



“Reel Women” & “Secret Women’s Business”

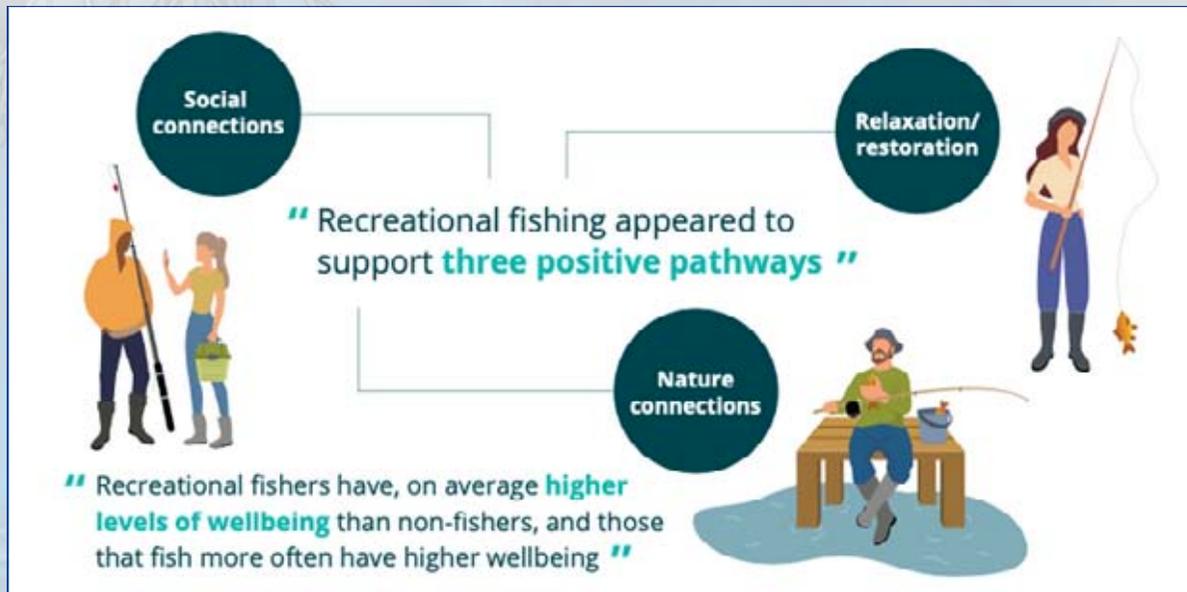
Women’s recreational fishing in the Top
End of the Northern Territory, Australia

Dr Jenny House (she/her)

Background

Recreational fishing: fishing for aquatic animals that do not represent the fisher's primary food source or get sold (Arlinghaus et al., 2010; Arlinghaus and Cooke, 2009).

Recreational fishers: those who have carried out non-commercial fishing for aquatic organisms using any gear or method in the last year (Moore et al., 2023).



" Recreational fishers have, on average **higher levels of wellbeing** than non-fishers, and those that fish more often have higher wellbeing "

