



Policy Brief:

The representation of Aboriginal health and wellbeing values within coastal, marine and fisheries policies of Northern Territory, Australia

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Contents

<u>Acknowledgments</u>	4
<u>Summary</u>	5
<u>Key Findings</u>	6
<u>Introduction</u>	7
<u>Research Approach and Analysis</u>	8
<u>Findings</u>	9
<u>Implications of the research</u>	10
<u>Recommendations</u>	11
<u>References</u>	12
<u>Appendix</u>	15

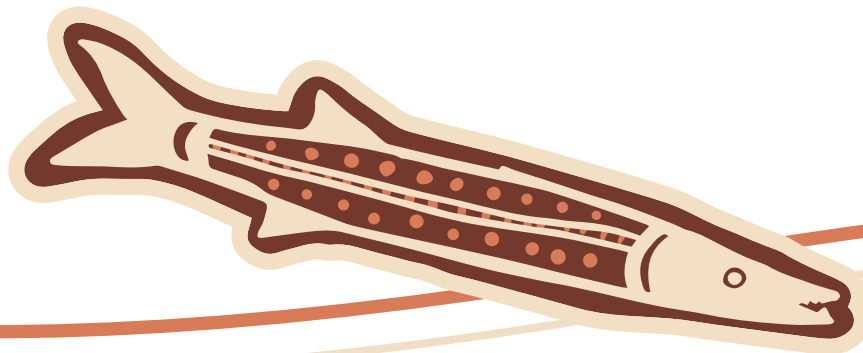
Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC), of the Maningrida region in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory (NT), Australia who have developed a seafood enterprise targeting several fisheries in their community. They have provided inspiration, insights and support for the work that informs this policy brief. We acknowledge and thank Dr Kylie McKenna for providing feedback and editorial assistance on this policy brief. We also acknowledge and thank the numerous Commonwealth and NT Government agency, Indigenous and Industry organisations and policy leaders who provided copies of policies to be included in this study.

This policy brief was developed as an output of a research Project [2019 – 143] ‘An investigation of Indigenous knowledges and nutritional health and wellbeing benefits and values of seafood for supporting Indigenous fisheries development’ supported by funding from the Fisheries Research Development Corporation (FRDC) on behalf of the Australian Government. The Project partners included Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation and Traditional Owners of the Maningrida region, Charles Darwin University and Monash University. The Project was conducted while the lead author, Dr Beau Cubillo, was a PhD candidate at Monash University supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship with Monash University (Cubillo, 2023). Dr Beau Cubillo is an accepted member of the Larrakia and Wadjigan Peoples from coastal regions of the NT.

This policy brief has been prepared to support communication of the findings of a policy analysis study conducted as part of this Project during 2022-2023 and subsequently published as Cubillo et al. (2024). The representation of Aboriginal nutrition, health, and wellbeing values within coastal marine and fisheries policies of the Northern Territory, Australia, *Maritime Studies*, 23:27 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40152-024-00370-4>.

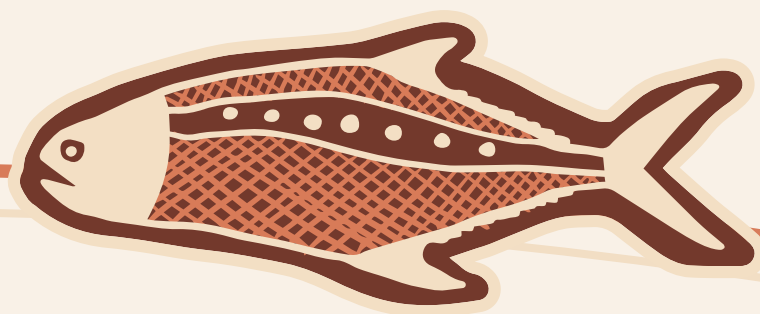
For the purpose of this document, the term ‘Indigenous’ is respectfully applied to reference the global Indigenous community and ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ is used to explicitly reference Australian Indigenous Peoples. It is acknowledged these terms do not fully capture the unique language, social, cultural and political diversity of Indigenous Peoples, and we respect the inherent rights and ongoing connections Indigenous Peoples have to the lands on which they reside (Maddox et al., 2023).



