

Platypus experts warn of localised extinctions and declining population

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The platypus is an Australian icon but landmark research being conducted by a large team of Australian scientists indicates the animal's future is under serious threat. *Photo: Douglas Gimesy*

Researchers undertaking a landmark study on the platypus are warning of significant population declines and localised extinctions across areas of South Australia and Victoria.

The study, which is still several years away from completion, seeks to establish a clear picture of the animal's population for the first time. Current estimates on population figures vary from 30,000 to 50,000 mature animals, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

"The platypus is notoriously difficult to study in the wild because it is a nocturnal animal and very elusive so there is no concrete population number," Richard Kingsford, Professor of Environmental Science at the University of NSW, told Fairfax Media.

"But what we have uncovered so far is leading us to believe that the situation for platypus right now in Australia is critical. We can report with certainty that they have disappeared from the Adelaide Hills, the Bass River and Avoca River catchments in Victoria and they have declined precipitously in the Wimmera River catchment in the Murray-Darling. Overall their population is in decline across the country."

Professor Kingsford brought together platypus experts from across the country this week to discuss the animal's future and share new research at a conference at Taronga Zoo.

"We are looking at everything from their genetic mapping, to see if populations are intermingling, to population numbers right across from the Gulf of Carpentaria to the top of Tasmania and the impact of climate change", Kingsford said.

"Essentially, we are taking the pulse of the platypus situation in Australia and what we have found so far has us very worried."

The platypus was categorised as a near-threatened species by the IUCN in 2014. Kingsford said the worst-case scenario coming from the study would be changing that categorisation to endangered, which identifies the species as threatened.

Josh Griffiths, a wildlife ecologist and platypus researcher, is part of the team looking into platypus populations and said numbers were declining due to loss of habitat, traps and pollution.

"Yabby traps are a disaster for our platypus population. They cause slow and horrible deaths to the species", he said.

"You also have dams affecting their environment, discarded fishing line, plastic rubbish and changes to their locality because of climate change. All of these factors are putting pressure on the species."

Mr Griffiths was part of a team that recently analysed five dead platypuses in two Opera House yabby traps in Labertouche Creek in eastern Victoria. Griffiths estimated that this could represent half of the local population.

Researchers have resorted to getting help from the public in trying to get a more precise picture of platypus numbers by establishing a citizen science website, PlatypusSPOT.

Professor Kingsford said researchers were also referring to old newspaper reports from the 19th and 20th centuries to try and establish what population numbers may have looked like in the past.

"We have a responsibility to keep the future of this unique and iconic animal alive." Kingsford said.