

Protecting Eel-Tailed Catfish in Western NSW – a guide for fishers and land managers

A THREATENED SPECIES

Eel-Tailed Catfish, also commonly known as Freshwater Catfish, is an Australian endemic species. The western population was once highly abundant and widespread throughout the Murray-Darling River System in NSW, Queensland, Victoria and South Australia. However in NSW most riverine populations have significantly declined since the 1970s, and the species is no longer common in many areas. The Murray-Darling Basin population of Eel-Tailed Catfish is listed as an endangered population in NSW. There are heavy penalties for harming, possessing, buying or selling individuals from the population (except from listed impoundments), or for harming their habitat.



Photo: Gunther Schmida

HABITATS

Eel-Tailed Catfish is a benthic species found in a range of habitats, such as rivers, creeks, lakes and billabongs, showing a preference for slow flowing areas with cobble and gravel beds. It is often found around aquatic vegetation, undercut banks and root masses. Eel-Tailed Catfish are generally non-migratory, tending to remain in the same section of river for most of their lives, however some recent research has shown that they have the ability to move large distances. The species breeds between October and March and spawning is triggered by a rise in water temperature and length of day. Males build circular nests of pebbles, sticks or coarse sand with a central sandy depression where the

females deposit their eggs. The male will guard, fan and clean the nest until the eggs hatch (about 7 days).



Photo: Gunther Schmida

DELIBERATELY FISHING FOR EEL-TAILED CATFISH FROM NATURAL RIVERS AND STREAMS IN THE MURRAY-DARLING BASIN AND UNLISTED DAMS IS ILLEGAL AND SIGNIFICANT PENALTIES APPLY

If you accidentally catch an Eel-Tailed Catfish from natural rivers and streams within the Murray-Darling Basin, you must release it immediately, causing the least possible harm. Penalties can include fines of up to \$220,000 and/or two years in prison for harming, possessing, buying or selling them or for harming their habitat.

While it is illegal for anglers to take Eel-Tailed Catfish from rivers and streams in the Murray-Darling Basin, it is legal for anglers who comply with the recreational fishing rules to catch and keep them from listed stocked dams and impoundments and in coastal rivers.

Minimum legal length: 30 cm in listed dams. Bag limit: 5 in listed dams. Possession limit: 10 in listed dams.

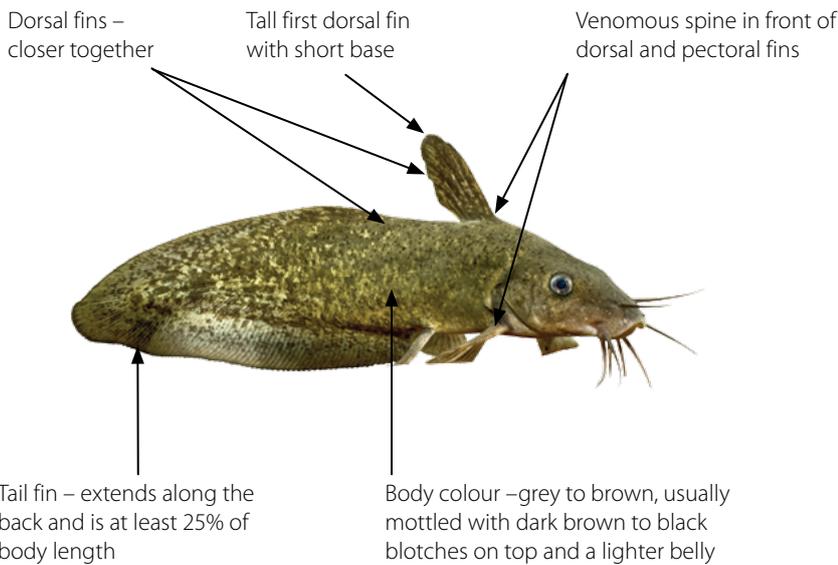
Dams in the Murray Darling Basin where Eel-Tailed Catfish may be taken are: Pindari, Copeton, Split Rock, Keepit, Chaffey, Windamere, Burrendong, Ben Chifley, and Wyangala. Burrendong, Ben Chifley, Wyangala, Wyangan, Yass, Burrinjuck, Lake Albert, Googong, Blowering, Jounama Pondage.