Summary





The study reported in this policy brief was part of a larger research project focused on exploring and strengthening Aboriginal connections to seafood for improving nutrition, health, and wellbeing outcomes in the Northern Territory (NT), Australia. It is recognised that Aboriginal Peoples in the NT have ongoing customary connections to seafood¹ as expressed through multiple and interlinked values which include association with health and wellbeing outcomes (Cubillo et al., 2023). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples view health and wellbeing as collective concepts which encompass values beyond bio-medical models of health (that often focus on absence of disease). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, health and wellbeing incorporates broader community-wide social and cultural determinants such as connection to Country, Kinship and Spirituality (Gee et al., 2014). In the context of health service delivery and health promotion, conceptualisation of these determinants and how they can inform practice and policy has been progressed largely by Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (Kennedy et al., 2023; McCalman et al., 2021). However, when considering how sectors outside of health can improve health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, such as fisheries (customary and commercial) and coastal and marine management sectors in Australia, the link to these underpinning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values of nutrition, health and wellbeing is less clear.

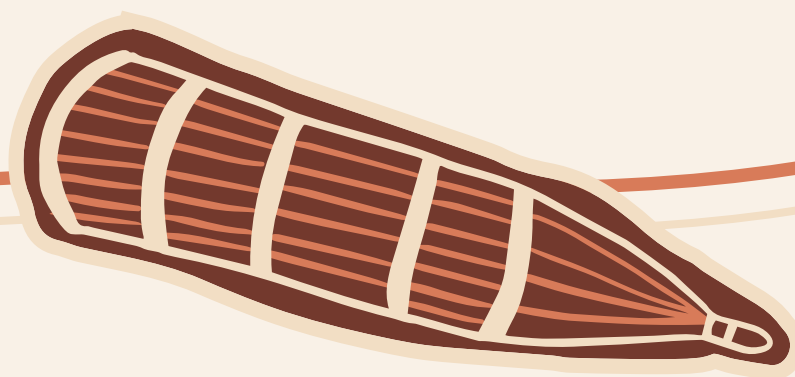
This policy brief presents the results of a study (Cubillo et al., 2024) that investigated how Aboriginal nutrition, health, and wellbeing values are conceptualised and represented in current (as of 2022) coastal, marine, and fisheries policies relevant to the NT. The aim of the study was to understand the discourse used in a suite of Commonwealth, Territory Government, industry, Indigenous organisation, and agency policies related to fisheries and coastal management. The results of this study are highly relevant to the topic of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition, food security and self-determination within fisheries in the NT and the wider Australian context.



1. We define seafood for the purposes of this study as explicitly marine aquatic animals including shellfish, mollusc, fish, mammals, cephalopods and crustaceans.

Key Findings

-  The focus of NT coastal, marine and fisheries policy is primarily concerned with the conservation and management of environments and resources, fisheries management and sustainability, and fisheries-based economic development.
-  The recognition of the contribution of seafood for Aboriginal Peoples diets and food security outcomes was not well represented. Only one policy explicitly mentioned the contribution of seafood as a food source. No policies explicitly referred to the health and wellbeing implications of seafood consumption.
-  Significant social, cultural, historical, commercial and political determinants linked to Aboriginal health and wellbeing outcomes are not well presented within the policies.
-  There was no representation of Aboriginal gendered seafood values, benefits and needs within any policies.



Introduction

International entities such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) have advocated for health and wellbeing including nutrition to be considered and integrated into cross-sector policies for improved health and social outcomes, including fisheries sectors (FAO, 2017, 2023; Arthur et al., 2022).

