Beach fishing – baits or lures?
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Surf beaches along the New South Wales coastline offer some good fishing throughout the year, but the autumn months are when things really gain momentum. This is a period when most species are actively swimming through the gutters, looking for a meal. If you strike it on a good day the fishing can be exceptional.

Bream are starting to emerge from the estuaries in preparation for spawning activities, which take place any time from now through to the end of winter. Tailor numbers are also usually building at this time of year and it’s common to encounter large mobs of smaller to average size choppers, as well as the occasional big greenback. With mullet also starting to venture out of the estuaries, it’s a top time for mulloway and other larger predators. On top of these species we can also throw in whiting, dart, tarwhine, flathead and salmon.

All of the above will take a variety of baits, as well as lures. The majority of anglers will be using traditional baits such as pipis, beachworms, prawns, pilchards and cut strips of fish flesh. Some of these baits appeal to most fish, while others are better for specifically targeting just one or two species.

Smaller, softer morsels like pipis or worms are prime whiting bait, but they also appeal to bream, dart and tarwhine. Even a relatively small beachworm bait will tempt a decent mulloway and tailor. Salmon tend to have a big appetite and will quickly scoff down such baits.

Larger offerings like whole pilchards, strips of fish flesh or calamari tend to attract more predatory fish. Tailor, salmon, mulloway and sharks are likely to take such baits. However, it’s not uncommon for big bream to take a large bait aimed at mulloway, and that’s probably how some of our biggest bream are hooked in the surf zone. My first genuine 4lb bream took a big chunk of calamari pinned to two 7/0 hooks while fishing for mulloway.

So as we can see, fish in the surf zone are quite opportunistic and often more aggressive than their mates back inside calm lakes and estuaries. This being the case, does it make sense that lure casting should work as well, if not better than in much calmer environments? As with most aspects of angling, there are plenty of variables to consider, and clear-cut answers are hard to come by.

TAILOR AND SALMON

This pair makes up the bulk of the beach catch along the NSW coastline, and both are excellent lure fishing targets. Their feeding habits revolve around hunting small baitfish. They both have big mouths and can be very aggressive at times. I’ve enjoyed some phenomenal lure casting sessions with both species, including times when my stamina gave out well before the fish stopped biting.

As good as it seems though, in the greater scheme of things casting baits like whole pillies remains a more reliable approach. The reality is that most of the time we’re not simply going to walk down to the surf and encounter large packs of aggressively feeding tailor or salmon. Often it’s a case of picking a suitable gutter, lobbing a bait out and waiting for fish to move in. Sometimes the fish will show up just as the sun sets or towards the top of a high tide.

The fact that a bait has fish-attracting scent and it’s staying out in the gutter for a longer period than a lure that needs to be cast and retrieved all the time, means that the first fish that swims within range is likely to find it. If two or more anglers are fishing together at the same gutter, this multiplies the scent. If a few fish are hooked we’ve then got some natural berley in the form of pilchard scraps drifting around, which then increases the likelihood of more salmon or tailor moving in to look for a meal.

If there are only a few fish around, then the pilchard baits will probably take their interest and a couple will be caught. We could count that as a minor success. On the other hand, perhaps a much larger mob of tailor or salmon will move in. If that is the case, baits would still be successful.

Now we’re getting to the point of difference. When ganged hooks and pillies are used it takes a while to unhook each fish and put a new bait on. If the action is heating up it’s also easy to make small mistakes between fish. Baits can fall off as they’re cast or we may fail to notice a scuffed leader, so the next fish hooked simply snaps the leader or bites the hooks off. In some cases we may even run out of bait. This is where lures come in.

Not needing to re-bait between fish speeds things up dramatically. Unhooking fish is often faster as well and there’s far less chance of a fish being hooked deep down its throat. Catch and release also becomes easier. In other words, the whole process is quicker and cleaner so you can enjoy it more and potentially double the number of fish hooked.

A little tip when lure casting for tailor and salmon around sunset is to try swapping over to a white or glow in the dark lure as light levels begin to fade. Chrome metals or other colours may be working fine while it’s still quite light, but white or glow white lures often score more bites after the sun sinks below the horizon. This can add another 20 minutes of action if the fish are still in the vicinity.

LARGER PREDATORS

Mulloway and sharks are the two main large predators encountered at the beach. Most anglers are very keen to catch a mulloway, but some
of us are also happy to hook a bronze whaler, which are the most common sharks at this time of year. Smaller bronze whalers around a metre or so put up a serious fight. Treated properly they also make excellent table fare. In some places the occasional kingfish, cobia, tuna or Spanish mackerel could also swim right in close.

