

## A Deadly Journey

STORY BY SHANNON TYRER



An Indonesian trawl fishing boat is a fleck on the horizon in the Arafura Sea. Wayan looks out from the wheelhouse toward home. It has been months since he's seen the shy smile of his new wife. Unfortunately with the increasing number of poaching vessels, Wayan isn't surprised that the fish have been scarce and he fears he'll have to return all but empty handed.

He decides to take one last risk and navigates skilfully through the choppy water. This area is well known for plentiful shrimp, but is also notorious for sharp coral. Even on the stillest of days precious fishing nets can get ensnared and lost to the sea.

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The torn fishing net moves listlessly through the water expanding and contracting with the tug of the ocean. Ripped from its fishing vessel it has floated for weeks and is now littered with debris. The net is relentless, capturing marine life over and over in its voluminous body. Fish struggle to free themselves, gaining the attention of nearby sharks. There is prey to eat.

As the monsoon weather builds, the currents take the net south-east towards northern Australia leaving a trail of death in its wake. The net reaches the shallows on western shores in Cape York. Aside from some stubborn seaweed, evidence of the deadly journey has been washed away.

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An Olive Ridley turtle feeds in the shallows, oblivious of the expanse of net stretching past. The fibres brush against his flipper and as he backs away they catch his claw. He panics, and trying to free himself he tosses his big body about until he is entirely ensnared.

The tide brings the net to shore. The long stretch of beach is uninhabited. As the waves crash over the entrapped turtle, it's breath begins to labour.

A troupie makes its way along the hard sand. Genan, bounces along in the passenger seat, keeping an eye out for any quarantine hazards that wash shore. The local Indigenous rangers have already collected pieces of driftwood that might be home to borers, whose insatiable appetite could devastate the Australian native forests.

Didj's eyesight is remarkable and he spots the fishing net and entrapped turtle from 100 meters away. "Ghost net" he says, lifting his finger for the other rangers to follow. Pulling over, they gently disentangle the turtle, which makes only an exhausted protest. Whilst the other two rangers carefully lift the 45 kg turtle into the troupie, Didj gathers up the ghost net so it doesn't wash back out to sea and waits for the others to load it up. He tests the green fibres in his fingers; this bit of net is just what Auntie's been looking for he thinks.

Before delivering the ghost net to Auntie, Didj helps to unload the turtle at the triage station in the nearby community. "You're in good hands mate", he says to the turtle before heading on his way.

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Didj was right, Auntie is ecstatic and before too long Auntie's expert fingers have twisted, coiled and woven the ghost net into the shape of a proud bush turkey.

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The woven bush turkey sits with his chest puffed out proudly on a stall at the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair; it's been quite a journey.



## What is a ghost net?

Ghost nets are fishing nets that have been lost at sea. They are called ghost nets because they continue to drift round the ocean with the currents and tides, continuing to catch marine life even though they are no longer being used.

## Why nets?

Most of the fish we eat is not caught on a fishing line (pole fishing) but caught by nets in the ocean. Fishing vessels range in size. The bigger the boat, the bigger the net. Some nets weigh hundreds of kilograms.

Fishing vessels operate in the ocean far away from shore in difficult environmental and climatic conditions. Due to bad weather or strong currents their nets can be lost or damaged. Once a net is lost overboard, it can be very difficult to retrieve it. Sometimes damaged nets are deliberately discarded at sea to avoid spending time and money on proper disposal.

## For discussion:

1. *A Deadly Journey* tells us about part of the journey of one ghost net. How far did it travel and why did it end up in Australia?
2. Why is ghost nets a good name for these fishing nets that are floating round the oceans still entrapping sea creatures and fish?
3. What do you think a troupie is and how large would it be? What is this one used for and who is on it?
4. What are the problems that ghost nets might cause?
5. What ranger work is mentioned in this story?
6. What things might get caught in ghost nets?

It is estimated that worldwide, **800,000 metric tonnes** of ghost nets find their way into the marine environment every year.

## Fibres or plastic?

Traditional nets were made using natural fibres such as hemp, cotton and jute. Today most of the nets are made out of plastic. Plastic nets have made the ghost net issue worse for two main reasons.

1. Plastic is cheap compared to traditional fibres. This makes plastic nets more economical to replace and therefore a more 'disposable' net option.
2. Plastic nets are more durable and buoyant than nets made from traditional fibres. They have the potential to drift around the world for *up to 600 years*.

## Net Art

Recycling nets in Australia is currently not possible but there is a big community of artists who call themselves *The Ghost Net Art Project*, who are making wonderful creations using ghost nets, like this bush turkey made by Zoe De Jersey.

## Further activities:

- Make a board game. You're a fisher who needs to bring in a big catch. Various hurdles such as ghost nets get in your way.
- Fishing with very large nets threatens food sources for poor fisher people. What threatens your food sources? Make a list.

## Websites to check out:

<http://plasticpollutioncoalition.org>  
<http://www.lifewithoutplastic.com>