



## Kimberley Land Council

**MEDIA RELEASE**

**September 7, 2017**

### **Fitzroy River sawfish soar**

Nyikina Mangala rangers together with Murdoch University researchers have recorded a spike in the critically endangered sawfish in the Kimberley's Fitzroy River.

The rangers, who are facilitated through the Kimberley Land Council, regularly undertake endangered species work in the region.

During a July expedition, more than 40 sawfish were recorded and tagged in the Fitzroy on Nyikina Mangala country. In 2016, only four juveniles were recorded in the same area at the same time of year.

The surge has been attributed to the big 2016/17 wet season, enabling juvenile sawfish to swim further up river, away from predators such as bull sharks and saltwater crocodiles.

Nyikina Mangala ranger Conan Lee, a ranger for the past seven years, said 2011 was the last time such a high number of sawfish had been recorded in the Fitzroy.

"There's only been two times that I've seen such a large number of sawfish pups," Conan said.

"It's really important that we look after the sawfish because they live in our land, in the Fitzroy River that runs through the heart of Nyikina Mangala country.

"They are a critically endangered species so it is really important for us to know that the sawfish are breeding and regenerating naturally like they should.

"Sawfish are very special to the Nyikina Mangala people, they feature in our song lines and we want to see them protected."

Murdoch University PHD student Karissa Lear has been working with the Nyikina Mangala rangers as part of her research into the impact of climate change on sawfish health in the Fitzroy River.

She said changes in water temperatures can have a direct impact on the metabolic rate of sawfish populations.

"When there is less water in the river we see an increase in water temperature, resulting in an increase in sawfish metabolic rate," Karissa said.

"While initially an increase in metabolic rate can be a good thing, it can quickly get to the point where there are serious negative effects. We already see this happening in the late dry season when the water temperature of the Fitzroy increases.

“I am investigating how changes in climate or impacts on the Fitzroy River, such as increasing irrigation, could further increase water temperature and the potential for negative effects on this very important local sawfish population.”

Karissa said partnering with the Nyikina Mangala rangers was vital to the success of research into sawfish.

“The rangers know sawfish better than anyone else.”

Karissa’s research is supported by Murdoch University, the Forrest Research Foundation and Australian Research Council (ARC).