Overall though, most anglers are probably more interested in mulloway. The very first time I specifically used a lure at the beach aiming for mulloway I was rewarded after only a few casts. I had a 10kg model hitting the sand and the big soft plastic hanging from its mouth. Six months and a thousand casts later I still hadn’t hooked another one, despite fishing at a very reliable beach where I’d caught many mulloway over the years on bait.

What this is mainly saying is that pure luck certainly plays a major role in fishing and there’s no escaping that fact. Aside from that, one of my main observations when it comes to the ‘bait versus lure’ question is that over a set period of time a bait spends a lot more time in the strike zone than a lure, thus increasing the odds of a mulloway finding it. Lures need to be cast and retrieved, so while a bait remains in the gutter, the lure spends time hanging from the rod tip, flying through the air and being dragged up from the shore dump to back to the rod.

While it’s out there, a bait also has the advantage of constant scent, which may entice smaller fish or crabs, which can only help attract a mulloway. While there’s certainly no doubt that larger soft plastics or big hardbody lures work when it comes to mulloway, it’s always going to be hard to beat top notch baits like calamari or a fresh slab of mullet if the end goal is to just catch one, regardless of the technique used.

LITTLE LURES

At the opposite end of the spectrum, small lures can appeal to the likes of bream, dart, flathead and whiting. Once again, it’s going to be hard to beat a fresh pipi or beachworm, but there are some advantages when it comes to using small lures for these common bread and butter fish.

The first and most obvious benefit that comes to mind is the convenience factor. This applies across the board with all forms of lure fishing in any type of environment. Armed with a bag or box of lures you don’t have to spend time or money gathering or buying bait. Simply grab your lure kit and off you go. Lures don’t have to be stored in an ice box and they won’t go off after you’ve finished fishing.

Over the years I’ve come to rely on lures and soft plastics as a first choice for flathead when beach fishing. Due to their ambushing style of feeding, flathead tend to lay in the one spot for longer than more mobile fish like bream or whiting. Quite often, the main places they lay are right behind the shore dump or in the shallow gutters close to shore. This means that only short casts are required, and after each cast you can walk a metre or two and fire off another cast, gradually covering more ground until a fish is encountered. Because this approach has been so successful, I simply don’t see a need to bother with bait if flathead are the chosen target species.

Bream and whiting also like to cruise just behind the shore dump and certainly aren’t afraid of shallow water, but they’re also quite mobile, so lure casting can be a touch hit and miss. Find a really good little gutter and it could house numbers of bream or whiting, so your lure is more likely to land amongst them.

Some suggested lures for these smaller fish at the beach include Berkley Gulp Worms, 80 or 100mm Squidgy Wrigglers and Ecogear ZX30 or 35 vibes. Of course, jighead weights may need to be heavier than what would normally be used back inside an estuary, but not too heavy. They’ll jam in the sand as you’re using them.

DOUBLING OPTIONS

Both bait fishing and lure casting work at the beach. While I’ll still say that good old bait is perhaps the better approach overall, as mentioned above, there are definitely times when lures can have an advantage, so they shouldn’t be dismissed. This is particularly true when it comes to tailor, salmon and flathead.

Therefore, a third option is worth considering. Pack a few lures in with your bait fishing kit. If the bait runs out or big numbers of hungry fish move in close, you’re armed and ready. This way you’re increasing your odds in the long run, learning a bit more about lure casting at the beach and having some fun in the process.
Solid salmon like this provide first-rate sportfishing fun when light lure casting tackle is used. As aggressive as salmon can be though, they’re also a fickle fish at times and refuse all lures, while still taking baits.

This tailor was one of many hooked during a very hectic lure casting session. A huge pack of tailor had moved into a gutter and lures were simply a much cleaner and more effective option than old school bait fishing.

Although mulloway will certainly take lures, in the majority of cases, it’s still best to stick with first class natural baits like calamari, tailor, mullet and so on.
A 3” Berkley Gulp pinned to a size 1 jighead. Such an offering works particularly well on flathead, but will also interest bream, dart and the odd whiting.

Metal lures at the top and sinking stickbaits at the bottom. Throw a few of these into the bait fishing tackle box and you’ll be ready for action should numbers of fish move into a gutter or if the bait runs out.
Tailor are the mainstay for beach anglers along the east coast. The good news is that they're also one of our very best lure fishing targets.

Slowly and methodically casting soft plastics at the beach is a great way of finding flathead.

These tailor were some of many that fell to a sinking stickbait lure one afternoon. No bait was used, yet around two dozen fish were caught. Of course, most were released.