

TEACH A MAN TO FISH

Extended synopsis and personal statement

It's been a long time since Biripi filmmaker, Grant Leigh Saunders, has had a real physical connection to the mighty Manning River, in his home country town of Taree.

Saunders left his home country over 20 years ago to get an education. He graduated with an MA (honours) in Film and TV documentary at AFTRS in 2006, worked at the ABC as a TV Producer for the Indigenous Unit for over four years and is now a Doctoral student, musician and filmmaker, now residing in Newcastle. However, despite all this success, he has always wanted to be a fisherman like his father, Grandfather Horry and his five uncles Mick, Russ, Dooley, Horry Jnr and Steve.

Grant admired all his male role models for their physical strength as well as strength of character and fishing gave him the only chance to be together with them and have quality time with his father, Ray. However, Ray never wanted him to be a fisherman and when he stopped waking Grant up to go fishing with him, as a way of deterring him, it devastated Grant as a young kid.

This film has been over ten years in the making with Saunders documenting the politics and family history behind one of, if not, the oldest Aboriginal commercial fishing business on the East Coast of Australia. Just when Saunders felt that the film needed him in front of the camera, participating in the family business rather than just observing it as a documentarian, his Uncle Steve decides to quit his job as Ray's fishing partner. Serendipitously, Saunders, as filmmaker, becomes participant in his own film and finally gets the chance to realise his childhood dream.

The film now follows Saunders's personal journey back home to learn the family fishing trade and along the way we learn that there is infinitely more to this fishing adventure. This fishing business means the world to the Saunders family. It held them together and provided for Grant's Grandfather Horry and Grandmother Faith's six sons and three daughters. Horry established the fishing business in a time when Aboriginal people had limited work opportunities, were still living in a segregated society and a regime of racist government control.

Grant's grandparents grew up on Purfleet mission just five kilometres south of

Taree. It was officially established with the arrival of the first missionary in 1900. This is where local Biripi people were rounded up and detained for so-called "protection". Grant's grandfather dared to defy this system of control over his people and he pulled no punches. After having the opportunity to work as a builder's labourer working on the new Housing Commission homes in Taree, Horry observed the stark contrast in the living conditions experienced by poor whites and people living on Purfleet Mission, where there was no running water, no electricity, no sewerage and no separate living spaces. In protest, Horry refused to pay rent and after months of resisting, the Aboriginal Welfare Board took him to the Supreme Court of NSW to force his eviction from Purfleet Mission. Horry was not only fighting for better living conditions on Purfleet, but the level of control the welfare board and police had over families, including the forced removals of their children. Horry had already lost his own sister to this regime at a very early age and was continuing to see families torn apart by the same system.

Even though he was initially successful in the case at the Supreme Court, the welfare Board and Magistrates Court of Taree were not going to wear it and eventually the family were evicted from Purfleet to be forced into a condemned house in the white farming community of Tinonee a further 5 kilometres away. In retrospect it was the best thing for the family's freedom and independence because it allowed Horry to fully establish the business, given that their new house, despite its poor condition, was only a walk away to the river, where Horry kept his boats. However, it came at a price not only for the people still living on Purfleet without one of its staunch community leaders, but for generations of Saunders family members, like Grant, essentially disconnected from the community. This history telling of how the fishing business came to be leads into Grant's personal history of how HE came to be and his continual struggle with his Aboriginal identity.

Tinonee is where Grant's father met his white mother Jennifer. Ray eventually took up a position as an Aircraft mechanic for the RAAF and after months of courting Jennifer, they married, had Grant and shortly after moved to Malaysia to be stationed at Butterworth Airbase toward the end of the Vietnam War. Two years later Grant's sister Tammy was born and not long after they moved back to Australia. For Ray it was difficult because of the decision to leave a promising career in the Air force. However, the family fishing business was about to sink financially, and Ray felt the need to help out and come back home.