Moore et al., 2023



Portrayal of women fishers

Carini & Weber, 2017; Gaynor et al., 2016

Women access diverse benefits

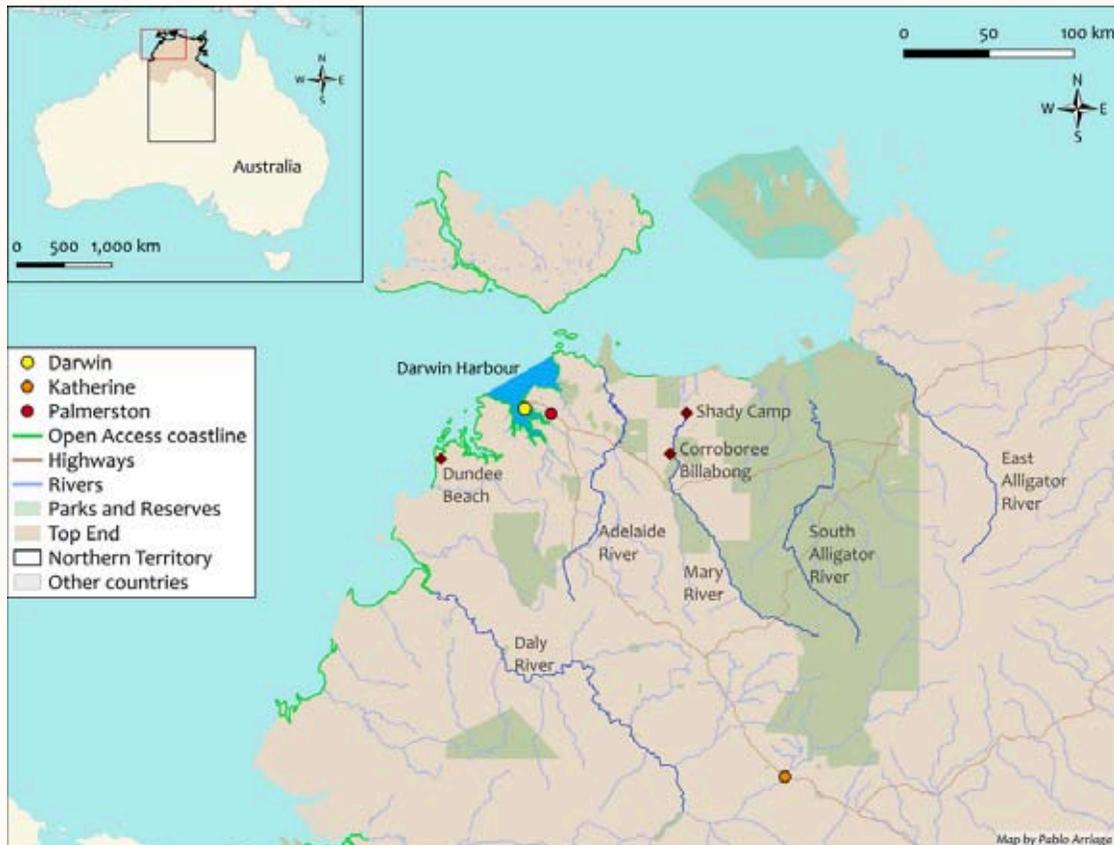
Burkett & Carter, 2022



National social and economic survey of recreational fishers 2018 - 2021 (Moore et al., 2023)



Study context: the Top End



- NT has 63 fishing tour operators, 27 annual fishing competitions & 11 angling clubs
- Competitions since 1950s - 1st women's competition was **Reel Women Barra Classic** in 2002
- **Secret Women's Business Barra Challenge** was first to offer independent category



Data collection

21 KI interviews

Limitations:

Geographic limitations

Indigenous fishing not addressed

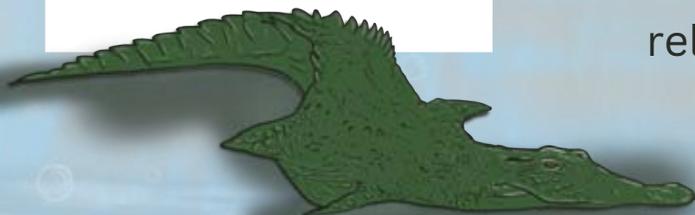
Lack of cultural and linguistic diversity

