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Building the capacity and performance of Indigenous fisheries

FRDC PROJECT NO 2013/218

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The Fisheries Research and Development Corporation plans, invests in and manages fisheries research and development throughout Australia. It is a statutory authority within the portfolio of the federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, jointly funded by the Australian Government and the fishing industry.



We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to land and water.

We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

FRDC-IRG funded projects use ethical methodologies and take place on Country with the consent of Traditional Owners.

This summary booklet was prepared by Leila Alkassab and Hanna Gallagher of Land to Sea Consulting Pty Ltd. as part of FRDC-IRG project 2018-183.

Artwork by Beau Pennefather Motlop



Background

In 2011 the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation (FRDC) sponsored a national Indigenous fisheries forum to discuss and identify issues impacting the involvement of Indigenous people in Australia's fisheries. An Indigenous Reference Group (IRG) then collated this work and developed a set of research priorities to guide research, development and extension.

These research priorities were subsequently endorsed in 2012 by the original national forum. Using these research priorities the FRDC-IRG have supported a number of projects focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fisheries.

1 PRIMACY FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

Indigenous people have certain recognised rights associated with and based on the prior and continuing occupation of country and water and activities (e.g. fishing, gathering) associated with the use and management of these.

3 SELF DETERMINATION OF INDIGENOUS RIGHTS TO USE AND MANAGE CULTURAL ASSETS AND RESOURCES

Indigenous people have the right to determine courses of action in relation to use and management of aquatic biological resources.

5 CAPACITY BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE ARE ENHANCED

Indigenous people have the right to access capacity building activities to further their aspirations in the use and management of aquatic biological resources..

2 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF INDIGENOUS CULTURAL PRACTICES

Indigenous people have the right to maintain and develop cultural practices to address spiritual, cultural, social and economic needs associated with aquatic resources and landscapes.

4 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES ARISING FROM INDIGENOUS PEOPLES CULTURAL ASSETS AND ASSOCIATED RIGHTS

Indigenous people have the right to engage in economic activity based on the use of traditional aquatic biological resources and/or the right to share in the benefits derived from the exploitation of aquatic biological resources.



About the project...

Indigenous community fishing comprises of a variety of activities including customary, commercial, aquaculture and recreational. Indigenous Australians own or have rights to 40% of Australian land yet many aquatic resources are not being used to their maximum potential in economic terms.

This project aimed to build the capacity and performance of seven Indigenous community fisheries across Australia.

The project team studied these fisheries case studies in order to document their aspirations, understand their social, cultural and economic capacities, identify the challenges in the way of achieving aspirations and trial development pathways.

What they found...

Indigenous peoples participate in all sectors of the fisheries including aquaculture, customary, commercial and recreational. Legislation and policy has a direct impact on Indigenous fishery development. Stable employment, education, training and mentoring that address the communities' values will also prove to be the path to long term economic development. Indigenous peoples' fishing rights are not currently flowing into beneficial economic outcomes for communities

Fishery ventures must be led by a management team that has authority from its community. The team must implement a business plan (3-5 years) and report progress to owners and community. Ventures which have links to other knowledge sources, mentors, training and relationships will be most likely to achieve economic development aspirations.

