



Northern  
Territory  
Government



# FISHING TOURISM

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# FISHING TOURISM Overview

Fishing is synonymous with the Northern Territory, and has come to be regarded as a signature experience, with some 6 200 kilometres of largely undeveloped coastline riddled with estuaries, wetlands, mud flats and inland islands. The fishing tourism industry's total economic contribution is estimated at \$26 million per year, with \$22 million of this generated by interstate or international visitors to the Territory.

The fishing tourism industry is well regulated and offers a range of experiences for barramundi fishing as well as blue water fishing. With a wide range of species available in Territory waters, fishing offers year round visitor traffic, especially in shoulder and traditionally low tourist seasons.

Experienced anglers in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland make up the vast majority of visitors who come to the NT for the primary purpose of fishing. They research thoroughly, plan and book well in advance of their trip, and use a variety of fishing-specific media to source their information. Length of stay is longer and they generally spend well on their chosen passion, and there is a high proportion of repeat visitation.

Fishing is also popular among international visitors to Australia and the NT, with all key markets for the NT identifying fishing as reason to visit.

Darwin will continue to be positioned as a fishing hub, enjoying easy access to inland and coastal waterways, offering a sophisticated level of tourism infrastructure and being well positioned to maximise the opportunities presented in the fishing market.

# THE FISHING TOURISM INDUSTRY

## RECREATIONAL FISHING IN THE NT

Fishing in the NT can be broken into two kinds of fishing activity, “Barramundi Fishing” and “Blue Water Fishing”. Barramundi Fishing is considered a signature NT fishing experience and is widely associated with the destination.

### Barramundi Fishing

The barramundi (*Lates calcarifer*) is an iconic fish that enjoys great popularity among anglers globally. Barramundi, or barra fishing, presents one of the greatest recreational fishing challenges on Earth – a real test of an angler’s fishing technique, finesse and knowledge of the local conditions. Landing a Barra over 1 metre (3 ft) in length is considered a great catch, and fish this size can weigh approximately 15kg (33lb). The experience of catching Barra requires great stamina, as these large fish are acrobatic and will put up a fight, tenaciously making hard runs and repeatedly leaping from the water using aggressive headshakes in an attempt to throw hooks.

Barra fishing predominantly takes place in rivers and estuaries, and may involve targeting other species such as saratoga, tarpon, mangrove jack and salmon. Fishing tour operators may also venture from estuaries to fringing reefs to target blue water species such as golden snapper and black jewfish, but the ultimate aim is barramundi. Anglers will usually target the species by casting or trolling with hard or soft plastic lures. Other techniques include live baiting, spear-fishing and fly-fishing. Vessels generally cater for up to four passengers.

The majority of barra fishing tour operators are based in Darwin, operating tours to rivers and estuaries in the surrounding regions of Mary River, Adelaide River, and Daly River. Barra tours can also be found in Nhulunbuy, Kakadu National Park, Dundee Beach and Borroloola. A number of residential fishing lodges operate in the NT, including the Tiwi Islands, West and Central Arnhem Land, Mary River Conservation Park and in the Daly River region. Heli-fishing operators take anglers to more remote areas that are harder to access by road, adding another adventurous dimension to the fishing experience.



## BLUE WATER FISHING

Blue water fishing in the NT encompasses a greater diversity of target species, method of catch, size of vessels and range of locations. A number of NT fishing tour operators offer blue water fishing, which can be further categorised:

### Reef fishing:

Using sinkers to drop bait, anglers target species that inhabit reefs, rocky outcrops and the ocean floor, including golden snapper, black jewfish, tricky snapper, red emperor and coral trout.

### Pelagic fishing:

Targeting species like tuna, Spanish mackerel, trevally and queenfish, which are found near the surface. Fishing methods include trolling with lures or live bait.

### Game fishing:

Anglers on larger vessels with specialised, heavy duty equipment target billfish such as black marlin and sailfish using skip baits and swim baits trolling behind the boat.

### Sport fishing:

this style of fishing has recently emerged among more experienced anglers as it involves technique and finesse. Anglers will jig and cast soft plastic lures or flies to target a specific species, either reef or pelagic.



**Fishing tour operators in the NT use a number of different business models to meet the needs of the blue water fishing market:**

**Mother Ship:** using a large vessel as a floating base, anglers fish from smaller tender vessels targeting various species. Accommodation and meals are served on the mother vessel, and trips can last a week or more at sea, affording the opportunity to reach more remote fishing spots.

