

24 September 2025

Recreational Estuary Crab Fishing in the Sydney North District

Overview

Crab fishing is a popular recreational fishery and important commercial fishery in NSW.

This fishing guide is designed to provide key information to help:

- Ensure these fisheries remain sustainable by maximising voluntary compliance with crab fishing rules
- Reduce conflict between/within user groups
- Answer commonly asked questions about crab fishing rules
- Report illegal crab fishing and crab fishing gear theft, and
- Reduce bycatch and other impacts

Popular crab species in NSW

There are several popular eating crab species with the main two sought after being the Mud Crab and Blue Swimmer Crab. There are many other crab species found in NSW including the Red Shore Crab, Swift Footed Crab and Soldier Crab which are popular bait species.

SYDNEY HARBOUR RECREATIONAL CRABBING AND DIOXIN CONTAMINATION

Test results have revealed elevated levels of dioxins in fish and crustaceans throughout Sydney Harbour, including Parramatta River and other connected tidal waterways.

Recreational fishers are urged to follow dietary advice on the consumption of seafood taken from Sydney Harbour.

It is recommended that crabs caught west of the Sydney Harbour Bridge not be eaten. You should release your catch.

For crabs caught east of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, you should generally not eat more than 750 grams of crabs per month.

For further information visit NSW Food Authority website www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au or phone 1300 552 406 for more information.

Mud Crab *Scylla serrata*

Distribution - Mud Crab inhabit tropical to warm temperate waters from Exmouth in Western Australia up and along the coastline of the Northern Territory and Queensland to the Bega River in southern New South Wales. They favour soft muddy bottoms below the low tide level and generally live in sheltered estuaries, mud flats, mangrove forests and the tidal reaches of some rivers.

Size - Mud Crab can reach a maximum size of approximately 24 centimetres carapace width and 3.5 kilograms in weight.

Characteristics - Mud Crab are a member of the family Portunidae. They are large crabs with a smooth, broad carapace and possess sizeable claws used for crushing and cutting prey. The two hind legs are flattened for swimming. Mud Crabs are generally very dark brown to mottled green in colour. Juveniles feed on planktonic animals, benthic molluscs and crustaceans while adults feed on bivalve and gastropod molluscs (mussels and pipis), small crabs and polychaete worms.



Figure 1: Mud Crab

Blue Swimmer Crab *Portunus pelagicus*

Distribution - Blue swimmer crabs are found in coastal waters from Cape Naturaliste in Western Australia, around the top end to NSW. The Victorian border is the southern limit for distribution of the species on the east coast.

Size - Maximum length of about 21cm across the carapace (shell), and a weight of up to 1kg.

Characteristics - Blue swimmer crabs, also known as sand crabs or blue manna crabs, are swimming crabs that have their last pair of legs modified to act as paddles.

Their claws are long and slender and the shell is rough in texture. The carapace is broad, with a prominent spine on each side. The colours vary from dark brown, blue and purple, with pale mottling. Adult crabs are frequently found in large numbers in shallow bays and estuaries, particularly during the summer months. Blue swimmer crabs are highly regarded for their taste.



Figure 2: Blue Swimmer Crab

PERMITTED CRAB FISHING METHODS

There are a range of permitted methods for taking crabs in NSW including prescribed nets and traps and other methods. The following section provides an overview of these; however, relevant bag and size limits and location restrictions apply. Check your local rules before going crab fishing.

Hoop or lift net (witches hat)

- Not more than four nets are to be used (or in possession) by any one person at any one time.
- No more than two hoops per net (no rigid frame between them).
- Diameter of hoops should be no greater than 1.25m.
- Mesh size cannot be less than 13mm measured on the diagonal.
- Drop (length of net) cannot be more than 1m.
- A float/buoy to be labelled with the letters HN, initial and surname, year of birth and postcode of the person who sets, uses or lifts the fishing gear. The float being at least 100mm in diameter and 50mm above the water with all letters to be a minimum of 15mm in height, clearly visible and in a contrasting colour to the buoy.
- Hoop nets or lift nets must not have any rope floating on the surface of the water.
- The net must be dropped and raised vertically through the water by hand.
- The net must not be used in ocean waters.
- Any rock lobsters or fin fish which are subject to a size limit must be immediately returned to the water unharmed if caught.
- The same rules apply for witches hats as for hoop nets.
- Avoid using nets and traps in areas of high boat traffic or navigation channels.
- Avoid setting gear in fast flowing tidal areas.