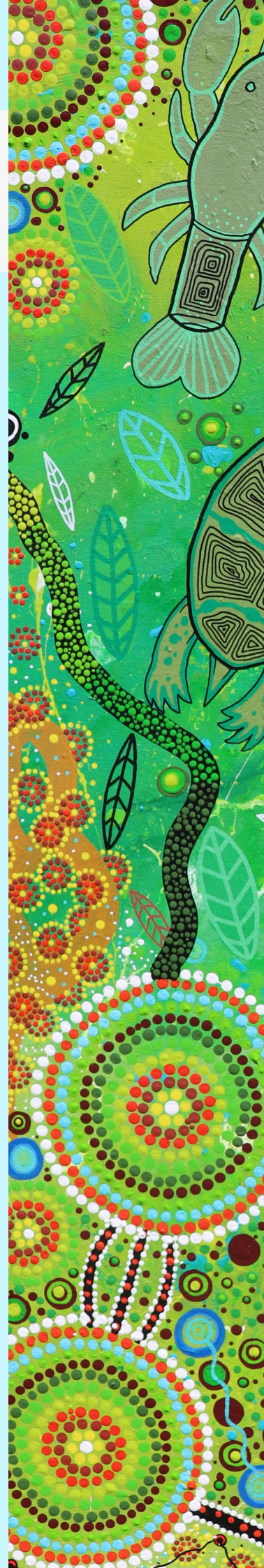
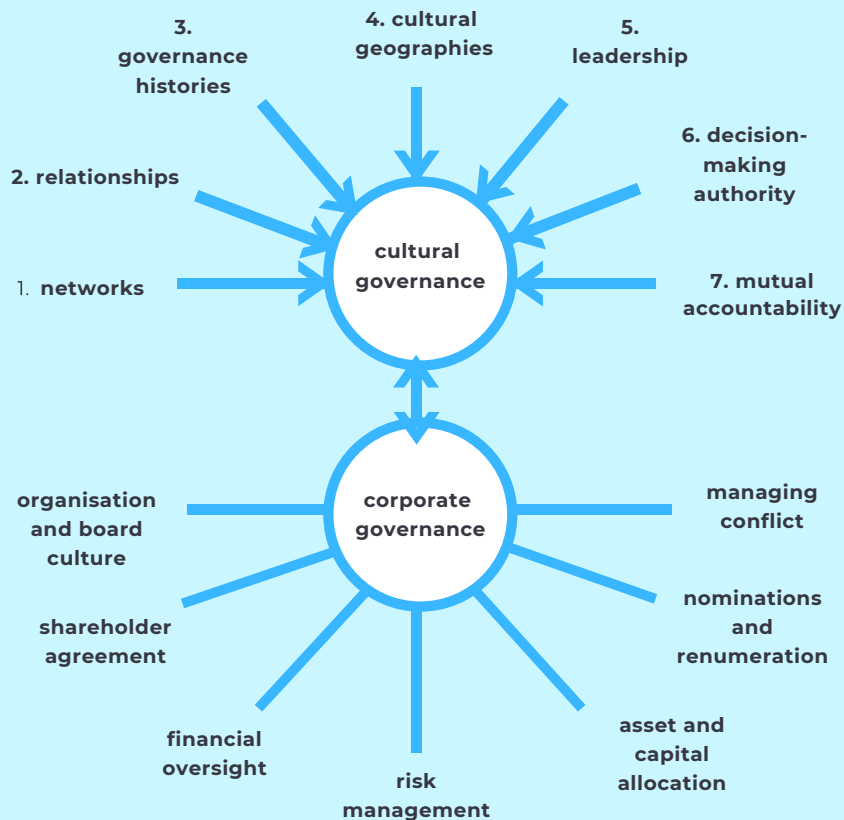
What they found...

Governance models

The type of governance model that communities use in their fisheries development is important. In remote Australia the family/ clan business is a recommended business model as it puts decisions in the hands of the families and clans.

Cultural governance is the first step in establishing a leadership platform. Most communities lack the second step which is the corporate governance aspect. Cultural governance needs to be balanced with corporate governance so that the community benefits economically. This is important so that the commercial returns from fishery resources can then be distributed to the community according to protocol (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Interface between cultural and corporate governance





Indigenous community fisheries...

The project team engaged with seven Indigenous community fisheries.

1. Warruwi community, NT
2. East Arnhem communities, NT
3. Ugar community, QLD
4. Girringun community, QLD
5. Gunditjmarra community, VIC
6. Far West Coast community, SA
7. Aarli Mayi community, WA

1 Warruwi Community, NT

People from the Goulburn Islands have always accessed, managed and traded seafood along their coastlines. They do not eat beche-de-mer but they have been trading it with Macassan seafarers from Indonesia since the mid-1700.

