Customary Fisheries Management

Background

Subsistence fishing has been undertaken along the Northern Territory (NT) coast since the first occupation of the region by Aboriginal tribes over 40,000 years ago (O'Donohue, 1993). During their occupation of the land and seas, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had carried out their custodial rights, hunting and collecting marine resources in a sustainable manner. It is clear that Aboriginal and Islander interests in the coastal zones are vastly different from those of other Australians. 'It is a relationship based on a long tradition of customary ownership, resource and access rights, and management obligations' (Smyth, 1993: 19). For example, sacred sites that have restricted or no access act as conservation zones. Many of the marine and freshwater species are totemic for the Top End Aboriginal people featuring in many of their art, craft and stories. These totemic values are linked to the protection of these species which is a form of customary management.

Under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act, Aboriginal people are able to assert their interest and rights in coastal areas. The Blue Mud Bay High Court’s decision 2008 further recognised these rights to reaffirm that Aboriginal land included waters landward of the low water mark. This affects approximately 85 per cent of the NT’s inter-tidal zone where the majority of barramundi and mud crab commercial and recreational fishing is undertaken. There is now more than ever a strong need for government to work with Land Councils and Aboriginal people to establish a fisheries management regime that can effectively engage Aboriginal interests.

Aboriginal engagement in contemporary management

Fisheries Division will continue to work with Aboriginal Traditional Owners through various forums to ensure they are engaged in Fisheries Management processes. Such forums include local (fisheries) Management Committees and Indigenous Protected Area steering committees.

Outcomes

Since the establishment of the Aboriginal Consultative Committees, the following are just some outcomes that have been achieved as requested by Aboriginal people:

- Marine Debris survey around Groote Eylandt;
- Employment of an Aboriginal Liaison Officer with Fisheries Division, this has since led to the establishment of an Indigenous Development Unit;
- Recreational possession limit on painted crayfish;
- Aboriginal representation on Fisheries Management Advisory Committees;
- Support towards Aboriginal Community Sea Rangers through the establishment of the Indigenous Community Marine Ranger Program;
- Joint research projects engaging Sea Rangers in juvenile mud crab and snapper research, survey of customary harvest of sharks and stingrays and barramundi research;
- Fisheries Guidelines to ensure Aboriginal sea rangers are engaged wherever possible in any fisheries research activities;

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• Employment of Indigenous people as Apprentices within Fisheries Division;
• Pilot projects for Indigenous engagement in aquaculture, including mud crab, trepang and giant clams;
• Fisheries Compliance (Seafood Industry) Certificate II & III delivered to Aboriginal Sea Rangers;
• Certificate II Measuring and Analysis delivered to sea rangers. This supports their engagement in fisheries research projects;
• Development of an Indigenous Fishing Strategy;
• Establishment of East Arnhem Fisheries Network project that has seen the formation of the Garngirr Fishing Aboriginal Corporation; and,
• Establishment of formal Indigenous Marine Training in Nhulunbuy.