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## **Gulf floods bring prawn bonanza**

Last summer's big floods across the Gulf of Carpentaria resulted in a larger catch of banana prawns than normal for the fishers of far northern Queensland.

Researchers from the Tropical Rivers & Coastal Knowledge (TRaCK) program say the big rains pushed the prawns from their estuary nursery grounds out into the sea as the salinity levels within the estuaries dropped.

"But, this is only part of the story," according to TRaCK researcher, Associate Professor Michele Burford. "Flooding also increases the growth of algae in the estuaries and we are trying to find out how this affects prawn production."

Researchers collected prawn samples in the Gulf of Carpentaria during the last wet season, coping with crocodiles, extreme heat and biting insects.

"Last summer we had a one in 50 year flood, which is at the extreme end of spectrum for understanding how river flows affect prawns," says Assoc. Professor Burford.

The flooding had negative impacts on some primary industries, but meant the banana prawn fishery had a big year.

"If you start taking water out of rivers flowing into the Gulf there will be less flooding and as a result, less prawns available for fishers to harvest."

Researchers are now trying to find out how much the natural flooding of estuaries varies from year to year, and what this means for prawn production.

"We don't understand enough about the relationship between estuaries and freshwater flows," Assoc. Professor Burford says. "But we do know that water running out to sea is not wasted."

If the northern rivers are dammed or have water taken out for irrigation, less fresh water will reach the estuaries and fishers want to know what this will do to their livelihoods.

Michael O'Brien, manager of Raptis & Sons fishing company, is a big supporter of TRaCK research.

"We want a good knowledge database on how water flows affect banana prawns. The northern prawn industry is recognised for its sustainable practice," he says.

"We've spent a lot of money and gone through hardship to get it that way. Where we used to run 300 fishing boats, now we run only 50. It's not just about economic yield anymore—it's about maximum sustainability."

Drawing together more than 70 of Australia's leading social, cultural, environmental and economic researchers, TRaCK focuses on Australia's tropical rivers and estuaries in Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory with a degree of intensity, coordination and integration not previously seen in the region.

TRaCK receives major funding for its research through the Australian Government's Commonwealth Environment Research Facilities Initiative; the Australian Government's Raising National Water Standards Program; the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation; and the Queensland Government's Smart State Innovation Fund.

### **For interview:**

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