



Government of South Australia



Australian Government

MURRAY FUTURE Lower Lakes & Coorong Recovery

FACT SHEET

Southern pygmy perch



A male southern pygmy perch (© Michael Hammer)

Background

South Australia has an amazing array of freshwater plants and animals but record low inflows to the River Murray have meant that many of these are now under extreme threat.

The freshwater habitats that they rely on for food, shelter and breeding have been drying at an alarming rate, especially since 2006.

Several freshwater native fish species have been driven to the edge of extinction in South Australia, including the southern pygmy perch.

The southern pygmy perch story

The southern pygmy perch is now endangered due to extreme drying in much of its wild habitat.

During 2007-2008 urgent action was needed to ensure southern pygmy perch survival. The sites where it was known to occur were monitored closely and plans were made in case emergency actions were needed.

In one case emergency watering was undertaken to maintain water in a wild habitat. Other measures included localised control of introduced fish in concentrated pools to give southern pygmy perch a better chance of survival through critical periods.

As a last resort populations of southern pygmy perch were rescued from Hindmarsh Island and from the Angas River (in the Mount Lofty Ranges) in early 2008.

These fish were placed in a secure and specialised breeding program.

The next step was to find them suitable surrogate refuge homes, (sites other than their wild habitats) as a backup if conditions in the wild sites deteriorate further.

Finding surrogate homes for these fish in wetlands, ponds and farm dams has been underway since 2008.

The southern pygmy perch is an important part of local and regional biodiversity and ecosystems.

How to spot a southern pygmy perch

The southern pygmy perch (*Nannoperca australis*) is a small fish (usually less than 6.5 cm long) with a gold body, becoming paler towards the belly. The fins are usually clear but breeding males develop a bright red colour towards the base of the fins as well as some black fin markings.

This species has a deep notch in the single dorsal (back) fin and can be distinguished from the related Yarra pygmy perch by red fins, a larger mouth and a round eye pupil.

Struggle to survive

The southern pygmy perch is currently listed as:

- **Endangered** in South Australia and is **Protected**
- **Endangered** in New South Wales.

Two separate populations of southern pygmy perch

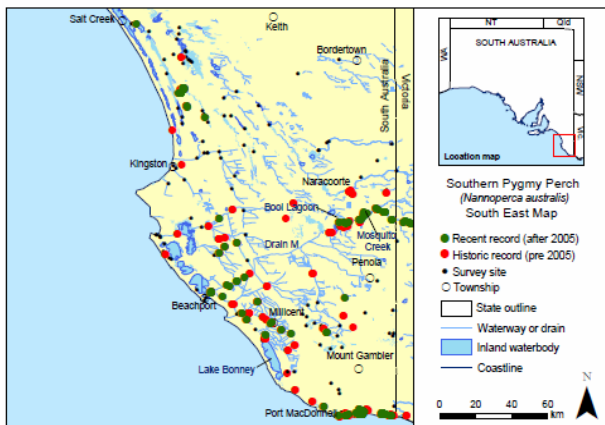
There are two genetically distinct species of southern pygmy perch, an eastern and a western species, but only the western species occurs in South Australia.

The western species can be further divided into two lineages; the South Australian Murray-Darling Basin (SA MDB) and the South-East lineage.

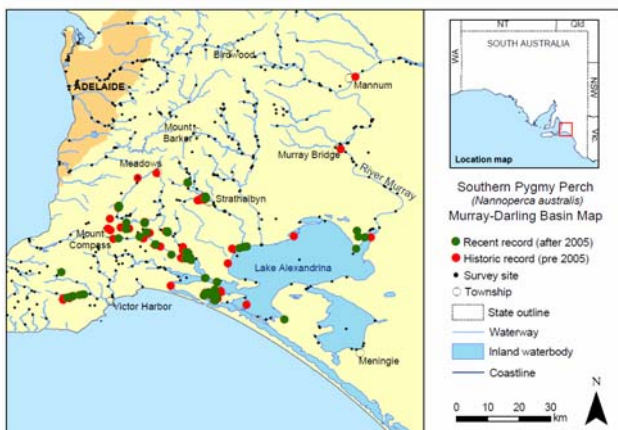
Southern pygmy perch were once widespread throughout the South-East and the Murray-Darling Basin, living in fringing swamps and tributary streams of the lower River Murray and Lake Alexandrina.

Where it is found today

In the SA MDB the number of locations where southern pygmy perch still occur has fallen dramatically. A similar story has occurred in the South-East, but southern pygmy perch are still widespread and fairly common in the upper South-East, including Mosquito Creek.



Southern pygmy perch distribution - the South-East



Southern pygmy perch distribution - SA MDBA (Maps sourced from: 'Action Plan for South Australian Freshwater Fishes 2009')

What is its habitat like?

Southern pygmy perch are usually found in slow flowing or still water, where there is a lot of cover. This can be in the form of rocks and snags, submerged plants such as algae and pond weeds, as well as emergent or overhanging edge vegetation such as grasses, water ribbon, club rush and *Typha*.

Southern pygmy perch love aquatic plants which is where they live, eat and breed so it is important to conserve and enhance this part of their habitat to ensure their survival in the wild.

What does it eat?

This carnivorous species will eat any small macroinvertebrates (including mosquitoes) that it can pick up from underwater surfaces.

Breeding

Southern pygmy perch breed in spring and occasionally summer, where permanent cool water flows. Eggs are laid when water temperatures are over 16°C and are scattered over aquatic vegetation. Young fish stay close to this cover.

Threats

The prolonged drought in South Australia caused reduced water flows, lower water levels and increased salinity, all of which have reduced southern pygmy perch populations, and still do.

Historically falling numbers were caused by loss of permanent wetlands due to drainage and levees separating swamps from the River Murray channel.

Loss of vegetation due to grazing and habitat clearance, and the introduction of redfin also had a negative impact on southern pygmy perch numbers.

How to help

- Join a local catchment management group and get involved in vegetation and site enhancement projects.
- If you catch an introduced fish such as redfin don't return it to the water.
- Never remove native fish from the water.
- If you find an interesting fish take a photo of it and email it to research@nativefishsa.asn.au.
- Reduce water usage in the home to leave more for our water dependent wildlife.

Planning for the future

Actively managing threatened populations in the region is a priority action in *Securing the Future: A long-term plan for the Coorong, Lower Lakes and Murray Mouth*.

Securing the Future outlines priority actions aimed at building resilience in the environment and maintaining the ecosystem in a state from which it can recover when freshwater flows improve.

The goal is a healthy, productive and resilient wetland system that maintains its status as a wetland of international importance.

Contact Details

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References

Action Plan for South Australian Freshwater Fishes (2009). Native Fish Australia (SA) Inc. Website: www.nativefishsa.asn.au