



# 'Slim female records the same old story': Newspapers, gender, and recreational fishing in Australia, 1957–2000



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## ABSTRACT

Recreational fishing is increasingly acknowledged as an activity that significantly impacts on marine environments. However, the cultural aspects of recreational fishing that shape its participation and practice in different geographical and historical contexts are poorly understood. In particular, the gendered nature of recreational fishing has been subject to surprisingly little scrutiny, particularly with regard to continuity and change over time. This article uses a long-running newspaper fishing column in an Australian context to illuminate women's modes of engagement in recreational fishing, as well as the way in which a mass media platform has reflected, and at times supported interventions into, gendered cultures of recreational fishing. In doing so, it highlights the complexity and potential of newspapers as sources for understanding recreational fisheries, present and past.

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## 1. Introduction

In August 1985, the *Sunday Times* (Perth) weekly fishing column ran with the headline 'Slim female records the same old story' (*Sunday Times*, 11 August 1985: 85). The 'slim female' in question was not a wahoo or other slender fish, but Kim Oxbury, a woman 'at best rated as a novice' who was fishing with her husband and a friend in the remote northwest of the state. The 'same old story' is that on these kinds of fishing trips, 'the female always gets the better of the men': Oxbury had caught the 'biggest and best table fish' as well as an assortment of unusual fish species that, due to their rarity, were likely state records. In spite of its purported ubiquity, this story – of women on fishing trips outperforming the men – was rarely regarded as newsworthy. Indeed, the column article describing Oxbury's achievement was one of only three that year describing women's fishing at any length.<sup>1</sup> This article seeks to explain women's minimal and trivialised appearance in the weekly fishing column in spite of their sustained and often skilful involvement in recreational fishing, while also more broadly illuminating

the gendered nature of Australian recreational fishing cultures in the second half of the twentieth century.

We argue that newspaper fishing columns comprise valuable evidence of women's involvement in recreational fishing, which is important particularly in an era in which the environmental impact of recreational fishing is increasingly acknowledged (McPhee et al., 2002). Though highly mediated, these texts provide glimpses of women fishing with families, spouses and women friends, in competitions and occasionally alone; they sometimes also tell us what they caught and how. This information enables us to better, if imperfectly, understand women's uses of marine and riparian environments over time.

These sources shed even more light, however, on the relationship between mass media and gendered cultures of recreational fishing in industrialised western societies. The way in which the *Sunday Times* fishing column represented recreational fishing as a gendered practice changed over the 1957–2000 period in response to specific elements of the historical context as well as the background and interests of column authors, while consistently promoting a hegemonic masculinity. This study therefore represents a new use of newspapers as source material for understanding the production of gender identities and power relations in recreational fisheries.

Sports geographer Christopher Gaffney has proposed that 'the role of gender in the production of sporting practice and sport places deserves much more attention' (Gaffney, 2013). In

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<sup>1</sup> The other six references to women's fishing were descriptions of, or listings of winners of, women's divisions in angling competitions.

elucidating how a newspaper column participated in the production of Australian fishing places as gendered – both in the social space of the column itself and by shaping wider understandings about appropriate roles for men and women on boats, jetties and beaches – this study engages with some key themes of cultural and feminist geographies especially in the area of sports and leisure. At the same time, in tracing and accounting for change in these gendered spaces over time, it provides an historical geographical lens onto Australian recreational fishing.

## 2. Aims and conceptual framework

More than 30 years ago, [Snepenger and Ditton \(1985\)](#) argued that given the increasing fishing participation rates for women, gender was becoming a salient field within fisheries research. However, in 2016 it was still rare for gender to be the focus of research in this field. Most of the scientific research on recreational fisheries employs survey-based approaches in which sex as a biological category is commonly used as one variable in determining angler demography (see for example, [Snepenger and Ditton \(1985\)](#), [Henry and Lyle \(2003\)](#), [Brownscombe et al. \(2014\)](#)). Such studies show that women's participation rates change over time: in the U.S.A., for example, they were increasing in the 1980s, but declined in the 1990s ([Schroeder et al., 2006](#)). They also indicate that in the recent past at least, in western, industrialised societies recreational fishing has attracted higher levels of participation by men than women.

Commercial fisheries, too, are perceived as male-dominated. However [Schwerdtner Máñez and Pauwelussen \(2016\)](#) note that the western cultural construct of a generalised 'sexual geography' of fisheries, in which men are associated with the sea and women with land, is challenged by women's historical and present roles as fishers and divers in Pacific Island and other cultures. [Probyn \(2014\)](#), for example, elucidates the integral position of women in the nineteenth century Scottish herring fishery, where they assisted in the catch and were critical to the quick curing of the fish for a global market. While women have often been responsible for the land-based work of administration and logistics, as well as processing and marketing – often key drivers of commercial fisheries over time – they have not been limited to such roles.