Often there is no clear implementation, monitoring, and evaluation systems for integrating cross-sector policy actions (WHO, 2019). There are concerns that Fisheries sector policies and commercial development of Fisheries sectors do not fully consider the role or impact of seafood towards nutrition, health and wellbeing outcomes (Koehn et al., 2022). With the growing double burden of disease and the rise of food insecurity both internationally and nationally for Indigenous Peoples (Anderson et al., 2016; Popkin et al., 2020), it is of global and national interest that Fisheries as a food system sector, explore their role in strengthening nutritional, health and wellbeing outcomes. This is especially pertinent for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities who have ongoing customary connections to Sea Country² and inherent interest in developing fisheries enterprises (Whitehouse et al., 2014; Cubillo et al., 2023). Seafood is an essential component of the wider Indigenous food system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and is particularly important for the diet quality and food security outcomes (Brimblecombe et al., 2014; Ferguson et al., 2017) but also integral to the cultural and social identity of Aboriginal coastal Peoples in the NT (Cubillo et al., 2023).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples within Australia continue to have their voices and perspectives within policy and practice including food related sectors subjugated in favour of dominant settler colonial systems (Eisenkraft and Shawanda, 2023; Poirier et al., 2022). International frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), endorsed by the Australian Government (as of 2009) provide guidance on integrating principles of empowerment to address inequalities and elevate Indigenous voices; referred loosely here as self-determination (UN, 2007; Davis, 2013; Yap & Yu, 2018).

Despite implementation of self-determination principles within targeted strategies such as Closing the Gap and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan Health Plan policies, these have largely failed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and social outcomes (Australian Government, 2021, 2023). There is a clear need for a paradigm shift in the way Aboriginal health and wellbeing is considered in sectors outside of health.

The NT is a suitable case study for a review to further understand how Aboriginal nutrition, health, and wellbeing values are conceptualised and represented in coastal, marine, and fisheries policies due to a number of recent changes and initiatives. This includes Aboriginal ownership and governance over 85% of intertidal coastal regions, recent establishment of remote community Aboriginal led fishing enterprises, and a newly created specialised Aboriginal Sea Company poised to provide development and investment opportunities in the maritime sector including Aboriginal fisheries development in the NT. This not only enables access to seafood for economic development but also livelihoods and includes food provision, dietary nourishment, social and cultural connections and subsistence for Aboriginal coastal Peoples (Stacey & Van Wyk, 2019; Cubillo et al., 2023).

This policy brief presents the results of a study into how nutrition, health, and wellbeing values are conceptualised and represented in current coastal, marine, and fisheries policies relevant to the NT from an Aboriginal perspective. Here, policy is broadly defined as “*a plan of action to influence and determine decisions, actions or other matters*” and is communicated in this study as strategies and plans (Zacharias & Ardron, 2020). The aim was to understand the discourse used in a suite of Government, industry, Indigenous organisation, and agency policies (current as of 2022) concerning self-determination, and Aboriginal community representation of nutrition, health, and wellbeing values.

2. Sea Country: refers explicitly to the geographically significant coastal and marine regions that hold substantial values, knowledge, resources and cultural and social obligations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Smyth, 1994; Whitehouse et al., 2014)

Research Approach and Analysis

The policy analysis included NT relevant coastal, marine and fisheries strategies and plans that impact coastal Aboriginal communities. From a potential 36 policies identified, our final analysis included ten policies (see Appendix). The included policies reflect strategy and plan documents from NT Government, Commonwealth Government agencies, Industry and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations. Three of the ten policies belonged to the NT Government (Department of Primary Industry and Resources Fisheries, Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security, Office of Aboriginal Affairs), two to the Commonwealth Government (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation), three to Commonwealth Government agencies (FRDC, reporting to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) and two to industry stakeholders (Northern Land Council: Aboriginal Sea Company and the Northern Territory Seafood Council). Commonwealth Government policies were included as Indigenous Affairs are considered an Australian Government Responsibility for the NT of Australia.

