



RARE FINDS AS SGW GOES FISHING FOR RIVER DATA

Rare native fish – and an escapee goldfish – were the surprise discoveries in the first fish census carried out by South Gippsland Water (SGW).

Local rivers surveyed over the past 12 months were found to be in comparatively good shape, according to Kerry Matthews, the river health officer of SGW.

“Fish are the barometers of river health,” she said. “We found a relatively healthy diversity and density of fish populations.”

It was the first of a five-year fish survey program implemented by SGW, DSE and the Arthur Rylar Institute. (fish ecology)

The water corporation employed Kerry in October 2008 as a Freshwater ecologist/water resources coordinator and one of her first assignments was to manage the survey of four major local waterways - the Tarwin, Tarra, Agnes and Powlett Rivers. While some studies have been completed, this was the first fish census ever taken of the waterways, said Kerry. The findings set a benchmark of local fish life, she added.

The survey found that the Tarwin had the most diverse native fish population, followed by the Tarra River.

The Tarra was the region’s healthiest river, judged to be in good health. The Powlett was ‘moderately good’, followed by the Tarwin ‘moderate’ and then the Agnes.

“All of our rivers scored from moderate to good,” Kerry said. “The rankings are based on a formal marking system for all Australian waterways and it was encouraging to see that all our rivers scored higher than major Australian rivers – such as those in the Murray Darling River Basin (MDRB).”

“This study provides a baseline from which to measure future studies. These results show that all-in-all, when compared to the MDRB, these rivers are in very good shape.”

The survey found that the most abundant native fish species collected locally was Australian Smelt, more than 4000 of them. The most abundant introduced fish species was brown trout.

And the single goldfish? It was swimming lonely – and lost – in the Powlett River.

The survey involved 28 sites, comprising 15 on Tarwin River (including tributaries), five on Powlett River, three on Agnes River and five on Tarra River.

Researchers captured 6513 fish across all sites and found 13 native fish species – including the rare Australian Grayling and uncommon species such as the short-headed lamprey, the South Gippsland spiny crayfish and river blackfish, along with introduced species such as brown trout, carp and goldfish.

Steve Evans, Managing Director of South Gippsland Water said: “the major part of Kerry’s job is to oversee our river health program. She also keeps an eye on wastewater discharges into Foster and Little Ruby Creeks. Any use of groundwater or pumping high-flow river water is also subject to her scrutiny.

Her work represents one element of SGW’s commitment to the health of the whole catchment.”