

Ralph Brown

A lifetime of crayfishing and a whole lot more besides

By Peter Stevens

The steady reduction of the number of individual operators (aka owner operators) in the seafood industry, especially as regards the catching sector, is now a well accepted fact of life. The numerous reasons for that decline are relatively well understood. The third element in this equation, that of the ultimate effect, is less understood because it requires at least a degree of prediction or, if you like, guesswork. In simple terms, the fact that something is happening, and the reasons for it, always precede the consequences. However, in this particular case it doesn't require too much guesswork to arrive at the consequences together with the realization that the outcome will be decidedly negative.

One of those consequences will be the loss of innovation, invention, and the germination of ideas and the acceptance of the challenge. The challenge, of course, growing out of the conviction that that things can be made easier, better, more productive, more profitable and, ultimately, more sustainable. That's not to say that all individual operators are of that persuasion because quite clearly they're not. However, the sector has attracted a considerable number of innovators who have paved the way for others and having done so deserve our recognition. One such individual is Wairarapa cray fisherman Ralph Brown.

Ralph Brown was born at Masterton in 1941. His dad was a cooper (barrel maker) and also a taxidermist. However, the thing that probably influenced Ralph's future to the greatest extent was the fact that the family had a bach at Castlepoint and visited it often. Ralph was taken out to the bach from early childhood and the coastal marine environment became second nature to him. He did all of his schooling at Masterton but fishing was always a major consideration. He

obtained his first commercial fishing permit at age 16 in 1956 whilst still attending college. He then left school to go full-time commercial fishing for crays (and some lining) at Castlepoint where he lived in the family bach.

Things were going well in that Ralph was doing what he had always wanted to do. But after a year he thought he'd better get a trade behind himself just in case. He took up an apprenticeship as a baker and even although he couldn't stand working indoors he duly completed his time and gained his qualification. The fact that he could go fishing on weekends and public holidays certainly helped get through four years in the bakery.

FULL TIME FISHING

With his trade certificate in his pocket it was back to Castlepoint for Ralph and back to fishing full-time. These were the days before fast planing hulls and jet boats and Ralph's boat was pretty basic: a modified 14ft X class yacht with an 8hp Briggs and Stratton inboard.

During that time, around 1960, ring potting was the main method but it was soon to be superceded by the use of set pots. Fishing with the X class continued for the >



Pam and Ralph Brown at their home at Crystal Park. "We don't think we could have found anything else more interesting and satisfying than what we've done at Crystal Park."



Crystal Park at Orui. The first paua farm and paua pearl producing facility in New Zealand.

next five years during which time he upgraded to a 20ft double ender with a 9hp Lister Diesel. (For some years these slow but safe double enders were popular for working the often dangerous surf beaches.) During the period 1966–1968 Ralph, until then a loner, worked in with another fisherman in a combined operation. In 1970, once more working on his own, he decided to shift camp and he and his wife Pam moved down the coast to Orui. Orui, some 20 kilometers south of Castlepoint and just north of Riversdale, offered better fishing and far less wind strength from the northwesterly which plague the Wairarapa coast on a regular basis.



Ralph's wife to be Pam, pictured beside Ralph's first boat, the converted X class yacht hull in the basin at Castlepoint. Trumpeter of this size (caught by Pam) were not uncommon in those days.

FRESHWATER EELS

Ralph and Pam settled down at Orui and fishing continued much as before but with much less wind to contend with. Ralph sold his crays to Townsend and Paul who also exported freshwater eels from their plant in Masterton. The manager of Townsend and Paul, Des Davies, suggested to Ralph that he might care to try raising eels as a sideline during the periods of downtime from fishing. Ralph decided to give it a go and the necessary permits were obtained. Glass eels were obtained from the nearby Whareama River and various sites in the Waikato and relocated in ponds at Orui. A range of diets were tried and the baby eels grew.

