

SAWFISH: The world's most endangered marine fish

FAST FACTS: AUSTRALIA



Species:

- Four of the world's five sawfish species - Narrow, Dwarf, Green, and Largetooth – are found in northern regions of the country

Status:

- All sawfishes have undergone significant, albeit largely unquantified, declines in Australia due to capture in fisheries and modification of habitat
- Despite this, northern Australia represents one of the last strongholds for sawfishes in the world
- Dwarf sawfish now only occurs in Australia; there have been no records from elsewhere in more than a century. It now has the smallest distribution of any sawfish species
- Green Sawfish is now extinct in New South Wales and southern Queensland
- Largetooth, Green, and Dwarf sawfishes are totally protected in Australia; Narrow Sawfish is not
- The Kimberley and Pilbara regions of Western Australia are globally significant for Green Sawfish

Biology:

- All sawfishes are marine species, but Largetooth and Dwarf sawfish also spend part of their lives in rivers; juvenile Largetooth spend 4-5 years in the freshwater reaches of tropical rivers before migrating to coastal and marine environment
- Rivers are an important nursery areas for Dwarf and particularly Largetooth Sawfish
- Female Largetooth Sawfish return to sites previously used for reproduction to give birth
- Despite its name, the Dwarf Sawfish reaches 3.2 m in length. While not tiny, it is the smallest sawfish
- Green Sawfish can live for more than 50 years. In contrast, the Narrow Sawfish only lives to 9 years

Threats:

- Despite protection, sawfish are still caught as incidentally as bycatch in commercial fisheries in northern Australia, particularly in gillnets
- Barriers in rivers (such as road crossings, barrages, and dams) can pose a restriction to the upstream migration of Largetooth Sawfish
- Some Australian fisheries have safe release guides, developed by the fishing industry
- Narrow Sawfish fins have been found amongst confiscated shark fin catches from foreign fishing vessels fishing illegally in northern Australia

Amazing facts:

- Amongst some Indigenous communities of northern Australia there are strong cultural connections to sawfishes
- Six public aquariums in Australia hold and display sawfishes that have been collected from the wild

Opportunities:

- The Australian Government has prepared a recovery plan for Largetooth, Dwarf, and Green Sawfishes
- As a party to the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), Australia can help ensure the listing of sawfish to CMS Appendix I in November 2014, which would oblige Parties to strictly protect the species in national waters while encouraging regional cooperation in sawfish conservation