

# Farming for eels

AFTER LOSING NEARLY ALL HIS FISH STOCK IN TROPICAL CYCLONE LARRY IN 2006, PETER WHIDDETT OF TARZALI LAKES HOLDS A SIMILAR PHILOSOPHY TO THE EELS HE NOW FARMS – NEVER SAY DIE.

STORY **CARLY CRUMMEY**



Pristine grounds and a jade perch known as 'The Big Fish' at Tarzali Lakes Aquaculture Centre on the Atherton Tableland, Qld.

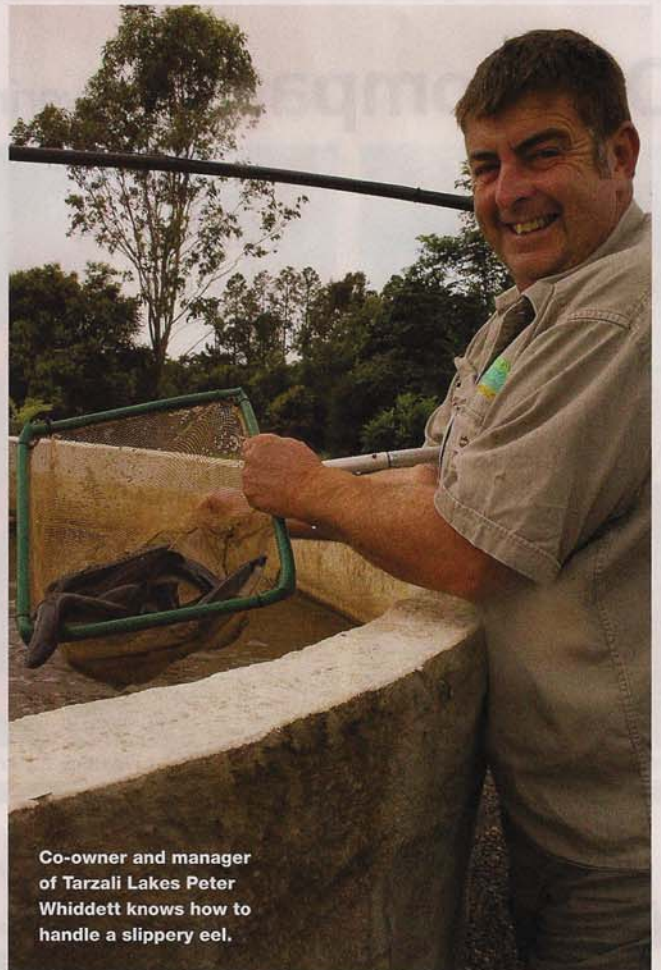
Tour guide Shane Bradley spots a platypus at Tarzali Lakes.



IT'S SUNDAY and Peter Whiddett's only day off. As the co-owner and manager of Tarzali Lakes Aquaculture Centre on North Queensland's lush Atherton Tableland, he has been up until the early hours doing bookwork and replying to the juggernaut of emails that roll in. He is now taking a few quiet moments to collect himself with a coffee before he tells, in his fast-paced tone, how tough the past four years have been, but how new opportunities were spawned from the devastation. "It's not like cattle farming where you buy or breed your stock and can sell it a few years later," Peter says. "When we decided to get into aquaculture 12 years ago it took about a year to get all the approvals, then we got our stock in the form of microscopic fish. By the time they had grown big enough and we found a market, Cyclone Larry came and nearly wiped us out. It's now taken us three-and-a-half years to get back to where we were and keep up with supply, and we are really starting to ramp up."

Tarzali Lakes is one of three eel farms in the region and is getting ready to make its first shipment of live longfin eels to the Asian market to take advantage of the drastically under-satisfied global hunger for the product. "At the moment they reckon the global demand for eel is about 800,000 tonnes," the gregarious Peter says, handling a net full of the slippery creatures in one of the 16-hectare property's concrete ponds. "But between all the producing countries I think we only get to 2000 tonnes, so there is a bit of a shortfall," he says. "Hopefully by the time we are ready to ship the price should be up to \$26-\$28 a kilo, but for the Chinese, the bigger the eel the better. We are told for anything above six kilograms you can pretty much name your price."

It's for this reason that female longfin eels are much more desirable as they can weigh up to 12-14 kilograms at 1.5 metres long, but males only reach half a metre. One of the biggest outgoings is feeding the animals,



Co-owner and manager of Tarzali Lakes Peter Whiddett knows how to handle a slippery eel.



The Tarzali Lakes Smokehouse Cafe offers Thai food and smoked goods. **OPPOSITE:** Dave Hoffman at work in the smokehouse, creating the delicacies that have become popular with local market-goers.



which need a rich meat and fish meal diet at \$3000 a tonne. The other major challenge is that eels don't breed in captivity and there's a limit to how many can be sourced from estuary environments each year. "Eels breed in saltwater but live in freshwater, and their spawn are carried into estuaries where they develop into glass eels," Peter says. "We get them when they are the thickness of a human hair and grow them to the size of a pencil, then we grade them each month and put them into separate ponds. Because they aren't grown in a hatchery and no one has succeeded in breeding them in captivity, the numbers aren't reliable so if the world has a crappy season there can be a global shortage."

One thing Peter has learnt since adding eels to his fish farm post-cyclone is that they are notoriously difficult to kill, which makes them ideal for live export where they are chilled and gassed so they stop wiggling and can be handled with greater ease. They are then revived when they reach their destination.

