New fishing rules factsheet: Trial of modified recreational crab catching gear in Port Stephens

April 2015

Why is a trial requiring modification of crab catching gear being implemented in Port Stephens?

Port Stephens is recognised as an important estuary for turtles based on recent DPI research data. Since 2011, 16 turtles have been found drowned in Port Stephens as a result of entanglement mostly in recreational witches-hats and rectangular, collapsible traps (based on DPI and National Parks and Wildlife Service monitoring data). It is expected there would also have been a number of unreported drownings in crab gear. Occasionally turtle drownings in recreational crab gear are also reported from other estuaries, however, these reports are much more sporadic compared to Port Stephens.

Witches-hats are made of very thin, entanglement mesh, which is inverted when set and can result in the incidental entanglement and drowning of turtles and other non-target species. Additionally, because of the lightweight nature of the steel ring in witches hats, they can often move location during tidal movements and be lost to the fisher. This lost gear then continues to ghostfish.

Compared to round and other traps, the entrances of collapsible rectangular traps are very wide, which makes it relatively easy for a turtle to enter these trap types and become entangled.

Given the high reported drowning rate of turtles in Port Stephens and recognition of the estuary being important for turtles, a trial of new crab gear rules is being implemented in Port Stephens requiring:

1) Recreational witches hats to be modified so that the entanglement net is not inverted when set, that is, the net must lie flat on the seabed significantly reducing its entanglement potential.

2) Recreational lift nets (modified witches hats) may only be set or used, and crabs may only be taken from these nets between sunrise and sunset (i.e. no overnight setting).

3) A reduction in the entrance size of wide mouthed (rectangular, collapsible) crab traps (and other traps if necessary) to a maximum diameter or width of 32cm. This will still enable crabs to enter the trap but will restrict entry of non-target species such as turtles.

Do these new crab gear rules only apply to Port Stephens?

Yes. The new rules only apply to the waters of Port Stephens and its tributaries, from a line drawn between the southern extremity of Yacaaba Headland to the northern extremity of Tomaree Headland up to the tidal limits of the tributaries, including the Myall River to the downstream side of the Myall St Bridge at the town of Hawks Nest.

How do you modify existing witches hats?

Witches-hats (image 1) can easily be converted to operate as a lift net by removing the float from above the mesh and re-attaching the lines with several lengths of lines directly to the ring (image 2). When set, the mesh would now lay flat on the bottom underneath the bait line and be effective in catching crabs feeding on the bait when the net is lifted.
How do you modify an existing wide mouthed crab trap?

The entrance width of wide mouthed crab traps, such as collapsible rectangular traps shown below, can easily be reduced to a width not exceeding 32cm using a cable tie, cord or similar (image 3 and 4). This will still enable crabs to enter the trap but will restrict entry of non-target species such as turtles.
Would modifications be required to rigid and round traps or lift nets (dillies)?

All recreational crab traps would be required to have an entrance diameter or width not exceeding 32cm. DPI has tested a wide range of crab traps currently available on the market and the majority of round and rigid traps already have entrances less than the proposed maximum entrance diameter or width of 32cm.

Therefore, it is very unlikely that modifications would be required for rigid and round traps. Similarly, the trial would not require any modifications to lift nets (commonly called dillies). However, fishers should check their gear prior to going crabbing. The risk of turtles drowning in rigid and round traps or lift nets is considered to be very low.

How will DPI determine the effectiveness of the trial?

DPI will continue to monitor turtle drownings in Port Stephens during the trial and elsewhere in NSW. DPI will also continue to monitor turtle movements in Port Stephens in collaboration with other organisations. The effectiveness of the trial will be looked at after 12 months.

When do the new rules commence in Port Stephens?

The new rules commence on 1 April 2015. There will be a one month advisory period to ensure fishers are aware of the new rules.

Is there anything else I can do to reduce the potential for turtle interactions when crabbing?

Recreational fishers are encouraged to check their crab catching gear regularly to reduce the potential for bycatch. In fact the latest research has shown that catch rates are better if you check your gear regularly (such as every half an hour) compared with longer periods or setting overnight.

How do I get more information about the new rules?

For more information, please email information-advisory@dpi.nsw.gov.au or phone the local Port Stephens Fisheries Office on 02 4916 3934.

Reference