IDENTIFYING AN EEL-TAILED CATFISH

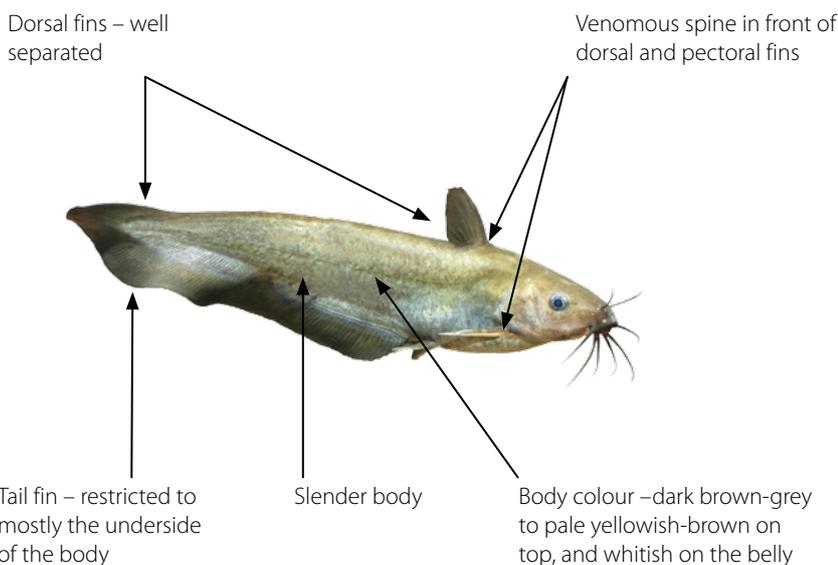
Eel-Tailed Catfish is a medium-sized fish with a large head and a compressed rear portion of the body. The second dorsal, caudal (tail) and anal fins are joined to form a characteristic eel-like tail that extends over the rear half of the body. Eel-Tailed Catfish can be mistaken for other similar

looking native species such as Hyrtl's Catfish (which overlaps in distribution in their northern range), so it is important that fishers and land managers can identify each species. Both species have a small, down-turned mouth surrounded by large barbels (whisker-like organs) and no scales.

EEL-TAILED CATFISH – MAXIMUM REPORTED SIZE 900 MM AND 6.8 KG



HYRTL'S CATFISH – MAXIMUM REPORTED SIZE 400 MM AND 2 KG



INDICATIVE DISTRIBUTION OF EEL-TAILED CATFISH IN WESTERN NSW



WHY IS EEL-TAILED CATFISH IN THE MURRAY-DARLING BASIN A THREATENED POPULATION?

The population of Eel-Tailed Catfish in the Murray-Darling Basin has significantly reduced over time due to a range of factors including:

- » Modification of natural river flows and temperature regimes due to the construction of dams and weirs interrupt breeding cues;
- » Introduced species including carp compete with food and habitat availability and may predate on eggs and larvae;
- » Degradation and removal of riparian vegetation affects instream habitat through loss of shading, loss of organic inputs and increases in runoff, erosion and siltation. Increased silt smothers nests and eggs;
- » Declines in water quality due to agricultural runoff degrading important instream habitat;
- » Removal of woody debris (snags) and aquatic vegetation impacts on catfish habitat availability and prey that also rely on those habitats; and
- » Historic overfishing and illegal fishing practices directly remove individuals from the population.

IMPACTS OF ILLEGAL FISHING

Any illegal activity that reduces Eel-Tailed Catfish numbers is considered harmful to the viability of the population and long-term conservation of the species. Targeted or indirect capture of Eel-Tailed Catfish directly reduces their numbers, removes breeding age adults and disturbs breeding activities.



