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Relationships

How dingoes manage dingoes

Rock-munching microbes

Seabirds – what works in a crowd

Platypus danger



protecting wildlife influencing choices engaging communities

Danger in the opera house

Banned in some areas, 'opera house' traps are cheap to buy but far too costly to use.

Young Brad saw the dark shape in the opera house trap as he began to haul it out of the river. As the trap broke the surface he saw the fur and the bill. Oh no! It wasn't moving. He had drowned a platypus.

Gingerly removing the body from the trap, he buried it in the sandy stream bank, remembering he had often seen one or two platypuses in this pool while he was fishing for bass. When he bought the trap for \$10 at the local fishing tackle shop, the shop owner had said that it shouldn't be used in the river, only in farm dams. He hadn't taken much notice of the Recreational Fishing Guide detailing where these traps could and couldn't be used. He had seen the traps on sale at some servos and even big variety stores and didn't remember that information on display. He was distraught for days: how much was a platypus life worth? He would never use the trap again.

Innocent, illegal and deadly

Reports of platypuses (*Ornithorhynchus anatinus*) drowning in traps set to catch yabbies are not unusual.

Catching yabbies in muddy creeks and farm dams is a cherished memory of many Australian childhoods; the practice often continues into adult years. Yabbies, or freshwater crayfish (*Cherax* spp) – popular as bait and food – are numerous, wide-spread across much of Australia and easy to catch. A bit of meat tied to a piece of twine is effective.

Reports from people often unaware of the possibility of drowning wildlife in yabby traps appear to be more frequent. Perhaps it is happening more often or perhaps more people are environmentally conscious and prepared to admit to activities

which they often didn't realise were illegal. Yabby traps, including the popular, cheap and readily available opera house traps, are banned from all public waters (rivers, creeks, lakes and reservoirs) in Tasmania, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory. In New South Wales it is illegal to use these traps in public waters east of the Newell Highway, which runs from Tocumwal on the Victorian border to the Queensland border near Goondiwindi.

Unfortunately, in Queensland, up to four traps can be used by an individual in most streams. Despite regulations, many people wanting to catch a feed of yabbies in their local creek still don't realise that these traps can





Photo © Alastair Freeman



Photo © Bev & Stan Pickering



Photo © Matt Ryan



Photo © Tom Grant

Far left: Legal in Queensland streams, even where platypuses are found, this abandoned trap contained the decomposed bodies of two platypuses and several turtles, as well as a recently caught turtle.

Left above: Illegally set nets keep killing platypuses even if they have been lost, abandoned or swept away by rises in stream level.

Left: This advertisement in the heart of platypus country in the NSW southern tablelands fails to mention the traps can only be used in farm dams in the area.

Above: This platypus would have struggled until it drowned after being caught on a set line in the Ben Chifley Dam in the central tablelands of NSW.

drown a range of air-breathing wildlife, including turtles, diving birds and platypuses. Even opera house yabby traps easily available in NSW, with the regulated 9cm diameter entrance ring permitting their use in the west of the state where platypuses do not occur, can still drown other wildlife species, particularly turtles. The 9cm entrance ring keeps out larger breeding-sized turtles but can still catch and kill smaller turtles. Checking these traps every hour or two can reduce turtle mortality, as many species can survive underwater for much longer than birds or mammals. For platypuses, there isn't much time.

Endemic to Australia and one of only five egg-laying mammal species in the world, the platypus feeds almost entirely in water and generally at night. Using the touch and electro-receptors on its distinctive bill, it spends many hours foraging along streambeds, consuming approximately 13-28 percent of its body weight in freshwater invertebrates. Females feeding young can consume almost their own body weight of these mostly tiny animals in a single day. Yabbies are part of their diet, making platypuses particularly vulnerable when pursuing their natural prey. 'Once lured into a trap by the presence of captured yabbies, a platypus will drown in less than three minutes,' says

Dr Melody Serena of the Australian Platypus Conservancy. 'As many as five drowned platypuses have been caught in a single yabby trap. If a breeding female is killed in this way during the summer months (the most common time of year for such traps to be set) then any dependent babies waiting in the nursery burrow for her return will slowly starve to death.'

Alternatives

Brad could have caught yabbies without breaking the law or drowning the platypus if he had bought either hoop or lift nets, which can be used legally in both Victoria and NSW. He could also have used up to 10 baited lines without hooks (legal in Victoria) or a hand-hauled yabby net (legal in NSW). It is important for recreational anglers to consult local fishing regulations. These vary from state to state, but can easily be found on the websites of government departments in charge of recreational fishing in each state or territory. These regulations are in place to protect not only the target fish (or in this case, invertebrates), but also to avoid endangering non-target or 'by-catch' species.

While some may just not care, most people are concerned when they realise the potential for harm, especially in small streams where

breeding populations of air-breathing wildlife species may be quite low. Although the platypus is not regarded as a threatened species, numbers have already declined in places because of habitat degradation, while prolonged drought and major floods are creating further difficulties. In this context, unnecessary deaths caused by yabby traps can potentially tip the balance against the long-term survival of local populations. Other illegal gear used to catch fish, such as hooked setlines and gill nets, can also catch, drown or strangle other wildlife species.

Any use of yabby traps or other illegal fishing gear in public waters should be reported to the nearest fisheries officer or office of the regulatory authority. Check the telephone book or Internet, which will have a designated contact to report fishing activities that concern you. You could save the life of a platypus – which is, in fact, worth a lot more than \$10!

DR TOM GRANT, School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of New South Wales, is a platypus expert and author of *Platypus* (CSIRO Publishing, 2007). For more information on platypus conservation, see WPSQ's PlatypusWatch program (www.wildlife.org.au) or visit the Australian Platypus Conservancy (www.platypus.asn.au).

Opposite left: Completely dependent on milk for their first four months, nestlings like these would starve in their burrow if their mother was killed in a trap, net or illegally set fishing line. Safer alternatives can save many lives.