Women who fish out in numbers

The love of fishing is more diverse than the masculine stereotype might otherwise indicate.

Anna Clark

It was always the men in my family who fished. My dad, uncles and grandfather cast lures and baits off the sharp rocks and into the swell on the NSW South Coast. They told the tall tales of giant fishes and near misses. My mum and grandmother cooked the catch.

I’m not quite sure how I was allowed to interrupt the unquestioned gender divisions and tag along.

But I did, and I loved it.

When I grew up, I wasn’t alone.

While the fishing stereotype is invariably masculine – men in tinnies holding up trophy barra while drinking tinnies – fishing is a little more diverse than perhaps that image allows for.

When I fished my way around Australia a few years back, there were plenty of blokes on the beaches ticking off bucket-list items like barramundi and giant trevally. But it was just as likely to be their grey-nomad WAGs trapping cherabin and handlining for whiting alongside them.

History also offers a broader picture. Standing just under Mrs Macquarie’s Chair it’s still possible to imagine the city as it was in 1788 – before the span of the bridge, the boats, the vast spread of urbanisation.

Back then, you would have seen Eora women walking the shoreline gathering oysters and shellfish. If you peered out across the water you would have spotted them paddling their little novie canoes to handline for fresh snapper, dory and bream.

At the end of these lines, elegant fishhooks made from carved abalone or turban shells were dropped over the side of their canoes. These novies were nothing more than a large piece of bark tied up at both ends with vines, described the British officer Watkin Tench, in his account of early Sydney. Yet these women were master skippers, navigating their boats in the swell, hauling in fish, and wrangling infants in their tiny vessels.

And if you closed your eyes, you would have heard singing from nearby coves, where the songs of the Eora women rang out across the water and down to the fish below.

Some female colonists were equally fond of baiting hooks. In Sydney in 1821 Elizabeth Macquarie, wife of the governor, out-fished her husband in Watsons Bay and participated in both boat and shore-based fishing expeditions.

Women were frequently depicted in 19th-century images of fishing parties. Dropping a line in was clearly a family affair for many colonial Australians.

While any quick reading of fishing magazines reinforces that image of fishing as a male-dominated sport, it pays to remember that men often took their wives and daughters along, too. Sometimes they might even have regretted it, as Tess Travers suggested in her 1953 column for *Outdoors and Fishing*:

> “What’s nicer than a real fishing holiday? Well, could be when you go out and catch one bigger than hubby’s!”

Commercial fishing has also been seen as a predominantly male industry in Australia. The labour of commercial fishing – the lengthy periods at sea, hours at dawn and dusk setting nets, and hard physical work – has dictated that historically gendered division of work. Yet women have been deeply involved: mending those nets, selling and buying catches and equipment, and processing fish on shore.
In South Australia's shark industry in the mid-20th century, for example, while fishermen set long hooked lines off the back of their little boats and caught school sharks by the tonne, it was the wives who rendered down the shark livers by hand, in large backyard vats.

It was a foul, stinking job. And it's hard to say who had the more difficult task.

In recent decades, increased mechanisation has also meant women are more likely to make it out onto the boats to fish.

But fishing isn't all work. For those of us who don't fish for a living, it isn't the grind of being on the water, but its restorative qualities, that keep us coming back.

According to the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation, 3.5 million Australians fish.

Of them, most people (65 per cent) say they fish not simply for the thrill of the catch, but to be out in the natural world.

It's a form of mindfulness – watching the tide come in, or the wind change, or the sun set. And that urge for quiet solitude and contemplation isn't restricted to one half of the population.

Summer's well and truly here: the water's warming up, and rod and reel racks at countless camping stores are brimming.

A quick walk through any fishing section reveals a cluster of pink rods at the end of the aisle. Is it a new gendered phenomenon in Australian fishing? Probably not – but it does suggest that market is increasingly worth something.

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Fishing, a sketch in Mossman's Bay, Port Jackson, 1871.