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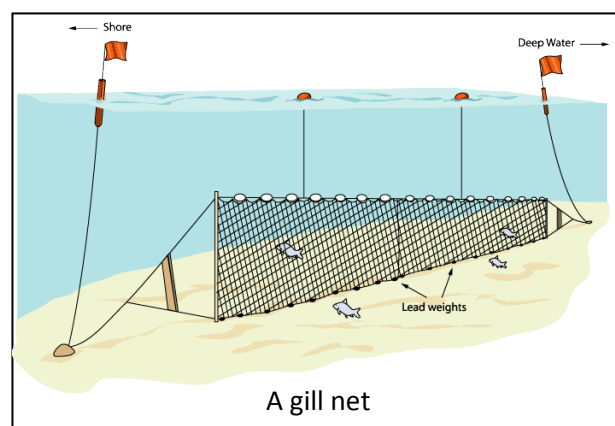
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'NET FREE' FAR NORTH QUEENSLAND

Ending commercial gill netting in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area between Cooktown and the Torres Strait is an opportunity to provide a big environmental win at minimal economic and social cost.

The Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area between Cooktown and the Torres Strait is one of the last global strongholds for dugongs and provides vital habitat for the critically endangered Bizant River shark, the green sawfish (which is threatened with extinction), and hundreds of species of turtles and fish. It is about 85,000 square kilometres in area, larger than the island of Tasmania.

These healthy populations of dugongs, turtles and fish are a result of well-vegetated and not-overgrazed landscapes on shore and relatively low levels of commercial and recreational fishing.



This proposal would end commercial gill net fishing in the area. Only 5-10 commercial fishing licences have been used in this region since 2014, landing between 10 and 30 tonnes of fish a year. Although the commercial gill net effort is currently low, the risks are high for the east coast's largest dugong population, as dugongs can drown in nets in just minutes. Preventing these drownings will also allow thousands of other animals to live, and enable the critically endangered Bizant River shark and vulnerable green sawfish to recover from the threat of extinction.

Recreational fishers are not allowed to use gill nets and Indigenous fishers can only use them for food for family and community and other traditional purposes. This proposal would not impact upon those two groups. Ending commercial gill net fishing in the region would primarily involve buying out one full time commercial gill net fisher based in Cooktown at a cost of \$206,000.

A total budget of \$5 million would be sufficient to buy out the commercial fisher, provide structural adjustment for other commercial net fishers who use the area from time to time, and help expand Indigenous ecotourism and guided fishing tourism opportunities in the region.

Although any commercial gill net fisher has the right to fish in the region, in practice only 34 have done so since 2009 when closures were implemented in Princess Charlotte Bay river systems, with active licences decreasing from 20 in 2010 to just five in 2015 before increasing to 10 in 2016. A number of these licences have already been surrendered under successive governments' licence buyback programs.

Recommended policy:

- Enact legislation to end commercial gill net fishing in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area between Cooktown and the Torres Strait including adjacent state waters by December 2018.
- 'Buy out' the one commercial gill net fisher based in Cooktown with access to the Princess Charlotte Bay Special Management Area that was established to protect local dugong populations.
- If required, provide structural adjustment for other commercial net fishers who use the area from time to time.
- Provide financial assistance to expand Indigenous ecotourism and guided fishing tourism opportunities in the region.

Costs:

- Provide \$5 million over three years in structural adjustment assistance for the commercial gill netting industry and to expand tourism including Indigenous ecotourism and guided fishing tourism opportunities in the region.



Green sawfish (*Pristis zijsron*) captured off Maroochydore in 1940. This species once occurred from NSW northwards but is now thought to be extinct from Cairns south. [Source: State Library of Queensland](#)



Freshwater sawfish (*Pristis pristis*) caught at the mouth of the Mulgrave River 1938, now largely restricted on the east coast to the waterways draining into Princess Charlotte Bay. [Source: State Library of Queensland](#)

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