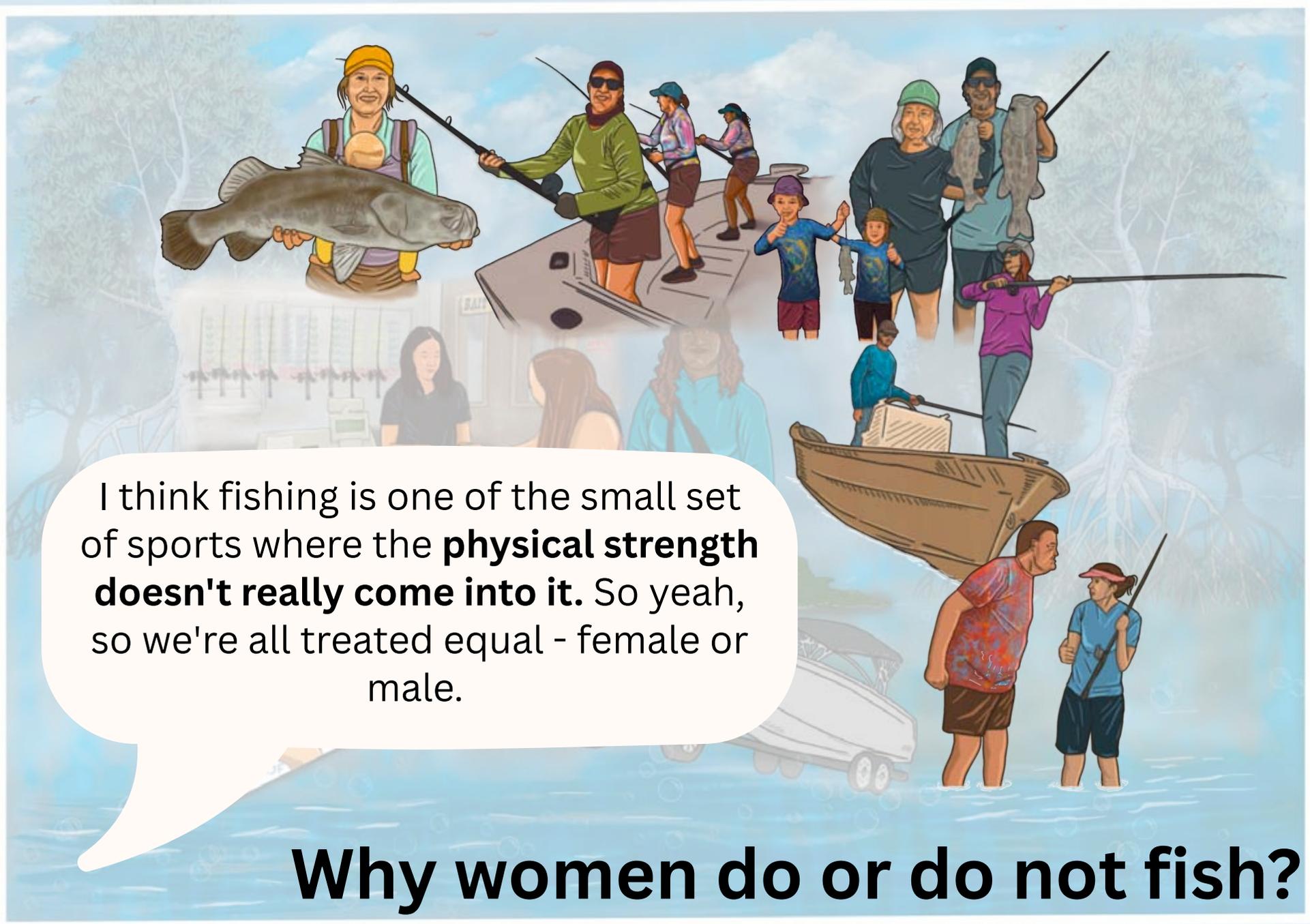
Some fishing activities underrepresented

More focus on auids than the “average” fisher

Fishers with disabilities not represented

Focus on women only (mainly in heterosexual relationships or single)

