

**PROTECTED
SPECIES
AWARENESS
INFORMATION
FOR
PROFESSIONAL FISHING OPERATIONS**

SAWFISH



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ISSUES INVOLVED WITH PROTECTED SAWFISH SPECIES IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

Within the Northern Territory there are four species of sawfish currently protected by either Commonwealth or Northern Territory legislation. These are the Freshwater sawfish (*Pristis microdon*), Dwarf sawfish (*Pristis clavata*), Green sawfish (*Pristis zijsron*) and Narrow sawfish (*Anoxypristis cuspidata*).



DESCRIPTION

Sawfish are modified rays which have shark like bodies, which are sometimes confused with sawsharks. Sawfish are distinguished by gill openings on the underside of their flattened head and an elongated blade-like snout bearing pairs of lateral teeth.

The snout can be used to feed by stunning slow moving shoal fish with sideswipes or by dislodging and locating molluscs and small crustaceans by sweeping through sand and mud. Sawfish can grow up to 7 metres in length and have an estimated lifespan of 20 to 30 years.

REPRODUCTION

It is believed that sawfish reach sexual maturity at approximately 10 years. Sawfish are born approximately 5 months after copulation and are approximately half a metre in length at birth, litter sizes ranging between 1 and 12. When the young sawfish are born, their snouts are flexible and covered in a sheath of fibrous tissues. Once born their snouts harden and the fibrous tissues wear away.

DISTRIBUTION AND HABITAT

Sawfish are distributed globally with four species found within the Northern Territory in coastal waters both fresh and marine. They generally inhabit shallow coastal and freshwater habitats in the tropical and sub tropical regions.

Distribution data is scarce, but they have been sighted in various regions throughout the Northern Territory.

VULNERABILITY OF SPECIES

Sawfish are targeted in some countries for their fins, flesh and other body parts. The loss of important habitats such as soft bottom areas which sawfish use for feeding and breeding also poses a threat. A further threat to sawfish is entanglement in fishing nets, as their snout is easily caught in net mesh.



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Dwarf sawfish (*Pristis clavata*)



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Freshwater sawfish (*Pristis microdon*)

SAWFISH AND NETS

If a sawfish swims into a net, in most cases it will initially become entangled with netting around its snout. The natural reaction is to thrash around to free itself and this struggling can lead to further entanglement. If the sawfish is entangled underwater and is unable to surface and breathe, it is likely to drown.

BEST PRACTICE IN USE OF FISHING GEAR

It is important that all practical measures are taken to increase the chances of survival for entangled sawfish.

Consideration should be given to the amount of net set in areas where sawfish are frequently spotted. The amount of net should be limited to that which can be adequately patrolled during the particular set.



FREEING LIVE SAWFISH FROM NETS

A threatened sawfish may defend itself using its snout to strike from side to side with considerable force. Because of this, human safety should be a major consideration when handling sawfish of any size.

Once it has been established that a sawfish is caught in a net, attempts should be made to raise the animal's head out of the water to see the extent of entanglement. It will also allow the animal to breathe if it has been underwater. If possible, the animal's head should be kept out of the water to prevent it from drowning, but also to allow access to the net to cut the animal loose. A knife tied to a long pole or stick is useful to cut net while maintaining a safe distance from the sawfish.

EXTRACTING A DEAD ACCIDENTALLY CAPTURED SAWFISH

Sawfish may become exhausted after extensive struggling and in such cases may show no movement or clear external signs of life. Ensure the sawfish is dead before handling it at close quarters.

Under Northern Territory legislation it is an offence to be in possession of a sawfish or any part thereof without an appropriate permit from the Parks and Wildlife Service of the NT.

Where a sawfish is accidentally killed in nets, fishermen should ensure that the carcass is released into the water without interference.

REPORTING INTERACTIONS

Professional fisherman can be an important source of information and observations on sawfish. Direct interactions allow sizes and other information on sawfish to be monitored over time. All interactions should be accurately recorded on log returns.

Records should include the date of interaction, species, size of the sawfish (approximate length), location and whether the sawfish was released alive or dead.

IDENTIFICATION

The identification key below will help identify sawfish species found within the Northern Territory. Follow the flow chart and match the number of teeth, their spacing and the positioning of dorsal fins to the sawfish in question.

