

### SAWFISH STORIES

On 4 July 2018, the Kimberley Society heard from **Monique Barker** and **Karissa Lear** who presented an overview of the findings of a group called Team Sawfish. We had noticed that Monique (campaign coordinator for [The Kimberley - Like Nowhere Else](#)) was the event organiser behind an interactive evening on 7 June featuring the fascinating sawfish of the Fitzroy River at Perth's State Library Theatre. When we approached her, she kindly agreed to organise a second presentation for our Society.

Based in West Perth, The Kimberley - Like Nowhere Else is an alliance of leading conservation organisations working to protect one of the last great unspoilt landscapes on earth. The alliance recognises the Kimberley coast as one of our continent's most important regions for conservation. Few of the world's marine and coastal environments are as biologically diverse, stunningly beautiful, and physically remote from destructive pressures as those in the Kimberley region.

[Team Sawfish](#) is a collaboration between scientists from Murdoch University and Indigenous Rangers (from [Nyikina-Mangala](#)) working together to study sawfish in the Fitzroy River. The research has been running since 2003, and involves catching, tagging and recording biological data from sawfish. Recently, a newly developed [tagging program](#) has given scientists insight into the behaviour of elusive sawfish – attaching little tags called accelerometers (the same technology that's in a Fitbit) to sawfish pups to record data in ground-breaking detail. The project is a joint collaboration between Murdoch University, the Forrest Research Foundation, the Australian Research Council, and Chevron.

Karissa Lear is the PhD researcher who developed this tagging program. She said the tags can tell her whether the fish is feeding, swimming or resting, and then how much energy each of those behaviours costs.

Sawfish have lived since the time of the dinosaurs, 60 million year ago, but now face extinction. That's where Team Sawfish comes in, and the support from The Kimberley - Like Nowhere Else, which regularly engages with the Perth community by hosting events such as film festivals, science presentations and art exhibitions.

At the State Library, and at our meeting, the audience heard the amazing survival story of the sawfish of the Fitzroy and learnt about the research carried out by Team Sawfish. There was also discussion of the threats the sawfish face and how their future is dependent on long-term protection for the Fitzroy River catchment. During the talk, Monique and Karissa showed some short videos and provided some take-home materials (bumper stickers and brochures).

Monique and Karissa presented Sawfish Stories in the context of the need to look after the Fitzroy River and its catchment area. In that way, while learning how the Fitzroy River is the world's last stronghold for the critically endangered Freshwater Sawfish, we also heard how fragile the river is with regard to water extraction.

Several sawfish saws (called 'rostrums') were on display.



The Kimberley - Like Nowhere Else was formed in 2008, as the in-coming Liberal Government committed to create a marine park at Camden Sound, and to deliver a *Kimberley Science and Conservation Strategy*. From 2008 to 2016 the alliance worked to progressively increase the scale of the pledges for conservation. The major achievement and outcome has been the [Great Kimberley Marine Park](#), which has been established in coastal waters along 500 miles of Kimberley coastline, which is considered the last remaining tropical coastline in the world. The total area of the GKMP is 8.1 million acres with 1.7 million acres of no-take sanctuary zones.

The new conservation regions on which the alliance focuses are aligned with recent (2017) election commitments from the Labor Government. This includes extending the Great Kimberley Marine Park to include the thousand islands of the [Buccaneer Archipelago](#) and the fringing coral reefs that surround them. WA Labor has committed to the creation of a new [Fitzroy River National Park](#) by extending the [Danngu \(Geikie Gorge\) National Park](#) and to putting in a protective management plan for the Fitzroy River. The Fitzroy is Western Australia's largest river and a key habitat for freshwater and estuarine wildlife in the Kimberley. The Fitzroy is also of great cultural significance, and has been [National Heritage](#) listed for its cultural values. Fitzroy River Traditional Owners expressed their concern for the river and their desire to be involved in its protection in the [2016 Fitzroy River Declaration](#). They are keen to ensure that proposals for dams and emerging industrial irrigation projects do not threaten the health and flow of the Fitzroy River. Considerable publicity has been given to these proposals and the Traditional Owners have established the [Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council](#) and called for the implementation of the 2016 Fitzroy River Declaration, immediate design and implementation of a Martuwarra Fitzroy River Catchment Management Plan, and a moratorium on all future water allocations in the Fitzroy River catchment until the plan is in place.

*Cathie Clement*