



ROCKY LAYS A PAPER TRAIL

BY CAPTAIN ASPARAGUS

I'm home again from another trip to the tropical bliss of the Solomon Islands, where the weather was beautiful and the water warm and calm, indeed, pretty much everything the weather here in our winter and spring is not.

This trip was particularly interesting for several factors, including meeting up with friends again, some interesting developments at the local deep-water port, and of course the fishing... a week of which we did with the Bill Hohepa/Inox Fishing Show, which was a pile of fun!

Perhaps the most interesting part for the bulk of our readers was the developments with NFD, a commercial tuna seining company based out of the nearby port of Noro, the operations manager of which is my mate, Tony Sarcich. Those readers who are long-term residents of the Chatham Islands will remember Tony as the chief engineer of the fisheries there back in the 1980s.

It has been a year of expansion for NFD, part of the United States company Tri-Marine Group. They acquired a pair of near-new 360 tonne purse seiners from Mexico, as well as spending a lot of investment in infrastructure to enable as much as possible of the non-dry dock work on the boats to be done at Noro.

The process of adapting the Mexican seiners to Solomon Islands' standard was surprisingly involved. Hey, I am just a recreational fisho, so the fact that one seiner is not the same as the next one came as quite a surprise.

I am told that the main problem with adapting the Mexican boats for use in the Sollies was that the new boats came fitted out to work on open-water, free-swimming schools

of tuna, whereas the bulk of the fish caught by NFD in the Solomon Islands is taken by targeting fish around the dozens of fish attraction devices, or FADs, they have laid around the islands.

This, it seems, means that the nets need to be larger and deeper than the more surface-fish oriented Mexican boats, with nets some 500m deep, as opposed to the nets that came on the

boats, which are mere 350m models.

Man, that sounds deep to me! But apparently skipjack and yellowfin can and do swim straight down easily that distance to avoid the nets, so the extra depth helps the seiners close the purse in time to encircle diving fish that otherwise would have escaped.

A lot of other work needed to be done on the boats, including new rails and all sorts of steelwork to make operating the larger nets a safe proposition. We actually managed to catch one of the new boats, the *Solomon Pearl*, at work one day, working the FAD nearest to the resort, and it was a very interesting operation to see.

They had shot their net at around 0400 using large bait lights to bring the tuna close to the boat and hold them there. But half way through the set, the genset providing the power died, the lights went out and half the fish escaped the closing net.

Still, we saw plenty of skipjack tuna, a few sharks, and a lot of rainbow runners still surrounded and scooped up by the ship. All told there was 35 tonnes of tuna. The chief engineer, Jon Bates of Whangarei, and the fishing master, Gabriel Santana of Stratford, made sure the bulk of the rainbow runners (a tropical relative of the kiwi kingfish) were put into sacks and dropped into our boat for us to take into one of the local boarding schools.

There's no such thing as a wasted fish here in this fish-eating country, I can tell you. The seiner was surrounded by small boats, even this many miles out to sea, all of whom were grabbing all the small or damaged skipjacks they could. Skippies in the Solomons is prime eating fish, not just bait as it is in New Zealand!

It was indeed fascinating, and we loitered around the boat for several hours, watching the work. I love good, hard work. I can watch it for hours, as the old joke goes, har har. I even got to see big pods of dolphins come charging up to pluck up the various undersized or wounded fish that were dropping out of the nets, so I guess this operation really is very "dolphin-friendly". The dolphins certainly love it!

Anyhow, this was all very good, but my main focus was to show Bill Hohepa around the place a little

more. We managed to get enough footage for a couple of shows, with poppering for assorted reef predators being my favourite pastime. The bottom fishing too was pretty good, with some very nice captures caught on camera. All this is shown on the Inox Fishing Show on Sky channel 110. The bits you do not see however are, to my mind, the better bits. But you will have to wait for a bloopers tape to come out before you see any of that stuff.

The one other mate I was able to meet up there was an old pal, let's call him Rocky. Rocky and I have been heading off to the islands to go fishing for well over a decade now. Rocky is a great bloke, salt of the earth, and will do anything for you if he can.

But just occasionally, you have to wonder if the ol' grey matter is all up to speed there, eh. Some of my very best stories involve the Adventures of Rocky. Let's see now, which of the dozens of "You

will not believe this" tales can I record for posterity? Oh, I know, how about the great toilet paper tale?

