for Murray cod to lay their eggs, protecting them so they can develop into larvae like these two day old cod.



Murray cod a great surface on which to lay their eggs. After swimming up to 130km upstream during late winter and early spring the female cod will find a hard, protected site such as a log, to lay her large sticky eggs. On completion of this, the female takes off back downstream, leaving the male to protect the eggs during their early development.

Research has also found that snags play an important role as territorial markers during migration. After making the treacherous journey upstream to breed, Murray cod will often return downstream to the same snag, emphasising the

Re-snagging work has been undertaken as part of projects that aim to improve aquatic habitat and will provide an ideal home for Murray cod.





With most of our waterways and riverbanks in bad condition, our native fish, including the Murray cod, are struggling to find a suitable home.

importance of these woody structures.

So what can we do to help swing the balance back in the favour of the mighty Murray cod in this battle royal?

There are fishers who've put themselves in the blue corner by supporting re-stocking efforts. Unfortunately, the success of putting native fish back in the water depends on there being good habitat available. So we need to do more than just put fish in the river.

Federal, State and local agencies are partnering with



By maintaining and improving waterways in good condition we can help bring back native fish species.



Murray cod can provide one of the greatest fishing experiences in Australia, but they need our help if it's to continue into the future.

local communities under the Native Fish Strategy, a 50 year program that aims to bring back native fish to the Murray-Darling Basin. The strategy is undertaking important research and projects, such as actively placing snags back in the river, making barriers to fish passage more 'fish-friendly', and looking at the management of alien fish. But perhaps the most

important aspect of the Native Fish Strategy is getting local communities involved in helping to return native fish to the basin. This can include simple things such as planting trees, reintroducing snags, fencing off riverbanks and becoming aware of the impacts affecting our waterways.

All of these actions go a long way to restoring the

home of the Murray cod, and help return us to a time when cod were kings.

To help fight the good fight and save the Murray cod before it goes down for the count join the Fish Habitat Network (fish.habitat@industry.nsw.gov.au) – a free network where you can talk about the fish that got away and the habitat that got improved.

– Tony Townsend

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