



Under the sea: Sea Country connections on the south coast of New South Wales

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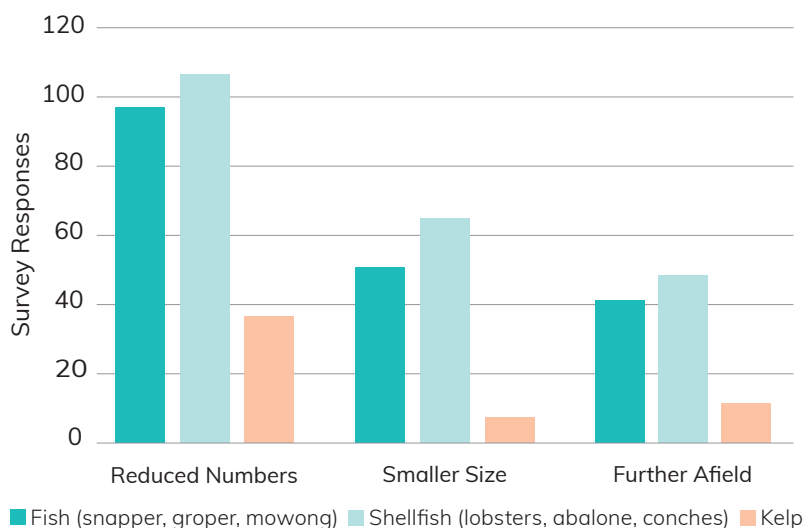
For over 50,000 years, Aboriginal people in New South Wales have managed marine resources. Sea Country is vital to saltwater communities around Australia, contributing to individual and community health and wellbeing, economic development and livelihoods. AIATSIS has been working alongside the New South Wales Aboriginal Fishing Rights Group to highlight and protect the continuing connection of the Yuin nation to their waters. In December 2020, AIATSIS visited Mystery Bay, New South Wales, to speak to people on Country. Traditional custodians were surveyed on their relationship to Sea Country, customary fishing and diving practices, and any changes witnessed to Sea health.

What is happening beneath the surface?

Similar to many ocean ecosystems, Sea Country on the south coast of New South Wales is under threat from increasing pressures. The Indigenous community who have lived on the coast for generations are deeply in tune to its health and these changes.

Growing threats have resulted in a decline in size, number and availability of the sea resources.

Graph 1: Changes to sea resources

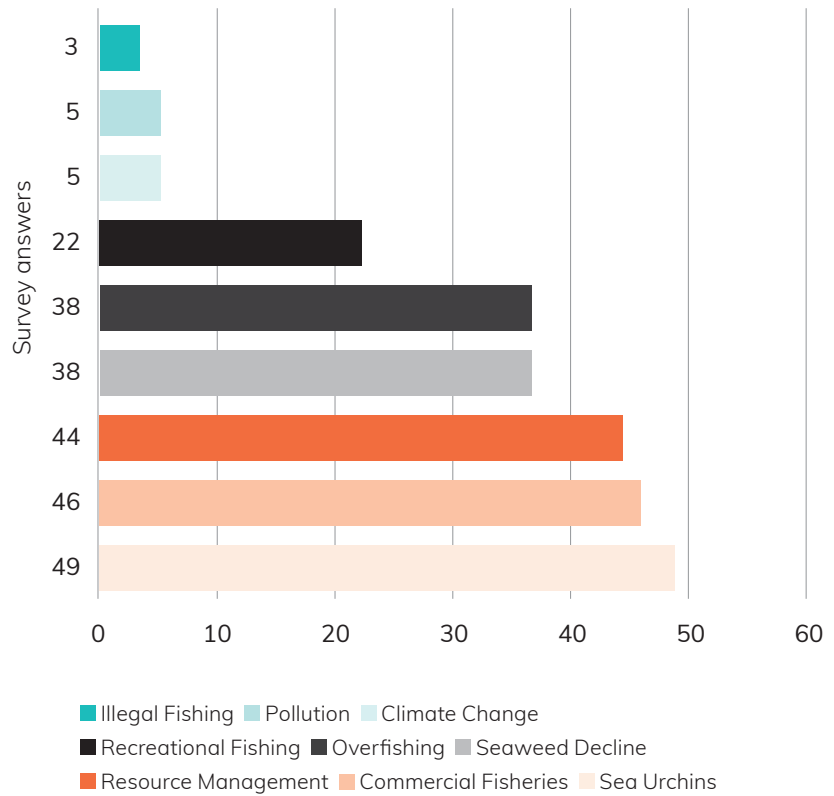


Sea urchins, commercial operations and current resource management regimes were identified as the key causes of Sea Country degradation.

