

Project update

ABORIGINAL FISHING VALUES ON THE NEW SOUTH WALES SOUTH COAST

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WHILE FISHING IS A POPULAR pastime and important commercial industry in Australia, for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples it is a way of life. Going fishing can be a central cultural practice, as well as a way of providing sustenance, income, and opportunities to connect with family, friends and country.

Since mid-2015 AIATSIS Native Title, Land and Water has been working with Indigenous communities to identify the livelihood values of Indigenous fishing in three different areas of Australia: the New South Wales South Coast, the Far West Coast of South Australia, and the Crocodile Islands in the Northern Territory. As the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as important stakeholders in fisheries management increases, it is essential that governments and the private sector understand local cultural perspectives on fishing, and in what ways fishing practices are valued.

On the South Coast of NSW there is a rich cultural fishing tradition that has continued to the present day. As Tom Butler, a Murramarang man and ex-commercial fisherman from the township of Mogo says,

Twice the European people tried to settle at Broulee and they would have starved, only for the Aboriginal fishermen, including my grandfather. We've been doing it in this country thousands of years more than white men put together have been doing it; we know how fish react, we know how they travel, we know where they travel, we know what time of year they travel. Our parents taught us, we were brought up living off the sea.

On the South Coast the AIATSIS project team has been working with the New South Wales Aboriginal Fishing Rights Group (AFRG).

The AFRG is a network of people who have been advocating for the recognition of Aboriginal fishing rights on the South Coast since 2014. They are using the project to record the fishing values of the Yuin nation and other Aboriginal groups on the South Coast, and to document the ways in which fisheries-related regulations has restricted their ability to carry out cultural fishing practices, as well as the broader impacts these restrictions have on the community.

Starting in March this year more than 70 people were interviewed by project staff from communities along the South Coast, from Nowra to Eden. The stories of community members revealed ways in which fishing regulations impact not just Aboriginal fishers, but their families and communities, too. These go far beyond just making it harder to fish; there are flow-on effects that touch every part of people's lives.

cultural

Much harder to practically pass on culture and knowledge

Kids aren't taken fishing or taught culture due to fear of prosecution

Can't use many traditional fishing and collecting sites, or take kids to the sites

Economic

Poorer families need to spend more of their income on food if they can't fish

Limited opportunities to legally make a living from fishing, high unemployment

Fishing-related criminal convictions make it harder to find a job

Social

People who can't go fishing, like Elders, go without healthy seafood

Jailing community leaders who fish for lots of other people leads to dysfunctional communities

People turn to drinking, drugs, and anti-social behaviour when they can't fish

Psychological

Chronic stress, fear of being caught by NSW Fisheries officers

Low self-esteem from being labelled a criminal, unable to provide for family

Going fishing is therapeutic, opportunity to connect with country

Health

Reduced physical activity due to no longer diving or fishing

Less healthy diets, leading to high cholesterol and iodine deficiency

Harder to gather traditional medicines



The project team and representatives from the NSW Aboriginal Fishing Rights Group and the Crocodile Islands Rangers met at the National Native Title Conference in Darwin.
Credit: Andrew Turner, AIATSIS.

In June members of the steering committee for the AFRG attended the National Native Title Conference in Darwin and met with representatives from the two other case study areas, the Far West Coast of South Australia and the Crocodile Islands in the Northern Territory.

Additionally, South Coast Aboriginal fishers Wally Stewart and Danny Chapman presented at the

conference on the history of cultural fishing on the South Coast and the struggle for the recognition of their rights. The AFRG representatives also met with Mohawk academic and activist Professor Taiiaki Alfred about fishing, government regulation and culture.

Following the conference, and inspired by their engagement in the research project, Wally Stewart

and the other member of the AFRG steering committee have been busy preparing a business plan for the South Coast Commercial/Cultural Fishing Corporation. This will be a community-based organisation that will serve as a focal point for fishing-related activities for Aboriginal communities on the South Coast. The AFRG are using the values identified in the project interviews to inform the business plan, and to highlight the need for a uniquely Aboriginal community fishing corporation for the area.

Already in the works are 'fishing clinics' targeted at Aboriginal kids between six and twelve, teaching fishing skills as well as knowledge of culture, the environment and sustainable fishing practises, and encouraging healthy diets and lifestyles. In the near future community members aim to run Aboriginal cultural tours of Montague Island off of Narooma and to establish a co-operative for Aboriginal fishers.

The Livelihood Values of Indigenous Customary Fishing project was made possible with funding from the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation.

Opposite: Surf Beach, Narooma.
Bottom: Barlings Beach, Tomakin.
Credit: Luke Smyth, AIATSIS.

