Southern Gulf NRM

22 January 2026

Improving River Health to Protect Endangered Sawfish

The Largetooth Sawfish (*Pristis pristis)* is critically endangered and relies on Southern Gulf river systems as vital nursery habitat. These rivers are essential to the species' survival and hold strong cultural significance across the region. Once prized for its distinctive rostrum, sightings of live sawfish are now increasingly rare, with dried trophy rostrums more common than encounters in the wild.

Extreme pressures on their habitat include riverbank erosion, excess sedimentation, nutrient runoff, and significant loss of riparian vegetation. Riparian zones are critical to healthy river ecosystems, providing sediment filtration, improving water quality and protecting ecological function. Their loss leads to declining water quality and degraded sawfish nursery habitat.

To address these challenges, Southern Gulf NRM, in partnership with Australia's national science agency CSIRO and landholders, is commencing on-ground habitat restoration programs to improve the long-term future of the Largetooth Sawfish, support sustainable land management practices and create opportunities for improved paddock spelling across grazing properties. This project is funded by the Australian Government Natural Heritage Trust and delivered by Southern Gulf NRM, a member of the Commonwealth Regional Delivery Partners panel.

The project brings together local landholders and CSIRO to deliver practical actions that benefit both river health and sawfish conservation.

Damian Miley, CEO of Southern Gulf NRM said, "Connecting and supporting landholders, scientists, and the community in the delivery of endangered species programs, like the sawfish, is an important role for SGNRM."

Dr Richard Pillans, a research scientist from CSIRO working on the project said, "This project is one of very few that is working directly with landowners to directly address and mitigate threats to Endangered juvenile sawfish in freshwater habitats"

By 30 June 2028, targeted on-ground actions will be delivered across priority properties within the Leichhardt, Gregory, and Nicholson River catchments to maintain or improve habitat condition and water quality for the Largetooth Sawfish. Planned works will deliver significant improvements to riparian health through the construction of 30 kilometres of riparian fencing and the installation of 10 off-stream watering points. These actions will enable paddock spelling and more sustainable grazing management, allowing riverbanks and floodplain vegetation to recover. Improved riparian condition reduces bank erosion, stabilises sediments, directly benefitting sawfish by protecting critical nursery areas and improving habitat connectivity during the dry season within the river system.

In addition, targeted research and monitoring activities will be undertaken across priority areas of the Southern Gulf region to improve understanding of Largetooth Sawfish population dynamics, connectivity and vulnerability. This will include field surveys in priority freshwater habitats, collection of genetic tissue samples, and analysis to address priority knowledge gaps identified in the EPBC Act Conservation advice.

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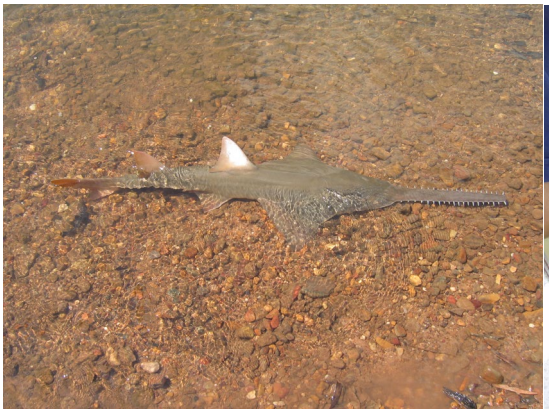

Photo Credit: Richard Pillans

Photo Credit: Southern Gulf NRM

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Southern Gulf NRM is the Natural Resource Management organisation for the Southern Gulf region of north west Queensland. We work with the community to deliver projects that improve and protect our region's natural resources and to maintain the prosperity of industries that rely on these. The Southern Gulf water catchment region includes all the land whose creeks and rivers run into the southern Gulf of Carpentaria. This encompasses an area of 215,000km square^2.