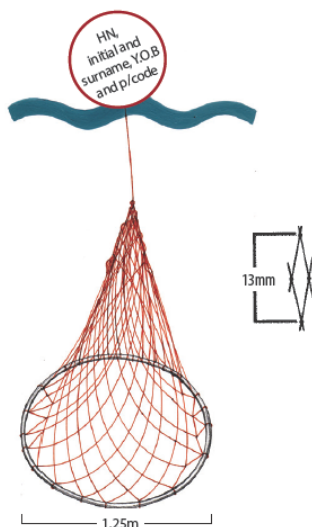


Figure 3: Hoop or Lift Net (Witches hat)

Crab trap

- Not more than two traps (and four witches hats) to be used (or in possession) by any person at any one time.
- Maximum dimensions – 1.2m length x 1m width x 0.5m depth or has a diameter not exceeding 1.6m at the top or bottom.
- Minimum mesh size 50mm.
- No more than 4 entrances (none of which are on the top of the trap).
- A float/buoy to be labelled with the letters CT, initial and surname, year of birth and postcode of the person who sets, uses or lifts the fishing gear.
- The float being at least 100mm in diameter and 50mm above the water with all letters to be a minimum of 15mm, clearly visible and in a contrasting colour to the buoy.
- There must also be a 50 gram weight attached no less than one metre below the buoy so that no rope/line is floating on the surface of the water.
- Must not be made of entanglement material.
- Must not be set to impede the free passage of fish (2 traps cannot be set closer than 3m apart).
- Do not set gear in areas of high boat traffic or navigation channels.
- Only crabs can be taken with this trap.
- Crab traps must not be used in inland or ocean waters.
- Check your crab trap regularly. Reducing set time for any fishing gear reduces the chances of harm to accidentally caught aquatic animals such as platypus and turtles.

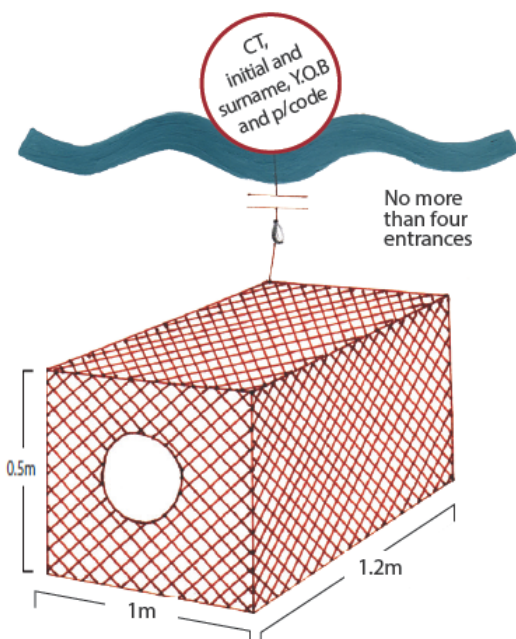


Figure 4: Crab Trap

Dip or scoop net

- Maximum diameter of hoop or ring 0.6 metres.
- Minimum mesh size 20mm measured across the diagonal.
- Drop (length of net) no more than 1.25 metres.
- Must be used by hand and not staked or set.
- Must not be joined or placed with any other net.
- Only one net per person at any time.
- Other fish (including crabs) caught while legally fishing for prawns may be kept, however, bag and size limits apply.

Line fishing

- A maximum of four rods or lines can be used by any one person at any one time.
- If any rods or lines are left unattended, they must be clearly marked with the fisher's name and address or name and boat registration number.
- A maximum of three hooks or three gangs of hooks can be attached per line. A gang of hooks should have no more than five hooks.
- One line may have six single hooks with a lure attached to be used by the method of hand jigging only.
- A maximum of three treble hooks can be attached to a lure.

Landing net

- May only be used as an ancillary aid for retrieval of fish (including crabs) caught when line fishing.
- Hand picking
- Hand picking may be used to take crabs, gloves are permitted.
- You may use a snorkel (not SCUBA) when taking crabs.

Spearing

- Spears may be used to take crabs but not with the aid of a light.
- You cannot spear crabs on rock platforms
- Care must be taken not to mutilate any crab with a size limit. A fisheries officer must be able to measure the carapace of any crabs with a size limit in your possession.



