



Preserving Tacoma

A NEW LIFE FOR A HISTORIC TUNA BOAT

Thousands of wooden fishing boats are slowly rotting in a quiet grave – a backyard, a muddy mangrove swamp or a lonely boatyard. One vessel saved from this fate by a group of volunteers is the MFV *Tacoma*, a South Australian tuna clipper from the 1950s, writes **Ross Haldane**, President of the *Tacoma* Preservation Society.



01 Seven years in construction, *Tacoma* was launched in 1951. The first purpose-built tuna boat in Australia, it pioneered the South Australian tuna boom. All images courtesy Tacoma Preservation Society

GROUPS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD are boldly attempting to save out-of-work wooden fishing boats, battling nature, physics, chemistry, human neglect, the developer's wrecking ball, or local authorities keen to remove a derelict eyesore from a park or prime waterside real estate. But doing this is much harder than it seems. Even institutions given custodianship of a noble vessel have to face the harsh reality that it will never go to sea again, and what that means for the boat's future. Paperwork in hand and lawyers at the ready, the boat's destiny may be determined around a board room. Perhaps a better fate would have been a body blow near a hidden reef, the splintering of timbers or a quiet sinking when the pumps could not save it.

Fishing boats are not as obviously lovable as their cousins, the classy yachts, due to the smelly, harsh nature of their work. And, with the fishing industry taken over by a fleet of square, steel fishing machines bristling with hydraulics and electronics, many boats on which men once manually hauled in the nets have found themselves out of a career and facing an uncertain future.

The South Australian-based tuna clipper MFV *Tacoma* is an old fishing boat that a group of enthusiasts have decided to preserve. *Tacoma* worked as a tuna fishing boat from 1952 to 1968 and then fished for prawns until 2003. Over its career, it hauled in shark, salmon, tuna and prawns worth about \$100 million in today's value. On board for that last trip were Robin Haldane, Andrew Haldane, Peter Schuurman and a deckhand. How do we know? Because it was filmed by a nearby boat and *Tacoma's* log records this.

So *Tacoma* began its new life as an out-of-work fishing boat – the most dangerous job for any boat in Australia. Of the thousands of fishing boats around, only the couta boats

of the Victorian coast, the pearl luggers and a smattering of cray boats have survived as unemployed fishing boats. Australia's whalers, oyster dredges and fishing cutters are preserved in books and photos, and some of the few remaining examples are static displays, as at Cheynes Beach in Western Australia.

Life as an out-of-work fishing boat is the most dangerous job for any boat in Australia

As a preservation project, *Tacoma* had several helpful features. It was only 52 years old, it was in good condition, it had good provenance and it was owned by the family that originally built it.

A boat in search of a home

The first step was to decide who should own the boat – the local council, state or federal governments or a private sponsor. We thought that *Tacoma* should be the people's boat, and that the best long-term plan was to build a shed to house it.

It was agreed that the local council would be the most logical custodians, so a Tacoma Committee was formed, under the umbrella of the Port Lincoln City Council. After one year the council withdrew, recommending that a commercial option be looked at.

The next grand plan was for *Tacoma* to become part of a harbour development that would revitalise the Port Lincoln waterfront – a \$50 million project, including a \$6 million home for *Tacoma*. But that was a bridge too far, so it was back to the drawing board.

Frustration ensued. Nobody seemed to want the boat; should it be sold? The owners, three branches of the Haldane family, were getting a little tense.

Advertising nationally for tender offers resulted in several nibbles. Proposed fates included an abalone service vessel delivering supplies to a huge steel factory ship, or a squid boat.

The service ship option was seen as a suicide mission for a wooden vessel, and the other option was knocked on the head by the 91-year-old matriarch, Christina Haldane, who vowed that she would never let this beautiful boat, crafted by her husband Bill, become a squid boat.