Probably fifty per cent of our reefs along the coast are turning into sea urchin barrens and there's just nothing there. Everything is dying off. Our people have been accessing these waters for 50,000 years. They've noticed these differences.
 – Wally Stewart

The identification of these threats is not new. Since consultation with saltwater communities in 2002, these threats have been described by Traditional Owners who have consistently maintained the need to recognise Indigenous connection and rights to Sea Country.¹ With little action since, but a rise of threats – the call for Indigenous participation in sea management is greater than ever.

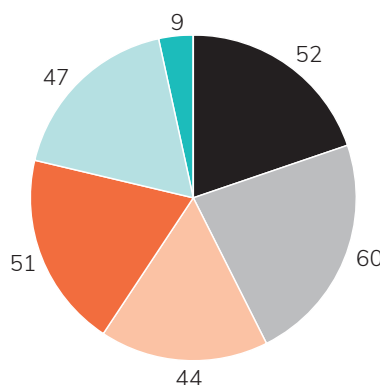
Graph 2: What is impacting Sea Country?



What if Sea Country was lost?

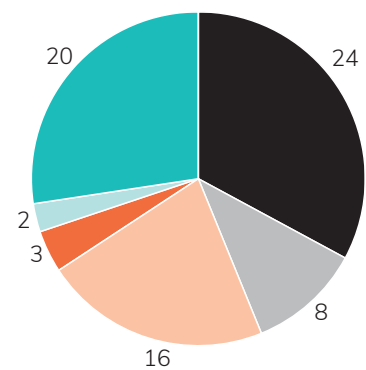
The ongoing connection to Sea Country and customary practices on the South Coast is clear. Further decline in sea health would be devastating to individuals, culture, communities, and future generations. The need for circumstances to improve is unanimous: 100 per cent of participants said it is critical to look after Sea Country.

What would happen?



- Loss of Culture
- Loss of Seafood
- Loss of Education
- Poor Health
- Impact on Community Connection
- Other (employment, mental health, family)

How would you feel?



- Devastated
- Lost
- Concerned for Future Generations
- Angry
- Traumatized
- Sad

The future: Co-management of Sea Country

The lack of Indigenous participation and Sea Country degradation has a deep impact.

'If you've got healthy seas, healthy waters, you've got healthy people. Healthy Yin people'
– Wally Stewart.

The demand for more sustainable sea management practices is an opportunity for co-management between Traditional Owners and regulatory bodies on the South Coast. Co-management utilises the extensive experience and knowledge of Traditional Owners with western science to develop new solutions for new problems.

The collates conflicting ideas of sustainable practice to create best practice sea management. Presently, this conflict sees unfair targeting of customary fishing practices in New South Wales.² Three-quarters of interviewees reported knowing someone who had been prosecuted for cultural fishing. An Indigenous voice in marine management would increase wider awareness and understanding of customary fishing.

The project on the South Coast highlights the strong connection to waters, the ongoing practice of customary fishing, and the wealth of traditional expertise over Sea Country. This information can be used leverage future action, leading to both the protection

It's our culture. We've looked after it for 40,000 years. We know how to manage it.
– Keith Nye.

of the right to practice culture, and more sustainable sea management with genuine Indigenous input.

¹ The National Oceans Office, *Sea Country: An Indigenous Perspective* (Regional Marine Plan Assessment Report, 2002) 1-196.

² Nicola Pain and Georgia Pick, 'Balancing Competing Interests in the Criminal Justice System: Aboriginal Fishing Rights in Coastal New South Wales' (2020) 43 *University of New South Wales Law Journal* 1383.



Keith Mason filling out survey. Mystery Bay, 2020. Photo: AIATSIS