**Fishing Lodges and Camps:** Located on land in usually remote areas, lodges and camps usually offer smaller vessels that can reach river, estuary or ocean fishing areas that are otherwise hard to access from main cities.

**Large Blue Water Fishing Vessels:** Most of these operators are based in Darwin and offer half, full day and extended (4-5 days or more) fishing trips on vessels that are smaller than mother ships but more comfortable than small boats. They generally carry around 10 passengers whose skill level will range from novice to expert, targeting reef and pelagic species relatively close to Darwin.

**Small Boats:** Operating smaller, faster boats based in Darwin or other accessible coastal communities, these fishing tour operators offer a mixture of barramundi and blue water fishing, including reef, pelagic and sport fishing.

For some visitors to the NT, caught fish could be processed on board and consumed as part of the fishing experience. Most of the blue water species are considered delicious and some operators offer services to pack and ship an angler's catch home. Catch and release is also popular, although for reef species, the effects of barotrauma need to be monitored to prevent unnecessary depletion of fisheries stock.

## FISHING TOUR OPERATORS

The fishing tourism industry in the NT has developed progressively since the 1970s to be a robust, sustainable sector today. The NT fishing tourism industry includes a range of barramundi and blue water fishing tour operators, fishing stays (lodges and camps), fishing competitions, specialist fishing agents, boat hire companies and local angling clubs.

- There are currently 134 fishing tour operator (FTO) licences held by 91 licensees
- There are 63 operating FTOs in the NT, including 31 tourism accredited and 27 members of Tourism Top End
- There are 26 fishing stays (remote lodges, camps, cabins) in the NT, including 15 tourism accredited and 12 members of Tourism Top End. Most of these offer either guided fishing tours or boat hire.
- There are 27 fishing competitions that take place annually in the NT
- There are at least 9 boat hire companies in the NT
- There are 11 angling clubs throughout the NT

*\*Information correct at time of publication.*

All licenced FTOs are required to maintain logs and report back to the NT Department of Primary Industry and Fisheries on a regular basis. These logs include passenger numbers, days fished, catch details and origin of guests, and this data is fed into annual Fishery Status Reports. The most recent NT Recreational Fishing Survey was conducted in 2009-10 and indicates:

- More than 300,000 days were fished in 2009-10, representing 1.9 million hours of fishing effort
- In excess of 40% of all recreational fishing was undertaken by visitors to the NT
- The majority of recreational fishing effort occurs in coastal areas, and almost one-third occurs in and around Darwin Harbour.

## FISHING COMPETITIONS

Most of the 27 fishing competitions in the NT are regional, run by local angling clubs. Competitors are usually their members, with some inclusion from locally based non-members.

The two high profile fishing competitions are the Barra Nationals and the Barra Classic, both held on the Daly River in the peak of the run-off season, usually in April. Around half of the 180 competitors in the Barra Nationals, and around a quarter of the 160 competitors in the Barra Classic are from interstate. The cost to enter these competitions is considerable (around \$5000 per team), but the prize money is substantial, with over \$40,000 worth of prizes up for grabs at each event.

The benefits of these events are that they occur in a shoulder season, attract an interstate audience, are a good PR/media platform, are professionally organised and executed, are solely catch and release, and the interstate audience usually spends an extra few days either side of the event in the NT. On the downside, there are limited promotional opportunities as both events are invitational; the locals believe there is a significant impact on their ability to access and enjoy the river in the lead up to, during and after both events; and most anglers believe there is a negative impact on the quality of fishing following the events.

# SEASONALITY

During this time, the inland floodplains rise, and barramundi swim upstream to feed. Best spots for barra at this time are floodplain channels and waterways, or estuaries around Darwin and Bynoe Harbour.

**The Wet**  
January-March



**Golden snapper, black jewfish, coral trout and red emperor**  
**Storms and monsoonal rains**

Blue water species hunt bait fish washed out of rivers and estuaries as they move back to estuaries to lay eggs and feed. This is the run-off and is considered the best time to target barramundi as they move back to estuaries to lay eggs and feed.

**Run-off**  
January-March



**Rains ease and floodplains drain out to sea**  
**Warm water and active fish make ideal reef and peepi fishing conditions**

Billfishing between Darwin and Dundee Beach and from Nhulunbuy to Grootte Eylandt. Barra fishing slows golden trevally and golden snapper. Tuna, Spanish mackerel, cobia, queenfish and giant trevally.

