

Protected species in NSW

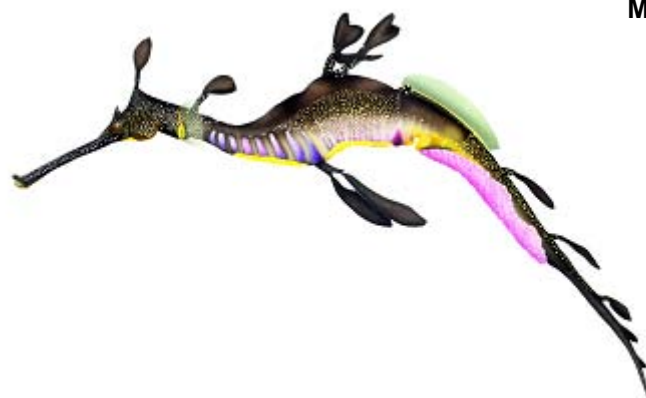
Weedy Seadragon

Phyllopteryx taeniolatus

Female



Male



Illustrations by Pat Tully

Threatened Species Unit

Fisheries Conservation and Aquaculture Branch
Port Stephens Fisheries Centre

Introduction

Weedy seadragons, also known as the common seadragon, belong to the family *Syngnathidae* that also includes seahorses, pipefish and pipehorses. They occur from Geraldton in Western Australia along the southern Australian coastline to Port Stephens in New South Wales.

Weedy seadragons are listed as **protected fish** in New South Wales, and there are heavy penalties for taking or possessing them.

Description

Weedy seadragons reach up to approximately 45cm in length. Leaf-like appendages occur along their body, which is usually reddish in colour with yellow spots and purple bars. The head is angled slightly down, with a long snout. The body of large females becomes deep and compressed, and are readily distinguished from the thinner bodied males.

Habitat and ecology

- Weedy seadragons are endemic in NSW waters from Port Stephens south. They can be found in a variety of habitats including shallow estuaries and deep offshore reefs.
- They can occur to depths of fifty metres and are generally found in waters deeper than ten metres. Juveniles of the species are often associated with kelp and seagrass habitats.
- Adverse weather conditions can cause high levels of natural mortality in weedy seadragons. They are poor swimmers and may be washed ashore during storms or heavy seas.
- Weedy seadragons feed upon mysids and other small crustaceans.
- Sexual maturity is reached within two years. The breeding season is early summer with one brood per season. Males carry eggs externally below the tail. Incubation takes eight weeks and results in about 250 young.
- The hatching period lasts around 6 days, during which time the young are spread over a large area.
- The young develop rapidly, measuring 25mm at birth and growing up to 3 times that size within 3 weeks. During this stage of their lifecycle they remain close to shelter provided by seaweeds.



Why are weedy seadragons protected?

- Collection for the marine aquarium trade may impact weedy seadragon populations.
- The decline of seagrass and kelp habitats is also a threat to weedy seadragons, as they rely on these habitats throughout their life cycle.

Conservation and recovery actions

- Declare marine protected areas to protect weedy seadragon habitats.
- Enforce compliance with fishing regulations.
- Prevent damage to seagrass and kelp beds from anchoring, mooring, and construction of jetties, (for example, anchor boats over non-vegetated substrates where possible).
- Implement the Protected, Threatened and Pest Species Sighting Program: **Report any sightings of the species on the NSW DPI 24 hour automated message-taking service by calling (02) 4916 3877.**
- Implement the Commercial Fisheries Threatened and Protected Species Interaction Reporting arrangements.

Legal implications

Taking or possessing weedy seadragons (or any other species of protected fish) is an offence and heavy penalties apply. For corporations, these penalties can include fines of up to \$55,000 while individuals can face fines of up to \$11,000 and up to 3 months in prison.

Bibliography and further reading

Baker J 2000a, New South Wales Dragon Search Project: Summary of Sighting Data August 2000, Unpublished Report to Marine and Coastal Community Network, August 2000, 10pp.

Baker J 2000b, South Australian Dragon Search Project: preliminary bioregional summary of sighting data April 1996 to August 2000, Unpublished Report to Marine and Coastal Community Network, September 2000, 11pp.

Hutchins B, Swainston R 1986, *Sea Fishes of Southern Australia - Complete Field Guide for Divers and Anglers*, Swainston, Perth, Western Australia, 180pp.

Kuiter RH 1993, *Coastal Fishes of South-Eastern Australia*. Crawford House, Bathurst, NSW, Australia, 437pp.

For further information

Phone the Fisheries Information and Advisory Line: 1300 550 474

For more information on general fishing regulations check with your local fisheries office or on the NSW Department of Primary Industries website at www.dpi.nsw.gov.au

Contact the NSW DPI Threatened Species Unit

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Photos: David Harasti

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