The Clarence, although only a small geographic region, is the most productive fishing region in NSW. Based mainly out of Maclean, the Clarence River supports both a general estuary fishing industry and a prawn trawl industry, while the townships of Iluka and Yamba are the home ports of the state’s largest fleet of prawn trawlers.

**A STRONG ECONOMY**

The professional fishing industry contributes more than $60 million in revenue annually and over 650 full-time jobs to the Clarence economy. 94% of residents believe the industry is important for their area and 93% feel it is also good for tourism, with locally caught fish and prawns a favourite among tourists and locals.

**FRESH, LOCAL SEAFOOD**

98% of Clarence residents agree that it is important we produce our own seafood in NSW. 86% want to know where their seafood comes from. 99% believe buying local seafood is better for their local community.

**COMMUNITY LIFE**

Professional fishers play an active role in community life. They frequently join in life saving search and rescue missions and flood response. The Clarence co-op and other fish merchant businesses provide sponsorship and donations — especially ice — to local sporting and community groups. The co-op also holds regular school tours and open days. Local seafood is central to Christmas, New Year and Easter celebrations.

**CULTURAL HERITAGE**

Many towns along the Clarence, such as Iluka, Yamba and Maclean, evolved from professional fishing communities and still identify with their fishing heritage. 78% of residents are concerned that a decline in the industry could lead to a loss of community identity.

**KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS**

Specialised fishing knowledge held by Clarence professional fishers has led to significant improvements in productivity and bycatch reduction. These fishers helped develop some of the earliest bycatch reduction devices for estuary and ocean prawn trawl fisheries in NSW.

**PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT**

The industry is highly regulated, and professional fishers must comply with a range of restrictions on when, where and how they can fish and the size of their catch. All fisheries must pass environmental impact assessments. Fishers themselves play an active role monitoring environmental conditions in their local area, and often are first to sound the alarm about environmental damage or pollution events. Many fishers are also actively involved in looking after the marine environment, by picking up rubbish and taking part in habitat restoration projects.

**RECREATION**

Close to a half (48%) of the residents surveyed in the Clarence were recreational fishers — the highest in the state. 80% preferred local bait supplied by local professional fishers even if it was more expensive. Jetties managed and maintained by the professional wild catch industry provide popular infrastructure for recreational fishers and boaters.

**ABOUT THE PROJECT**

A team of independent social scientists and economists spent two years gathering this research data in their “Valuing Coastal Fisheries Project”, funded by the Commonwealth’s Fisheries Research and Development Corporation (FRDC). The researchers investigated the NSW professional fishing industry by:

- interviewing professional fishers, fishing families, community members, recreational fishers, local council staff and councillors, tourism organisations, seafood retailers, wholesalers and restaurant owners
- sending out an economic questionnaire to professional fishers
- conducting a random phone questionnaire of 1400 people living in NSW coastal communities
- conducting random and targeted phone questionnaires with fish co-ops, fish retailers and wholesalers
- conducting an internet survey of hospitality and tourism operators.
Iluka, Yamba and the Clarence River are famous for their prawns. The two main species of prawn caught are School prawns (Metapenaeus macleayi) and Eastern King prawns (Melicertus plebejus).

HOW DO PROFESSIONAL FISHERS CATCH WILD FISH?
They use
- estuary meshing of fish and prawns
- line fishing (catch includes Snapper and Kingfish)
- trapping of Mud crabs, Lobster and fish
- trawling or purse-seining (catch includes Flathead and Sardines and prawns)
- ocean (including beach) hauling (catch includes Mullet and Salmon)
- diving for Abalone and Sea Urchins,
- hand gathering of pipis and worms

For more information visit: masterfishermen.oceanwatch.org.au

A LONG HISTORY
Professional fishing started on the Clarence in the 1860s at Iluka, and until the mid-20th century it supplied more than half of Sydney’s fish. Transporting fresh fish was tricky so canneries emerged in the early 1900s, first at Iluka processing Bream and Whiting, and then Maclean canning Mullet, Bream and Flathead. The Clarence prawn industry didn’t become commercially viable until mid-20th century, along with improvements in transport and refrigeration. Women’s seasonal work was to shell, cook and snap-freeze prawns for market.

Today the Clarence co-op – with depots at Maclean, Iluka and Yamba – is one of the longest running co-ops in the state and remains one of the biggest employers in the region, catering for both wholesale and retail markets.

TRAWLING IN NSW
Ocean-based trawlers operate throughout NSW, targeting fish like Whiting, Flathead, Trevally, squid, octopus as well as prawns and bugs. Trawling is managed using a range of methods, including controls on gear, seasonal closures and restrictions on where trawlers can operate.

LOCAL FISH, LOCAL FISHERS
Professional fishers use estuary prawn trawl or meshing techniques in the river. When the prawns move out to sea, ocean-based trawlers harvest them.

“Our estuary School prawn, if it gets washed out to sea, it becomes our ocean School prawn. That is a very sought after product. The School prawn spawns at sea – but it doesn’t matter where it spawns. That spawn always ends up back in the Clarence River”
Garry Anderson – Co-op employee and former prawn fisherman (Clarence River)

CATCHING THE PRAWN
Prawn fishing began at the beginning of 20th century in the Clarence when fishers would wade near the shore, dragging cotton or hemp nets. They began to use trawlers in the 1940s, and today Iluka and Yamba have the state’s largest prawn trawler fleet. The trawl nets are different mesh sizes depending on the species targeted and are shaped like a funnel with a wide opening to catch the prawns and a narrow closed cod-end. Fishers tow the trawl nets behind a boat through the water column and above the sea floor.

REDUCING BYCATCH
Through years of experience and trial and error, many NSW professional fishers have played a significant role in developing environmentally friendly fishing techniques. For example, a number of fishers in the Clarence were involved in early trials of bycatch reduction devices.

“Our family has pioneered all the way through. From that you learn, learn, learn and learn. So I cut a hole in the net, put a bit of twine to hold it together and shot away. When I picked the trawl up, two came in full of fish rubbish and prawns... but the one I cut a hole in was just about pure prawns. So over a couple more nights I started doing a little of my own research on it... I had contacts in fisheries... They decided yep, this is worthwhile following up on... That’s now mandatory in all ocean going boats, it’s what we call a BRD, which is a by-catch reduction device.”
Garry Anderson – Co-op employee and former prawn fisherman (Clarence River)

• King Prawn (Melicertus plebejus)
• School Prawn (Metapenaeus macleayi)

Iluka, Yamba and the Clarence River are famous for their prawns. The two main species of prawn caught are School prawns (Metapenaeus macleayi) and Eastern King prawns (Melicertus plebejus).

• Trawling Net with by-catch reduction device (BRD)

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