Other options were canvassed, with similar luck. The ANMM, with an already large fleet to look after, declined the opportunity to take on *Tacoma*, as did the Victorian town of Port Fairy, where *Tacoma* had been built from 1944 to 1951. A plan to make the boat into a static display at the local Axel Stenross Maritime Museum was complicated and financially unviable. In desperation the mood turned dark. Taking the boat out and giving it a Viking burial – burning it – was mooted. After all, the Haldanes are half Dane, and it would save everyone the worry.

Now, after three years, some important issues about putting boats ashore were arising. Seattle-based Joe Petrich, son of *Tacoma's* designer and a naval architect himself, was consulted. He noted that to look after a boat, you need the same number of crew whether the vessel is in or out of the water. The windiness of any potential site had to be considered – a wooden boat will de-salt itself in three years under windy conditions. Vermin and public access also needed to be addressed, plus an effective cradle – boats are not designed to be out of water.



01



02



03

With the boat now on the slip, we began the smelly task of scrubbing three years of barnacles off the hull

- 01 Rodger Halliday from Flinders University wields the touch-up brush.
- 02 All hands to the paint brushes: Kate and Anna are the perfect height to paint the galley roof.
- 03 Caption required

At this point the Tacoma Preservation Society emerged, after several glasses of wine and the sharing of bold ideas, with the faithful cry 'We must save the MFV *Tacoma*'.

A wonderful ragtag group stepped up – Derek, a Geordie; Pauline, the daughter of a Cape Horner Finn; Cecelia, from a farm in Kimba but originally from Sydney, and a former ANMM Council member; Ib, a blown-away Danish marine scientist; Bazz, tuna fisherman and abalone chucker; Fran, TAFE HR/CEO; Carin, interior designer; and Ross, Haldane family member.

With the *Tacoma* Preservation Society (TPS) officially formed, we arranged 'designated gift recipient' status so any donations could be tax deductible. We met with the owner family and proposed that, with a vessel management plan (VMP) in place, *Tacoma* be kept in the water and operating. The motion was passed and the vessel was gifted to the people of Australia.

The real work starts

Having a VMP, as recommended by the ANMM, was a great asset but first it had to be written up – all 90 pages of it.

That proved not quite the burden we expected. We were given a template for the ANMM pearl lugger. What do a pearl lugger and tuna clipper have in common? Not much, at face value – but by replacing pearls with tuna and northern with southern,

and with a visit from ANMM curator and VMP author David Payne, the VMP fell in place. It turns out that the process of looking after wooden boats and documenting their history and significance is common to most boats.

With the boat now on the slip, we began the smelly task of scrubbing three years of barnacles off the hull. But a more daunting task was approaching the Department of Transport, as only they could pass the boat fit to carry passengers.

The first attempt at engaging with the department was, to put it in nautical terms, a shipwreck. But then a new light shone in the department in the form of a living person whom we will call Saint Adam.

With his clear and practical vision, he both steered *Tacoma* through its survey minefield and, in the process, structured a historic vessels group to include paddle steamers, tugs and nine other vessels, all of which were to be treated differently. By organising this in such a way that the government would forgo any expense in survey costs, he has made a net saving to the group of some \$100,000 over the time the policy has been place.

Tacoma's first trip after its restoration was to the 2011 Australian Wooden Boat Festival in Hobart, Tasmania. For this five-week, 2000-nautical mile undertaking, we needed all hands on deck to get the ship ready.

The mast was lengthened, the stern re-built, an Aga stove installed, a push-button head (toilet) with macerator put in, plus a hundred other jobs completed.

No one wanted to be heading into a westerly gale rounding Maatsuyker Island wondering if the bow would stand up, so it was refastened with some 400 three-inch silicon bronze screws costing \$10 each.

Finally, with a hearty crew and three other vessels on deck, *Tacoma* departed for Hobart. Without the impetus to go to the festival, the *Tacoma* restoration would have taken another three years.

