

Sharing Knowledge

Commercial fishers will share knowledge on the distribution and abundance of SOCI to help minimise interactions.

Fishers will also share their experiences with interactions to help improve and refine best practice avoidance and release techniques.

Best practice gear modifications

The use of certain net types and configurations can help minimise harmful interactions with protected species.

Many of these best practice gear configurations have already been adopted in fisheries and marine parks legislation (e.g. restrictions on net length, mesh size). Fishers in the Gladstone region should continue to monitor any developments in relation to gear which minimise interactions with SOCI species while at the same time maintaining commercial catch rates.

Independent Observers

Independent scientifically-trained observers are important in validating catch and effort in the fishery, recording interactions with SOCI and encouraging two-way flow of information between fishers and scientists. Observers may be available from time to time depending on funding and fishers have the opportunity to participate in these programs when available.

Commercial net fishers working in the Gladstone region are encouraged to accommodate the placement of independent observers on board their vessels by agreement with Fisheries Queensland or other relevant Government agency.

Co-operation with scientific research and monitoring

The profession of commercial fishing relies on keen observation of the marine environment and means that fishers are on the water more than most other users. As a result, commercial fishers have a valuable role to play in collecting information and intelligence for the scientific community to monitor and evaluate the health of the Gladstone marine environment.

Commercial fishers complying with this Code will:

- **Actively co-operate with relevant scientific research and monitoring programs being undertaken to evaluate the health of the Gladstone marine environment and local fisheries;**
- **Record any tagged animals and report it to the contact details listed on the tag.**

Reporting sick, injured or dead species of conservation interest

Commercial fishers are also encouraged to actively report all sightings of sick, injured or dead marine turtles, dugongs, dolphins and whales to the Queensland Government’s Marine Stranding Hotline, via 1300 ANIMAL.

The following information should be provided with each report:

- location (*GPS coordinates if possible*)
- a description of what is wrong with the animal (e.g. *stranded on beach, injuries*)
- a description of the animal (*type of animal—dugong, turtle, whale, dolphin; condition; size and any identifying tags*)
- photos (*if available*); and
- your contact details.



Communication Meetings

A meeting of commercial net fishers and partner agencies will be held at least once annually to promote awareness of regulatory requirements relating to SOCI and the measures outlined in the Code.

The meeting will be a forum to update fishers on any new regulations, clarify any operational issues, refresh best practice release techniques and reiterate relevant contact details and reporting procedures.

Fishers will be notified of upcoming meetings.

The contents of this Code will be reviewed at the meeting and refined where necessary to better achieve its objectives.

KEY CONTACTS

QSIA – 0417 631 353

The Fishermen’s Portal Inc. – 0427 373 844

Fisheries Queensland (inc. QB&FP) – 132 523

Fishwatch Hotline – 1800 017 116 (*to report illegal fishing*)

Marine Stranding Hotline

(*to report sick, injured or dead turtles, dolphins or dugongs*)
– 1300 ANIMAL (1300 264 625)

GBRMPA/NPSR/DEHP

(*Field Management - Gladstone*) – (07) 4971 6500



CODE OF BEST NETTING PRACTICE

GLADSTONE





The Gladstone region continues to be an important producer of mixed estuary fish, as well as an attractive destination for recreational fishing.

The region's waterways are also home to important populations of species of conservation interest (SOCl), including dugongs, turtles and inshore dolphins. All users of the Gladstone region's waterways have an important role to play in conserving the environmental values of the area, including populations of SOCI.

Commercial net fishers operating in the region recognise the importance of environmental stewardship and, through this voluntary Code have identified 'best practice' measures to help avoid unintended interactions with SOCI, and minimise the impact of interactions where they occur.

Development of the Code has involved input from fishers, relevant Government agencies and scientists. The Code is expected to produce benefits through:

- Highlighting best practices, over and above those already included in legislation, that assist in minimising interactions with SOCI;
- Creating new networks of stakeholders with shared interests in monitoring and conserving SOCI and the wider environmental health of the Gladstone area waterways;
- Capturing and sharing the knowledge of experienced local people.

THE FISHERY

Two main types of inshore net fishing occur in the Gladstone region: set netting and ring netting.

Set netting is the most common form of netting in the Gladstone region and is primarily used to target barramundi in rivers and creeks and threadfin salmon on foreshores. A set net, as the name suggests, is a net that is set and the commercial fishers wait for fish to mesh in the net. Even though the net is set, commercial fishers are still required to be in attendance of the net. The nets need to be checked regularly in order to maintain the market quality of the fish. Up to three nets are typically used at once within a maximum distance of 1 nautical mile from first to last net.