**The Dry**  
May-September



**Peak tourism season. Cool climate**

Warm water and active fish make ideal reef and peepi fishing conditions

Flat seas and little wind make perfect reef fishing conditions close to Darwin. Largest Barra to be caught during this time

**The Build Up**  
October - December



**Heat and humidity**  
**Best time for Fly Fishing**  
**Barra breeding season**

# SEASONALITY

Fishing is a year-round activity, although the best times to fish are often shoulder seasons or low seasons. This is an ideal activity to generate visitation in non-peak periods, and as such, fishing is not impacted by accommodation, aviation and other infrastructure squeezes that can be felt during the peak season.

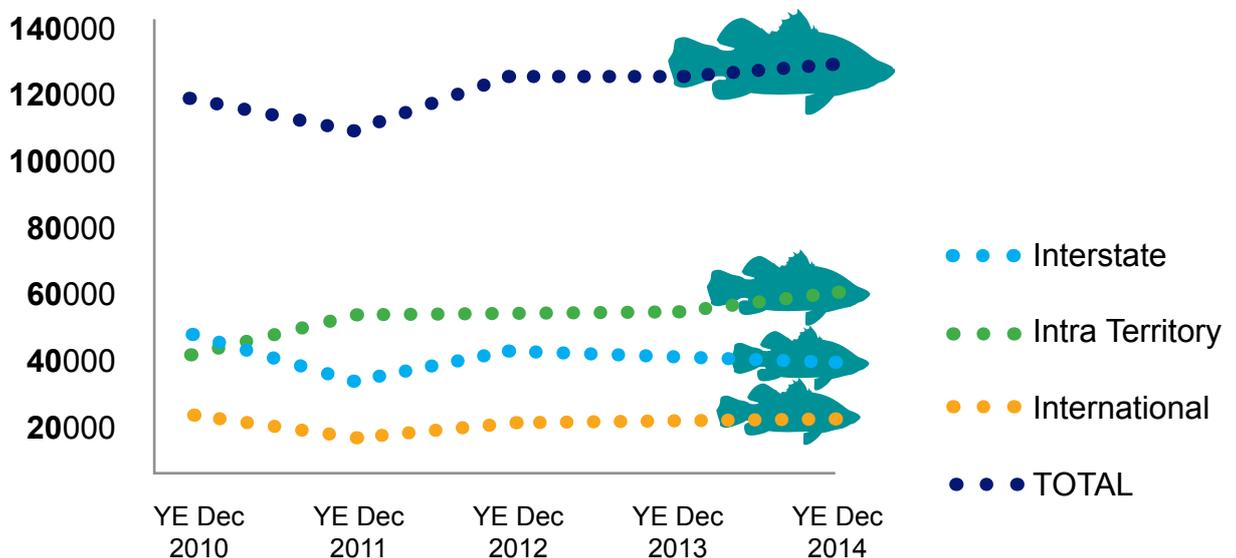
# NATIONAL CONTEXT

Australia's population is largely concentrated along its immense coastline – the 2011 census shows that more than 80% of Australians live within 50km of the sea. Every state and territory offers a wide range of fishing experiences, and due to vast variances in Australia's geographical make up, these experiences differ from region to region. Fishing is an accessible, affordable, appealing recreational activity, enjoyed around the country.

National Visitors Survey (NVS) data indicates that 18% of interstate visitors to the NT are interested in fishing. However, this data does not accurately reflect whether this was the primary and only reason for visiting, or if fishing was just one of many activities selected.

The International Visitors Survey (IVS) provides similar information to the NVS, but relates to international visitors to Australia. In addition to the challenge of not knowing whether fishing was the primary purpose for visit, it is also difficult to ascertain where the fishing activity might have occurred. For example, a visitor to Australia who indicates fishing as a purpose to visit might travel to the NT, QLD and NSW, but the data does not indicate where they fished during that trip, just that they visited those places.

