

Research uncovers the secret of sawfish

BREAKTHROUGH research into Australia's elusive and highly-endangered freshwater sawfish has found the animals use their saw to locate and dismember fish.

It was previously believed sawfish used the saw to dig in the seabed for food, much like shovel-nosed rays and some sharks, however, researchers from the University of WA have debunked the theory.

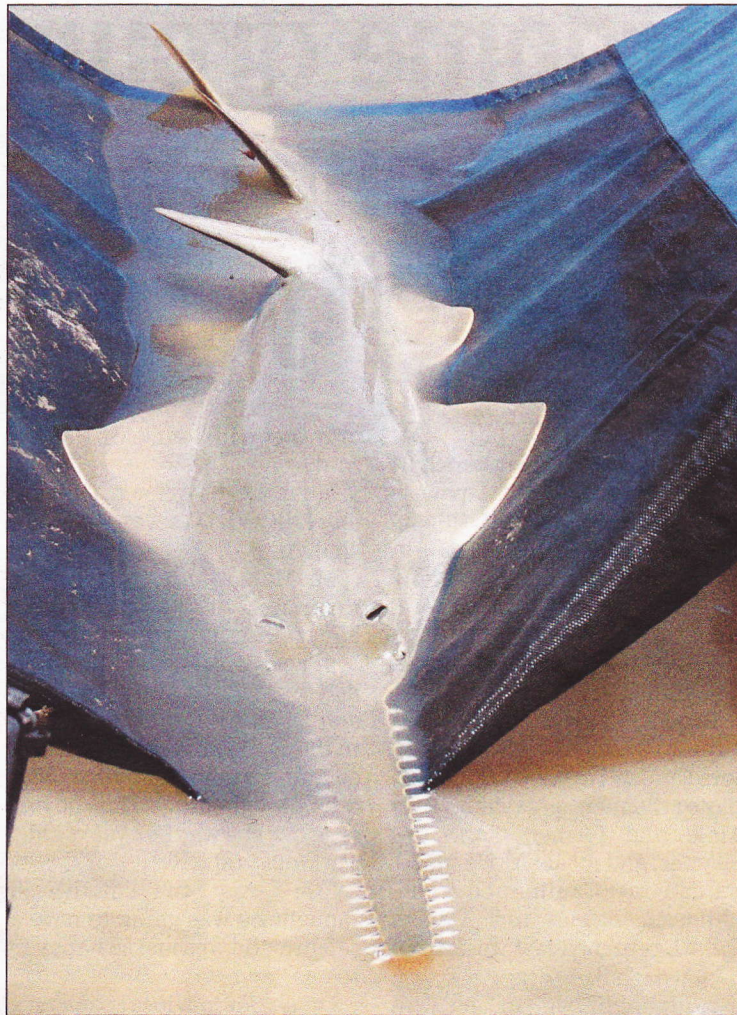
Cairns-based researcher Barbara Wueringer studies the animals, which can grow to more than 5m long, in the Melbourne aquarium.

The aquarium is the only one in the world with freshwater sharks and sawfish.

Ms Wueringer's research found the saw, an elongation of the animal's head, with teeth along its sides, provided them with a sixth sense.

"It is packed with thousands of tiny pore-like organs which can detect the minute electric fields surrounding living organisms, and it can also be used to attack its prey," she said.

Her research found the sawfish had much more concentrated collections of the organs, called ampullary pores, along



A freshwater sawfish captured for research into the Fitzroy River.

Picture: Murdoch University

the top of the saw than relatives such as the shovel-nosed rays.

She said collections indicated the sawfish used the saws to detect prey in a three-dimensional space above the saw.

"Northern Australia is considered to be the last stronghold in the world for four species of saw-

fish, but if we do not understand these animals, we will not be able to save them."

Ms Wueringer's work was last week presented for the first time in public in Melbourne.

UWA's Professor Shaun Collin said Ms Wueringer's changed understanding of sawfish lives.