The experiment was proceeding well and showing promise until a major setback occurred. The local farmer's cattle continually trampled through the ponds and ruined the eel's habitat. Because he didn't own the land Ralph was prevented from erecting adequate protective fencing and with no solution in sight he was forced to abandon the project.

"However," says Ralph, "I still believe that raising juvenile eels to marketable size holds a lot of promise and could be commercially viable, especially given the advances in scientific knowledge over recent years."

In 1974, after four years at Orui, Pam was looking for something to occupy her time and they moved back to Castlepoint where they purchased some holiday flats (Castlepoint Holiday Homes). Pam managed the holiday homes while Ralph continued with fishing. Running crays into town every day was somewhat of a drag especially when



Juvenile paua feeding on bull kelp gathered from the nearby beach. The variation in size from the same brood is evident.

the daily catch was low and Ralph set to solve the problem. Holding pots left much to be desired and mortality, besides the inconvenience, was a constant problem. Ralph set up a holding tank on his property at Castlepoint and simply pumped water straight from the sea. It was extremely simple with no frills whatsoever but it worked well and saved a massive amount of traveling time. It also suited the shed in that they didn't have to keep staff back to tail small quantities of crays.

PAUA

Ralph carried on fishing but the physical aspects of working small boats from exposed beaches was starting to tell. In addition, when you've spent many years setting and hauling cray pots endlessly, the sheer tedium of it exerts a toll and any form of change becomes attractive. Ralph and Pam thought paua farming might just provide that option and they took themselves off to Wellington to the Fisheries Research Division's scientists at Mahanga Bay. They did a course on the raising and husbandry of paua and read up as much on the subject as they could find. However, there was insufficient land available for the establishment of a paua farm at Castlepoint



Ralph and Pam's living quarters at Orui during their first stay there in 1970. Their second boat, a double ender, is in the foreground.

but land had become available back at Orui. They negotiated for, and secured, a six and a half hectare site at Orui and in 1986 Crystal Park was born. (Crystal Park because tiny, just formed paua tend to look like little crystals in the water).

The Castlepoint Holiday Homes had been sold releasing capital for the move and Ralph's crayboat sold. The *Candya* 30ft twin engine (2x 200hp Volvos) aluminum boat was Ralph's pride and joy and she went with considerable regret.

The construction of amenities such as buildings, tankage, plumbing and a pipeline to the sea were commenced at Orui. The necessary permits were obtained with relatively little fuss or bother recalls Ralph. "The fact that we were the first probably helped a great deal together with the fact that ours was a pretty remote location with very little public interaction," he says. "Certainly a far cry from the red tape and cost factors that prevail today. In fact, if the current situation had existed back then I'm sure that we wouldn't have proceeded."

Twelve months after construction started paua taken under quota were placed as brood stock in the new tanks. The juvenile pauas produced were fed micro algae in the early stages and once over 10mm went onto a diet of local seaweeds harvested from nearby. Reproductive and growth rates were generally good but there was a considerable difference in the growth rate between individual paua.

However, as the young paua grew to marketable size two realizations struck home. Paua didn't grow as fast in a large commercial environment as they did in small scale laboratory trials. Being the first commercial

paua farm in the country meant that there were no established precedents to go by and it became evident that the time required for paua to grow to a predetermined marketable size was about 33 percent longer than first thought.

The second realization concerned the market value of 'cocktail paua'. Domestically paua featured little if at all in the restaurant trade and chefs tended to ignore them completely – there was no market tradition for 'cocktail paua'. Size wise and economically they were totally unsuited for the fish shop trade for use in fritters. The predominately Asian export market was adverse to our 'black foot' paua and bleaching cocktail paua (as is done with large mature wild grown paua) was out of the question for obvious reasons. Breaking in a new market with a new product is not easy especially given that regular high volume deliveries couldn't be maintained.

However, Ralph and Pam boxed on accepting that it was early days and breakthroughs would come. Selling juvenile seed stock (10–15 mm) to newly establishing paua farmers provided an extra return also.