Women's involvement in recreational fishing over time has been the subject of a range of studies, mostly in western contexts. [Foggia's \(1995\)](#) profiles of numerous women who made their mark in recreational fishing in twentieth century North America and [Morris's \(1991, 1995\)](#) compilations of writings by women fishers, starting with Dame Juliana Berners in 1421, reveal something of the long history of women's fishing in the Anglo world. Survey-based studies have examined differences in men's and women's motivations for fishing, fishing behaviour, and fishing socialization in American contexts in the 1990s and 2000s (see for example [Toth and Brown, 1997](#); [Fedler, 2000](#); [Ditton and Sutton, 2004](#); [Schroeder et al., 2006](#); [Kuehn et al., 2006](#)). These, however, cannot be generalised between contexts. For example, [Goodall \(2006\)](#) found that women in rural New South Wales were most likely to fish during the intensive child-rearing years, while in northeastern USA, working women with children were least likely to engage in recreational fishing ([Anderson et al., 2005](#)). Broader national or local cultures can shape women's recreational fishing patterns in diverse ways; for example Finnish summer cottage culture has been shown to enhance fishing participation of urban citizens, especially children and women ([Salmi et al., 2006](#)).

As well as a leisure activity and a way to acquire food, recreational fishing sometimes takes the form of a more organised sport. Since John [Bale's \(1989\)](#) ground-breaking work in sports geography, researchers in this area have focused on organised sports with

regulatory bodies and designed playing venues, with some attention to women in sport. For example, [McEwan \(2002\)](#) illuminated how gendered golfing spaces work to reproduce gender binaries and shape women's golfing opportunities and experiences. More recent research in this vein has examined how women – particularly women of sexual or ethnic minorities – have contested the production of racial and sexual identities in sports spaces (see for example [Cudwell, 2007](#); [Prouse, 2015](#)). In a similar way to our study, [Muller's \(2007\)](#) analysis of the heteronormative game space of the Women's National Basketball Association attends to the role of mass media in the production of gendered sporting spaces. Sports geographers have yet to examine the socio-spatiality of recreational fishing, yet our study reveals that fishing competitions, including their gendered narration in the newspaper fishing column, can play a significant role in structuring men's and women's differential uses of marine and riparian environments as sporting spaces. Furthermore, while sports geographers' work has highlighted the inroads made by women into male-dominated organised sports (for example, [Rosso, 2010](#)), our study shows how women have been present in the less structured spaces of recreational fishing all along.

Survey-based studies of women's participation in recreational fishing, while providing valuable insights into differences in men's and women's experiences and motivations, tell us little about gender, as 'a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between sexes ... and a primary way of signifying relationships of power' ([Scott, 1986](#): 1067). In regarding recreational fishing as a field within which masculine and feminine identities are defined, ordered, performed, and sometimes challenged, our study aligns with feminist approaches within history, geography and leisure studies that seek to identify and explain the social and symbolic production of gender in time, space and recreational activity ([Scott, 1986](#); [Aitchison, 1999](#)). We ask how mass media has participated in the production of gender in recreational fishing in Australia in the second half of the twentieth century.

Following gender theorists such as [Connell and Messerschmidt \(2005\)](#), we emphasise the historicity of gender relations and their susceptibility to change over time: a necessary counter-point to essentialising conceptualisations of gender. As our study shows, media representations of recreational fishing have often engaged in the promulgation of hegemonic masculinity and its ideological legitimization of women's subordination by consistently connecting positive qualities such as skill, competence, independence and strength with male fishers, while often positioning female fishers as dependent, marginal and incompetent. However, while these associations showed a degree of continuity over time, they also shifted in response to broader changes in gender relations, the internal logics of capitalist mass media, the political mobilisation of recreational fishers, and the individual styles and backgrounds of particular newspaper columnists. We also found that our newspaper source did present glimpses, albeit not representative, of white women's experiences in recreational fishing. In contrast to recent sociological analyses that present Australasian outdoor spaces in which men hunt, fish and shoot for pleasure as exclusively or 'almost exclusively' male ([Espiner et al., 2011](#); [Franklin, 1999](#)), we attend to these depictions as important if partial evidence of women's diverse and enduring presence in these spaces and as such, their significance as stakeholders in recreational fisheries management.

Given our interest in the ways in which mass media representations are involved in the production and transformation of gender over time, we used a newspaper archive, rather than interviews or surveys, as our primary source material. Newspapers have been occasionally used in fisheries-related research as a source of empirical data on past fishing activity. For example, they

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