While overseas markets represent the main direction for the eel-farming side of the aquaculture business, Tarzali Lakes is also putting its smaller short-finned eels to enterprising uses in its relatively new smokehouse. Peter reports that sales of the slightly unusual fare at this week's local Yungaburra markets were double that of their previous visit. But it's not just eel on the menu; the Tarzali Lakes smokehouse produces everything from smoked mackerel, gourmet sausages, chorizo with haloumi cheese to lemon myrtle chicken and dried Thai crocodile, and all this largely came about by chance.

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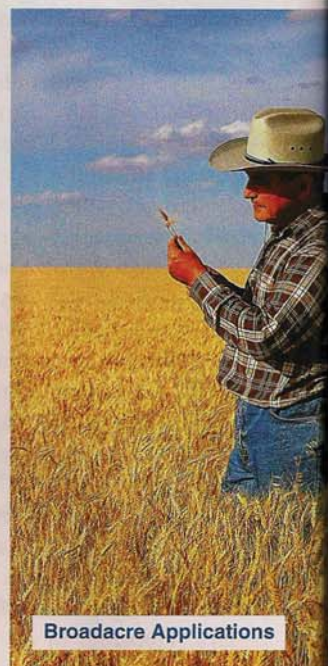
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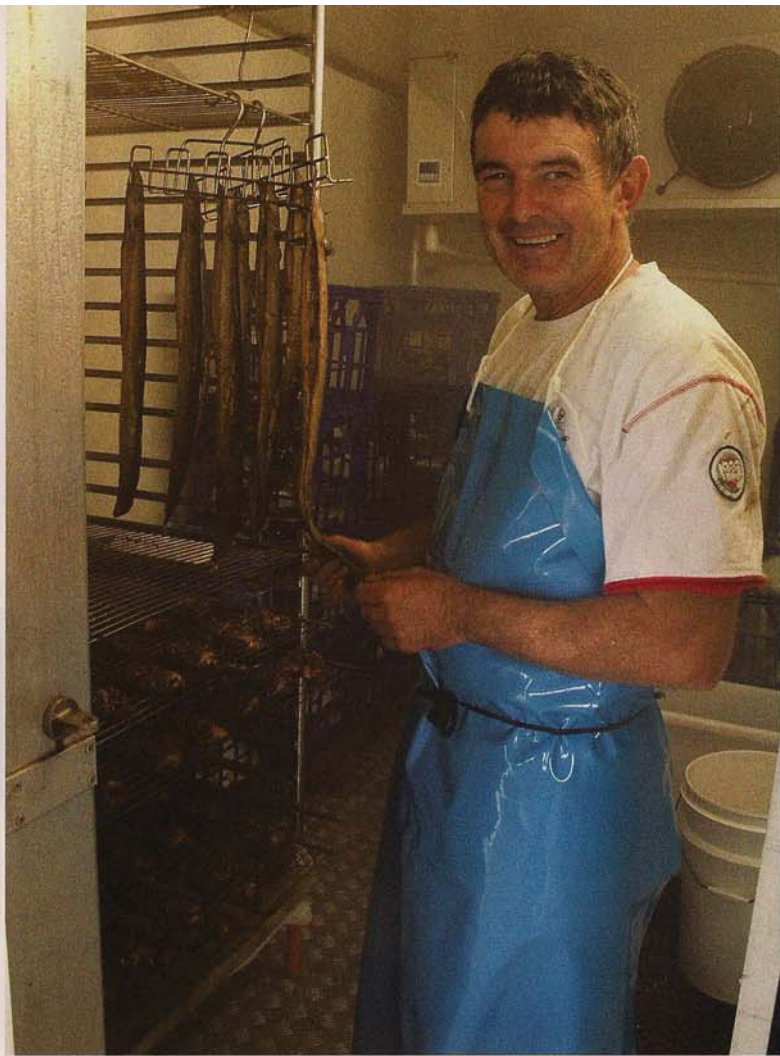
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“One day a guy called Dave Hoffman turned up and wanted some catfish to smoke, but I told him it would be a bit rough with a Tally-Ho,” Peter jokes. “But the next day he came back with a folder and showed me how he was National Sausage King Champion and had won several awards and owned his own shop in New South Wales, and he was keen to get a smokehouse up and running. He has since established a bush-tucker plantation on the property and Epicurean Gold in Cairns has become the distributors for our products in North Queensland.”

The fish farm is organic, using natural techniques to maintain the balance of the ponds’ ecosystems. Peter says an increase in red claw and prawn numbers has helped maintain the equilibrium, which has led to an increase in the platypus population, which feeds on these crustaceans. Platypus tour guide Shane Bradley says this has allowed Tarzali Lakes to offer the only ‘guaranteed sighting’ platypus tour on the Tableland. “Our lagoon is recognised as a specialised platypus habitat and we have 36 in there, which are all wild [not stocked],” Shane says. “Red claw is \$28 per kilo at the moment and they eat about 300kg of seafood a year, so the little buggers cost us a fair bit, which is why we started doing the tours. The tourists love it.”

Other strings to Tarzali’s bow include educational school tours, the selling of nutrient-rich waste from the cels and fish as a fertiliser and a Thai restaurant, which is run by Peter’s wife Yuwadee who will only cook with the freshest ingredients that have been growing or swimming on-site. With so many facets to the burgeoning business it’s no wonder Peter feels a little worn-out, but the determined character is buoyed by the fact the clouds are clearing and the Tarzali team can only look forward to brighter horizons.



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