

How can we allow platypuses to drown in Queensland?

TAMIELLE BRUNT (PHD CANDIDATE), DOUG GIMESY (CONSERVATION AND WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER) AND JOSH GRIFFITHS (WILDLIFE ECOLOGIST) SHED LIGHT ON THE TRAGIC BUT LARGELY AVOIDABLE DEATHS OF AN ICONIC SPECIES.

The thought of any animal trapped underwater, slowly drowning while it frantically searches for an escape, is horrific. Knowing that we allow this to happen to one of our most iconic and unique species, the platypus, for the sake of a few yabbies, is simply disgraceful.

And yet this is what happens every year with people using enclosed yabby traps (such as opera house nets and drum net) and other type of enclosed nets in our freshwater waterways.

These nets indiscriminately and frequently trap and drown platypuses (as well as other air breathing animals such as rakali and turtles).

In Queensland there is confusion around the current regulations, as well as a lack of awareness of the risks posed by these nets so let's clarify a few common misunderstandings:

1. "What are the current regulations in Queensland."

A funnel trap must be no longer than 70 cm or no more than 50 cm in width or height. The trap entrance must be made of rigid material. If the trap does not have a mesh made of rigid material, the size of the mesh must be no more than 25 mm.

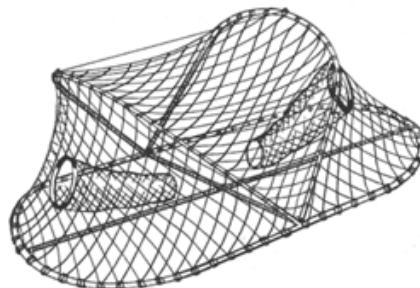


Three platypuses drowned in one opera house net. Doug Gimesy.

The use of certain funnel traps east of a line following the Great Dividing Range and east of the Gore Highway (Highway 39) is prohibited outside of certain impoundments (see [map](#)).

This means that:

- funnel traps with a rigid opening size of up to 5 cm maximum in all its dimensions can be used in all non-tidal waters
- funnel traps with a rigid opening size between 5 cm and 10 cm can only be used in listed impoundments east of a line following the Great Dividing Range and south of the Gore Highway (Highway 39) or in non-tidal waters west of the aforementioned boundary.



Opera house net.

2. "I have traps with the small trap entrance size".

Platypuses are smaller in Queensland and when juveniles emerge from the nest in February they can weigh as little as 300 – 400 grams. They (as well as rakali) are small and streamline which will squeeze through a 5cm opening for food.

3. "There aren't any platypus in this stream, I've been coming here for years and haven't seen any."

As platypuses can be quite elusive and mainly active at night, not observing one in your local waterway certainly does not mean they are not present. Platypuses inhabit many large and small waterways throughout Victoria, and long-term residents are sometimes quite surprised when they are told they have some platypus neighbours.

For someone unfamiliar with the waterway, it is virtually impossible to tell if platypuses are present.

4. "I can use them in my farm dams."

Platypuses are regularly found in farm dams. In fact, some on-stream dams can provide excellent foraging habitat for them. They can also travel across land to reach off-stream dams or travel along drainage channels after rainfall. Rakali, native freshwater turtles and water birds are widely distributed across Australia.

5. "I live west of the Divide, there are no platypuses out there".

The distribution of platypuses does not extend out west. However, the distribution of rakali, freshwater turtles and water birds are across the state. Causing horrible deaths for this wildlife.

6. "I use these nets safely as I check them regularly."

Platypuses and rakali are mammals like us. They only have a few minutes of air when diving, and if they are frantically searching for a way out of a trap, they will use this up even quicker. Checking nets regularly will not prevent their drowning.

6. "But they are sold in my local camping store so surely I can use them?"

Yes, and that's part of the problem. While most responsible stores will inform customers of the regulations and risks, many don't. These nets are also available in large fishing and outdoor stores and online, where no staff are available to share this information. The problem is compounded by the fact that many nets sold have little or no labelling.

7. "I wasn't aware of the restrictions on nets used in freshwater waterways in Queensland."

The great news is, now you do, and you can share this information, so others know.

8. "I'm unsure of the difference between an enclosed yabby trap, such as an opera house net, and a hoop or drop net".

Queensland Fisheries Authority has good information available on their website. Go to www.daf.qld.gov.au

9. "The hoop or drop nets don't catch as many yabbies".

Yes, they pretty much do. Yes, there is the chance that some may find their way out, but you will not go home disappointed.



So how do we prevent this?

We're sure that most people would be absolutely devastated to be responsible for the death of a single platypus. How terrible would it be to pull out a net with your kids and find a drowned platypus in it? Or two? So what to do?

1. We want owners/users to immediately stop using enclosed yabby traps and switch to the safer alternatives such as hoop or drop nets.
2. We'd like to see retailers acknowledge the problem, show some corporate responsibility, and simply stop selling enclosed yabby traps immediately. Wouldn't it be great if they considered a product recall or implemented an in-store discount/swap out scheme for safer nets?
3. We'd like legislation and regulations in Queensland to be changed so the sale, ownership and use of enclosed yabby nets in any waterway is prohibited. There are platypus-friendly alternatives that are virtually just as effective, such as hoop or drop nets.

What can you do?

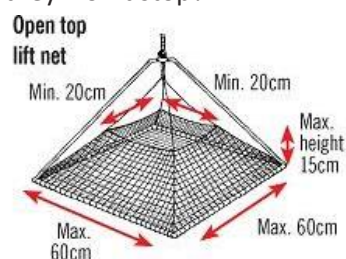
Spread the word

Many people are simply unaware of the regulations or about the risks that these nets pose, so please pass this information on.

If you find any trap being used illegally, immediately report this to the relevant authorities. In Queensland you can call **Fishwatch** hotline 1800 017 116.

Talk to retailers

If you go into a fishing/outdoor store, ask if they sell enclosed yabby traps, and if the answer is yes, explain the issue to them, and then ask them if there is a good reason they won't stop?



Engage with those who make policy

Contact your local or state politicians, and politely ask them to support a change in regulations which ban the sale, ownership and use of enclosed yabby traps, and explain why. A key minister responsible for both fisheries and animal welfare related regulations is Minister Mark Furner, email: agriculture@ministerial.qld.gov.au The Environment Minister Meaghan Scanlon can be emailed at: environment@ministerial.qld.gov.au . Or simply sign our petition at www.change.org. Search for 'Enclosed yabby traps drown platypuses - ban their sale, use and possession in Queensland.

Report a sighting

If you are ever lucky enough to see a platypus in the wild, please register the sighting with the Platypus Watch Network platypus@wildlife.org.au or by using the platypusSPOT app available at www.platypusspot.org. The more we know about their distribution the better.

What are we (and others) doing?

In Queensland, PlatypusWatch are working hard with relevant government authorities and like-minded organisations to try and get the use of enclosed yabby traps in all waters banned, as well as raise awareness around the issue. You can find us on Facebook and will update with developments.

At the end of the day, we must ask ourselves, "Are a few yabbies worth causing the traumatic drowning death of our most iconic wildlife?"

We think the answer has to be a resounding 'NO', and call on all people who use them to stop, all retailers who sell them to stop, and all the relevant authorities with the power to do something, to change the regulations.