Indonesian Invasion

Indonesian Snapper,( ***lutjanus bitaeniatus***). CSIRO and various official web information have this fish native to areas off Sumatra and Sulawesi with a small population off Kuri Bay in WA and a few pockets north of Darwin. It is not native to Qld. So, what’s the news in this? It is the fact that these fish are virtually infesting most of the southern Whitsunday region in massive numbers, dominating many of the recognised rubble grounds to a point where you can’t get a bait to the bottom to target Reds as double hook-ups on these fish are almost instant. The issue with these fish is they are small, reaching a max of around 40 cm, but usually caught in the 25 to 35cm range, they are great to eat, but, have been caught up in fisheries regulations as a lutjanid species under abroad definition of “tropical snappers” with a subsequent bag limit of 5 fish. The available scientific literature is of a fish with frightening fast population growth,(unusual in a Lutjanid species which are mostly very slow growing) identifying a doubling of population in LESS THAN 15 MONTHS. Despite a head in the sand attitude from Qld fisheries senior management, who prefer to doubt the existence of these fish, they are here, they are quickly getting out of control and they are being protected by a bag limit. What next, a bag limit on Tilapia or carp? This species is, according to the CSIRO literature, a fish found solitary or in small schools and inhabits waters from 40 to 60 meters. WRONG. It is present in massive schools, almost blacking out sounders and in waters from 5 to 80 meters. Qld Fisheries excuse for maintaining a bag limit is that these are too hard to easily identify from other “tropical snappers”, particularly large mouth nannygai. WRONG again, and typical of professional bureaucrats who may be great at writing rules but know nothing about fish and fishing. The difference is very obvious. No saddle near tail, black tail and white tipped caudal fin. What is it with these guys? Here you have a species which would be a desirable recreational species, if you could catch enough to generate a decent feed, have little or no commercial value, or interest, and are breeding and spreading distribution at alarming rates and clearly displacing native species.

First formally identified in the Whitsundays in 1994 by a single specimen sent to the WA and again in 2010 by JCU marine researchers, it has become apparent to Whitsunday fishos that the last few years they have exploded in population. Historically restricted to a few pockets around Long Island they were a popular local target, with no bag limit and an easy feed. The 5 fish bag limit, coupled with 2 monster wets over the last 2 years seem to have combined to cause a population explosion, akin to what the literature indicates which provides for a doubling of population every 15 months (or less) and the fish are now showing up everywhere. How long before these things dominate the entire Great Barrier Reef? Recreational fishers are about the only possible means to slow these things down, even if only while the boffins come to terms with what to do. Not only is this cost free to Government, it could even add value to fishing tourism and the diet/lifestyle of locals and visitors alike as a great, easy, bread and butter fishery. But, typical of bureaucracy, Qld Fisheries Management is holding the line that these things don’t really exist, or are not really a problem. I have personally had direct contact with the Minister’s office, GBRMPA, boating and fisheries and fisheries field and research operators, the vast majority of whom agree this should be an open fishery and actively encouraged. If Qld fisheries management continue with their head in the sand approach and continue to protect these fish there is a very real threat to the biodiversity of fish stock on the GBR. A recent sounding in an inshore local green zone confirmed an obvious expectation. The purported rational for green zones was to protect biodiversity and fish stocks. This particular area, where I risked a heavy fine by dropping down a bait to confirm identity of the huge schools showing on the sounder, is wall to wall Indo’s. And it is just the tip of a very large, fast growing iceberg. We have been told to trust the new LNP Government would remove stupid green tape and regulations which either do not make sense, or, in this case, appear plain straight out dumb.

The major rational, as relayed by senior fisheries managers to the Ministers office is this. “The fish (if they really exist, or exist in numbers) are too hard to identify from other lutjanid/tropical snappers so anglers will be encouraged to exceed bag limits on tropical snapper species if an open fishery was declared on Indonesian Snapper.” With respect, what a load of crap!.

Below is the photo and here are the “Lutjanids/ tropical snappers” targeted by recreational anglers.

Large Mouth Nannygai (Saddle Tail Sea Perch/snapper)

Small Mouth Nannygai (Crimson Snapper)

Fingermark (Golden Snapper)

Red Emperor

Mangrove Jack

Spanish Flag (Stripy Bass/ Stripy)( Lesser degree by catch)

Moses Perch ( Lesser degree by catch)

Hussar ( Lesser degree by catch)

Note attached a clear high res image (and attachment) for clear identification.

1. This is about as big as they get and **YES**, it looks a bit like a juvenile Large Mouth Nannygai (Saddle Tail Sea Perch) but little at all like a juvenile small mouth Nannygai(Crimson Snapper)…………It looks NOTHING like any other Lutjanid
2. Underslung Lower Jaw (Saddle tail is prominent lower jaw)
3. Note no “Saddle” markings at the upper base of the tail.
4. Black tail (saddle Tail have clear to pink)
5. The easy to spot “smoking gun” White tips on the caudal fin ,(zoom in where fin tips extend on fingers) hence a common name of white tip snapper.
6. While I would say anyone can see the difference, clearly senior fisheries managers are not just your average “anyone”. What’s old saying? If you build something idiot proof, they just build a better idiot.

