

The background is a solid light blue color. A series of teardrop-shaped elements, resembling a fish's tail or a curved path, starts from the left edge and curves downwards towards the right. In the lower-left quadrant, there are several concentric, semi-circular shapes in varying shades of blue, suggesting waves or a circular pattern. The text "indigenous fishing" is centered in the upper half of the image.

indigenous fishing

Indigenous Fishing Status Report 2004

INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have lived in Australia for over 40 000 years. Many Indigenous groups lived on the coast and depended on the sea for social, cultural and subsistence benefits. Subsistence fishing continues to form an important part of Aboriginal culture in the Top End as well as a traditional source of protein. Many of the marine and freshwater species found in the billabongs, rivers and along the coastline of northern Australia are totemic to Aboriginal people and therefore of great cultural significance.

The majority of Northern Territory coastal Aboriginal groups continue to practise customary management and education relating to the sea through law that has been passed down over generations in the form of stories, dance, song, art and ceremony. Management styles varied, with some Aboriginal groups electing families to act as sea managers while others allow people to undertake this role in their mothers' country. This usually means that Aboriginal people will only fish and hunt within their own country and would seek permission before fishing in someone else's country. Aboriginal customary fishing and hunting is done according to seasons, which allows species to be targeted when in abundance and in prime condition. These are some examples of the customary management practices used by Aboriginal people to ensure the sustainability of their aquatic resources.

Today Aboriginal groups have established community ranger programs for the purpose of natural resource management and protection. Six community marine ranger groups receive funding and support from the Fisheries Group annually. Ranger groups report fishing activities in their respective areas.

PROFILE OF THE FISHERY

Commercial Sector

Under the NT *Fisheries Act 1988*, Indigenous people have the same access to commercial fishing licences as those from any other cultural group. However, the high costs of

purchasing commercial licenses remains a significant barrier to their entry into the fishing industry and therefore restricts the level of Indigenous participation. The exact number of Indigenous owned commercial licences is not known as new applicants or current holders of such licenses are not required to advise of their ethnicity. However, it is known that two barramundi licences and two developmental coastal net licences were held by Indigenous people in 2004. At least one mud crab licence and one coastal line licence is Indigenous owned and operated.

In 2004, there were 2 Aboriginal coastal licences issued within the Northern Territory. Each community may have only one community licence and the community council or traditional owners must nominate the licensee. This fishing licence allows the licensee to catch and sell fish (except managed species) within their own community. There are no reporting requirements for this type of licence. To look at ways of increasing opportunities and capacity for Indigenous Territorians to participate in commercial fishing, the Northern Territory Government is currently reviewing the nature of Aboriginal coastal licenses.

Area

In 2004, Aboriginal coastal licenses were in operation in the north east Arnhem Land and Bathurst Island regions.

Fishing Method

Aboriginal coastal licenses allow for the use of amateur fishing gear, including amateur dragnets that are the most common fishing method used with this type of licence.

Fishing Tour Operator Sector

Some Aboriginal groups and individuals have established agreements with Fishing Tour Operators (FTOs). Such agreements may include employment opportunities or payments for the use of land based facilities established on Aboriginal land.

Indigenous Sector

The impact of Indigenous fishing activities were only assessed on a large scale for the first time in 2000 with the completion of the Northern Territory component of the *National Recreational and Indigenous Fishing Survey* (NRIFS). The data described in the following headings is taken from this survey research.

Area

The majority of Indigenous fishing activities occurs in the close vicinity of communities and out-stations and is widespread across the northern part of the Territory. Such activity occurs in inshore and estuarine waters (61% and 11% respectively) and rivers (17%).

Fishing Method

The most preferred fishing method for Indigenous fishers in 2000 was the use of lines that represented 45% of all fishing events. Not surprisingly the use of bait (84%) was far more common than using lures (16%). Surface spearfishing, hand collecting and cast nets account for the majority of the remaining fishing effort.

Catch

In 2000, Indigenous people living in communities in the Northern Territory harvested over 1.5 million individual fish and other aquatic organisms. The most prevalent species of finfish taken by Indigenous fishers were mullet (83,000 or 5% of the total harvest), catfish (60,000 or 4%) and barramundi (44,000 or 3%). The most important non-fish species were mussels (580,000 or 35% of the total harvest) and mud crabs (86,000 or 5%).

Indigenous fishers also harvested a range of species that cannot be taken by non-Indigenous people. These species included turtles, dugongs, crocodiles and mangrove worms.

Effort

In 2000, a total of 20,700 Indigenous people living in communities in the northern region of the Territory went fishing. This represented 91% of the area population. A total of 245,698 days fishing was expended, and on average this equates to 12 days of fishing per fisher per year.

