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TURTLE DEATHS - FISHERMEN HAVE THE SOLUTION.

OceanWatch Australia supports the efforts of commercial fishers in Moreton Bay who believe they have invented a solution to reduce the number of marine turtle interactions with crab pots.

Bruce Sutton, a fisher that targets and catches crab in Moreton Bay has devised a simple and effective way to keep turtles out while allowing crabs to enter the traps. He has nicknamed his invention the Turtle-Smart Crab Pot. "Only a small number of turtles that interact with commercial crab pots actually become trapped", said Mr Sutton. "Despite this we want to prevent any interactions with these important species".

Michael Wooden, a local mitigation specialist, with OceanWatch Australia's SeaNet Program is working with Mr Sutton and is looking for funding to trial the Turtle-Smart Crab Pots on a broader scale within the fishery. "The fishers know the pots work but they need to be statistically tested to demonstrate this to all crab pot fishers, both commercial and recreational"

"Once we have trialled the new design it will be a fairly straight forward process to get the commercial fishers to modify their crab pots, as many make their own pots or use a limited number of "off the shelf" designs. The challenge will be the recreational crab fishers. There are currently over a dozen or more crab pot designs available over the counter, many of which are turtle unfriendly, so we will have to work with tackle shops and the pro-active recreational fishers and try and get them to influence the buying habits of the rest." Mr Wooden said.

Anissa Lawrence, CEO of OceanWatch Australia said "There is nothing new with commercial fishers inventing successful mitigation measures to reduce their bycatch. Turtle Exclusion Devices (TEDs) were invented by commercial prawn fishers working in the Gulf of Mexico fishery in the US. This device has saved millions of turtles around the world from being captured and subsequently dying in prawn trawl nets. These devices have been readily adopted in Moreton Bay and in many trawl fisheries throughout the world."

Kellie Williams, CEO of the Moreton Bay Seafood Industry Association said, "The commercial fishers in Moreton Bay are very protective of the bay and the turtles that live here, they are stewards of this area and have always been proactive in their environmental management of the area. They recently received the Sustainable Primary Production Award 2006 for their Environmental Management System (EMS) which outlines their commitment to the local environment. If there is a potential new design for a turtle smart crab trap then the industry would be totally supportive of a trial of this device."

Martin Hicks, CEO of the Queensland Seafood Industry Association agrees with the push for a trial, "Often the solution to these issues is a simple matter of changing the design of the fishing gear. What is more difficult is convincing people to invest in a new type of gear that has not been trialled and tested. If this new design works, then industry will most likely adopt it, but it needs to be proven before people go out and outlay the dollars to replace all their gear."

Mr Wooden said, "Working with these fishermen is very inspiring, they are so pro-active in searching for solutions to their environmental issues. Not many industries out there are so willing to look hard at themselves and their problems and then pro-actively get in and create solutions to those issues. The Moreton Bay fishermen really are stewards of this area."

SeaNet is a program funded by the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust. SeaNet Officers work with the commercial fishing industry to help move them towards environmental sustainability. SeaNet is run by OceanWatch Australia.

For more information, contact:

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OceanWatch Australia (OWA) is a national environmental, not-for-profit company that works to achieve sustainability in the Australian seafood industry through protecting and enhancing fish habitats, improving water quality and advancing the sustainability of fisheries through action based partnerships with the Australian seafood industry, government, natural resource managers, business and the community.



IMAGE: Bruce Sutton's "Turtle-Smart Crab Pot". The modified design reduces the ability of sea turtles entering the funnel and becoming trapped and drowning. The insertion of two extra steel rings adds tension to the mesh in the pot and reduces sea turtles ability to tear holes in the mesh. Simple and innovative solutions, such as replacing polyethylene ropes with leaded rope can help to reduce unwanted entanglements and mortality.

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