Figure 5: Red Shore Crab - a popular bait species

HOW TO MEASURE A CRAB

Blue Swimmer and Mud Crabs are measured along the body from the notch between the two most protruding frontal teeth to the centre of the posterior margin of the carapace or shell.

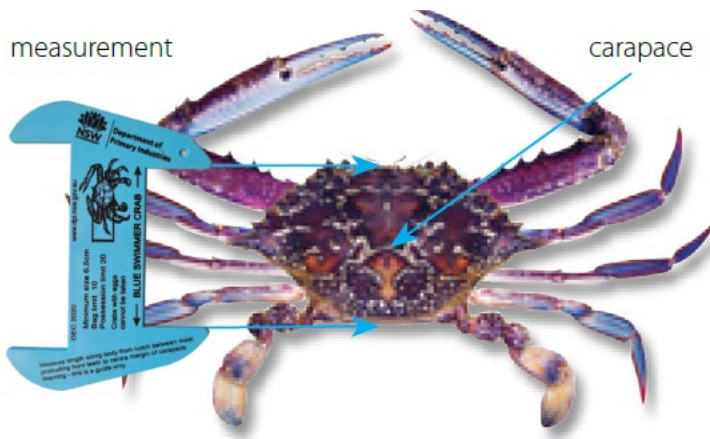


Figure 6: How to measure a crab

BAG, SIZE AND POSSESSION LIMITS

Blue Swimmer Crab: Legal length: 6.5cm. Daily bag limit: 10 (20 in possession).

Mud Crab: Legal length: 8.5cm. Daily Bag limit: 5

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Do I need a licence to go crabbing in NSW?

Yes, when fishing in NSW waters you are required to pay the NSW recreational fishing fee and carry a receipt showing the payment of the fee. Some exemptions apply.

You can pay the NSW recreational fishing fee at www.onegov.nsw.gov.au or by calling 1300 369 365

Can I set or lift crab fishing gear for someone else?

No. You can only use, set, or lift your own crab fishing gear.

How many nets and traps can I use?

You can use 4 hoop or lift nets (witches hats) and 2 crab traps.

Can I have a few extra crab traps and or witches hats with me when I go fishing?

No. You are permitted only to have the amount of gear permissible for yourself.

If I catch a few more crabs than the bag limit, can I keep them for someone else?

No. A recreational fisher is not permitted to take fish on behalf of another; over and above the individual's daily limits.

Can I keep female crabs?

Yes. In NSW you can keep female crabs as long as they are taken, and in your possession legally, but not if they're carrying eggs.

Can I set crab fishing gear without a float/buoy to stop someone else from lifting it, stealing my crabs or stealing my gear?

No. It is illegal to set any fishing gear without marking it in accordance with the regulations.

What should I do if someone steals my crab fishing gear?

Taking someone else's fishing gear is theft. If you have information on or been a victim of crime on our waterways, call NSW Crimestoppers on 1800 333 000.

What do I do if I see someone fishing illegally?

Call the Fishers Watch number 1800 043 536. All information received in good faith will be treated confidentially. Alternatively, report online at <https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fishing/compliance/report-illegal-activity>

Further information on collecting crabs and other intertidal species in the Sydney area can be found <https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fishing/recreational/resources/info/multi-lingual-fishing-guides/collecting-animals-and-plants-sydney>

WATERS CLOSED TO CRABBING

Duck River and Homebush Bay (Figure 7). The whole of the waters of Duck River and Homebush Bay (including Haslams and Powells Creeks) located in the upper reaches of the Parramatta River.