Non-retained Species

Many Indigenous groups would prefer not to waste any food that is caught, so only a very small amount of the catch is released.

Eco-system Impact

The effect on the eco-system by Indigenous fishing is unknown. However, in localised areas near to Indigenous population centres, fishing activities will have some impact on the surrounding eco-system.

Social Impact

Fishing is an important lifestyle activity for Indigenous people in Northern Australia and assists with maintaining a more healthy diet. In part fishing allows communities and families to retain their independence and connection to country.

Many studies have documented the importance of wildlife catch in the diet of Indigenous people, and seafood has also been shown to contribute a large proportion of caloric intake for those living in coastal out-stations.

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

Economic Impact

Aboriginal coastal net licence holders are able to catch and sell non-managed species, allowing them to gain some economic benefit. However, some Indigenous fishers will give away their catch to their extended families rather than sell it as cultural status and obligation still remains strong in many Aboriginal communities. Generally, commercial licences offer lower levels of employment opportunities, and most licences are only viable with the employment of between two to four people.

STOCK ASSESSMENT

Monitoring

As mentioned earlier, Indigenous fishing activities have only been assessed on a large scale for the first time through the NRIFS research undertaken in 2000. Other monitoring programs tend to be fishery specific and such details have been included within individual fishery status reports contained elsewhere in this publication.

Stock Assessment Methods and Reliability

Information gained from the Indigenous fishing sector may also be used as part of species specific stock assessments. However, a variety of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal agencies and groups have questioned the reliability of data collection methods that have been used. More specific stock assessment information has been included in the individual fishery status reports within this document.

Current Exploitation Status

Catch data obtained about the impact of the Indigenous fishing sector has been included within individual fishery status reports.

Future Assessment Needs

Continuing assessment of the Indigenous fishing sector is required. A methodology for such assessment has been established with a view to collecting such information as part of the proposed Territory-wide surveys of recreational fishing to be undertaken at five-yearly intervals.

RESEARCH

Summary to Date

Prior to 2000, there was no research concentrating specifically on the Indigenous fishing sector. In 2000, the NRIFS was conducted with the aim of this national survey to provide detailed information that would be available on a total fishery basis. In some States this was possible by combining the recreational catch with that of the commercial sector. However in some areas, particularly northern Australia, Indigenous people are also an important user of fisheries resources. On this basis, the terms of reference for the national survey were expanded to include all non-commercial fishing and included a survey of Indigenous fishing in northern Australia. The specific objectives of a component of the NRIFS were to quantify the catch and effort of the Indigenous fishing sector in Northern Australia.

A community/dwelling based area sample with face to face interviewing was used.

Incorporation into Management

Information obtained from the 2000 NRIFS focused research on Indigenous fishing has been used by the Fisheries Group for a variety of purposes, including as part of the management of individual fisheries as well as the planning of future activities.

Current Research

At present there is no specific research currently being undertaken on general Indigenous fishing activities. However, it is planned to undertake new research as part of the proposed Territory-wide surveys of recreational fishing to be undertaken at five-yearly intervals.

MANAGEMENT/GOVERNANCE

Management

Objective

Indigenous groups have been included in the management process through the establishment of Aboriginal Fisheries Consultative Committees (AFCC). These Committees offer a mechanism for Indigenous Territorians to contribute to the management of resources within their sea country. The aim of the AFCC process is to provide a mechanism that allows an information flow between Aboriginal people engaging in customary fishery management practices and the Fisheries Group using more contemporary management approaches.

In addition to AFCCs, Indigenous representation also exists on the Aquatic Resource User Group Forum (ARUG), and individual Fishery Management Advisory Committees (FMACs), both of which provide advice to the Minister for Primary Industry and Fisheries.

History

Aboriginal groups throughout the Northern Territory have managed their marine resources in a sustainable manner for many thousands of years. European settlement saw the implementation of western management regimes. Prior to 1993, consultation between the Fisheries Group, Aboriginal communities and the fishing industry in relation to fisheries management regimes tended to be on an informal basis only. In 1993, the first AFCC was established in the Northern Territory, which focused on information sharing between the parties and providing coastal Aboriginal communities a mechanism to voice their concerns relating to fisheries management in a more formal manner. There are now seven consultative committees across the Northern Territory.

Further recognition of Aboriginal people as an important stakeholder group occurred in 1996 with the creation of a dedicated Aboriginal Liaison Officer position within the

Fisheries Group. Subsequently, this has led to the formation of the Indigenous Liaison and Economic Development Unit within Fisheries, which is staffed by three full-time officers.

