

# INDIGENOUS FISHING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STATUS REPORT 2009

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## INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have lived in Australia for over 40 000 years. In the Northern Territory (NT), many Indigenous groups live on the coast, nearly half of them in remote or rural areas, making up 30% of the NT population (ABS 2006).

Subsistence fishing is an important part of Aboriginal culture in the NT as it is a traditional source of protein and economic benefit. In addition, many of the freshwater and marine species found in billabongs, rivers and coastal waters of northern Australia are totemic to Aboriginal people and are therefore of great cultural significance.

The NT *Fisheries Act 1988* makes provision for Aboriginal people to continue traditional use of NT fish and aquatic life.

Most Indigenous fishing activities which occur close to communities and outstations, are widespread across the northern part of the NT. Such activity occurs in inshore waters (61%), estuarine waters (11%) and on rivers (17%) (Henry and Lyle 2003).

Most of NT coastal Aboriginal groups continue to practise customary management, education and law relating to the sea. These customary laws have been passed down over generations in the form of stories, dance, song, art and ceremony. Customary management styles vary across the NT, with each group respecting others' boundaries for hunting and fishing. This usually means that Aboriginal people will prefer to fish and hunt within their own country and would seek permission before fishing in someone else's. Aboriginal customary fishing and hunting are undertaken according to season, which allows species to be targeted when in abundance and when in prime condition (Davis 1983).

Some areas of significance, such as sacred sites, may exclude Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous people, depending on the level of cultural significance. These exclusions may be according to age or gender. In addition, some species have totemic value and cannot be harvested by particular people. These restrictions also act as management tools that help protect species and habitats. Many Indigenous groups continue to manage their resources, by acting as community leaders, sea and marine rangers.

## PLANNING AND CONSULTATION

The NT Government has identified a need for greater Indigenous participation in various economic development activities, including aquaculture, fishing tourism and wild harvest fishing ventures to create long-term employment and producing positive economic and social outcomes. Such outcomes can only be achieved by establishing new partnerships with Indigenous communities while maintaining old alliances and by fostering a constructive working environment with Land Councils, other Indigenous organisations and the fishing industry to identify, negotiate and implement Indigenous economic development opportunities in the fishing industry.

A number of initiatives to increase the involvement of Indigenous Territorians in the seafood industry and aquatic resource management have been successfully implemented over time, including:

- Establishing and maintaining recreational fishing campsites on Aboriginal land.
- Establishing agreements between Aboriginal landowners and commercial fishermen.
- Implementing a Dugong Code of Practice for the commercial fishing sector.

- Donating vessels to coastal ranger groups to carry out coastal surveillance.
- Establishing an Indigenous apprenticeship program in the Department of Resources (DoR).
- Establishing the Indigenous Community Marine Ranger Program (ICMRP).
- Developing and delivering Certificate II Fisheries Compliance (Seafood Industry) training to Indigenous rangers.
- Using funds from the Natural Heritage Trust for conducting a pilot trial survey on the impact of Indigenous people on sharks and rays.
- Researching new and innovative aquaculture farming models suitable for remote Indigenous communities.

### **Consultative Committees**

Many Indigenous groups have been included in the management of fish and aquatic life in the NT through the establishment of Aboriginal Fisheries Consultative Committees (AFCCs) by the Department of Resources (DoR). One of the principal roles of AFCCs is to provide a mechanism that allows information flow between Aboriginal people engaged in customary fishery management practices and the NT Government. Information obtained from AFCCs is incorporated into contemporary fisheries management decision-making processes. In addition, AFCCs provide Aboriginal communities with an avenue to voice their concerns about matters relating to fisheries to Government.

Information provided to Indigenous communities through AFCC meetings increases Indigenous understanding of potential opportunities for involvement in commercial fishing, aquaculture, tourism, resource management and research.

Currently, there are seven established committees in the NT, two of which met during 2009. The composition of Aboriginal members on

each committee is determined by the relevant community. AFCCs also have representatives from the Water Police Section of the NT Police, Fire and Emergency Services, DoR, the Amateur Fishermen's Association of the NT, the NT Seafood Council and other government agencies as required.

AFCCs are being reviewed to improve Indigenous engagement in the fishing industry. DoR is developing an efficient fisheries management framework to include Indigenous input more effectively.

### **Government Liaison and Community Involvement**

The maintenance of an open communication process with Aboriginal communities has enabled DoR to build a capacity among Indigenous people to participate in the long-term sustainable management of aquatic resources in the NT.

Through the AFCC consultative process, DoR conducts discussions and plans and implements new fisheries initiatives relevant to coastal Aboriginal communities. This may include exploring commercial development opportunities for remote coastal communities, which may help resolve social and economic problems that many communities face.

Indigenous people are also represented on individual Fishery Ministerial Advisory Committees, which provide advice to the Executive Director of Fisheries and the Minister on sustainable fisheries management.

In the past few years, there has been an increase in the participation rate by Indigenous people in the broader use of aquatic resources.

To further enhance the capability and knowledge sharing between Government and Aboriginal people, DoR has employed a manager, a marine ranger coordinator and a support officer to carry out community engagement activities, including on-going consultation, economic development and resource management. This also includes the employment of Indigenous apprentices. Since

the employment of the first four Indigenous apprentices in 2003, 16 more have been employed to work in DoR. The apprentices develop skills in a wide range of areas in fisheries management and have completed qualifications in Certificate II and III Business Administration and Certificate III Seafood Industry (Aquaculture).