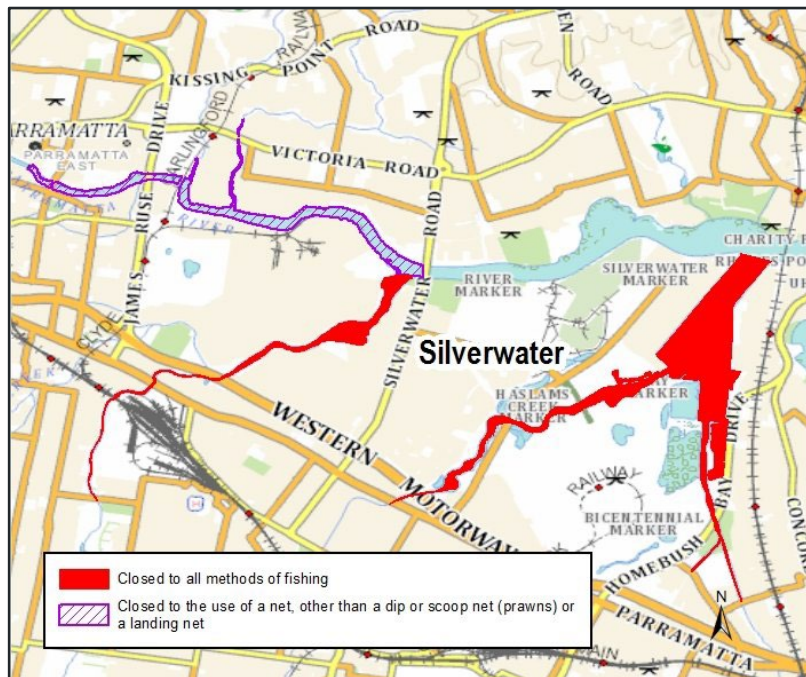


Figure 7: Duck River, Homebush Bay and Parramatta River (Silverwater to Parramatta Weir)

North Harbour Aquatic Reserve (Figure 8). Within the reserve you are NOT permitted to take any species of crab. Boundaries are formed by a line between headlands at North Head and Grotto Point, and another line joining Little Manly Point, Manly Point and Forty Baskets Beach and extends from the seabed at these outer boundaries up to the mean high-water mark.



Figure 8: North Harbour Aquatic Reserve, North Harbour and Hunters Bay

Darling Harbour and bays (Figure 9). Hoop or Lift nets and Dip or Scoop nets are not permitted in the waters of Darling Harbour, Johnston's Bay, White Bay, Rozelle Bay, and Blackwattle Bay, south of a line drawn from the NSW Maritime tower to Darling Street ferry wharf.



Figure 9: Darling Harbour and bays

Barrenjoey Head Aquatic Reserve (Figure 10). Within the reserve you are NOT permitted to take any species of crab. Includes the rocky platform around Barrenjoey Head from the northern end of Station Beach to the northern end of Palm Beach.



Figure 10: Barrenjoey Head Aquatic Reserve

Sydney Harbour Intertidal Protected Area (Figure 11) and its tributaries, including the Parramatta and Lane Cove Rivers and Middle Harbour excluding the shoreline of North Harbour from Manly Point to the southern end of Forty Baskets Beach from the mean high-water mark to 10 meters seaward from the mean low water mark.

The collection or spearing of crabs in these areas is not permitted.