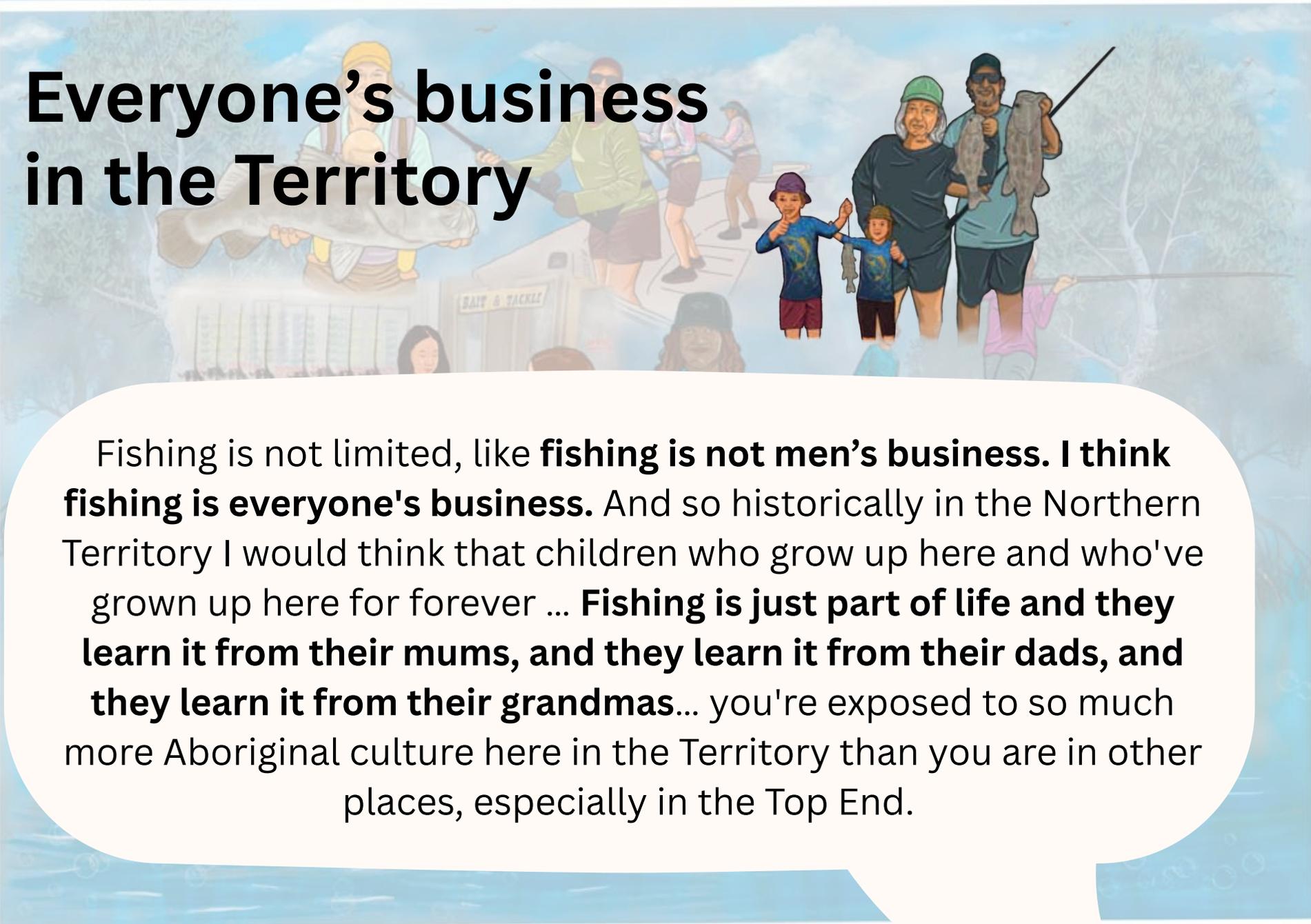




I think fishing is one of the small set of sports where the **physical strength doesn't really come into it**. So yeah, so we're all treated equal - female or male.

Why women do or do not fish?

Everyone's business in the Territory

An illustration depicting a community engaged in fishing. In the foreground, a man and a woman are holding large fish, with two children standing nearby. In the background, a man is shown on a boat, and a woman is at a tackle shop labeled 'BAIT & TACKLE'. The scene is set against a backdrop of trees and a blue sky.

Fishing is not limited, like **fishing is not men's business. I think fishing is everyone's business.** And so historically in the Northern Territory I would think that children who grow up here and who've grown up here for forever ... **Fishing is just part of life and they learn it from their mums, and they learn it from their dads, and they learn it from their grandmas...** you're exposed to so much more Aboriginal culture here in the Territory than you are in other places, especially in the Top End.