But the work was hard and endless with the daily ritual of cleaning tanks, gathering seaweed and feeding it out as well as the constant maintenance. The power bills kept rolling in.

Initially, they had started the venture with a partner in the form of Townsend and Paul whose shareholding was taken over by Skeggs Fisheries. Just prior to 1990, after about three years of operation, Ralph and Pam bought out Skeggs shareholding and became independent. The first six years produced little profit but they had always considered that it



Ralph's last commercial cray boat and his pride and joy at the time, the 30ft *Candya*.

would be a long haul so they boxed on with hope springing eternal.

PEARLS

One day a Korean chap turned up at Orui and asked if he could do some pearl culture experiments at Ralph's installation. With his curiosity aroused Ralph readily agreed and the Korean set about inserting a significant number of inserts in 75 mm paua. Ralph considered that the inserts that he used left much to be desired when it came to New Zealand abalone and, accordingly, the mortality rate was very high. Before very long the Korean withdrew and Ralph continued to feed the paua that had survived his handicraft.

Some three years later some pearls were produced but in the intervening period Ralph and Pam had done their own research and had come up with a better insert and a superior method of placement. Rather than using the smaller more vulnerable farmed paua they bought in mature wild stock for pearl cultivation and that move led on to the production of good pearls. However, the return from pearls, the meat sales of pearl-carrying paua and the return from the breeding operation, whilst improving, were not returning enough to compensate them for the running costs, time and effort.

Extra income and plant utilization came when Port Nicholson Fisheries asked Ralph if he would operate rock lobster holding tanks for his company at Orui. Ralph had the necessary plant and his previous experience in operating holding tanks and so he agreed. So, between the pearl cultivation, the paua farming and the live tank operation they carried on but it didn't get any easier.

Things took a turn for the worst when Ralph developed heart problems which were compounded by a diagnosis of cancer as well. >



First stage growing tanks for spawned paua on the left and rock lobster holding tanks on the right.

Facing the uncertainties associated with that situation Ralph and Pam decided to pull the plug on the paua farming side of the business in 2001.

After a period of pretty intensive treatment Ralph's cancer was cured, allowing him to undergo successful heart surgery. When he initially took ill and it looked as if he'd opt out of the paua business (growing and pearl cultivation) he charitably passed on much hard won experience to others in the same business.



Paua pearls before and after removal from the shell.

2004

Ralph and Pam continue to operate their rock lobster holding facility and Ralph has some experiments in mind. They lease out their rock lobster quota and remain thankful that they never sold it. "That quota," they both consider, "has provided solid asset backing throughout and the sale of any or all of it would have been sheer folly."

And on the subject of the quota system per se Ralph is decidedly positive. "It was necessary, the only way to go and apart from a flaw or two it works well. One problem is that the areas are too large and too much effort can be concentrated in a small section of a fishing area thus leading to localized serial depletion. I've always believed that there needed to be a mechanism which kept the area in which quota could be taken in line with where it

was originally recorded as taken for allocation purposes," he says.

As for any regrets; well Pam and Ralph are adamant that they have none. "The paua work," says Ralph, "was the most interesting time in my life without question. Sure we didn't make as much out of it as we would have liked, but you could say that about anything that you elected to do. And we didn't exactly lose on the deal either. I have a couple of projects in mind that I intend to pursue and, of course, we have the necessary facilities to carry them out right here. I have some unfinished business in the cultivation of paua pearls and some definite ideas I'd like to trial in the enhancement of wild stocks."

They say that necessity is the mother of invention but it doesn't end there and there are a few more motives besides necessity. Curiosity and the challenge involved are also key motivators. But without innovators, curiosity and challenges are not exercised.

The Ralph Brown's are getting thin on the ground and the working climate that is essential for the nourishment of their efforts and development of their ideas is fast disappearing. Sort of like erasing the first five letters from the word extraordinary. ■



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