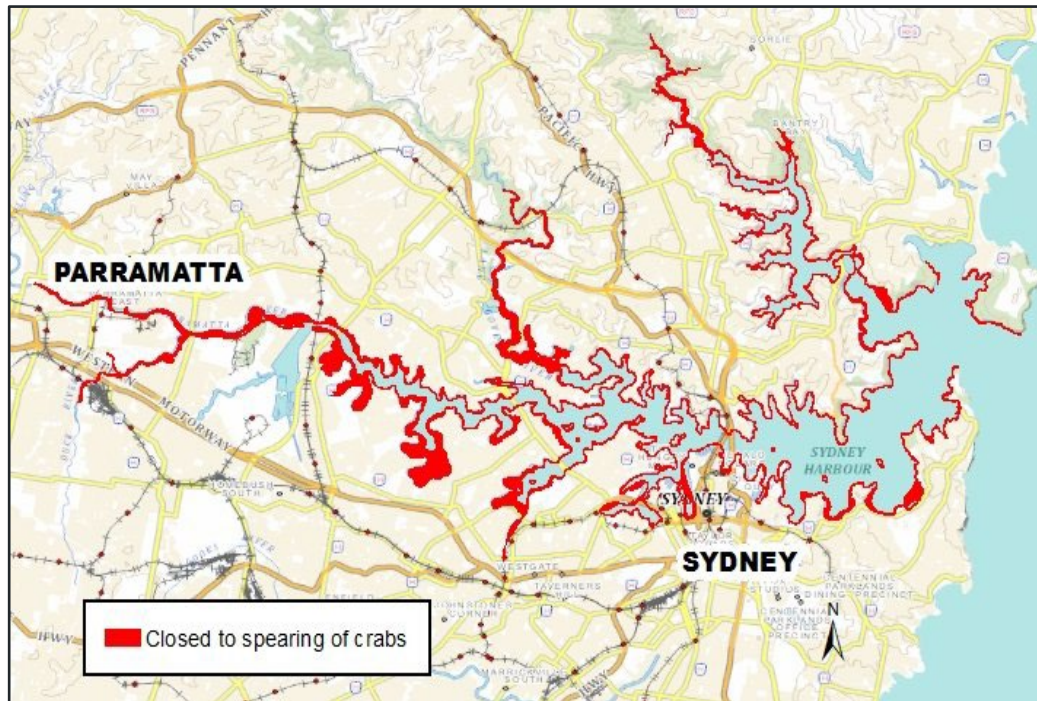


Figure 11: Sydney Harbour Intertidal Protected Area

WATERS WHERE CRAB TRAPS AND NETS CANNOT BE USED

A person must not use a net or trap for taking any fish (includes crabs) unless its use by the person for taking those fish is declared by the regulations to be a lawful use of the net or trap.

Generally, you cannot use any net or trap to take crabs near the mouths of estuaries, in protected or sensitive aquatic environments or in sanctuary zones of marine parks.

Following are net and trap closures relating to crabbing in the Sydney North Fisheries District.

Parramatta River (Silverwater to Parramatta Weir) (Figure 7). The following waters are closed to the use of a net, other than a dip or scoop net (prawns) or a landing net: all tidal waters of Parramatta River and its tributaries, from the Silverwater Road bridge upstream to Parramatta Weir (excluding the waters of Duck River).

North Harbour (Figure 8). Crab traps, Hoop or Lift nets and Dip or Scoop nets are not permitted in the waters north of a line drawn on a bearing of 115° from the eastern extremity of Forty Baskets

Beach to the southern extremity of Manly Point, northern boundary of North Harbour Aquatic Reserve.

Hunters Bay (Figure 8). Hoop or Lift nets and Dip or Scoop nets are not permitted in the waters of Hunters Bay, Middle Harbour, enclosed by a line drawn generally southeasterly from Wyargine Point to the western end of Cobblers Beach from October to March (inclusive).

Curl Curl Lagoon (Figure 12). Crab traps and Hoop or Lift nets are not permitted in Curl Curl Lagoon and its tributaries.

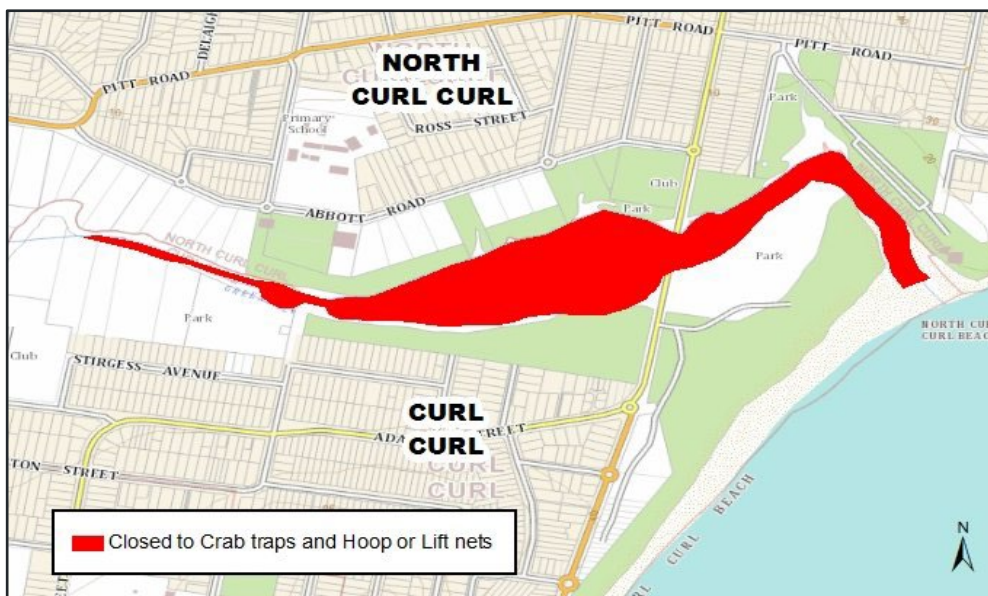


Figure 12: Curl Curl Lagoon

Narrabeen Lake (Figure 13). Crab traps, Hoop or Lift nets and spearfishing are not permitted in the waters of Narrabeen Lake and its tributaries.