Combined data from the NVS and IVS shows the following breakdown of fishing visitors to the NT over the past 4 years:

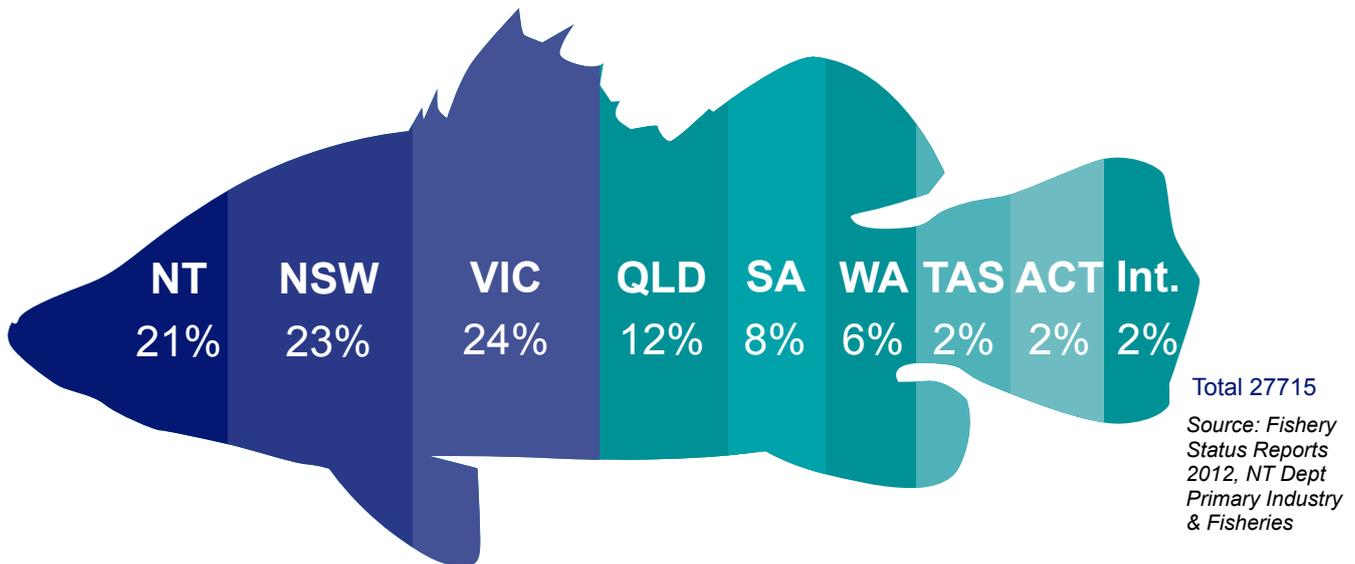


# THE MARKET

In line with the Tourism Vision 2020, Tourism NT will focus marketing activities to attract interstate or international visitors to the NT whose primary purpose for travel is to participate in fishing experiences.

## Domestic Market

The *Fisheries Status Report 2012* provides a breakdown of visitors to the NT who went fishing by their state of origin. This data is derived from the log book reporting of licensed fishing tour operators in the NT, and does not include those visitors who arranged their fishing experiences independently.



The key domestic markets for fishing are New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.

## Experienced Anglers Market Profile

- Predominantly male (estimated at approximately 90%), made up of groups (families or groups of mates); most often in the 35-60 year old age group, with middle to high disposable income
- They are knowledgeable and determined, and are looking for an iconic fishing adventure, which could be a once in a lifetime holiday, or a regular pilgrimage
- Length of stay ranges from 2-10 nights in the NT, most of that time spent fishing.
- Boat ramp surveys in the Northern Territory 2009-10 Recreational Fishing Survey indicate that interstate visitors account for:
  - o 20% of fishing effort from Darwin Harbour and the Leaders Creek catchments
  - o 24% at Dundee Beach
  - o 31% at Bynoe Harbour
  - o 41% at Mary River.

## Travel Behaviour



- Focus is on a fishing holiday, not a holiday with some fishing as part of a range of activities
- They time their visit with the peak fishing season – usually March-June every year, to coincide with the run-off, the peak time to target barramundi
- Secondary season is during the build-up, September-December
- Trip research begins around 12 months prior to travel; booking happens around 6 months prior to travel.
- Not generally interested in other activities, but will engage in some aspects of nature and cultural tourism within the context of their fishing experience (e.g. learning about traditional owners on whose land they are fishing, or enjoying wildlife during their fishing)
- Travel styles vary: Fly/tour; Fly/drive; Drive
- There is an emerging group of fishing visitors who own and store a vehicle and boat in Darwin, and share this resource among friends, with several groups visiting regularly throughout the year, or during the peak fishing seasons. These groups usually have a local contact and are regular repeat visitors, so have their own knowledge on local conditions.

