

Platypus News & Views



Newsletter of the Australian Platypus Conservancy (Issue 55 – Feb 2014)

MORE NEWS ON YABBY TRAPS

Opera house-style yabby nets have a well-deserved reputation for being death traps for platypus, turtles and water-rats (see photo at right, showing a water-rat that drowned in a trap set illegally in northern Victoria).



People often ask us why this should be so – if animals can easily swim in through the entrance, why can't they find their way out again before drowning?

To answer this question in relation to platypus, Conservancy biologists have been conducting a series of carefully controlled behavioural trials, using an opera house trap placed underwater (at a depth of about 40 centimetres) in a natural stream. An adult platypus is introduced by hand into the trap, and the animal's subsequent efforts to escape are filmed using an underwater video recorder. If the animal fails to get out within two minutes (leaving about a 30-second safety margin before it drowns), the trap is immediately raised from the water so the animal can take a deep breath or two before being released back to the wild.

In each of the nine trials carried out to date, the platypus has failed to find its way out in time. Animals first carefully and methodically search for an opening around the bottom perimeter. Having concluded that no exit exists at the bottom, they start searching elsewhere – all around the sides and top of the trap and around the base of each of the two netting funnels connected to entry rings. No animal has ever gotten close to finding an exit because – from the platypus point of view – any escape point should logically be located around the trap's outer perimeter and not inside the trap, where the entry rings are effectively found.



These results suggest that a safer opera house design could potentially be developed by incorporating a circular escape hatch in the trap's roof (as shown at left). Tests of the platypus's ability to escape from opera house traps modified in this manner are currently being completed by Conservancy staff in Victoria and Dr Tom Grant in New South Wales, with funding generously provided by the Taronga Conservation Society.

The APC is also conducting trials to determine how the addition of an escape hatch affects the performance of opera house traps (if at all) with respect to the number and size of yabbies captured. Last but certainly not least, the ability of freshwater turtles to escape from modified opera house traps in a timely manner is currently being investigated as a joint initiative of the Conservancy and Turtles Australia.