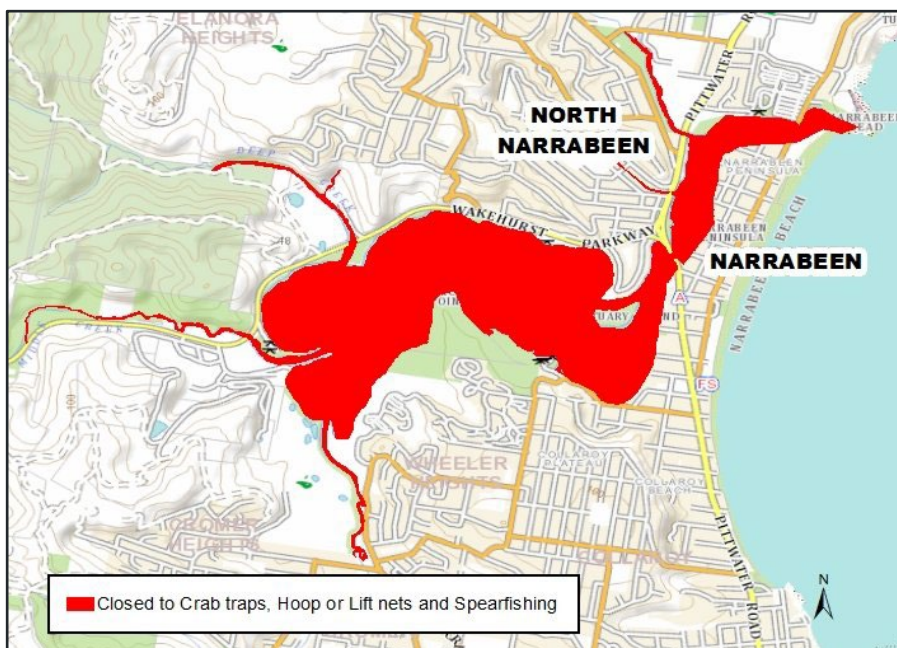


Figure 13: Narrabeen Lake

Lane Cove River (Epping Highway bridge to Little Blue Gum Creek) (Figure 14). The following waters are closed to any method involving the use of a net other than a landing net: that part of Lane Cove River and its tributaries, from the Epping Highway bridge, upstream to a line drawn between two posts on opposite sides of the river at Little Blue Gum Creek.