After their return, Grant's family eventually settled into a place, just north of Taree. A town, called Cundletown. But there were things about this place that were also un-settling for Grant.

When Grant went to Cundletown primary school, he experienced overt racism for the first time, having to endure racist jokes and be called racist names. He didn't tell his parents at the time that he was being bullied. After years of denying or hiding his aboriginality and bottling up all the hurt and anger, it was at high school that Grant started to write songs as a form of therapy. His first song was called 'identity'.

...I'm not what I seem man
I'm not what you want me to be
I am who I am see
This is my struggle for identity
You grew up thinking I was white
While I grew up feeling I was black
Ya say ya needed some explanation right
And I became half this and half of that...

"So why do I struggle so much with identity? I always felt like somewhere in the middle. I asked my Mum's parents once: 'If Dad is Aboriginal and Mum is white, what does that make me?' Pop made light of it and said, 'An alien', And in truth that's how I felt sometimes, not accepted fully by white or black fullas. And to make things even more interesting, I have a partner now who is Norwegian." Grant says.

Grant now not only dissects his own Aboriginal identity, but he explores the cultural identities of his children, who his Norwegian wife, Gabrielle, and him, jokingly describe as "Koori-wegians". Grant is faced with the dilemma of how he will instil pride and understanding in his kids of his Biripi culture, community and country, while acknowledging both his mother's and wife's cultural heritage as well.

The answer, Grant hopes to gain through learning cultural fishing knowledge from his father, and reconnecting with him and his community on a deeper level. However, learning how to fish is not as straightforward as it sounds and is fraught with industry politics and government restrictions, which eventually blocks Grant's path to learning.

Traditionally Biripi fishermen freely moved all over the Manning River, traditionally known as Batu, to find their catch, but in 2004 the state government closed two thirds of this river to commercial fishing and small fishing families like Ray's are doing it real tough. Now the state government is about to implement a share-market system, where fishermen will have to buy more shares in fishing just to make a living. For the Saunders family it means that they will be made to pay tens of thousands of dollars to fish waters that their ancestors have fished for tens of thousands of years.

Toward the end of the film, in 2017, Ray and Grant travel to Sydney together for a parliamentary hearing on the new proposed changes. They are the only Aboriginal voices out of 100 odd statements made by commercial fishermen from around the state. Many of Ray's fellow fishermen in Taree understandably thought it a waste of time, they'd seen it all before, but Ray still wanted to face these ministers and have his say. It is a moment in the film where we see father and son come together in a unified stance against policies that will eventually cripple Ray's business and will see the end of an era of Saunders fishermen.

As it turns out, the pair didn't hear back from parliament for months and when they did receive the final report and recommendations, it was as if all commercial fishing voices got silenced and the share-market system was now set in stone.

“What was even more demeaning was that our statements made to parliament were relegated to a couple of lines in the report. History repeats itself once again, and I hear my grandfather's voice ringing in my head,” Grant says.

“The closures are set up for land developers and tourist operators. They're selling the country from underneath us as far as I'm concerned...I always saw fishing as an equal opportunity but when bigger, more wealthier fishermen can buy more shares to work more waters or more days, they can bomb you out,” Ray says.

In the later stages of making this film, Grant makes the difficult decision, with his wife Gabrielle, to uproot their family from Newcastle to move to Taree. Grant believes that by being immersed in his home country, culture and being closer to family and community, that they can grow up confident and sure in their Aboriginality and connection to country. Grant also hopes that one day their kids get the chance to know their mum's country too. Learning how to fish from dad has made Grant realise a few things. He

appreciates now how hard his father and his grandfather worked so they could have a better life; that his real calling is not to be a fisherman like them but rather a fisher of stories. His forefathers were storytellers and that's how Grant finally sees himself and is comfortable with being. And after returning to his home country, Grant now understands that his country will always be with him no matter where he is.

**“Teach a man to fish and he will feed for a lifetime;
Teach a Man to be and he will know what freedom is.”**