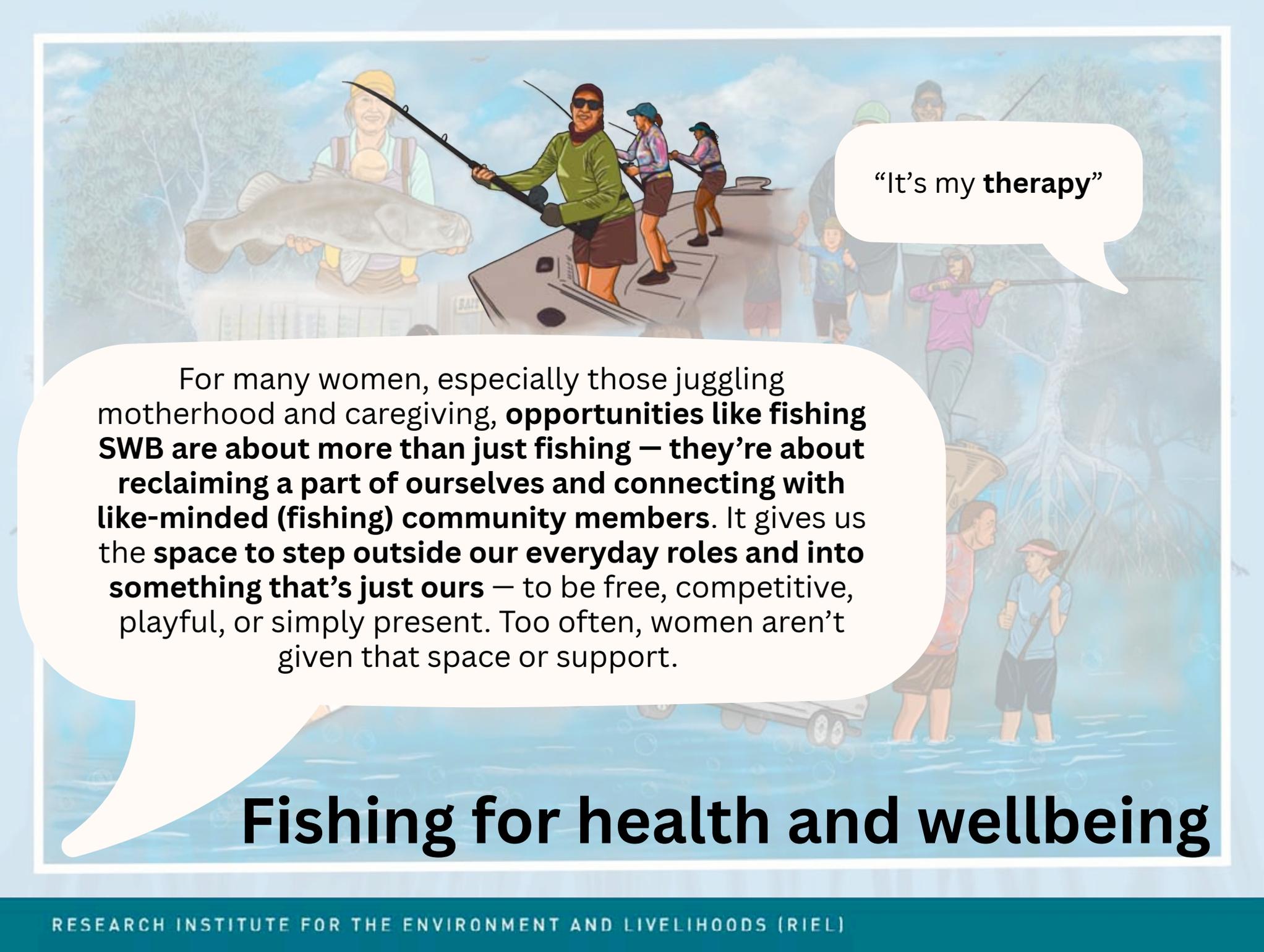
It was harder for a woman to buy a boat... I would have said that 20 years ago, but now, especially when you look at competitions... you know that there are so many incredible independent women that know how to change a tire, that know how to fix a four-wheel drive, they know how to put a boat on another trailer, they know how to backup down the boat ramp ... I think all women competitions, I think that helps. Because it makes them get out of their comfort zone...and it makes them want to learn and be independent. **For [my generation], like the husbands or the boyfriend, they'd go off fishing... but now it's a bit of a reverse thing. The women say, 'Look, I'm going fishing with the girls, you look after the kids this weekend.'**





[Fishing is] just what my family does... [for] me seeing ...those photos of my whole family, all the women in my family fishing, that's something that for me has sort of gone: **'I'm gonna catch up one day, I'm going to be like nanna and catch big fish'**... when I catch a big barra, I send them to my grandma, and she's always so proud, and my granddad is always so proud of me when I catch those fish. So...**I think it does make a difference having the women in your life, like having that role model. But I know a lot of girls who just their dad fishes, and they want to catch fish like that.** And I'm like, that's the same thing. So I think having parents or people in your life, that fish is obviously a big driver or at least it was to me.