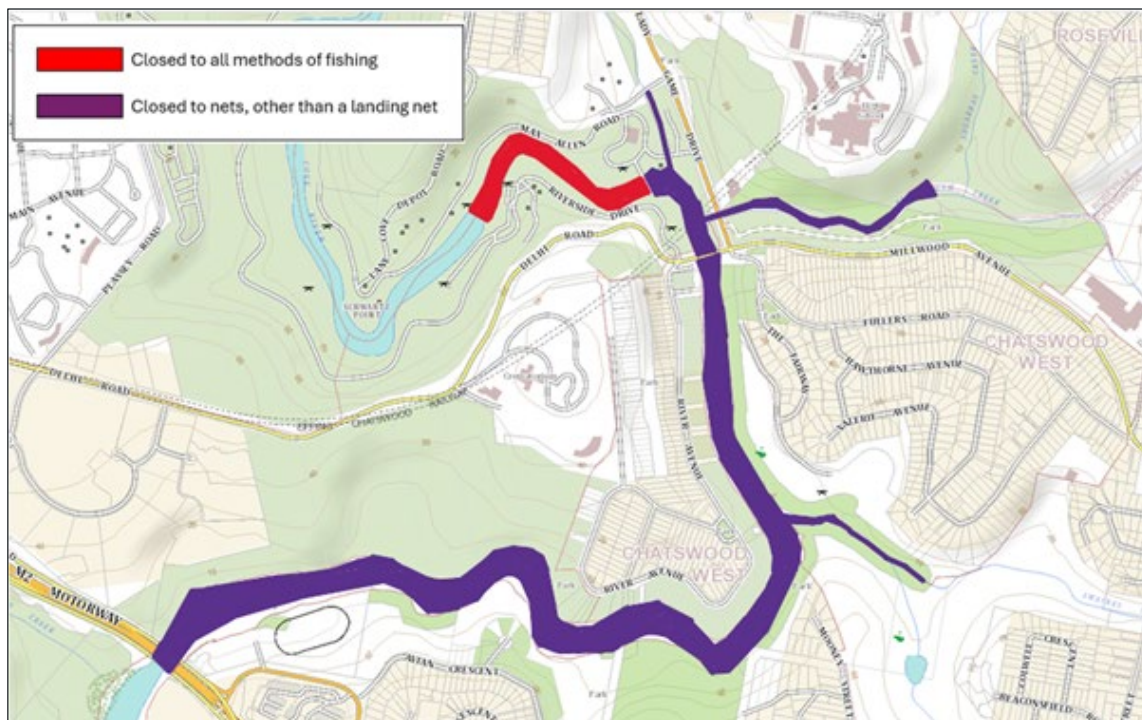


Figure 14: Lane Cove River

Dee Why Lagoon (Figure 15). Crab traps and Hoop or Lift nets are not permitted in the waters of Dee Why Lagoon and its tributaries.



Figure 15: Dee Why Lagoon

Manly Lagoon (Figure 16). Crab traps and Hoop or Lift nets are not permitted in the waters of Manly Lagoon and its tributaries.

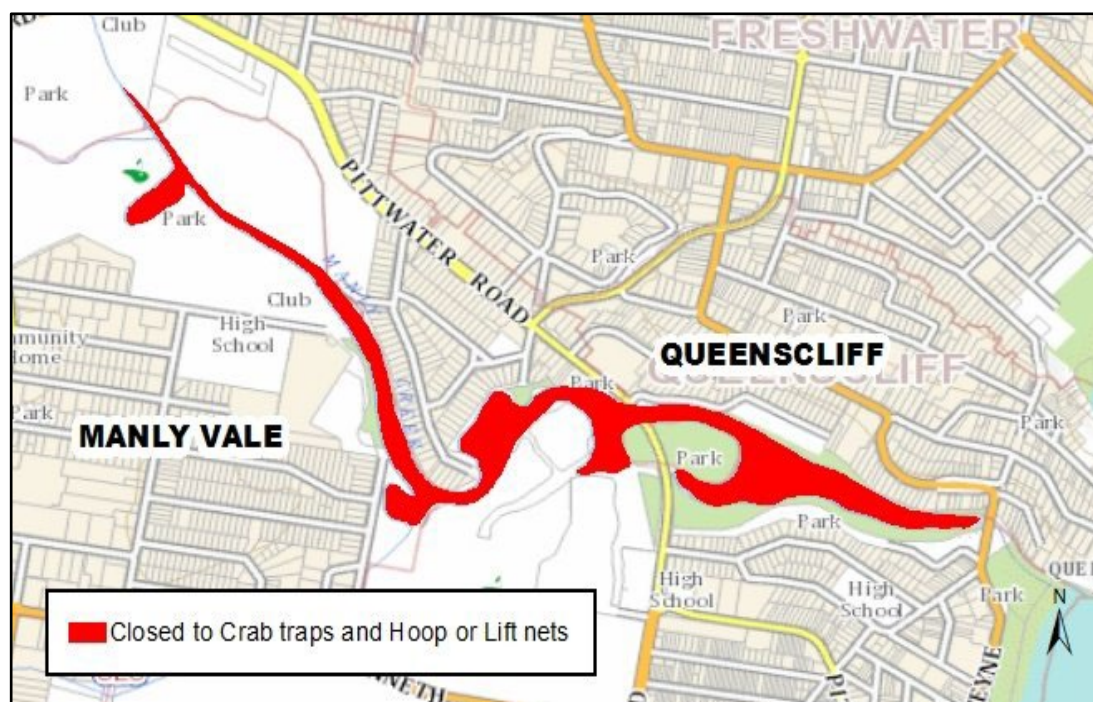


Figure 16: Manly Lagoon

Middle Harbour (Figure 17). Hoop or Lift nets & Dip or Scoop nets are prohibited in the waters of Middle Harbour and its tributaries, upstream from the Roseville Bridge (Warringah Road).