A few years back, Rocky, myself and another mate, Steve, were heading up to the Zipolo Habu Resort in the Solomons. I had been given an urgent shopping list of engine parts for the resort which we would need if we wanted to use the best boat up there, so I let Rocky and Steve know that I would appreciate it if they could pack as lightly as possible to keep our baggage excess as low as we could. The baggage excess at that time was a pretty shocking \$30 per kilo. Eek!

We met up at the international terminal, and to cut a long story short, although Steve had packed very light, giving us a welcome 5kg of spare freight capacity, Rocky, it turned out, had brought along an extra box, an 11kg box at that. Oh dear, so much for being under weight. Our combined baggage came to a total of 14.5kg over the limit.

"Oh dear," said the young lass at the counter. "If you were within five kilos of the limit I could let this slide, but I am afraid I will have to charge you for this excess. Are you sure you need everything here?"

I put this question to Rocky. "Well mate, what have you got in that box, is it really important?"

"Hell yes!" was his reply. "I have packs of lollies, pens, books, toys and stuff for the kids (We have known the Entrikin children, the family who own Zipolo Habu, since they were knee-high to... well, our knees), some bits of stuff I need, a bit of toilet paper (eh? Well, a roll of loo paper, maybe it was extra specially soft or something, no big deal I thought), and some other stuff. I really want to take it all, okay?"

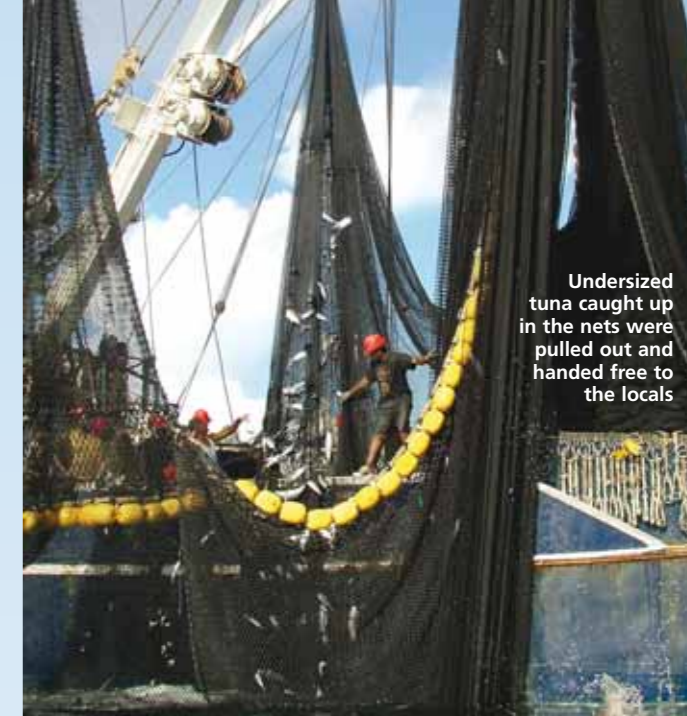
Well, who am I to say what can or cannot be taken up there, although I did repeatedly point out that without his 11kg box we would have to pay nothing extra. If this box went, someone was going to have to cough up \$420 in excess baggage, and guess who was the only guy with a credit card. Yup, muggins.

We got to the resort after a long day's travel, and started unpacking. While I was sorting out my gear, Steve came in, chuckling evilly.

"Here Stu, come check this out," he said, and lead me back to their bungalow. Going into Rocky's room, he pulled the offending box out from under the bed, where Rocky had somewhat suspiciously shoved it, and said, "You are not going to believe this."

Well, he was right. Once opened, the contents of the box, all 11kg of it, consisted of a couple of 250gm packets of lollies, half a dozen colouring pencils, three or four small packets of cashew nuts, and 36 rolls of toilet paper.

What! Bloody hell, I could not believe my eyes! Ah, but this was no ordinary toilet paper either, oh no. It was that useless stuff that comes in those great big wagon-wheel rolls they have in



Undersized tuna caught up in the nets were pulled out and handed free to the locals

commercial loos, which they replace when they get down to only about an inch or so of paper left on the spool.

