

A close-up photograph of a person wearing bright pink nitrile gloves, carefully handling a large quantity of wild green shrimp. The shrimp are piled up, showing their characteristic yellowish-green color and long antennae. The background is slightly blurred, suggesting an industrial or processing environment.

WILD GREEN BANANAS RIPE FOR CHRISTMAS

After a bumper 2008 season, the recently restructured Northern Prawn Fishery is boosting the promotion of its natural assets – locally

Australia's Banana Prawns are largely sold green. It is part of the nature of the industry and its catch. With Northern Prawn Fishery (NPF) fishers at sea for weeks at a time, cooking prawns on capture for sale soon after – as is the case with wild-caught King Prawns or farm-bred specimens – is not an option. Instead, Banana Prawns are frozen at sea.

This ensures optimum freshness and quality, but means that at the retail level they can struggle to compete with their cooked and better-known relations, particularly when prawns are in high demand as in the festive season.

This, and a long-time focus on exports by the Banana Prawn industry, are two potential explanations for their historically low profile in local markets.

However, now industry hopes to trade on the 'wild' and remote nature of Banana Prawns' capture and use it in a new industry-funded campaign to boost domestic sales.

"The Northern Prawn Fishery is Australia's last wild frontier fishery," says Annie Jarrett, CEO of NPF Industry Pty Ltd, which is managing the campaign. "It's very remote, pristine and unpolluted, and it's that type of imagery we want to build."

NPF Industry, made up of about 93 per cent of NPF operators, was established after the Federal Government's \$220 million 'Securing our Fishing Future' package saw statutory fishing rights in the fishery almost halved, from 95 to 52.

With a key objective to boost the fishery's profitability through both management initiatives and promotional activities, the company conceived the 'Go Wild, Go Bananas' campaign – inspired by a series of events that were outside the fishers' control.

The plan was hatched in May when a bumper crop (5500 tonnes in 2008, compared with 2900 the year before), high fuel prices and a rising Australian dollar, saw fishers facing the very real prospect of being unable to sell their stock in traditional export markets.

And with about 90 per cent of Banana Prawns exported, that put the industry's profits under enormous pressure.

"The bottom line was looking very, very bleak even though they'd had a good season," Annie Jarrett says. "The campaign came about because we had a very big Banana Prawn season, but the real catalyst was that the exchange rate meant that the domestic market prices were more favourable."

David Carter, NPF Industry member and CEO of Austral Fisheries, which has a big stake in Banana Prawns, operating nine trawlers in the fishery, says that with export markets unable to afford the produce, the domestic market was the only alternative.

"With the Australian dollar at US90 cents or more there was nowhere else to go," he says. "You're in that big, wide world competing head-to-head with the tidal

wave of aquaculture products and it's tough. So in the circumstances, home was the best place to be."

Although since then the dollar's value has dropped considerably, both Annie Jarrett and David Carter say an increased presence in the domestic market will always be an advantage, as terms of trade inevitably continue to fluctuate.

But back in May, with producers facing hostile export conditions and a glut of stock, a new focus was needed, and fast.

Enter the 'Go Wild, Go Bananas' campaign, which was launched a few months later, in September, at the Sydney Fish Market, to boost local sales leading into the summer months and Christmas.

"Crustaceans are obviously a big thing at Christmas so we wanted to point people towards eating some Banana Prawns," Annie Jarrett says. "Boosting awareness is really the whole point, because there are alternatives to well-known species like King Prawns – such as Bananas – that are particularly well priced. It gives people choice."

Longer term, the NPF Industry hopes Banana Prawns will become a fixture in consumers' buying habits as they become more familiar with the product and the best ways to use it.

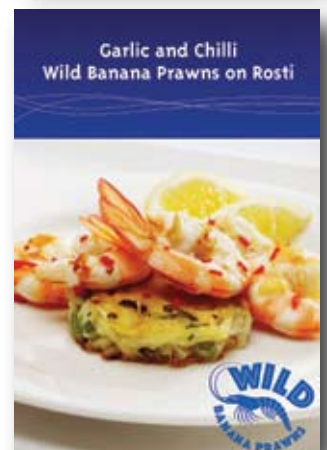
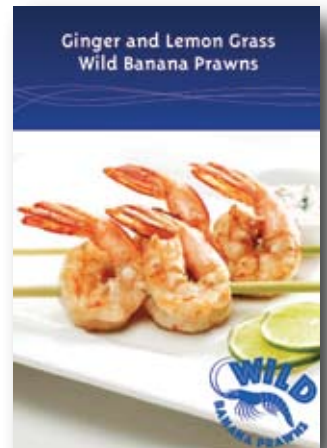
Aimed squarely first at Sydney's wholesale and retail markets, the campaign involves radio advertisements, posters, flyers, the sponsoring of events such as the Australian Food Media Awards, and recipe cards given away at sales points explaining the best ways to use the prawns.

These are all reliable marketing activities, but what makes this campaign somewhat unusual is that it is wholly funded by NPF fishers – who responded at lightening speed with pledges of \$3000 per boat when the idea for the campaign was first raised – and marketers together.

David Carter says he was overwhelmed by the response of the NPF fishers, two-thirds of whom agreed to fund the plan within hours.

"The campaign was extraordinary," he says. "In the space of a one-hour conference call we had pledges of \$130,000. The people who were part of it operated at such a high integrity level that their word was their bond: deadlines were delivered. It happened – and it blew me away."

The bounty allowed marketing company Bowtell Clarke & Yole to be engaged to develop the campaign



Recipe cards: part of the industry-funded 'Go Wild, Go Bananas' campaign to promote Banana Prawns to consumers.



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— DAVID CARTER



and promotional material, with NPF Industry support, which has given the initiative a professional edge. The FRDC also chipped in with advice on media contacts and the group drew on the successful FRDC-supported, Cairns-based 2007 Endeavour Prawn pilot marketing program, which saw prices and sales increase.

David Carter says hardships facing the industry have led to the quick and coordinated response of the group, which since the restructure has been much tighter.

"Hardship breeds the kind of cooperation that really works for recovery and this is, to me, a significant turning point in allowing us all to realise our destinies are holding hands, not gloving up," he says.

That the campaign took just four months from conception to launch was testament to the trust the stakeholders had in NPF Industry, he says. "It was command and control basically, the group just said 'we trust you to do it' and we ran it from here."

David Carter and Annie Jarrett say it is too early to gauge any results yet, but their broad aim is to boost sales as much as possible.

Without the resources for market analysis they will seek anecdotal feedback and sales figures from distributors through until the new year. If results prove positive, the group hopes to expand the campaign

beyond Sydney for a national focus.

"This was a deliberate focus on the Sydney market because we didn't have an unlimited amount of money and Sydney's arguably the most important prawn consumer in the country," David Carter says. "So if you get it right there, you can then wheel it out more broadly across the country."

The campaign, while timed to capitalise on increased shellfish consumption, should also tap into growing consumer interest about where food is from, he says.

"Australia has a fairly affluent marketplace as well as a growing consumer awareness around 'buy local'," he says. "Now, when they buy prawns a lot of people ask, 'Where are they from?' and that has been aided by country-of-origin labelling, which means that in a cabinet you are presented with some really clear choices."

This consumer sensibility is also where he expects the 'wild' element to play positively. "The 'wild' is an important differentiation, both from the point of view of where the fishery is and that it's natural food," he says. "It's very, very rare in our diets where you've got food that's 'as God intended' and wild fisheries are among the last of it." ●

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