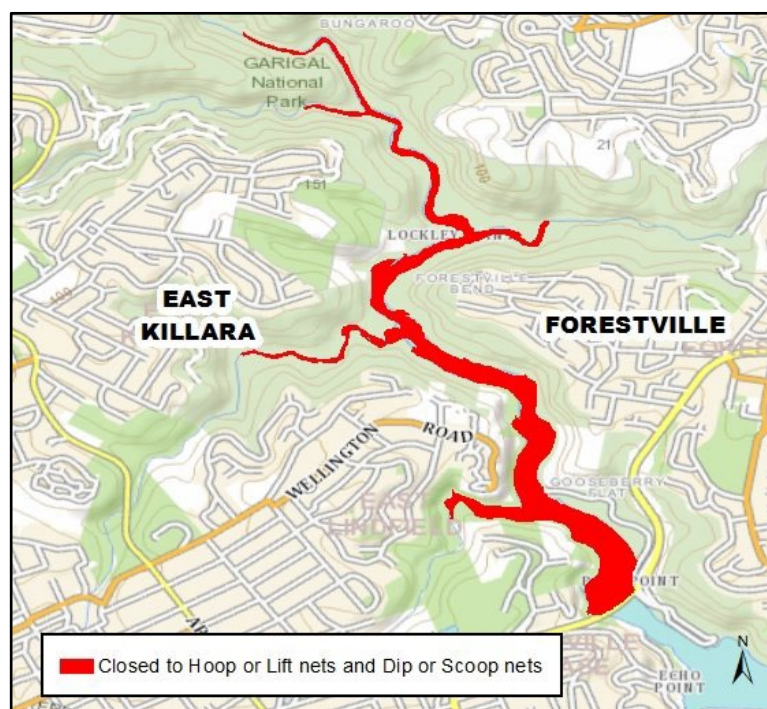


Figure 17: Middle Harbour

Hawkesbury River (Figure 18). Nets of every description (with the exception of a landing net) are not permitted in the Hawkesbury River and its tributaries from the road bridge at Windsor upstream to the Yarramundi Bridge crossing near Agnes Banks.

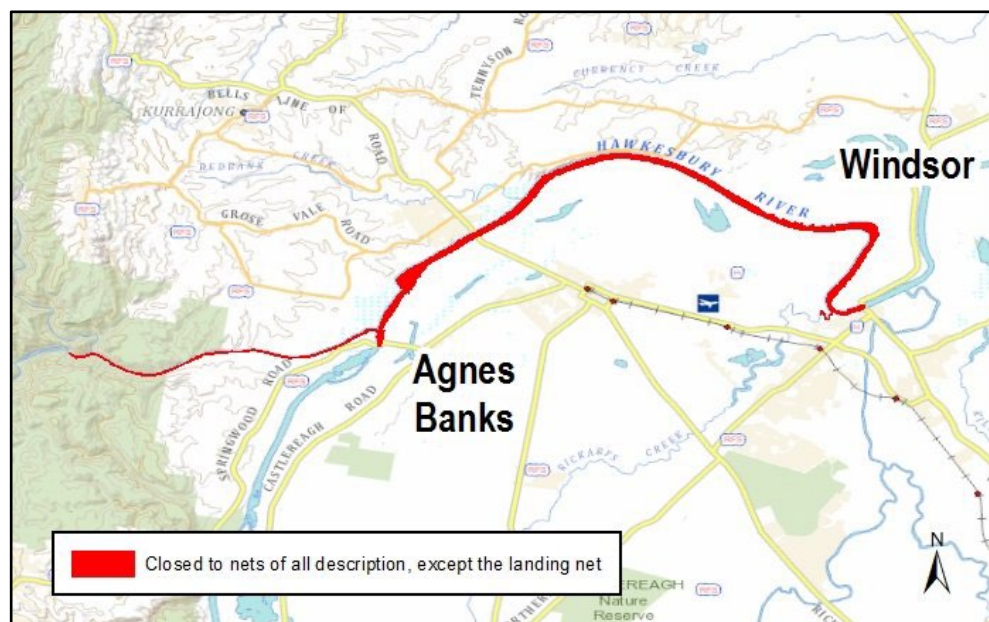


Figure 18: Hawkesbury River

Penalties

Penalties apply to persons who take or possess fish (including invertebrates, shells, etc.) taken in contravention of fishing closures, including aquatic reserves and intertidal protected areas.

Further information

For more information about fishing restrictions that apply to the Central Coast's waterways and beaches, please contact the;

Central Coast Fisheries Office

Central Coast Primary Industries Centre

The University Of Newcastle, Ourimbah Campus

North Loop Road

Phone: 1800 043 536

Web: www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fisheries

Check for updates of this Recreational Fishing Guide at:

<http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fishing/recreational/resources>

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