

Ethnobiology in the NT



What is the project about?

Due to the history of settlement of northern Australia large amounts of traditional biological knowledge are currently threatened with extinction as senior elders from various languages pass away. This knowledge is ancient and is an integral part of Australia's cultural heritage. For the countrymen who are the knowledge custodians it also represents a critical aspect of biological knowledge diversity and indeed of the biological diversity itself.

Research

The primary aim of the Ethnobiology Project is to work with Aboriginal people, where requested, in the Top End of the Northern Territory to record the diversity of traditional knowledge of plants and animals in a culturally sensitive and scientifically sound manner.

Recording traditional biological knowledge began in 1987 and the formal establishment of the Ethnobiology Project occurred in 1991. During its operation the Ethnobiology Project has pioneered innovative mechanisms for protecting intellectual property rights of Aboriginal knowledge custodians by facilitating authorship, copyright and publishing rights to traditional owners.

The project has since its inception published accounts of traditional plant knowledge with 17 Top End Aboriginal languages, and has published accounts of traditional animal knowledge with six languages. A number of languages are currently being recorded and these will be completed in the future.

The project has also produced a series of colour pocket sized identikits and posters to help promote a general awareness of the importance of traditional biological knowledge; including bush tucker, a bush medicine, colour and string and calendar plants.

Recent collaborative research with the Wardaman Aboriginal Corporation and the Jawoyn Association has resulted in the trial sale of wild thyme and crocodile flowers at Nitmiluk National Park. These products have been developed with Aboriginal elders based on previous traditional knowledge recording projects and aim to use traditional knowledge as a value adding tool while returning all economic benefits to Aboriginal communities

A significant amount of similar knowledge recording has also been undertaken in the Kimberley region in conjunction with the Kimberley Language Resource Centre, WWF and the Kimberley Land Council.