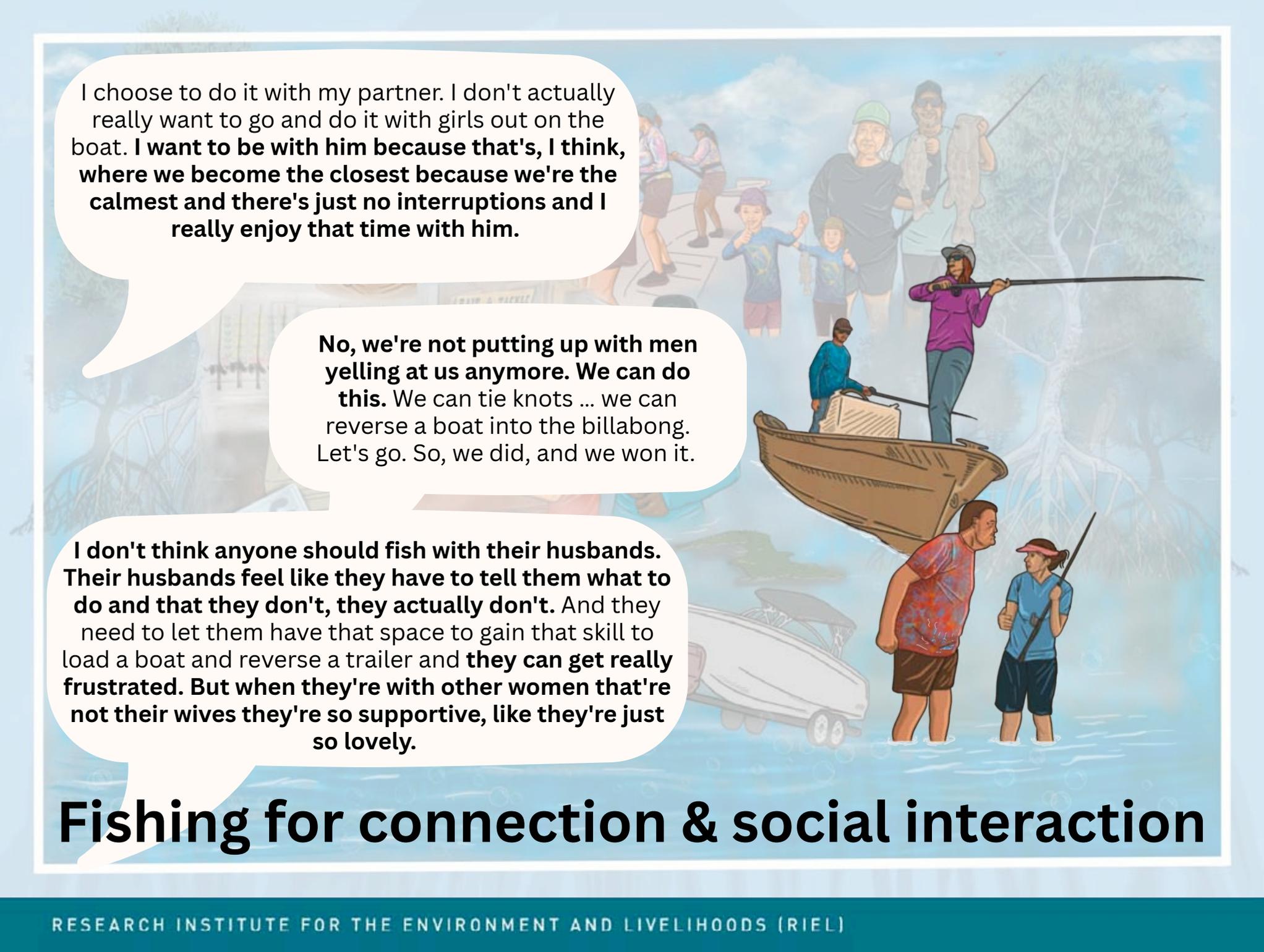
Fishing as family

An illustration showing a group of people fishing. In the foreground, a woman in a green shirt and sunglasses is reeling in a large fish on a boat. Other people are visible on the boat and in the water, some holding fishing rods. The background shows a body of water with mangrove trees and a blue sky with clouds.

“It’s my **therapy**”

For many women, especially those juggling motherhood and caregiving, **opportunities like fishing SWB are about more than just fishing – they’re about reclaiming a part of ourselves and connecting with like-minded (fishing) community members.** It gives us the **space to step outside our everyday roles and into something that’s just ours** – to be free, competitive, playful, or simply present. Too often, women aren’t given that space or support.

Fishing for health and wellbeing



I choose to do it with my partner. I don't actually really want to go and do it with girls out on the boat. **I want to be with him because that's, I think, where we become the closest because we're the calmest and there's just no interruptions and I really enjoy that time with him.**

No, we're not putting up with men yelling at us anymore. We can do this. We can tie knots ... we can reverse a boat into the billabong. Let's go. So, we did, and we won it.

I don't think anyone should fish with their husbands. Their husbands feel like they have to tell them what to do and that they don't, they actually don't. And they need to let them have that space to gain that skill to load a boat and reverse a trailer and **they can get really frustrated. But when they're with other women that're not their wives they're so supportive, like they're just so lovely.**

Fishing for connection & social interaction

Proudly, the blokes might stare...they recognise it, and **the vast majority of them value the fact that there's no gender bias [in physical ability to fish]**. You know, they think it's fantastic. So it's us...**the problem holding women back in fishing is women's mindsets, our beliefs, it because the men, for the most part, have moved on.** You know, there is always going to be some blokey blokes out there. But there is in all aspects of society anyway...Our job is to attain the skills in a safe environment ...that recognises a disparity between perhaps the way men teach and the way women learn...**when a woman teaches a woman, there's a coherence there that is so much more powerful than when a man tries to teach a woman.**