THE ORGANISATION

In 2011, the Yagbani Aboriginal Corporation was established, supported by the five major clans of the Goulburn Islands: Manggalgarra, Meyirguldj, Murran, Namarawaidja and Yalama. Yagbani Aboriginal Corporation has sixty members and represents and supports social enterprises and small businesses for the community. Their governance is based on a community approach and structured around kin relationships and extended family ties.

Tasmanian Seafoods Pty Ltd has been harvesting beche-de-mer in the Northern Territory since the 1990s and controls all six NT beche-de-mer licenses. The beche-de-mer is cleaned frozen within a few hours of collection. It is then shipped to Melbourne and processed before it is exported for the Asian markets.

THE FISHERY

From the year 2000, aquaculture trials have taken place targeting bath sponges, beche-de-mer, black-lip tropical oysters and fluted giant clam. The Yagbani Aboriginal Corporation also aims to develop fishery capacity for oyster and clam farming and coastal line fishing and to work with other co-ops in the region on commercial fishing opportunities.



THE STRATEGY

The Yagbani Aboriginal Corporation and Tasmanian Seafoods Pty Ltd have a Memorandum of Understanding for the harvesting of beche-de-mer. The aim is that each of the five clans who own the coastline operates their own beche-de-mer microbusiness.

The beche-de-mer harvested by the clan micro-businesses is then sold to the Yagbani Aboriginal Corporation which processes, trades and exports the beche-de-mer through the Memorandum of Understanding with Tasmanian Seafoods Pty Ltd.



THE FINDINGS

- The project team found that there is a lack of commercial capacity of the Indigenous microbusinesses and the Yagbani Aboriginal Corporation.
- The venture is not viable at low harvest levels however, through a slow expansion and geographic diversification of the beche-de-mer fisheries over 3-5 years the venture will be worthwhile financially.
- The Yagbani Aboriginal Corporation will need to become more commercial for the beche-de-mer venture to be profitable long term. The relationship with Tasmanian Seafoods Pty Ltd will be important for capacity building in this area.

2 East Arnhem Communities, NT

Yolngu of north-east Arnhem Land have a long history of harvesting seafood for their own use and for export trade. Yolngu belong to five main clan groups: Gumatj, Rirratjingu, Djapu, Madarrpa and Dhalwangu. Traditional Owners have access to their coastal waters along 80% of the Northern Territory coastline.

THE ORGANISATION

The long term plan is for the trust to own Mackerel, Barramindi, Mud crab as well as Coastal line licenses. Aboriginal coastal licences allow for Indigenous people to catch and sell fish but they are different to commercial fishing licenses in their limitations. Coastal licenses are based on a lower cost and as a basis for small scale operations.

THE FISHERY

In 2013, the Garngirr Fishing Aboriginal Corporation (GFAC) was established as a commercially focussed way of expanding the Indigenous community fishery network. Their community cooperative governance and business model combines cultural and corporate governance (Family Governance model).

THE STRATEGY

- Facilitate the establishment of a network, endorsed by East Arnhem Traditional Owners, dedicated to assisting Yolngu people to become involved in the seafood (commercial fishing and aquaculture) industry in the East Arnhem region,
- Produce a 3-year strategic plan and a workplan for the development of fisheries and aquaculture in the East Arnhem region,
- Develop a program of coordinated education and training in seafood and small business skills that is available to the East Arnhem community,
- Assist the establishment of at least three Yolngu owned seafood businesses within three years. Increase the supply of locally produced seafood from Yolngu fishing businesses in the East Arnhem region.

THE FINDINGS

Challenges to the venture include infrastructure, lack of capital, low levels of fishing and seafood chain skill, and governance challenges across multiple participating communities. These gaps need to be overcome for it to reach its commercial objectives.

It may be beneficial for the GFAC consider joint ventures with commercial fishers. This could offer employee training and partnerships to harvest, process and export branded “East Arnhem” seafood.