This Tassie trip inspired the ABC *Landline* documentary 'Three Men and a Boat', produced by Ian Doyle, which has been watched by some one million people and has sold more than \$30,000 worth of DVDs. In 2016 *Tacoma* and its story will feature in the BBC History Channel program *Coast*, hosted by Neil Oliver. *Tacoma* now plays an active part in Port Lincoln's tourism industry in Boston Bay, undertaking day cruises, parties, weddings and the scattering of ashes; participating in the annual Tunarama Blessing of the Fleet and charity days, raising more than \$15,000 for local and other causes; making an annual wool pick-up from a local island; and, of course, setting off on our main feature trip, poling for tuna – all helping to keep *Tacoma* in its prime as an active working boat.

A community of supporters

What have we learnt from the *Tacoma* project? Firstly, that activity begets activity. The *Tacoma* Preservation Society has spent some \$300,000 on the vessel, and has been given many more thousands of dollars in in-kind support: paint, free slipping, life jackets, equipment transport, plus much more.

In our original planning, we anticipated (and hoped) that out of the sheds and hollows of Port Lincoln's retired fishermen would come a band of hearty souls with the required skills of painting, rope work, boat handling and the many useful talents required to preserve and operate *Tacoma*. Our expectations have been well met!

Tacoma has attracted an interesting, enthusiastic, cheerful and very active group. Most of our volunteers are over 60, and half of them are women, so it is not a 'men's shed' thing. Our working volunteers have a great variety of skills, and we find new skills with each new undertaking.

One of the big advantage of restoring and preserving a boat like *Tacoma* in its home port is the fantastic support we get from local businesses. The project so far has used some 70 local providers, including the usual suspects – the fuel and electronics providers, the welder, the engineer, the aluminium fabricator – but it's fascinating how many services are needed to put together a project

like *Tacoma*, and just how many willing, supportive people there are. To the above list we've added suppliers of fibreglass, sandblasting, chroming, compass adjusting and safety equipment – and the list goes on.

All of *Tacoma's* paint has been provided by two national paint companies, and Doyle Media Services have made an amazing effort, showing huge dedication and professionalism.

To help grease all these providers, a steady supply of local Haldane wine has added to the negotiating power of the *Tacoma* team, not to mention the odd box of *Tacoma* / Atlas prawns.

Tacoma has always relied on the good will of those providing services. The boat's original timbers were hand selected by a keen-eyed team in a Melbourne timber yard. To increase their powers of observation, a bag of crayfish would regularly arrive on the train from Port Fairy. It is amazing what trade can do to improve quality and produce lifetime friendships.

Next for *Tacoma* could be another Hobart trip, with Eden and Sydney in the planning, perhaps. But before we travel, there is the question of a permanent workable berth, and on the wish list, a shed. *Tacoma* currently operates out of some five sheds of varying suitability; a dedicated shed would set us up for the long term.

Tacoma is not the only vessel we look after; there are also our 1944 banana boat surfboat, a flatty, a dinghy and, lurking in the wind, the cray boat MV *Dolphin* – all of them listed on the ANMM's Australian Register of Historic Vessels.

And as *Tacoma* is the people's boat, you can enjoy its story by joining in on an afternoon visit (\$12 per head). These are programmed for two hours, but often continue longer when robust galley discussions takes place over a cup of coffee.

Our signature events are our tuna-poling trips: a five-day trip for the blokes and a two-day jaunt for women. The five-day trip into the Great Australian Bight is a re-enactment of a 1950s tuna trip; only the age of the crew has changed. Original crewmember Jack Bellamy rejoins the boat, and at 82 years of age, he is still a very impressive fisherman. To stand in the racks and pole a tuna with Jack is a privilege – and when you're puffed, another person can take your place. These trips cost \$2,000 per head.

The two-day trip, at \$400 per head, is women only, plus four men to help out. Because of the limited time, catching fish is not guaranteed, but the trip will give you an idea of shipboard life.

So many more excuses to continue 'messaging about in boats!'

For more information, please go to tacoma.org.au