Ring netting is an active form of fishing where a net is set in a figure of "6" around an area where the target species has been seen or where they are thought to be aggregated. It is a "worked" net which means it is attended at all times. In the Gladstone region, ring netting is mainly used to target salmon and grunter. After it is deployed, the commercial fisher gradually hauls in the net, removing fish from it as they go. Because they are actively fished and have a lighter ply than set nets, ring netting is a lower risk to SOCI.

PURPOSE

Considerable effort has been put into designing measures to limit interactions between net fisheries and SOCI. These measures form a minimum benchmark to limit interactions between net fishing and SOCI, and commercial fishers are required to comply with these arrangements by law.

The purpose of this Code is to identify and put in place best practices over and above the benchmark legal requirements to further minimise the risk of interactions between SOCI and net fisheries in the Gladstone area, and to improve the chances of survival where unintended interaction occurs.

Many of the best practices included in this Code are behavioural in nature and could not be either effectively considered in legislation or addressed by enforcement. Voluntary compliance with this Code will mean that fishers exceed the minimum benchmark requirements for the protection of SOCI and will further strengthen the reputation of net fishers as responsible stewards of the Gladstone marine environment.

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

This Code applies to all waters open to net fishing within the area described in Figure 1.

This includes all tidal waters from Rodd's Bay in the south to the top of the Narrows in the north. The Code area adjoins the southern boundary of the Capricorn Coast Net Free Zone in the north and encompasses the Port of Gladstone-Rodds Bay Dugong Protection Area 'B' Zone in the south.

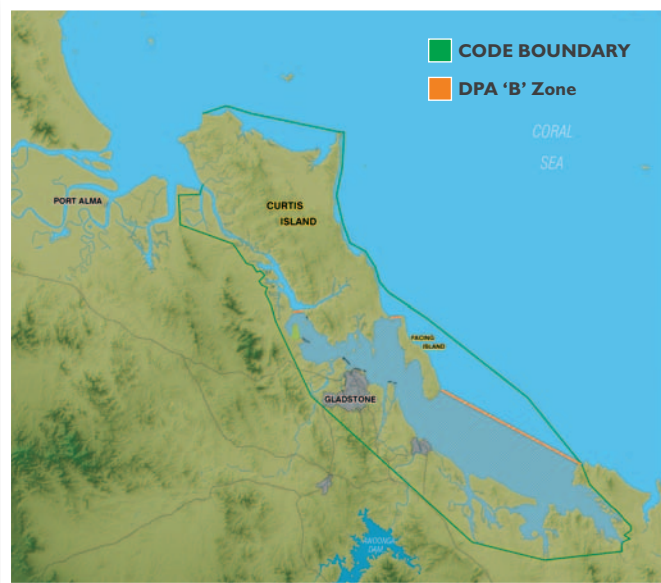


FIGURE 1.
Geographic Scope covered by the Code.



EXISTING FISHERIES AND MARINE PARKS REGULATIONS

Commercial fishing in the Gladstone region is highly regulated by the Queensland Government through the Fisheries Act 1994 and Fisheries Regulations 2008. Fishers are also required to comply with relevant provisions in the Queensland Marine Parks Act 2004 and Commonwealth Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975 and Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.

The main restrictions on net fishing in the Gladstone region include:

- limits on the number of net fishers through licensing;
- limits on the length of net able to be used, and on the maximum and minimum sizes of net mesh;
- limits on the number of nets that may be used, as well as the ways in which nets may be used;
- seasonal and area closures;
- requirements to be in attendance of nets while in the water;
- limits on the size of fishing boats.

A full summary of the existing regulations is available from the Queensland Boating and Fisheries Patrol (QB&FP)¹. All net fishers working in the Code area are required to comply with these measures by law.

Under fisheries legislation, since 2005 commercial fishers have been required to complete an additional SOCI logbook in which interactions with SOCI are recorded.

¹ A consolidated online copy of the Fisheries Regulations 2008 can be accessed here: http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/qld/consol_reg/fr2008201/

BEST PRACTICES UNDER THE CODE

Attendance and checking nets regularly

One of the most important measures in minimising the risk of interactions between SOCI and mesh nets is to ensure that nets remain 'actively' fished.

In practice, this means that fishers remain in close proximity to nets in the water and check them regularly for both target and non-target species catch.

Active fishing not only ensures a better quality of fish for sale, but improves the chances of releasing any unintended catch unharmed.

Commercial net fishers complying with this Code will maintain at all times when nets are in the water a level of vigilance suitable for detecting interactions with SOCI, and take appropriate action if required. When checking nets, fishers will haul a sufficient depth of net to be able to see the leadline.

Fishers should determine the frequency with which nets are checked according to factors such as the fishing location, water temperature and risk of interactions with SOCI.

Operational factors such as tidal flow will generally allow nets to be checked more regularly when fishing on foreshores.

Use of best practice recovery and release techniques

Mitigation measures included in fisheries and environmental legislation and the measures outlined in this code are designed to minimise the risk of interactions between net fisheries and protected species.