3 Ugar Island community, QLD

Ugar Island (Stephen Island) is situated in the eastern Torres Strait. There are nine traditional owner family clans on Ugar Island. The recognised native title rights of Ugar Islanders include exclusive possession of land on Ugar Island, Campbell Islands and Pearce Cay and non-exclusive possession of the sea and its resources for personal, non-commercial communal needs.

THE ORGANISATION

Kos & Abob Fisheries Inc. is owned by the Ugar community and operated a fishing, seafood processing and distribution business on Ugar Island that sends the frozen seafood monthly to Cairns agents for export.

The business is currently run with voluntary input from directors and staff. The community would like Kos & Abob Fisheries Inc. to expand and to be financially sustainable as a commercial seafood business. Governance is based on a community approach (a hybrid of the Family Governance Model).



THE FISHERY

Kos & Abob Fisheries Inc. is targeting beche-de-mer, tropical rock lobster and finfish (including mackerel, coral trout, emperors and barramundi cod). Family businesses will be contracted by Kos & Abob Fisheries Inc. to harvest a minimum amount of the fish in an agreed timeframe.

THE STRATEGY

Kos & Abob Fisheries Inc. has a strategy based on securing exclusive use and processing to the marine resources within 10 nautical miles from Ugar Island. This concept is currently in discussion with Australian Fisheries Management Authorities (AFMA) so that local communities can benefit through the optimum utilisation of the harvest.



THE FINDINGS

- Community engagement and participation across Island communities will be important for realising future aspirations.
- The unharvested commercial catch is under-utilised.
- Fisheries management covers 81,000km square of the Torres Strait. Establishing Community Home Fishery Zones with other eastern island communities will be vital to enhance local management and economic and social returns.
- Kos & Abob Fisheries Inc. lacks incentives, tools and procedures to develop its business to its potential.
- The lack of infrastructure limits the development of commercial fisheries. To achieve its aspirations, the Ugar island community needs items for monitoring environmental sustainability, harvesting, processing, freezing, drying, and managing inventory risks on-site and in relation to transshipment to Cairns.
- Training and mentoring will be needed for all fishery and seafood activities and service inputs, including marine resource management, fishing and diving, vessel and equipment maintenance, quality assurance, processing, drying, freezing, logistics, finance, planning management and marketing.



4 Girringun Community, QLD

Located between Cairns and Townsville, nine tribal groups are represented in the Girringun Region Indigenous Protected Area (GRIPA) - Bandjin, Djiru, Girramay, Gugu Badhun, Gulnay, Jirrbal, Nywaigi, Warrgamay and Warungnu.

Most of the country within the Indigenous Protected Area is privately owned so access to traditional owners is limited and marine waters are shared with non-Indigenous users.

THE ORGANISATION

Girringun Aboriginal Corporation was established in 1996 by traditional owners to represent the diverse and overlapping interests of the nine clan groups. There are 900 members of the corporation. Two representatives from each of the nine tribal groups make up the governing body and Girringun Aboriginal Corporation governance is based on a community approach which is a hybrid of the Family Governance Model.

In 2005 Traditional Use of Marine Resources Agreement was developed, a legal agreement under the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975. It is non-exclusive and allows Traditional Owners to self-regulate traditional hunting of marine protected species in the marine park such as turtle and dugong.

THE FISHERY

Girringun sea country covers waters owned by six Girringun clans; Bandjin, Djiru, Girramay, Gulnay, Nywaigi and Warrgamay. There are two core objectives to be pursued over the next 5 years:

- To create commercial fishery skills and employment for community members,
- To develop and implement a Girringun commercial fishery that will supply Girringun branded seafood to consumer markets.

THE STRATEGY

The Girringun Aboriginal Corporation mission is 'to provide sustainable outcomes for the enhancement of social, cultural, spiritual, environmental and economic well-being for the benefit of Aboriginal people of the Girringun region through strong leadership, direction and strategic partnerships.'

Initial aspirations of Girringun have been addressed and the community now seeks to increase engagement in economic activity.