The following ten policies were included for analysis (for a full listing of policies and purpose statements (See appendix)

- Northern Land Council: Aboriginal Sea Company Draft Strategic Plan (Aboriginal Sea Company LTD, ND)
- Australian Government, Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation: Northern Australia Regional Indigenous Land and Sea Strategy 2019-2022 (Australian Government, 2019)
- Australian Government: National Fisheries Plan, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment 2022-2030 (Australian Government, 2022)
- Fisheries Research Development Corporation: Research and Development Plan 2020-2025 (Fisheries Research Development Corporation, 2020a)
- Fisheries Research Development Corporation: Annual Prerational Plan 2022-23 (Fisheries Research Development Corporation, 2022)
- Northern Territory Government: Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security; Coastal and Marine Management Strategy 2019-2029 (Northern Territory Government, 2019a)
- Northern Territory Government: Department of Primary Industry and Resources Fisheries Division Strategic Plan 2019-2022 (Northern Territory Government, 2019b)
- Northern Territory Government: Office of Aboriginal Affairs Land and Sea Action Plan 2022-2024 (Northern Territory Government, 2022a)
- Northern Territory Seafood Council: Strategic Plan 2018-2023 (Northern Territory seafood council, 2018)
- Fisheries Research Development Corporation: Shaping Fisheries Research Development Corporation 2020-2025 R&D Plan (Fisheries Research Development Corporation, 2020b)

The policy documents were analysed using a qualitative content analysis method that provided a means to draw upon previous research by Cubillo et al (2023), which had identified intangible and tangible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values connected to seafood from a health and wellbeing perspective. Using an inductive coding process within NVIVO software the 10 documents were open coded resulting in an initial set of 47 codes, collapsed into a set of categories. This included values relating to connection to Country, traditional fishing, Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer, Culture, history, business and fishing enterprises, self-determination and governance, traditional medicine, food, health and nutrition. From the inductive content analysis eight main concepts (see below) were identified as representing Aboriginal values connected to health and wellbeing outcomes and positioning of self-determination.

Findings

From the content analysis of 10 policy documents, eight main concepts were constructed from the analysis of values represented and related to Aboriginal nutrition, health and wellbeing:

- Aboriginal Peoples and community aspirations and values
- Aboriginal self-determination and governance
- Aboriginal Knowledge
- Conflict in fisheries, challenges for Aboriginal Peoples
- Closing the Gap on Aboriginal inequity
- Coastal Aboriginal identity
- Economic development with Aboriginal Peoples
- Aboriginal nutrition, health and wellbeing

The policies reviewed reflected a wide range of priorities targeted at various levels of government, industry, and public and community stakeholders. Similarities and differences were identified across the documents relating to the eight main concepts and associated themes relating to economic development, self-determination and governance of Fisheries sectors. Only a subset of policies focussed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values and interests and only one policy explicitly mentioned the contribution of nutrition, which represented seafood as a food source (Aboriginal Sea Company LTD, ND, p. 4). No policies explicitly referred to the health and wellbeing implications of seafood consumption. Access issues relevant to consumption or seafood production for Aboriginal Peoples was also not clearly presented. Another topic of interest arising from the review was that there was little representation of gendered seafood values, benefits and needs within policies and the distinct needs, roles and activities of men and women in fisheries and use of seafood.

While self-determination principles were well reflected within the policies, this was largely positioned within a socio-economic development lens with little understanding indicated of how this could include health and wellbeing values. The policies analysed tended to focus on economic values in terms of employment, income and management rather than recognising outcomes other than those related to economic development. Further, while some government policies acknowledged the need to address Closing the Gap targets in general terms there was no indication of how fisheries and associated

policies could contribute to Closing the Gap, beyond socio-economic development. This suggests policy makers are using a narrow policy framing approach where potentially health and wellbeing are viewed as individual disease, or social outcomes focused rather than as part of an integrated view of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values associated with seafood (Cubillo et al., 2023). This has been a common failing of much sectoral-based government policy making where policy has been slow to integrate social and economic goals alongside health and wellbeing (Dovers & Hussey, 2013; Dawson et al., 2021).

