

Order PRISTIFORMES

Family PRISTIDAE - Sawfishes

There are four known sawfish species that occupy niches in marine, estuarine and freshwater habitats in Queensland waters. This is contrary to the myth by fishers that only one sawfish species exists and that the broad billed sawfish is female and the narrow billed sawfish is male. The four sawfish species include freshwater sawfish (*Pristis microdon*), green sawfish (*P. zijsron*), dwarf sawfish (*P. clavata*) and narrow sawfish (*Anoxypristis cuspidata*). Sawfish are members of the ray group (Batoidea) because their gill slits, like all rays, are located ventrally (underneath) on the head unlike sharks where they are located laterally (on the side). Sawfish do however possess shark like caudal and dorsal fins.

Sawfish populations have declined over the years because of pressures imposed on them from fishing and modification of their habitat. Sawfish are vulnerable to most forms of fishing in particular net fisheries as at any size their toothed rostrum is easily entangled in the mesh. Sawfish are limited in their capacity to recover from population decline as they mature late in their life cycle and produce few young. Sawfish are long lived, approximately 45 years for *Pristis* and 35 years for *Anoxypristis*. Sawfish also have a preference for shallow inshore coastal and freshwater habitats which makes them more susceptible to the interactions with humans. These include activities such as habitat modification (weirs) and disturbance from coastal development and water quality issues related to terrestrial born pollution.

Sawfish give birth to fully developed pups (ovoviviparous). Litter sizes range between 8 to 24 pups. Sawfish are born at a size range of 65 to 90 cm. The number and size at birth of pups is dependent on the size of the birthing mother with larger parents having the ability to producing larger litter sizes. Sawfish are born with a toothed rostrum which is covered by a sheathed membrane. The membrane coated rostrum is an adaptation designed to protect the birthing mother from the sharp pointed teeth. Sawfish have a rapid growth rate in their first year of life, growing as much as 45cm. This growth rate slows considerably as they reach maturity which is at approximately 4 years for *Anoxypristis* and 9 years for *Pristis*.

Sawfish are top order predators and will actively seek out prey items such as live fish, prawn and squid, stunning them with a slashing motion of their toothed rostrum before consuming them whole and head first. Catfish spines are often found embedded in the rostrum and fish scales impaled on the rostrum teeth of caught sawfish. Sawfish will also eat dead prey and will strike at lures. In many cases lure caught sawfish have the line wrapped around the rostrum.