However, in the event that a SOCI unintentionally becomes meshed in a net, using best practice release techniques can substantially improve the animal's chances of survival.

Fishers complying with this Code will use the best practice release techniques recommended below:

TURTLES

The majority of turtle interactions with set mesh nets are usually minor and temporary in nature. Most turtles 'bounce off' nets, with the animal swimming away unharmed.

In the event that a turtle becomes meshed in the net, best practice release techniques can improve the chances of survival. This is particularly the case where the animal has been submerged for long periods of time.

Just because a turtle is not moving or appears comatose, it should not be assumed that it's dead, and the use of simple recovery procedures (Figure 2) and assistance where necessary can see the turtle make a full recovery.

If you have a turtle that is comatose or with another injury or ailment (not necessarily from fishing), and you think it needs further assistance, please contact 1300 ANIMAL.

The staff at this service will provide practical advice and guidance on what to do next.

DUGONGS AND DOLPHINS

Despite the very low number of interactions between commercial netting and dugongs and dolphins, particularly in the case of the dolphins their populations are so small that the death of even a single individual can have serious consequences for the population.

Where these species become entangled in nets, it is most often by getting the tail fluke wrapped in either the floatline or leadline. Sometimes the animal will also roll in the net and get their whole body wrapped up. If the animal is prevented from reaching the surface of the water to breathe, this can result in injury or death.

Dugongs and dolphins have less capacity to hold their breath underwater than turtles, so time is of the essence in releasing meshed animals. Given the size and difficulty in handling these species, experience has shown that the safest approach for both fishers and these animals is to cut the floatline or leadline to release the animal.

All instances in which SOCI have been released from nets must be reported to DEHP and in SOCI logbooks.

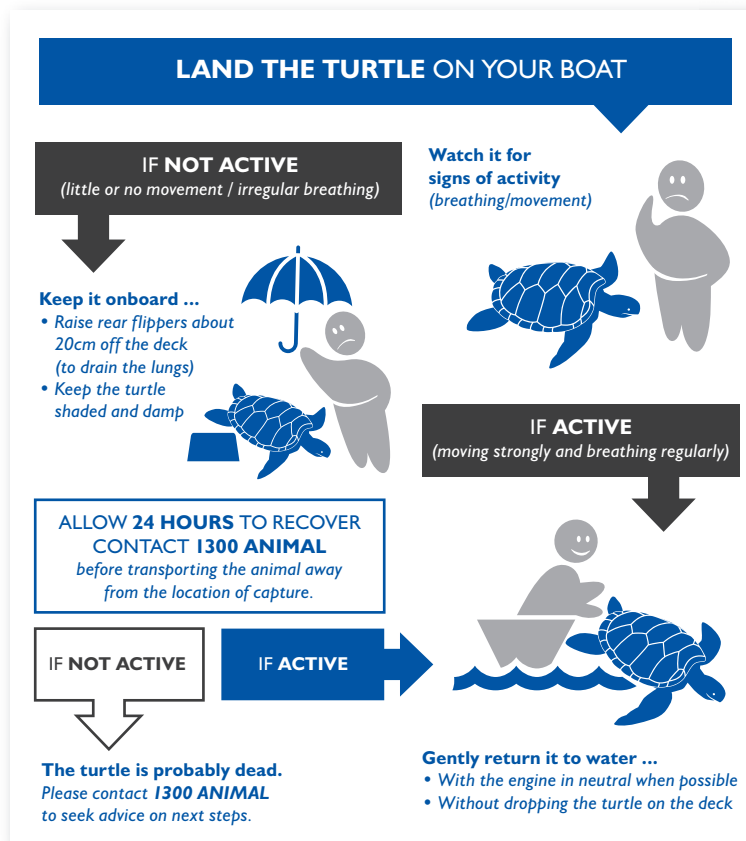


FIGURE 2. Turtle Recovery Procedures

Vigilance after extreme flooding events

Experience has shown that many SOCI are most vulnerable in the period immediately after extreme flooding events. In the case of marine turtles and dugong, flooding events can affect the health of animals by affecting the quality and abundance of seagrass meadows and other food sources, as well as making them more likely to move in search of food. This can make them more vulnerable to capture in nets and less able to survive the interaction.

Where an extreme flooding event occurs in the Gladstone region, Fisheries Queensland will coordinate a meeting of net fishers in the area, together with relevant scientists and managers.

The purpose of the meeting will be to outline what to expect in the months after the event (e.g. sick animals, increased vulnerability), to refresh fishers' understanding of best practice recovery and release techniques and to reiterate the process for reporting sick, dead or injured animals and interactions. The meeting will also coordinate other responses (e.g. placement of scientific observers) as required.

For the purposes of this Code, an extreme flooding event is defined as an event which results in water spilling over the Awoonga Dam spillway.