THE FINDINGS

Girringun Aboriginal Corporation is a not-for-profit so a new entity that is for-profit will be needed for commercial ventures in fishery development. Current zoning, harvest and non-exclusive rights mean it may be difficult for Girringun Aboriginal Corporation to operate sustainably and viably. Crab and net fishery is less risky option for Girringun community until capacity and financial resources are developed. Suggested pathways include:

- Develop long term business case, Indigenous Fishery Permit for 3 years, target lower value non-quota species. This will require less capital, less risk and a cheaper entry point while community builds skills and capacity.
- Link Traditional Use of Marine Resources Agreement Management Plan to a Commercial Fishery Development Permit and Plan.
- Training program for commercial fishery skills and mentoring for Girringun fishers and rangers. Links to available experienced mentors available from the Cairns commercial seafood industry.
- There are opportunities for Girringun Aboriginal Corporation to engage with the QLD government to develop new policies and changes that can create economic returns for the Girringun community.



5 Gunditjmara Community, VIC

Around 6,600 years ago, the Gunditjmara People established one of the world's first aquaculture ventures. They farmed eels in a complex system of weirs along 30km of waterways comprising Lake Condah and the Darlot Creek drainage system. Local people settled here and built stone houses around this reliable food source. In 2019, the site received World Heritage status.



THE ORGANISATION

Since 2011, the Gunditjmara community has been represented through the Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC, which has administered native title as well as an Indigenous Land Use Agreement with the Victorian Government.

The Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation also manages the interests and obligations of Gunditjmara people in relation to caring for country, cultural strengthening, community development and wellbeing. Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation is a service provider and development company for the Gunditjmara people.

THE FISHERY

The Gunditjmara People, working with their two well established corporations, seek to develop separate economic ventures based on two native fisheries; Customary farming of short finned native eels (*Anguilla australis*) from Lake Condah and Customary and/or commercial wild harvest of pipis (*Donax deltoids*) from Discovery Bay.

THE STRATEGY

A tourism development concept is detailed in the Budj Bim Master Plan to create public-private partnerships in order to develop tourism products and resources. The plan involves projects to expand visitor experiences to the Budj Bim landscape, including upgrading and adding new visitor facilities.

THE FINDINGS

Strengths for this case study include: access to passing tourism, experienced leaders, agency support, access to seafood chains and primacy in eel farming and potentially for Pipi harvest.

This is one of the most well established Indigenous seafood communities in Australia and meets most of the criteria of IRC 11 strategic principles and 5 aspirations.

6 Far West Coast Community, SA

Indigenous Corporations are developing commercial, recreational and customary fishery activities on traditional coastal country in the far west coast of SA. Traditional owners comprise of six cultural groups across the far west coast of SA. They are Kokatha, Mirning, Oak Valley, Roberts, Wirangu and Yalata People.

THE ORGANISATION

In 2013, native title rights were collectively recognised and the Far West Coast Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC was established, based in Ceduna. Separation of cultural governance and corporate governance is highlighted across the community organisational structure. The community approach is a hybrid of the Family Governance Model.





THE FISHERY

1 Recreational fishing tours

The Eyre and Far West Coast have the highest recreational fishing rate in SA and there is opportunity to create recreational fishing tours that integrate Indigenous customary knowledge. Partners would include the Recreational Fishing sector, existing regional and local tourism operators and cultural heritage bodies, and local governments.

2 The Seafood Trail

The Seafood Trail would be a regional marketing tool to connect new operators to existing tourism and seafood operators and festivals. Partners would include regional accommodation providers, tourist operators, seafood retailers, food retail and service providers, and local governments.

3 Commercial fishing

Designing and investing in sustainable jobs for people to be employed in commercial fishing and seafood processing. Partners would include existing regional and local commercial fishers and aquaculturists, service and input suppliers, trainers and local and SA governments.

These ventures are in the initial stages of development and proof of concept discussions are taking place for each venture.



