



PLATYPUS 'DEATH TRAPS'

Geoff Williams, Australian Platypus Conservancy

The discovery last May of five platypuses drowned in two opera house yabby traps set in Labertouche Creek near Melbourne quite rightly horrified most people. Depressingly, this incident was just the latest in a long list of known by-catch mortalities in enclosed yabby traps involving the platypus and also other air-breathing species such as rakali (the Australian water-rat) and freshwater turtles.

Recreational fishing regulations have traditionally attempted to address the problem by prohibiting the use of enclosed traps in waters where the platypus is known to occur. In Victoria, Australian Capital Territory and most parts of New South Wales and Queensland this essentially means that traps can only be legally deployed in private farm dams. Unfortunately, opera house traps – the most popular type of enclosed trap – are sold in their thousands, often at the cost of just a few dollars each. Point-of-sale information regarding restrictions on trap use is often woefully inadequate; retailers are not obliged to inform customers about restrictions on usage or provide informative labelling on

traps. Effective law enforcement is virtually impossible, opera house traps are relatively small and inconspicuous and often deployed in the evening or overnight. As a result, illegal deployment is widespread. The resulting death of wildlife in traps is a significant animal welfare issue. In cases where this causes a sizeable proportion of an already small population to be wiped out – as was true along Labertouche Creek – it also has genuine conservation implications.

There is little reason to believe that increased community education and law enforcement will be sufficient to solve this issue. Also, rakali and turtles remain at risk in many places where enclosed traps can be set legally, particularly in South Australia where trap deployment in all waters is allowed.

The Australian Platypus Conservancy (APC) has been working for several years to address the issue of trap-related mortality, particularly by carrying out studies to identify safer yabby trap designs. The platypus's streamlined shape and ability to squeeze through small openings make it difficult to design

a trap that will exclude the species while still allowing large yabbies to enter.

Accordingly, recent field trials conducted by the APC and Dr Tom Grant of the University of NSW have concentrated on testing whether adding an 'escape hatch' to a trap's roof would allow platypus to escape before drowning. However, while the majority of platypuses exited successfully, after this extensive research, it has now been concluded that the objective of a 100 percent platypus-safe enclosed yabby trap is unlikely ever to be achieved.

The APC, therefore, believes that mandating a total ban on the use of opera house traps and other enclosed yabby traps will now be the only realistic way to minimise the risk that wildlife is harmed as a consequence of recreational yabbing. Such a ban will require fishing regulations to be amended in all states and territories (apart from Western Australia and Tasmania, where prohibitions are already in place).

Above: Adult male platypus found dead in enclosed cray trap in Yarra River. Photo: Mike Sverns. Image provided by DEWLP (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning)



Two of the five platypuses found dead in opera house traps in Labertouche Creek. Photo: Mike Sverns



A healthy platypus. Photo: Geoff Williams



Yabbies can be captured safely and effectively in hoop or lift nets. Photo: Geoff Williams

Interestingly, both VRFish (the peak representative body for recreational anglers in Victoria) and the Recreational Fishing New South Wales Advisory Council (RFNSW) have now called for such a ban, and it is believed that steps are now being taken in New South Wales to consider regulatory action in response to RFNSW's position.

It is acknowledged that there are many highly responsible users of enclosed yabby traps, including landholders who have been yabbing for generations in farm dams without causing any harm to non-target species. However, it should also be recognised that alternative recreational yabbing methods – such as hoop/lift nets – exist that are both productive and safe for air-breathing wildlife.

The platypus is an iconic species, and the vast majority of Australians would not accept any of them being killed for the sake of a few recreational yabbies.

IT'S TIME TO BAN THE USE OF ENCLOSED YABBY TRAPS

Editor's note: Geoff Williams has been Director of the Australian Platypus Conservancy since its foundation in 1994. Before that, he was Director of Healesville Sanctuary in Victoria (1988–1993) and Assistant Director of Sydney's Taronga Zoo (1985–1988).



Two opera house traps containing five drowned platypuses, discovered in Labertouche Creek. Photo: Mike Sverns