The Indigenous Development Unit (IDU) in DoR employed one Indigenous apprentice in 2009 and extended the employment of another apprentice for an additional 12 months.

IDU conducted nine field trips to remote communities to work with marine rangers, meet with traditional owners to discuss fisheries management issues and work with interested people in economic development activities.

## MARINE RANGER PROGRAM

The NT Government commenced funding for Indigenous ranger groups through ICMRP in 2002 and continues to allocate annual grants of \$60 000 to each ranger group. The program currently involves eight marine ranger groups that are strategically based along the NT coastline and include the Tiwi Islands, Borrooloola, Port Keats, Maningrida, Goulburn Island, Elcho Island, Groote Eylandt and Ngukurr.

ICMRP facilitates and provides fisheries monitoring and surveillance support in local coastal waters. It also promotes a culture of environmental responsibility and continues to strengthen community leadership. Increasingly, the marine ranger groups are playing an important role in educating both Indigenous and non-Indigenous fishers, as well as providing a visual presence on water to help deter illegal fishing activities.

The marine ranger groups provide regular reports of their coastal activities to DoR. Information contained in these reports is forwarded to other relevant agencies, such as the Water Police and the Australian Customs Service. Funded marine ranger groups conducted 134 patrols in 2009. In July 2009, DoR amended the Marine Ranger

grant agreements to ensure that each group conducted a minimum of 40 patrols per year. This will increase the expected number of patrols next year.

A nationally accredited Certificate II Fisheries Compliance (Seafood Industry) course was held at Charles Darwin University's Katherine campus in 2009. The course provided an opportunity for marine rangers across the NT to meet and develop their skills. Twenty four rangers attended and completed the course. The Water Police provided essential support in the delivery of the training course that included:

- Intelligence, surveillance and evidence gathering.
- Presenting evidence in court.
- Communicating in cross cultural environments.
- Promoting the sustainable use of aquatic resources.
- Working effectively in the seafood industry.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Indigenous people make up about 30% of the NT population, 80% of whom live in remote or rural areas. Aboriginal identified land covers 84% of the NT coast line. In the recent past, there has been an increase in sustainable employment opportunities in remote areas. These opportunities have arisen through NT Government and Commonwealth-funded ventures (such as those supported by Indigenous Business Australia and Regional Development grants) in fishing and aquaculture industries, as well as through ongoing support to ICMRP.

Many coastal community groups live in certain geographical locations where they own land, which makes them potentially eligible for joining existing activities in the fishing industry and also developing new fishing enterprises. The NT Government is committed to facilitate and

enhance partnerships with Aboriginal groups to increase their economic development and employment opportunities.

A number of Aboriginal communities are actively involved in the commercial fishing industry with several groups or individuals owning licences, including Aboriginal Coastal, Coastal Net, Barramundi, Mud Crab and Aquarium Fishing/Display licences. IDU visited remote communities throughout 2009 to conduct a range of activities, including training and the provision of advice on economic development opportunities

Some Aboriginal groups and individuals have joined Fishing Tour Operators to facilitate the use of landbased facilities established on Aboriginal land.

## **SOCIAL BENEFITS**

Fishing is an important lifestyle activity for Indigenous people in northern Australia. It assists them to maintain a healthy diet. In part, fishing also allows communities and families to retain their independence and connection to their country.

Many studies have documented the importance of wildlife catch in the diet of Indigenous people. Seafood has also been shown to contribute a large proportion of caloric intake for those living in coastal outstations.

The value of food collecting, hunting and fishing is important in maintaining the social cohesion of communities. Social networks are reinforced through the customary sharing of gathered food. Hunting is also used as an important educational tool for teaching younger people to adhere to Aboriginal law through the expression of knowledge and strengthening spiritual beliefs.

Indigenous subsistence fishing does not value individual species in a similar way to the commercial and recreational fishing sectors, but rather as a valuable source of protein. The Indigenous fishing sector targets species when they are most abundant and in prime condition. Other fishing is done opportunistically with

virtually no waste or bycatch. Most Indigenous fishing takes place as a family event or for the purpose of education, cultural maintenance and ceremony. It is a cultural obligation to provide food for everyone and as such, there is very little discarded catch.

A range of issues exist that relate to Indigenous engagement in resource management and economic development. The cost of entry into the fishing industry is too high for most Aboriginal people. There is also a shortage of fishing industry related skills in remote areas. Coastal Aboriginal people know where the fish hide and how to catch them; however, this alone does not guarantee a sustainable business. Fishing industry training and capacity-building needs to be implemented in remote communities. However, there also needs to be employment outcomes to complement any training. Fishing industry training that can also be applied to other jobs, thereby providing Indigenous people with a range of career options is necessary.

## **RESEARCH**

Through ICMRP many Indigenous groups are becoming more active in the monitoring of community fishing activities.

Marine rangers commenced work in 2008 on collaborative research projects with the NT Seafood Council and DoR. The research projects aim to identify juvenile red snapper nursery grounds and the location, distribution and abundance of juvenile mud crabs. The research projects continued through early 2009 with the assistance IDU. Further information on these projects can be found in the Timor Reef Fishery Status Report 2009 and the Mud Crab Fishery Status Report 2009.

Manager, Indigenous Development – Mr Bo Carne

## **REFERENCES**

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