THE STRATEGY

Through a united and cooperative approach, the six cultural groups in the Far West Coast Aboriginal Corporation want to:

- Ensure Native Title Rights to Far West Coast traditional lands are exercised and maintained,
- Enhance the recognition and respect of the Aboriginal cultures and heritage within the Far West Coast region,
- Provide the children of Native Title Holders with a future which supports their cultural, social and economic needs,
- Ensure assistance is available to support the wellbeing of members of the Far West Coast Native Title Holding Community and other Aboriginal people living in the Native Title area,
- Create and maximise business and economic opportunities to generate profits and Aboriginal employment outcomes for the benefit of the Far West Coast Native Title Holding Community,
- Foster harmony and inclusivity for Far West Coast Native Title holders in Native Title determinations.



THE FINDINGS

There is strong governance and external cash flows, making these ventures likely development prospects. There is also a real opportunity to develop fishing and seafood ventures that intersect with tourism.

Working with regional and local partners, industry, organisations and agencies will be important for the success of the ventures.

7 Aarli Mayi Community, WA

The Dambimangari, Bardi, Jawi and Mayala peoples conduct a range of activities to manage their land and sea country, train and employ their people, and sustain their communities and country. Most of these activities are housed in commercial “for profit” enterprises and joint ventures.

THE ORGANISATION

The Aarli Mayi Aquaculture Project is a joint venture based on the visions of the Dambimangari, Bardi, Jawi and Mayala traditional owner groups in partnership with the Maxima Opportunity Group.

Governance structure makes clear separation between cultural governance and corporate governance. The community approach is a hybrid of the Family governance model.

THE FISHERY

In 2016 the Aarli Mayi Aquaculture Project got a licence to culture the following finfish: Barramundi, Cobia, Barramundi cod, Saddletail snapper, Coral trout, Flowery rock cod, Camouflage grouper, and Giant grouper.

THE STRATEGY

The Aarli Mayi Aquaculture Project is a joint venture based on the visions of the Dambimangari, Bardi, Jawi and Mayala traditional owner groups in partnership with the Maxima Opportunity Group. Cultural and Heritage Advisory Committee will be the subcommittee to set policy and advice regarding the recognition of custodians of the land and sea, providing jobs on-country and for guidance regarding culture.





THE FINDINGS

There is excellent potential for growing a range of species including Barramundi, freshwater prawns (Cherabin), edible oysters, aquarium fish, and particularly marine prawns. The governance approach used is groundbreaking for Indigenous fishery ventures. There is:

- High level of trust between the traditional owner groups and the non-Indigenous investor.
- Traditional owner partnership, involvement and cooperation.
- Preapproved aquaculture zone.
- Established finfish production and husbandry.
- The team has experience in marine based projects.



Recommendations...

- Implement a plan to identify Indigenous fishery communities across Australia that hold exclusive or non-exclusive rights and control of underutilized fishery resources.
- Encourage Indigenous fishery communities that seek to develop their fishery resources, to establish at least one community corporation registered with the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations.
- Encourage each Indigenous fishery community (including local residents and remote Traditional Owners and members) to undertake a formal planning process.
- Encourage community to identify commercial partners, networks and collaborations.



Conclusions...

- Indigenous Australian communities maintain their customary fisheries but do not take full advantage of their fisheries resources for economic development.
- Indigenous communities will need to undertake a formal process with people who have commercial experience in the fisheries when they begin to pursue economic development ventures.
- Access to cash flow and investment directly impacts on governance and economic development.
- Governance models for case study communities were mostly cultural governance and there is a need to combine this with commercially driven corporate governance in order for communities to have most potential in moving forward in their economic ventures.
- Jurisdictional policy settings vary across Australia and they often run counter to commercial outcomes so Indigenous communities need a clear vision and solid business plan to negotiate and to achieve commercial objectives.
- In all of the communities there was a shortage of experience and skills to design, create, and operate a viable commercial fishery business. Community engagement, investment and a training culture are critical in order to create long term wealth.
- The business model most evident in the case studies relates to cultural governance. For purposes of economic development, communities need to integrate and balance cultural governance with corporate governance.