

# Sea rangers close in on Gulf's killer nets

Along Australia's remote northern coastline, indigenous sea rangers have been working with government and non-government organisations to clean up a deadly threat to marine life.

Northern Australia is under attack by a new threat – ghost nets. These are fishing nets that have been lost, abandoned or deliberately discarded, but that continue to 'fish' indiscriminately.

Due to its unique shape and location, the Gulf of Carpentaria acts as a catchment for marine debris from the entire Indo-Pacific region. The ghost fishing nets are swept in by the monsoonal winds over summer and, aided by the south-east trade winds during the winter season, the result is a steady stream of nets all year round.

The Gulf's strong clockwise circular current, or gyre, means that the nets become stuck in an endless cycle of 'ghost fishing', bringing with it a huge and devastating catch of precious marine life.

At Cape Arnhem between 1996 and 2003, derelict fishing nets entangled around 185 of the 205 stranded marine turtles – including four species listed as endangered or vulnerable. The floating nets also get caught up in propellers, rudders and even engine intakes.

Only 5 per cent of nets originate in Australia; most originate from fishing activities outside the Gulf, making it harder to deal with the issue through negotiations with commercial fishing bodies or awareness-raising among fishermen.

The Carpentaria Ghost Net Programme was set up with the help of a Natural Heritage Trust grant in 2002. The program involves a network of indigenous sea rangers from small coastal communities removing decades of accumulated ghost nets from the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria and the Torres Straits.

With the help of a WWF net identification guide, the sea rangers record information about the nets, which will help negotiations to stop the problem at its source. Over 200 different types of nets have been identified to date.



Sea rangers Milkay, Banula and Balu Palu unearth a buried net at Yalangbara, south of Cape Arnhem in the Northern Territory. Jane Dermer

When the rangers find animals, especially turtles, still alive in the nets, they are able to release them back into the wild.

In the past 18 months, the program's 90 or so sea rangers have removed 2174 pieces of net with an average length of 28.3 metres from accessible parts of the northern coastline. This equates to approximately 59 kilometres, or 60 tonnes, of net.

The largest net was a 6-tonne, 19-kilometre-long Taiwanese gill net found off the coast of Arnhem Land in 2006. The removal of this net required the combined resources of Customs, the Australian Fisheries Management Authority, Dhimurru Rangers, NT Parks & Wildlife, and two local charter vessels. It took five very long hours to get this net from water's edge to landfill!

Individuals involved with the project learn skills in project planning and management, information recording and reporting.

The flexibility of the project allows for a high variation in literacy and numeracy skills – from simple data entry in the survey sheets supplied to GIS mapping. The project encourages individuals to self-assess and improve their skills, continually raising the bar by providing a range of training options.

The program is managed by the Northern Gulf Resource Management Group and has taken out Banksia Awards in 2006 and 2007 as well as the Queensland Coastcare Award 2005.

It involves a diverse cross-section of partners ... from the Northern Territory,



Hawksbill turtle attempting to escape a ghost net at Cape Arnhem in 2001. Djawa Yunupingu

Queensland and Australian governments, and non-government participating organisations – Northern Gulf Resource Management Group, WWF, Northern Land Council, North Australian Indigenous Land & Sea Management Alliance, Clean Up Australia, Oceanwatch Aust Ltd and Conservation Volunteers Australia.

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**More information:**  
Carpentaria Ghost Nets Programme: [www.ghostnets.com.au](http://www.ghostnets.com.au)  
Marine and Coastal Community Network: [www.mccn.org.au](http://www.mccn.org.au)