Current issues

Management of the Indigenous fishery in the Northern Territory is part of an integrated approach. Certain key species have specific management arrangements and these details are included in individual fishery status reports contained elsewhere in this publication.

The Northern Territory *Fisheries Act 1988* exempts Aboriginal people from the restrictions of bag limits, size limits or taking of any protected species, if they are fishing and hunting within their own traditional country. This allows Aboriginal people to continue with their custodial rights and to practice customary management with regard to aquatic resources.

To further enhance the capacity and knowledge sharing between Government and Aboriginal people, in 2004, the Fisheries Group employed a Manager and Support Officer to carry out community engagement activities including on-going consultation, economic development and resource management. This also included the employment of two Indigenous Apprentices with one Apprentice taking up an offer of permanent employment with the Unit.

Aboriginal groups have had to face the challenge of managing their traditional resources while living in communities made up of multiple clan groups. Over recent years there has been a trend for Aboriginal people to move back to their homelands. This outcome may reduce some of the pressure on local fish and other aquatic stocks. However these stocks often have the added fishing pressure from outside influences such as the recreational, fishing tour and commercial fishing sectors.

This combined impact on fishing resources may lead to a requirement to restrict the level of total fishing activity. It is important to note that under the NT *Fisheries Act 1988*, specific provisions exist ensuring that Aboriginal fishing activities would be the last area targeted with restrictions should such steps be deemed necessary to protect a resource.

Future plans

There is a desire to increase the number of AFCCs and broaden their scope to ensure that the consultative approach adopted by the Fisheries Group is more inclusive.

Compliance

The Northern Territory Police Marine and Fisheries Enforcement Unit undertake the monitoring, compliance and enforcement of fishing activities in Northern Territory waters. However, a network of Indigenous community marine rangers has been established across the Northern Territory to deal with localised monitoring and surveillance of coastal waters. Increasingly, these rangers play an important role in educating both Indigenous and non-Indigenous fishers, as well as being a visual presence on the water.

Marine rangers have been established on the Tiwi Islands, Borroloola, Port Keats, Maningrida, Goulburn Island and at Elcho Island. In 2004, three ranger groups completed Certificate II Level courses in Fisheries Compliance.

Consultation, Communication and Education

The AFCCs were established to give coastal Aboriginal communities an avenue to voice their concerns to Government with matters relating to fisheries, as well as providing an opportunity for Indigenous Territorians to take a more formal role in the contemporary management of aquatic resources. After the first Committee was established in 1993, a further five were established between 1995 and 1998. The Maningrida Fisheries Consultative Committee

was established in 2004. There are currently seven of these committees and it is intended to establish another two.

Aboriginal members decide on the composition of each committee, which also includes representatives from the following agencies and departments: Northern Territory Police Marine and Fisheries Enforcement Unit, Fisheries Group, Amateur Fisherman's Association of the NT, NT Seafood Council, relevant Land Councils, and the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Environment. In 2004, nine AFCC meetings were conducted and these took place both in Darwin and in local communities.

The consultative process provides an opportunity for the Northern Territory Government to discuss, plan and implement new initiatives relevant to coastal communities. This may include exploring commercial development opportunities for remote coastal communities in order to help with social and economic problems that many of them face. These committees give Government the opportunity to work closely with Indigenous Territorians on issues from the 'grass roots' level.

To date, a number of issues and projects discussed through the AFCC process have successfully contributed to the management of NT fisheries. These include:

- the introduction of a possession limit on painted crayfish;
- the establishment of recreational fishing campsites on Aboriginal land;
- agreements with commercial crabbers for restricted access areas;
- a fisheries compliance course for Aboriginal Community Police Officers;
- a greater awareness of the FISHWATCH campaign;
- a greater emphasis on Indigenous economic development in the fishing industry;
- development of an Indigenous Aquaculture Policy for the NT;
- the implementation of a Dugong Code of Practice;

- the introduction of Indigenous Community Marine Ranger networks; and
- the donation of vessels* to coastal ranger groups to carry out coastal surveillance.

*Note – A number of these vessels had previously been seized by officers from the NT Police's Marine and Fisheries Enforcement Unit as allegedly they had been engaged in illegal fishing activities contrary to provisions under the *Fisheries Act 1988*. If convicted under the Act, such vessels (and other items) used in the commissioning of an offence may be forfeited to the Director of Fisheries, who in turn has powers with respect to the disposal of seized goods.

There have also been several other projects including undertaking research activities, school visits and the cleaning up of marine debris.

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Reference

Henry, G. W. and Lyle, J.M. (Eds.) (2003). The National Recreational and Indigenous Fishing Survey. FRDC Project No. 99/158. NSW Fisheries Final Report Series.