

sawfish

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DESCRIPTION

Sawfish (family Pristidae) are modified rays which have shark-like bodies, gill openings on the underside of the head and an extended toothed rostrum - or 'saw'.

Four species are found in Northern Territory waters: the Largetooth Sawfish (*Pristis pristis*), Green Sawfish (*Pristis zijsron*), Dwarf Sawfish (*Pristis clavata*) and Narrow Sawfish (*Anoxypristis cuspidata*).

The Largetooth Sawfish (*Pristis pristis*) was formerly known in our region as Freshwater Sawfish (*Pristis microdon*).

Sawfish inhabit freshwater, estuarine and marine waters, with a preference for coastal bays and foreshores. This, along with their toothed rostrum, makes them vulnerable to capture in all forms of fishing nets. Some sawfish species are believed to live for 30 years or more. A relatively low rate of reproduction means stocks can be slow to recover if depleted.

Largetooth, Green and Dwarf Sawfish are protected under Commonwealth and Territory law.

REPORTING INTERACTIONS

An "interaction" is any physical contact a person, boat or fishing gear has with a protected species.

Interactions with protected species are required to be reported to the Australian Government Department of the Environment within 7 days (see overleaf). To assist with research, interactions can also be reported to the NT Marine Wildwatch number 1800 453 941.

All interactions should also be accurately recorded on log returns. Records should include the date of interaction, species of sawfish, approximate length, location and whether the sawfish was released alive or dead.

SAWFISH AND FISHING GEAR

Sawfish species that inhabit estuaries or rivers, such as the Largetooth and Dwarf Sawfish, are particularly vulnerable because their reproductive and survival strategies are closely related to particular environments.

Changes to water quality, habitat availability and land use (such as dams) can greatly affect them.

Although sawfish may not be in immediate danger of local extinction in the Northern Territory, they have become rare or locally extinct across much of their range in other parts of the world.This increases the importance of maintaining healthy sawfish populations in Australia.

Sawfish are at risk of being unintentionally caught as bycatch in both professional and amateur fishing operations. Along with species vulnerability concerns, large sawfish can also present a considerable danger to the person trying to release it. See overleaf for sawfish handling tips. If caught on a fishing line or net, sawfish have a good chance of survival if they are carefully and quickly released.

There are many techniques for avoiding or minimising the impacts of fishing gear on sawfish, including avoiding the areas and times of the year when sawfish are known to occur, checking gear regularly and ensuring fishing gear (and its catch) is not left to dry out.

The Environmental Management Systems (EMS) for the Northern Territory Barramundi and Offshore Net and Line fisheries contain more information on identifying sawfish species and techniques for avoiding interactions.The publications are available from the Northern Territory Seafood Council (NTSC) office or on the NTSC website:

www.ntsc.com.au/responsible-fisheries/environmental

HANDLING AND RELEASE OF SAWFISH

Try and minimise the amount of time the sawfish is out of the water. Release sawfish away from set nets and avoid placing nets in the vicinity of the release site for as long as possible.

Even if a sawfish shows no movement or signs of life be aware it may just be exhausted - be cautious about handling it at close quarters, and release it into the water without interference.

Where a sawfish is accidently killed in nets the carcass should be released into the water without interference. Under Northern Territory legislation it is an offence to be in possession of a protected sawfish or any part of a protected sawfish.

Stressed or injured sawfish are highly vulnerable to predation, so minimise handling as much as possible. Signs of stress include redness on the underside and, with Largetooth Sawfish, the first dorsal fin lying to one side. If stress is kept to a minimum, released sawfish can recover quite well.

Take care in handling small to medium sawfish as the base of the saw is very soft and can be easily kinked or broken. The saw is the most sensitive part of the animal so any damage should be avoided as best as possible.

Turning sawfish upside down can often calm them enough to untangle the mesh. Keep your body either in front or behind the saw, not to the side, even if you believe it is secured well.

To move or lift a large sawfish a slipknot can be placed around the saw and two people can move it - one holding the rope and the other holding the tail. One crew member can hold the saw using the entangled net while the other turns the body upside down - this can help keep the sawfish calm. Untangle the tail and mid section before tackling the saw.

In most circumstances, cutting the net is easier and safer for both the fisher and the sawfish.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information on protected species and their identification please see the following resources:

The Australian Government Department of the Environment - *Reporting interactions*
T 1800 641 806
PO Box 787 Canberra ACT 2601 Australia
E protected.species@environment.gov.au **| W** www.environment.gov.au

Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) - *Threatened, Endangered, Protected species Management Fact Sheets*, *Protected Species ID Guide*, and *Seabird ID Guide*.
T 1300 723 621
PO Box 7051 Canberra ACT 2610 Australia
E info@afma.gov.au **| W** www.afma.gov.au

The Northern Territory Department of Land Resource Management - *reporting injured marine wildlife*
Marine Ecosystems, Flora and Fauna Division
T Marine WildWatch 1800 453 941
PO Box 496 Palmerston NT 0831 Australia
E Marine.Ecosystems@nt.gov.au **| W** www.lrm.nt.gov.au



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This project is supported by Territory Natural Resource Management, through funding from the Australian Government.

Territory Natural Resource Management