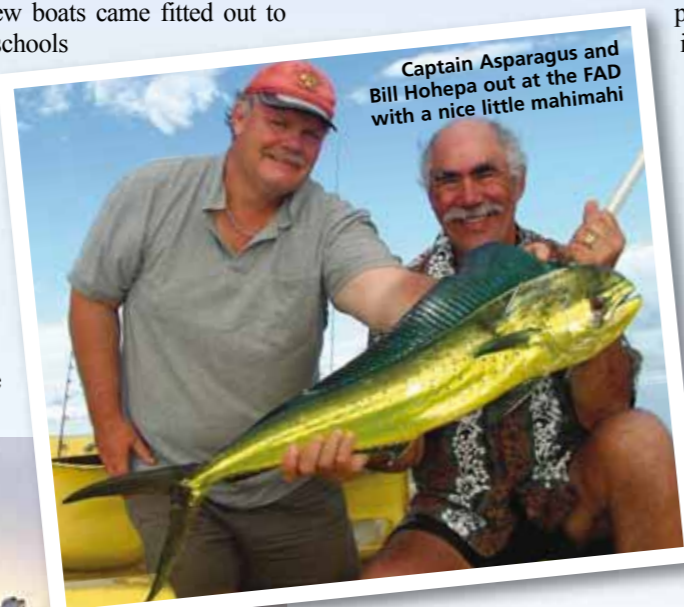
It turns out that Rocky had seen someone replacing these things in a service station one day, and was told he could have this whole box of them for free if he wanted them, and he thought they would be very handy for the resort to have. The paper parts of the rolls were probably outweighed by the thick, heavy-duty PVC pipe they were wrapped around. And it was this that I had spent \$420 on shipping up to the Solomon Islands? But hey, they were free, yeah?

Amazing, simply bloody amazing. I was stunned more than any mullet could ever have been. I mean, in the Solomons, toilet paper rolls cost about 40 cents each in the local currency. Once we worked out the local dollar value of each of these rolls of loo paper, it worked out at around \$60 each.

Once word got around the lagoon, and believe me, a story like that gets around fast, hopeful islanders would come running out of their houses waving rolls of toilet paper to sell to this crazy white man every time they saw us cruising past in the boat.

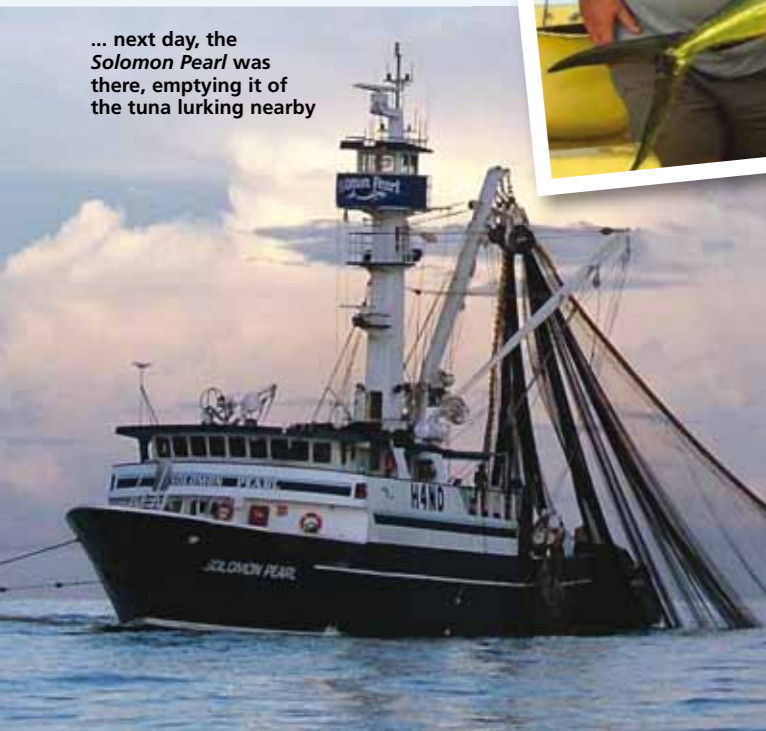
I even put a roll of it behind the bar in the restaurant, and every day we were heading out, I would tear off a length of it and say as loudly as I could, "Here, let's take some of this, so that if we run out of gas, we can trade it for a few litres more." Rocky got a little sensitive about it after a while, so don't tell him I have told you all, eh.

There are more stories, really, this is just one of many. But I see the editor is starting to tap the word counter button on the computer, so I better wrap this one up now. Maybe next time I could tell a few more tales of the Amazing Adventures of Rocky, like the one... well, no, that'll have to wait.



Captain Asparagus and Bill Hohepa out at the FAD with a nice little mahimahi


... next day, the *Solomon Pearl* was there, emptying it of the tuna lurking nearby



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