

There seems no real reason not to open up Lake Clifton



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WHEN the Department of Conservation and Land Management built a timber walkway out from the marshy shoreline of Lake Clifton in 1996, south of the Dawesville Cut, it was designed as a viewing platform so visitors could see the thrombolites — rock-like, ever-so-slow-growing life forms that are found in the shallows.

A couple of local kids who didn't know there shouldn't be fish in saline coastal lakes, went down with rod and reel and pulled in an enormous black bream.

Within days the platform at the end of the little walkway was buzzing with excitement as small bunches of anglers had the amazing experience of tangling



Lake Clifton is the home of monster black bream and has the potential to be a world-class trophy fishery.

with bream of a size they had previously only dreamt about.

Many of them were monsters, some certainly over 3kg and others rumoured to be almost 4kg.

It was astonishing, like finding a lost tribe, and fisheries scientists were getting all excited.

Was this a new subspecies of bream? At first, it was reported this was indeed the case, but more thorough investigation revealed the fish had probably been stocked in the lake on three occasions and had undergone some minor internal and external adaptations, possibly to suit their novel environment and diet.

In the interim, the lake was closed to fishing as a precautionary measure.

Well, the bream turned out to be just normal black bream but the lake was never reopened and a unique and tremendously exciting new fishery was lost.

Have those monster fish all died of old age? Or are they still there, true ancients, possibly the biggest black bream ever to swim in Australian waters?

Studies of the bream caught back then included a 500g, 30cm, three-year-old fish; a 12-year-old, 1.5kg, 435mm fish; and a 20-year-old, 485mm, 2.5kg fish. So it's probable that there are still plenty of bream in Lake Clifton and some are almost certain to be monsters of the 1996 ilk.

So why hasn't the lake been reopened to fishing, especially given our inventory of inland fishing opportunities in the southern half is so meagre?

Is it because fishing is a threat to the thrombolites?

Not so, according to University of WA zoologist Brenton Knott, who supervised research on the lake and thrombolites in the 1980s and 90s. Salinity, powerboats and wading could pose threats but not bream fishing from a fixed structure like the boardwalk.

Over the years I have raised the possibility of reopening Lake Clifton with the Department of Fisheries and Recfishwest, only to be fobbed off with mutterings about priorities.

There is no obvious reason why the lake shouldn't be reopened to fishing, so it must be simply because both agencies can't be bothered to do the paperwork or negotiate with the Department of Environment and Conservation over mutually acceptable terms of access.

Pretty disappointing considering they both have a charter that includes providing or creating the best-quality fishing experiences they can for the WA community.

Restoring the Lake Clifton fishery would obviously involve some careful planning to minimise impact on the thrombolites from rubbish pollution and the like, but that shouldn't be insurmountable.

It could mean building an extension of the boardwalk out into the middle of the lake to take fishing away from the thrombolites on the edge, or it could mean creating access at another spot. But that's just the sort of project that would be a suitable application for our fishing licence money.

Lake Clifton has the potential to be a world-class trophy fishery, especially if managed on a catch-and-release-only basis.

We just need the Department of Fisheries and Recfishwest to meet their obligations and do something about it, or give us reasons why it shouldn't be so.