## Media Consumption

- They consume various media including specialist fishing magazines, TV shows, and peer sourced information, to learn about and book the BEST experience available
- Social media popular platforms are Facebook and YouTube
- While fishing is a niche activity, fishing TV shows appeal to a mainstream audience – people who never or rarely engage in fishing can connect with a destination through the experience of fishing. For the NT, this could mean our abundant nature appeals more broadly to a mainstream audience of fishing shows.
- Most popular national Fishing TV Shows:

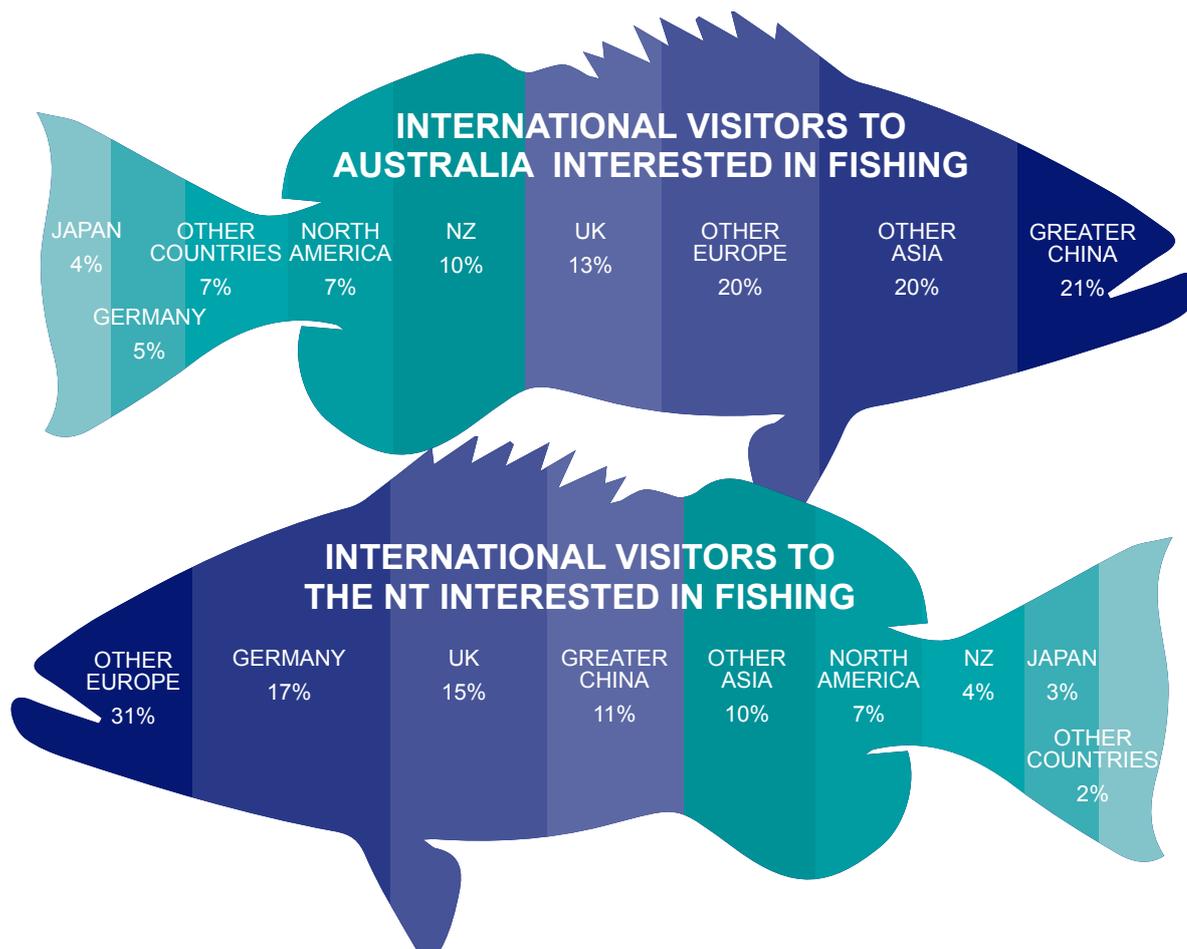
TV show	Broadcast on	Hosts	Facebook Followers	Brief description
iFish with Tackleword	Network10 (Ch10, OneHD) Southern Cross Foxtel	Paul Worsteling	>291,000	All things fishing – tips, techniques, new products and FISH! Covers all of Australia and some international. All fishing styles, species, locations, etc.
YouFishTV	Ch 31 TVS44	Brendan Wing and Justine Wing-Smith	>250,000	Spontaneous trips, unpredictable behaviour; left of centre thinking; Original content; Inspirational results
Mark Berg Fishing	7Mate Lifestyle	Mark Berg	>116,000	Each episode, Mark surprises a fan and takes them on a fishing adventure
Hook, Line and Sinker	7Mate	Nick Duigan Andrew Hart	>54,000	Non-stop fishing action including seafood recipes, Yamaha project boats and Classic Catch competition
Australian Fishing Championships (AFC)	9 Network (Ch9, WIN) Star Sports CCTV WFN	Adam Royter Darryl Beattie Matthew Campbell Steve Starling Carl Jocusen	>7000	Follows competitive fishing tournaments in targeting three species, saltwater bream, Australian bass and barramundi

