



## VALUING COASTAL FISHERIES

Social and Economic Evaluation of NSW Coastal Professional Wild-Catch Fisheries



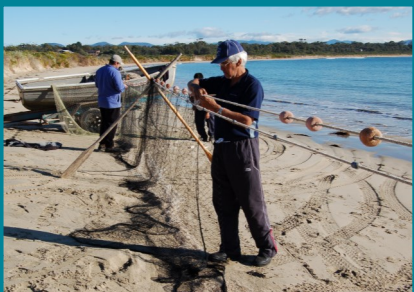
### Indigenous professional fishing

Coastal Indigenous people have a long association with professional fishing in NSW. They began trading seafood with white settlers not long after colonisation and are credited with keeping the colony alive in the early years of settlement. Later, as colonial control over Indigenous people increased it was not uncommon for the Aboriginal Protection Board to provide boats and fishing gear to Indigenous communities to encourage both active participation in the NSW economy and the use of seafood as an alternative or supplementary food source to government-issued rations. A number of reserves established around the turn of the 20th century were used as a base from which fishing operations could be conducted. NSW Indigenous communities have built up a strong cultural connection to the tradition of professional fishing and many Indigenous families and communities owe their survival to active engagement in the industry. Despite this, Indigenous involvement in professional fishing has been in decline since the 1960s. The Valuing Coastal Fisheries project investigated the role of professional fishing in Indigenous communities according to seven dimensions of community wellbeing.

<p><b>Dimensions of wellbeing</b></p>	<p>Seven 'dimensions of wellbeing' were identified through the Valuing Coastal Fisheries project as being relevant to the professional wild-catch industry. These are all elements of overall community wellbeing that the industry contributes to in a number of ways. The project explored the nature of these contributions through interviews, an economic questionnaire of fishers and social questionnaires.</p>
<p>A resilient local economy</p>	<p>There is not an accurate long term record of the level of Indigenous involvement in professional fishing, however there is little doubt that it has declined significantly over the past 40 years in response to increasing formalisation and regulation of the industry. Today there are somewhere between 30-40 Indigenous people working in the professional fishing industry in NSW, the majority of whom have spent their entire working lives as professional fishers. Most come from families in which multiple generations have worked in the industry, with estimates ranging up to seven generations. Eighty-four percent of those engaged in the industry fish mostly on their traditional Country.<sup>1</sup> While only a small section of the overall community, the benefits of professional fishing to local Indigenous communities are likely to be substantial. The national employment rate within Indigenous communities is much lower than the employment rate for Australians generally (47.5% compared to 72.1% in 2013). And employment can be particularly difficult to obtain given the low levels of formal education amongst nearly half Indigenous men in NSW of workforce age.<sup>2</sup> The importance of secure, intergenerational work opportunities for Indigenous Australians, particularly in regional communities, cannot be overstated. Our project found that professional fishing provides important employment opportunities to many individuals, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who might otherwise have trouble finding a job.</p>
<p>Community health and safety</p>	<p>Professional fishing is closely tied to the health and wellbeing of Indigenous communities in three important ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) a source of employment on Country: there are significant mental and physical health benefits to Indigenous people in maintaining a connection with their ancestral lands, family and communities.<sup>3</sup></li> <li>ii) a source of nutrition: Indigenous people living in coastal areas often report a decline in seafood consumption as being a critical factor in poor health. The main forms of fishing undertaken by Indigenous professional fishers (ocean haul and estuary general) are also the major fisheries for culturally significant and highly nutritious fish products such as Mullet and Luderick. Indigenous professional fishers estimate that up to 20% of their catch is distributed amongst family and community members.<sup>1</sup> Where necessary fish can also be obtained through retail outlets, and these lower-value species provide a cheap and healthy source of protein to a generally low-income group.</li> <li>iii) an opportunity for cultural and social connection: Community and family connections are built and maintained by the act of going fishing and this has important implications for the mental and physical health of coastal Indigenous communities. Traditionally the act of fishing – particularly beach haul fishing – was a community activity involving multiple generations and extended family groups.</li> </ul>
	<p><i>When we get an abundance of fish we take so much to the local community and share it around and then just drive around the mission and then back into town because there's so many Indigenous relatives that live in town as well. We just go around to key family members that we know will pass it on to the rest of their families. <b>Indigenous fisher (061114_7) Great Lakes - Hunter</b></i></p>

