

PARRAMATTA RIVER FISHWAYS PROJECT

Well, the Marsden Street fishway is finally complete and it's the vital link that gives migratory fish in the Parramatta River access to some worthwhile habitat.

The Charles Street fishway has been in place for a couple of years now but not operational - the lack of flow from upstream has encouraged Parramatta City Council (PCC) to block the channel. The "Kiosk" weir fishway, upstream of Marsden Street, has been operational - but of little value when fish can't get past the Marsden Street barrier.

Now that barrier has been breached with the completion of an exciting new "lock" style fishway that will allow fish to move from the featureless shallow water of "The Pound" to the backed up water of Parramatta Park – a much more hospitable environment.

As with most of these things, the longest part of the construction exercise has been the planning and approval process. Whilst the project has been ongoing for about five years now, the construction at Marsden Street took only 3 months. The photo at right was taken in early May and shows preliminary excavation as well as cut in the old apron to admit the new fishway.



The photos at left and below were taken in early August and show the lock nearing completion. In fact, the contractor can be seen fine tuning the electrics and only the temporary bunding need be removed to make the fishway operational. The lock controller is set to cycle through the lift process every 20 minutes – a lot better than the 190 odd years that fish have been waiting since the last free access was available!

If you're wondering where the 190 year references comes from, our research has revealed that a town dam was first installed at Marsden Street in 1818. This was the approximate tidal barrier at the time so the town dam would definitely have affected fish migration.

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Bass Sydney's Involvement



So where does Bass Sydney fit into this project?

Well we were there at the start when the project was first floated by the Upper Parramatta River Catchment Trust (UPRCT) and we've stayed the course since control was passed to PCC. Our primary contribution has been to successfully apply for \$45,000 in Commonwealth grant funds to support the construction of the Charles Street fishway.

The fishway was significantly more expensive than that by the way. We believe the majority of the remaining cost was funded by the UPRCT. And of course, the three fishways completed so far have been constructed at significantly greater cost showing great commitment from the Government and semi-Government bodies involved.

Bass Sydney's ongoing involvement is driven, not only by our club mission to improve the lot of native fish, but also by continuing obligations under the grant process. Those funds were granted in return for a commitment to spend time educating the community about the project.

To date we've put in close to 100 man hours across three Parramatta River Carp Fish-outs doing just this (see photo of our information stand and club volunteers at right).

These events are put on by PCC as part of their Healthy Rivers Program and started out as an event within their annual River Beats Festival. The popularity of the event meant they couldn't wait a year to host the next!



So far, after a washed out event in November 07, Carp Fishouts have been held in February 08, November 08 and May 09. Bass Sydney has manned a stand at each of these and expects to be there again when the next event is held – currently expected in November 09.

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Are There Any Bass Here?

Bass Sydney decided to target the restoration of the Parramatta River bass populations back in the late '90's. At that time, we were hearing sporadic reports of bass captures in the area – most by coarse anglers in The Pound (the stretch between Charles St and Marsden St) but also some captures further upstream.

Our own initial foray with a few anglers above Marsden St weir and a couple in The Pound was held in 1997. This returned only one bass: a 300mm plus fish caught in The Pound off the best available structure – an incoming stormwater pipe!

Later there were some fairly comprehensive “fish surveys” in The Pound. Once when it was drained in Nov 2002 to facilitate some bridge works (doesn't get any more comprehensive than that!). According to newspaper reports, this turned up 2 tonnes of carp, 3 eels and “some” bass and mullet (the carp and mullet were sent to the fish market while the others were relocated above Marsden St weir). The Pound was then electro-fished by NSW Fisheries in Sep 2004. The yield was 41 carp (killed), 41 eels according to my notes (though that seems rather a coincidence!), 5 goldfish and 4 bass.

Bass Sydney fished again in 2006 but failed to turn a scale. In retrospect, it is likely that the few bass seen in the Parramatta River over the last 10 to 15 years were stocked fish that came over the wall from Lake Parramatta in high water. It's possible, though, that there is a remnant, natural population hanging on in the Parra and perhaps even populating small creeks downstream from the tidal barrier at Charles St.

What's certain is, if we don't provide migratory access via fishways we will never again have a viable, self-sustaining population of Australian Bass in this stream.

It is our intention to monitor the progress of the population (using angling techniques) once the fishways are operating. We know that PCC are also planning a five year monitoring program and we will happily contribute our efforts and knowledge to that. With any luck, they will find funds to apply more scientific methods to the task e.g. video monitoring of movements through the fishways.

Should the natural population not be seen to be making a recovery after this time (and only after this time) then we would consider promoting a re-stocking program using locally sourced brood stock. This is considered an action of last resort for us – if you're not aware of Bass Sydney's policy on stocking then you can check it out in the article posted on our web site.

Where To From Here?

Whilst we now have three completed fishways on the system there is a fourth on the agenda. This will be constructed on the last significant barrier which is only about 500m upstream of the Kiosk weir in Parramatta Park (adjacent to the old Asylum).

We know PCC are still committed to this fishway and it is certainly a critical one as it provides access to another significant weir pool and to the waters of Darling Mills Creek and Toongabbie Creek.

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This last fishway has suffered continuing delays as design and heritage issues are discussed with the Parramatta Park Trust. With the other fishways completed, it is to be hoped that a greater focus will see a resolution of these issues and some quick progress.

The last issues to be resolved are those of water flow and levels. PCC are under significant pressure to maintain water levels in Parramatta Park and in The Pound. To date, they have left the boards in the Charles Street fishway to make sure this happens but, of course, there is no point in having a fishway if you keep it blocked.

We have spoken to PCC about taking the boards out during crucial migration months as a temporary measure but haven't had a final decision on this yet.

The long term solution may resolve itself when all 4 fishways are constructed i.e. the flow allowed through the top fishway may be enough to offset the flows going out the bottom.

Alternatively, there may need to be some modifications to baffle size in the Charles Street fishway and/or to cycle times on the Marsden Street lock to achieve a compromise.

Conclusion

Bass Sydney is excited to have been involved in this project so far and will continue to take an active interest.

With so much achieved to date we feel we're close to making a difference in this river system after more than 10 years of effort. Let's hope the mighty Aussie Bass can make a successful comeback here in the not too distant future!