

Clubbies queue for big snapper

Karen Phelps

After 15 years of annual fishing trips, Papakura Club are as keen as ever – there was a waiting list of clubbies queueing up to join this year's trip.

Neville Cobbald and his brother, the late Colin Cobbald, initiated the idea after seeing the catch of a land-based fishing club, which included 20-pound snapper and large kingfish. The pair asked around and found that the catches were made off Great Barrier Island. The Papakura Club annual fishing trip was born.

It was become an institution, always at the end of September or the first week of October.

"We're mad boat fishermen, but this is something different as we fish only off the rocks or a beach on this trip," says Neville Cobbald. "Rock fishing is pretty hard work, but we make it even harder because it's a pretty social weekend as well."

This year's trip is planned for October 4-6. The fishermen load their 4x4 vehicles, equipment and trailers with inflatable dinghies on the Sealink ferry

for the three-and-a-half-hour trip to Great Barrier.

The Papakura group always stays at the Stray Possum Lodge, at Tryphena, where they typically wind down their evenings with a beer on the deck and a chat about the one that got away. Such as the year Grant Rouse hooked a kingfish that was estimated at 80 pounds. The feisty beast took all his line leaving Grant holding the rod as it swam away. They hope there will be more such stories to tell when this year's group returns.

The competition typically kicks off with an initiation for the newbies, which has involved eating a raw onion, drinking a glass full of raw eggs or downing a dry Weet-Bix. Neville is remaining mum on what this year's initiation might involve.

Then it's time for more serious stuff. Safety is paramount in the challenging island environment. No fishing before 5am or after 6pm. Skippers have to tell Neville where they will be fishing that day.

Competitors are limited to five snapper. It's a self-imposed target to ensure the trip has minimal impact on the natural environment, and it leaves no doubt the group is targeting the big boys. Because

nothing under 2kg is allowed to be kept, some go home with empty bags.

To get a 20-pounder or bigger is the aim, but it's no easy task. In fact, it has happened only eight times on Papakura trips.

The biggest snapper caught weighed in at 27.5 pounds – still a personal best for club member Michael 'Tooley' Chipman.

Sunday is prize day. The main individual prize, the CC Memorial Cup (named after Colin Cobbald), goes to the person who catches the highest accumulated weight of snapper. It is highly contested, and Brian Hardwick has won it four times. The present holder, Keith George, will be back to defend it.

Before the trip starts, all competitors names are put into a hat and on the Sunday names are drawn to form teams of five. The combined points of all team members determine the team with highest accumulated weight. The last-placed team gets the booby prize – which has seen these fellows spend the rest of the weekend in a pinafore. It's a bit of fun to end the competition, says Neville.

There's also an "Old fellas" versus "young fellas"



competition. Neville explains: "Four years ago one of the young fellas carved a hunk of kauri wood into the shape of the island. Because it came from a dam, it's now called the 'dam log of wood' and is the old versus young prize. We total up all the points from the over-35 and under-35s. The old fellas have won it twice, and last year the young fellas won it. It hangs up at the club and gives a good atmosphere as we give each other a hard time."

Because of the unpredictable nature of the weather, club members often don't know where they will be able to fish until they arrive on the island. And there have been a few rough trips over the years. On one occasion the group travelled eight hours in the ferry, arriving back in Auckland at 3am. Another time they got stranded on the island for an extra day when the ferry couldn't make it over. Not that they minded being put up at the Stray Possum Lodge with a beer for the night.

The competition has been going so long it has spanned generations of clubbies: "A lot of the guys have been coming for a number of years," says Neville. "This year we are having some of their sons along as well."

PHOTOS

Top, right: The Sealink ferry unloads at Great Barrier Island after the three-and-a-half hour trip from Auckland. Left: Stray Possum Lodge...island headquarters for the Papakura Club group.