Fishing with skills and confidence

What does a fisher look like?

Even though we have some of the highest levels of female or the highest level of female representation, in terms of fishing activity, its **probably not reflected in media**...and you're still seeing a lot of the male representatives... Isn't it like there's some good [female] fishos out there? Yeah...and they're good representatives...very capable

If women went into those comps, **they were hunting men or hunting fish**. And that's kind of a bit right. I've seen it myself. So **we weren't those sorts of women**. So we thought, if we want to be respected, ... we've got to put the work in. **We've got to earn that respect** for ... wanting to be good anglers and good boaters...so we earned respect over a few years of entering into that competition. So **that was really paving the way, not that other women hadn't been in that comp, but we wanted to actually do well.**

The ones that have **the biggest following is usually because they've taken their clothes off and stood in a bikini, and the following is predominantly male**. So again, it's that kind of sexualized vision

I'm not known as a female fisho. I'm known as someone who has knowledge and experience in the industry. It doesn't matter what I've got between the legs...That's how it should be

I don't know that [women's needs are] unique. It's just I don't know that our voice is heard. **The guy next to me might be saying the same thing. But I think that's better received.** Yeah, more credible.

Women and the recreational fishing industry



I think the fishing industry is also realising that they have 50% of the population that they're not targeting. And **they're changing the way that they advertise and the products that they offer that are actually targeting women and supporting women.**

And probably, **you wouldn't feel as uncomfortable now going into some of the local fishing shops** than you maybe would've in the past.

It's still very, very **patronising**. Still very **misogynistic**. I've encountered some **appalling behaviour from brands** at trade functions of just being completely disparaging of women.





Thank you!



RIEL

Research Institute for
the Environment and
Livelihoods

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Art by Toto Eduk a.k.a. Perfecto26 Art
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