Two juvenile Eel-Tailed Catfish. Photo: Gunther Schmid

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The independent Fisheries Scientific Committee is responsible for listing threatened species of fish and marine vegetation and for reviewing scientific information to assess whether a species should be downgraded or de-listed from the *NSW Fisheries Management Act 1994*. The Committee assesses the eligibility of each species for listing against criteria set out in the Fisheries Management (General) Regulation 2010. The Murray-Darling population of Eel-Tailed Catfish will be de-listed when they cease to be eligible for listing as a threatened population in accordance with the criteria set out in the regulations.

HANDY FISHING TIPS

The population of Eel-Tailed Catfish in the Murray-Darling Basin is listed as endangered and deliberately fishing for them from waters other than listed dams and impoundments is illegal. However when fishing for other species within the Murray-Darling Basin, please consider the following tips to maximise the survival of any inadvertently caught Eel-Tailed Catfish:

- » Use methods and rigs that reduce deep hooking – fish for your target species with artificial lures or flies and use non-offset circle hooks when using bait.

- » If the fish is hooked deeply, cut the line as close as possible to the fish's mouth. Do not try to remove the hook.
- » Use barbless hooks or hooks with reduced barbs to make removal easier and minimise damage.
- » Avoid lifting the fish from the water – if possible unhook the fish while it is still in the water. Try to retrieve hooks from mouth-hooked fish and release the fish as quickly as possible.
- » Support the weight of the fish properly. Use wet hands or wet gloves when handling fish to minimise damage to their skin. Don't hold the fish by the gills or eyes.
- » Use knotless mesh landing nets – avoid knotted landing nets which may damage the fish's skin, eyes and fins.
- » Use only legal fishing gear – the use of gaff hooks, spears, spear guns or similar devices is prohibited in any freshwater environment.
- » If you find that you are catching Eel-tailed Catfish or other threatened and protected species, you should consider trying to avoid hooking them by changing your location, baits or fishing rigs.

FIVE THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP

1. Take a moment to study this guide and familiarise yourself with the appearance of Eel-Tailed Catfish.
2. If you catch an Eel-Tailed Catfish from waters other than listed stocked impoundments, release it carefully causing the least possible harm.
3. If you live on or manage land adjacent to Eel-Tailed Catfish habitat, prevent stock from directly accessing waterways, manage and protect vegetation on river banks, revegetate degraded riparian areas and prevent erosion. Become involved in habitat restoration or other programs that improve habitat for native fish.
4. Report illegal or suspect fishing activities by:
 - » Contacting your nearest Fisheries Office
 - » Using the Fishers Watch Phone line 1800 043 536; or
 - » Completing the online report from: www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fishing/compliance/report-illegal-activity
5. Participate in the NSW DPI Threatened Species Sighting Program. If you catch or see an Eel-Tailed Catfish from rivers or streams within the Murray-Darling Basin, take a photo, record the details and send the information to the NSW DPI Threatened Species Unit by emailing: fisheries.threatenedspecies@dpi.nsw.gov.au or completing the online report form: www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fishing/species-protection/report-it

WHAT IF YOU ARE NOT SURE?

If you catch an Eel-Tailed Catfish or if you are unsure, release the fish back to the water with minimal harm. Significant penalties apply for buying, selling, possessing or harming threatened or protected species in NSW without the appropriate approvals. Special rules apply for Eel-Tailed Catfish in listed stocked dams and impoundments.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

NSW DPI has a number of publications available on Eel-Tailed Catfish. The publications are available online at the NSW DPI website:

www.dpi.nsw.gov.au

Alternatively email the NSW DPI Threatened Species Unit at: fisheries.threatenedspecies@dpi.nsw.gov.au

Fishing regulations may change during the life of this publication. It is the responsibility of fishers to ensure they are acting within the law at all times.

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Disclaimer: The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing (September 2018). However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information with the appropriate officer of the Department of Primary Industries or the user's independent adviser.

Published by the Department of Primary Industries.