INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND THE NSW PROFESSIONAL FISHING INDUSTRY

Not long after European colonisation in 1788, coastal Indigenous people helped feed the settlers by trading seafood products for tea, flour, sugar and tobacco. Later, the Aboriginal Protection Board provided boats and fishing gear to Indigenous communities to assist them to use seafood to supplement their government-issued rations.

Reserves such as Botany Bay, Wreck Bay, and Wallaga Lake grew up around fishing both for trade and barter and for subsistence and cultural purposes. NSW Indigenous communities built a strong cultural connection to the tradition of professional fishing. Despite this, Indigneous involvement in professional fishing has declined since the 1960s.

$ A STRONG ECONOMY

In the late 1800s, the Census described Indigenous fishers in Moruya as "remarkably well off and can earn the same wages as Europeans". Today the majority of the state's 30 to 40 Indigenous commercial fishers have spent their entire working lives in the industry, and most come from generations of fishing families – some up to seven generations.

H CULTURAL HERITAGE

Indigenous fishers do not distinguish between 'professional' and 'cultural' fishing – both are important parts of individual and community identity. 84% of Indigenous people who are engaged in the industry fish mostly on their traditional Country and enjoy significant mental and physical health benefits by maintaining a connection with their ancestral lands and community.

B FRESH, LOCAL SEAFOOD

Indigenous fishers are involved in the ocean haul and estuary general fisheries and catch highly nutritious fish such as Mullet *(Mugil cephalus)* and Luderick *(Girella tricuspidata)*. These fishers distribute up to 20% of their catch amongst family and community members, for whom it is a cheap and healthy source of protein. They also sell their product to retailers.

C COMMUNITY LIFE

Fishing also plays an important role in bridging Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Indigenous fishers practice beach hauling and worm gathering, two highly visible forms of fishing that involve frequent interaction with the wider community, and they use this as an opportunity for public education about what they do and the history of their involvement in fishing.

VALUING COASTAL FISHERIES

Professional Fishing and Indigenous communities in NSW

K KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Participating in professional fishing activities allows for important teaching and learning of cultural stories and practices.

E PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

Indigenous fishers practise the environmentally friendly methods employed by their grandparents; some use row boats and make traditional nets. The knowledge held within these communities evolved over many generations and guides fishers to practise effective and sustainable fishing. Indigenous stories provide invaluable information about how the environment along the NSW coast has changed over time.

R RECREATION

Fishing and seafood products play an important role in celebrations and cultural events significant to Indigenous people in NSW. Events such as NAIDOC week are marked with fish BBQs and gatherings, with seafood taking centre stage.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

A team of independent social scientists and economists spent two years gathering this research data in their "Valuing Coastal Fisheries Project", funded by the Commonwealth's Fisheries Research and Development Corporation (FRDC). The researchers investigated the NSW professional fishing industry by

- interviewing professional fishers, fishing families, community members, recreational fishers, local council staff and councillors, tourism organisations, seafood retailers, wholesalers and restaurant owners
- sending out an economic questionnaire to professional fishers
- conducting a random phone questionnaire of 1400 people living in NSW coastal communities
- conducting random and targeted phone questionnaires with fish co-ops, fish retailers and wholesalers
- conducting an internet survey of hospitality and tourism operators.

UTS CRICOS Provider Code: 00099F
UTS:MCU / JOB 20059 / SEPTEMBER 2016 / IMAGES BY: DAVID MITCHELL, HAYLEY EGAN, MICHELLE VOYER

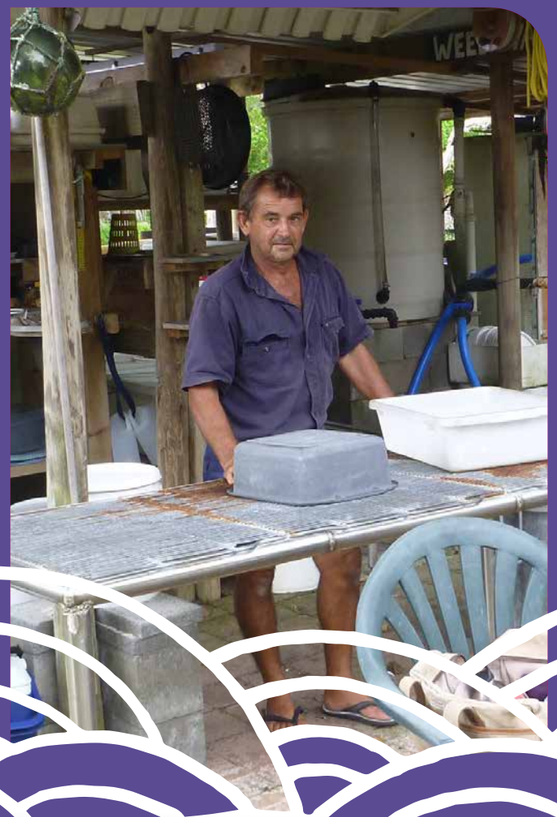
INDIGENOUS PROFESSIONAL FISHING

In the last half-century, the number of professional Indigenous fishers has declined dramatically from a peak between the World Wars when settlements of Indigenous fishing families stretched from Tweed Heads south to Merimbula. Today Indigenous fishers in NSW number less than 40 individuals, who are involved in the estuary general and ocean haul fisheries.

FISHING AS CULTURE

Franc Krasna is a beach-worm fisher in Tweed Heads, and fishing is an integral part of his individual and community identity.

"Being out and in touch with what's around you, which is what we're about, you know? It's sustained us for forty thousand years or more!... But it's part of our wellbeing, as well... To us, it's, I suppose, to some degree, our meditation. Getting out there with nature. Looking and seeing and observing, taking it in and learning. And it's about, you know, not just individuals, it's about the family. You come back with fish or pipis. Your family have got fish and your extended family, they come around and you share it out."



ENVIRONMENTAL WISDOM

Franc also holds a wealth of general fishing knowledge that he passes onto university researchers and school students.

"You've got a lot of bush stuff that we used to tell our people, you know, the best time to go to get mud crabs, for example. Or, at the moment, you're just starting to get the banksias, the cones are starting to come, which indicates the start of the sea mullet season ... We didn't have our clocks and watches and calendars those days."

TEACHING THE NEXT GENERATION

South Coast Indigenous fishers John Brierley and Andrew Nye have fished their whole lives. John is a descendent of one of the original Indigenous whalers in Eden and is very passionate about carrying on the Indigenous fishing tradition.

"If kids come up to me and say, 'Can I come with you?' I say yes... because they are family and they want to learn the culture of hunting and gathering. And if we can't take them out, how the hell can you keep your culture going? Because culture is not given to them. It is taught to them by their elders. Right?... Their culture will die if I don't teach them now. I'm at the stage now where the young bloke, within the next few years, he's going to take over from me, and if he's not taught, well, all that history, all my knowledge, all Dad's knowledge, all his grandfather's knowledge, is gone."

John Brierley – Indigenous professional fisher, South Coast

TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

Andrew uses methods employed by his grandfather.

"There are five generations of fishermen in my family, I've been a fisherman since I was 15, it's always been a part of my life, I just love it – I can go out in the morning throw a net get the fish back in and take them to the truck then come back down to the beach and just sit and watch the water for a while and before you know it it's 5 pm, you just blend in, it's your country, you just feel relaxed and comfortable. I can't imagine doing anything else. I will die a fisherman."

Andrew Nye – Indigenous professional fisher, South Coast