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<p>Education and knowledge generation</p>	<p>Indigenous fishers have progressively been ‘squeezed out’ of more lucrative fisheries such as Abalone and Lobster. In part this is due to regulations which failed to recognise the communal and often transitory nature of Indigenous involvement in the industry. Today nearly two-thirds of all licensed Indigenous professional fishers are involved in the estuary general and/or ocean (or beach) haul fisheries, which are the only two fisheries in NSW that do not allow unendorsed crew to assist in the fishing operations.<sup>1</sup> This has led to concerns over the loss of important opportunities for passing on knowledge and building connections with kin and culture in Indigenous communities. Beach hauling in particular has traditionally been a communal activity involving whole families in which everyone plays a role - as licenced fishers, ‘spotters’, crew assisting in pulling in the nets, and in the sorting and packing the product. The community shared a portion of the catch and had an opportunity to connect with family, share stories and participate in an activity that they strongly regard as a traditional cultural practice. These were important times of learning and of passing on traditional knowledge as well as practical skills in fishing for younger generations wishing to enter the industry.</p>
<p><i>... 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... 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. Indigenous Fisher (260315_2) South Coast</i></p>	<p>A healthy environment</p> <p>Indigenous professional fishers operate within a highly regulated fishery. Many practice methods employed by their grandfathers, using row boats and traditional net making. The environmental knowledge held within Indigenous communities, learnt through the practice of fishing together over many generations, assists them to practice effective and sustainable fishing. The environmental histories told in the stories of Indigenous fishers are an invaluable source of information about environmental change over time on the NSW coast.</p> 
<p>Integrated, culturally diverse and vibrant communities</p>	<p>Integrated communities provide opportunities and support for people from diverse cultural, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Professional fishing plays an important role in smaller regional communities in NSW where employment opportunities are scarce, especially for Indigenous and non-Indigenous men with limited schooling or formal training. On the South Coast Indigenous leaders are currently exploring opportunities to grow Indigenous employment in the wild-catch sector, including in post-harvest and processing sectors.</p> <p>This dimension of wellbeing also refers to the way in which communities relate to themselves internally and the wider community around them (social capital). Professional fishing can play a role in building ‘bonding social capital’ (relationships within a community) by providing opportunities for the community to come together to assist in fishing activities and share the catch. Fishing also plays an important role in building bridging social capital—or connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Beach hauling and worm gathering are two forms of fishing practised by Indigenous fishers which are highly visible fishing methods and involve frequent interaction with the wider community. Fishers use this as an opportunity to educate the public about what they do and the history of their involvement.</p>
<p>Cultural heritage and community identity</p>	<p>Indigenous people have been involved in professional fishing activities since the earliest days of colonisation. Reserve communities such as Botany Bay, Wreck Bay, and Wallaga Lake were built around fishing both for trade and barter and for subsistence and cultural purposes. As a result Indigenous fishers do not distinguish between ‘professional’ fishing and ‘cultural fishing’ - they are intertwined in inextricable ways. Fishing is therefore an important part of individual and community identity in many NSW coastal Indigenous communities.</p>
<p>Leisure and recreation</p>	<p>Fishing and seafood products play an important role in celebrations and cultural events that are significant to Indigenous people in NSW. Events such as NAIDOC week are marked with fish BBQs and gatherings in which seafood plays a central role.</p>

<sup>1</sup> Schnierer S, & Egan H. 2012. Impact of management changes on the viability of Indigenous commercial fishers and the flow on effects to their communities: Case study in New South Wales, Final report to the Fisheries Research Development Corporation, Canberra. Lismore: Southern Cross University.

<sup>2</sup> Commonwealth of Australia 2016. Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report 2016. Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2015). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework 2014 report: New South Wales. Canberra, AIHW.

For more information and the full report visit @UTSvaluingcoastalfisheries