- Magazine consumption is popular in this market. Roy Morgan readership figures for year ended Dec 2012 showed fishing titles experienced 17.2% growth in readership
- Top three national titles are Freshwater Fishing Australia, Fishing World and Modern Fishing
- Locally produced magazines also enjoy good readership, particularly North Australia Fish Finder (regarded as the fishing bible for the NT, and for many FTOs, the only publication in which they advertise) and National Australia Fishing Annual (NAFA).
- List of publications:
  - o Freshwater Fishing Australia
  - o Fishing World
  - o Modern Fishing
  - o Fishing Wild
  - o Fishing Monthly
  - o BlueWater Boats & Sportsfishing
  - o FlyLife Magazine
  - o Sport Fishing
  - o North Australia Fish Finder
  - o National Australian Fishing Annual
  - o North Australian Fishing and Outdoor Magazine

# INTERNATIONAL MARKETS

The International Visitors' Survey for the year ended June 2014 shows that 8.7% of international visitors to the NT indicated that fishing was one of the reasons they came to the Australia. However, we are unable to ascertain whether fishing experiences were enjoyed in the NT or in another region in Australia.

The IVS provides a breakdown by country of origin for those visitors to Australia, and those visitors to particular states and territories, who indicated fishing was one of the reasons to visit Australia.



Of all holiday visitors to Australia, the Asian markets show the highest level of interest in fishing. However, of international holiday visitors to the NT, the UK, Germany and Other Europe account for 62% of those interested in fishing. China and other Asia (excluding Japan) account for another 21%.

While fishing is an activity enjoyed in most of the key visitor markets for the NT, each of these markets varies in terms of the style of fishing that is most popular, as well as the propensity to travel to fish. Tourism NT's international offices are able to supply more detailed information on their markets directly, including key fishing personalities, main fishing social, broadcast and print media outlets.

**Contact: [international.tourismnt@nt.gov.au](mailto:international.tourismnt@nt.gov.au).**

# ECONOMIC VALUE OF FISHING

Data presented in the Fishery Status Report 2012 estimates that 78.8% of fishing tour operator clients were from interstate or overseas, spending on average approximately \$15 million per year with fishing tour operators. The fishing tourism industry's total economic contribution was estimated at \$26 million per annum, with approximately 80% of this attributable to interstate or overseas visitors.

The fishing tackle and bait industry, the fishing tourism industry, the recreational boat industry and tourism in coastal and some regional areas all rely wholly or in part on the recreational fishing industry.

70% of recreational fishing occurs in regional areas, where recreational fishing is the primary economic and development driver. Fishing tourism is also an impetus for regional development and capacity building initiatives for remote Indigenous communities.

Questions exist around the reliability of data captured by the tourism fishing industry. Official reports rely on hand-written logs being maintained by fishing guides, and operators all report various practises in handling this information. The NT Department of Primary Industry and Fisheries is working with fishing tour operators to establish better practises.

## CONCLUSION

Fishing in the Northern Territory is a popular pastime for locals and an appealing experience for visitors. A robust market of experienced anglers exists in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland (and other states to a lesser extent), which are easily targeted through fishing-specific media such as fishing magazines, fishing TV shows and special interest Facebook and other social media outlets.



The fishing tourism industry is well established and collectively offers a wide range of fishing experiences to suit various markets, from short-haul day trips to inland waterways targeting barramundi, to longer live-aboard operations targeting reef and game fish in remote areas. This broad range of experiences presents a good opportunity to demonstrate diversity within the niche tourism sector of fishing.

Fishing is a year round activity. This niche sector presents opportunities to promote travel to the NT in shoulder and low tourist seasons, which coincides with the best times to fish for certain species. This will not impact on aviation access, accommodation, car hire and other tourism infrastructure during peak tourist periods.

The value of the fishing tourism industry can be maximised as this market generally stays longer and spends more on their special interest, bringing added value to the NT economy.

Opportunities exist to explore ways to improve the capture and reporting of accurate data for the fishing tourism sector.