

## Lee Lafferty Eulogy

Lee Lafferty was a prime specimen of a threatened and fast disappearing species, the free white male. Their habitat has been devastated by the blight of urbanisation, bureaucratization, certification, political correctness and the nanny state. In heart and soul Lee was a fisherman. He came from a time and place where being a successful fisherman demanded substantial skills and hard work but was wonderfully free of artificially imposed demands or restraints. A fisherman could fish how, where and when he wished, catch whatever he could and sell it to whomever he wished. However, in addition to knowing how to catch fish and being a capable mariner, a fisherman had to be able to build and maintain most of the equipment he used, from boats and motors to pumps and winches as well as all the fishing gear itself. Lee could do all this and more. He was indeed a master fisherman.

The range of skills, knowledge and abilities required in fishing were not something one could acquire in a classroom in a few years. They could only come from years, and usually generations, of real world experience. However, the one thing for which few fishermen were prepared to cope, and fewer still were willing to accept, has been the ever increasing paperwork, fees, requirements and restrictions which began to be imposed by government over the latter half of the past century. To fishermen who had enjoyed near complete freedom and having grown up in a culture wherein personal freedom was a central ideal, the transformation from the "*home of the brave and land of the free*" into the home of the slave and land of the fee was hard to accept.

For a time Lee found some relief by shifting his fishing effort from his native Texas to Central America and the Caribbean. While this afforded more freedom in the fishing itself, to operate there it was also necessary to cope with the endemic corruption in that region. Then the drug trade from and through that area began. On the US end anyone operating boats there became suspect and on the other end the corruption went into hyperdrive. It soon became time to look elsewhere.

To a fisherman from the US at that time Australia looked like a younger, freer version of what they had lost. There were few restrictions, huge under-fished fishing grounds, only a few, generally easy going, English speaking, incorrupt officials to deal with and plenty of good blokes to share a beer with.

In the late 1970s Lee and Janet found their way to Port Douglas and Lee soon bought a suitable launch and began to explore the fishing possibilities. The results were good and he set out to build a proper vessel set up for extended line fishing on the GBR. The result was the *JessieRay* a 50 foot north sea trawler style hull of fibreglass. She had a variable pitch propeller, good electronic gear, long range fuel capacity and capacious freezer capacity for the catch. She was also very comfortably outfitted for extended living on board. Most importantly, Lee's knowledge and experience made sure all the details were done properly, would work well and be easy to service.

In late 1978 I came to Cairns aboard my vessel *El Torito* after three years in the Solomon Islands. Over the next year John Lindsay and I started building longboats there and we soon came across Lee who was building *JessieRay* nearby.

Unfortunately, by the time *JessieRay* was launched and operating for a couple of years the situation in the fishing industry was rapidly changing, and not for the better. The national economy was doing

well and government was expanding. Far North Queensland quickly changed from being a sleepy backwater to a booming development area and the prawn fishery was in hyper mode with over 500 trawlers using Cairns as their home base. The fishery bureaucracy was also booming and GBRMPA was zoning the reef into a complex maze of areas where fishing would be prohibited, permitted or restricted in various ways. Port Douglas, which had suited Lee well as a home port, had also been caught up in the development mania. The writing was on the wall and Lee had seen it all before. It was time to move into something else, somewhere else.

In the meantime I had found a property at Frog Hollow on the north side of the Daintree River and had established a home base there. Lee and Janet paid us a visit on JessieRay. They liked the area, found a riverfront property that was for sale and bought it.

Not wanting to be caught up in the bureaucratic morass that was engulfing the fishing industry Lee saw a way out in the form of an eco-tourism river cruise operation. Although this was not his personal preference as an occupation it was something in which he could apply his knowledge of boats and keen sense of observation of the natural world. It also involved only modest levels of regulation and most of the daily operational aspects could be carried out by employees without demanding his own full time personal involvement as did fishing. The Laffertys River Cruise Centre proved to be quite successful and has provided them a comfortable income and lifestyle for many years.

Unfortunately, Lee's valuable fishing skills and knowledge have now been lost as they have not been passed on. This loss involves much more than just nostalgia. Across the spectrum of primary producers, independent farmers, graziers, fishermen and small miners have declined to only a third to a quarter of their numbers three to four decades ago. Few wanted to give up a cherished way of life. They were forced to and it was not because of any inability to produce or lack of demand for their product. The biggest factor in this decline has been government imposed taxes, fees, restrictions and demands.

Much of this has been predicated on ill-founded environmental concerns. While in most countries farmers and fishermen are valued and respected for their vital role in feeding everyone, for some reason here they have been denigrated as despoilers of nature. Ironically the core demographic of this so called "green" movement has been inner urban non producers whose own preferred habitat is the tiny fraction of the continent where nature has been virtually annihilated.

The loss of numerous small, diverse, low overhead, family producers has relegated more and more of our food production to larger corporate operators who have the scale and resources to cope with the bureaucracy. One result, we are all now paying for, has been an explosion in food prices. A recent OECD survey found a 17% average increase in prices over the previous 7 years in the developed countries. The highest increase was in Australia at 34%.

As for our fishing industry, we have the largest fishing area in world *per capita*, but have the lowest harvest rate. On the GBR the allowable commercial catch limit has been set at a ludicrously low level. It equates to an annual harvest rate of 90 g/Ha when well managed reefs elsewhere sustainably produce 150 Kg/Ha. With a harvest limit of less than 1/10 of 1% of the sustainable limit elsewhere we then have to import poor quality seafood at great cost to meet even our own modest

local consumption. Three-quarters of the seafood we eat is now imported and all of these imports come from resources much more heavily exploited than our own.

And, the idiocy doesn't stop there. Numerous large scale clinical and epidemiological studies strongly indicate major benefits from seafood for a broad range of major health problems. Increased consumption could save billions of dollars in health care costs annually and greatly improve the quality of life for millions of Australians. The real cost of the bureaucratic strangulation of our fishing industry goes far beyond just the loss of livelihood for fishermen. It is little wonder why men like Lee have given up in disgust.

Lee and I shared many commonalities in background, upbringing, interests and thinking. He is going to be sadly missed both personally and for what he stood for.

If this has all sounded a bit political it's because it is. However, I have not been speaking so much about Lee as I have been speaking for him on something he felt strongly about. I'm sure others can and will better comment on other more recent and personal aspects of his life.

**Walter Starck**

Presented at funeral service for Lee Lafferty in Miallo, QLD 7 June 2015

PS: For a most interesting follow up story on Lee Lafferty see:

[http://www.tampabay.com/news/publicsafety/crime/traffic-accident-in-australia-ends-40-year-old-mystery-in-florida/2234369?fb\\_action\\_ids=10153388912778564&fb\\_action\\_types=og.shares&fb\\_source=other\\_multiline&action\\_object\\_map=\[953597458019690\]&action\\_type\\_map=\[%22og.shares%22\]&action\\_ref\\_map=\[\]](http://www.tampabay.com/news/publicsafety/crime/traffic-accident-in-australia-ends-40-year-old-mystery-in-florida/2234369?fb_action_ids=10153388912778564&fb_action_types=og.shares&fb_source=other_multiline&action_object_map=[953597458019690]&action_type_map=[%22og.shares%22]&action_ref_map=[])