



Tilapia invasion fear spreads

By **TERRY BUTTS**

ENVIRONMENTALISTS from across North Queensland have met in Cairns to discuss strategies to combat the incredibly invasive tilapia that now totally dominates our waterways and threatens to invade the entire Gulf of Carpentaria and even the Northern Territory.

According to some experts the African pest fish is in plague proportions in some areas and is a serious threat to all native fish.

"They are the cane toads of the waterways," said Dr Damian Burrows, a director of the Australian Centre for Tropical Freshwater Research at James Cook University in Townsville, and a member of the steering committee comprising members of the region's Natural Resource Management groups, and government agencies that meets quarterly to discuss and plan for pest fish management, said.

"Tilapia is by far our greatest concern," Dr Burrows said.

Townsville's Ross River has the dubious distinction as having the greatest concentration of the pest in all of Australia.

It was first spotted 20 years ago and is by far the most dominant fish in the Ross.

Just four years ago, it was discovered in the Ross Dam, where it is now the most dominant fish – and it

has spread to the Barron, Johnstone and Mulgrave Rivers near Cairns.

There have been discoveries in SE Queensland and as far away as Carnarvon in WA.

Experts believe tilapia found their way into the rivers when people initially bought them from pet shops and later dumped them from their fish tanks into household toilets and other gullies and waterways.

There is now a \$75,000 fine for anyone caught selling the fish and a similar penalty for anyone found keeping them. But as yet there has not been a single prosecution.

"Often, kids catch them from the rivers, take them home and keep them in a tank," Dr Burrows said.

"After they have demolished their mates the fish are then dumped back into the river.

They should be destroyed immediately."

Dr Burrows said the most humane method of disposing of tilapia was the same as with cane toads.

"Put them in water and gradually decrease the temperature until the fish are frozen," he said.

There are two species currently in our waterways. Originally from southern Africa, tilapia are aggressive breeders, and, in fact breed, all year.

They are very tolerant of poor habitat and water quality, which

makes them a perfect invader.

"They are every bit as bad and harmful as carp in the Murray-Darling," Dr Burrows said.

They were discovered in the Burdekin in 2004 (Keelbottom Creek), but spread rapidly downstream being recorded in the Upper Burdekin in the same year and soon after they were found in Gladstone Creek at Charters Towers.

They have been reported as far upstream as Clarke River and in a number of upper Burdekin tributaries, such as the Fanning and Star Rivers. They were recently spotted at Strathalbyn and in the Bowen River at Collinsville.

There is a genuine fear the entire Burdekin catchment will be overrun within a few years.

Last year, tilapia were found in Lake Barrine, a popular fishing and tourist haven on the Tableland, and in December 2007 they were discovered in the Endeavour River at Cooktown.

In January this year, they were found in the Eureka Creek that runs into the Mitchell River in the Gulf.

"If the population establishes there is nothing to stop them spreading across the entire Gulf during flood events and all the way to the NT," Dr Burrows said.