We acknowledge this study as a preliminary scoping exercise to inform further research and policy development and implementation. While government, industry and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations have specific agendas to support economic and community development, health and wellbeing are a crucial component of this. There is clear opportunity for coastal, marine and fisheries policies to contribute to NT and national Indigenous health, nutrition and wellbeing agendas. This needs to be specifically considered in current and future policy development through explicit statements on Indigenous nutrition, health and wellbeing contributions alongside socio-economic development agendas. The coastal, marine and fisheries policies relevant to Aboriginal NT currently do not fully realise their potential and responsibility to support nutrition, health, and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal People who so rely on these environments and resources for food, livelihoods and other cultural and social values and benefits.

Implications of the research

The Australian Government has demonstrated its commitment to strengthening the nutrition, health, and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as evidenced in the national Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2023, where food security for remote communities is a cross-cutting priority (Australian Government, 2023a). This includes the development of the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) National Strategy for Food Security in remote First Nations communities (Australian Government 2023b). Given the crucial role of seafood in Aboriginal communities in the NT for food provisioning and other social, cultural and economic contributions, there is opportunity for coastal, marine and fisheries policies to strengthen these outcomes linked to health and wellbeing. It is acknowledged that a more focussed policy agenda and implementation pathway is needed to achieve specific implementation targets and actions to directly and indirectly improve nutrition, health and wellbeing outcomes in NT Aboriginal communities via seafood access, availability, and consumption. The following recommendations provide suggestions for how future policy and research could contribute to this.



Recommendations

Coastal, marine, and fisheries sectors can contribute further to food security, health and wellbeing outcomes in Aboriginal communities in line with national and internationally recognised approaches. This includes the global and national commitments through the 'WHO Health-In-All-Policies' and 'UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples', and the Commonwealth government's commitment to food security for remote communities through the a 'National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities'. The following recommendations are coherent with these commitments.

1

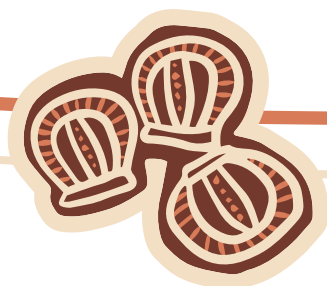
Coastal, marine and/or fisheries policies should be reviewed and revised to recognise the contribution of seafood to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing outcomes beyond an economic lens. A platform should be provided to integrate Aboriginal values connected to seafood into policies that provide sustainable benefits to the individual and community. This may occur through greater representation and understanding of the role of Inter-generational Knowledge transfer, access and caring for Sea Country, cultural and social expressions, and traditional medicine.

2

Prioritise nutrition and food provision of seafood in policy to increase local food security and dietary quality. This is especially important for populations of high need within the community such as elderly, children, and those with disabilities. This could occur through policy action that supports fisheries as a pathway for greater food supply to aged care and disability services as well as school/childcare facilities in remote areas that is locally sourced.

3

The evaluation and monitoring of the implementation and attainment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values within policies is not currently well understood. Future research is needed to understand how the concept of self-determination can be measured to reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander coastal, marine and fisheries interest for local communities, in relation to nutrition, health and wellbeing.



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Appendix

Appendix 1: Policy documents reviewed and summary of purpose statements

POLICY	PURPOSE
Aboriginal Sea Company Draft Strategic Plan	A key feature of this plan is the Aboriginal Sea Company has consulted stakeholders and incorporated their aspirations and desires. The plan aims to establish long-term success of embedding the pillars of the Aboriginal Seafood Council and taking back control of fisheries management.
Australian Government Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation: Northern Australia Regional Indigenous Land and Sea Strategy 2019-2022	The Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation (ILSC) aims to assist Indigenous Australians in acquiring land and water-related rights and managing Indigenous-held land and sea. This strategy details a framework for how the ISLC wants to deliver its mandate to achieve economic, environmental, social and cultural benefits for Indigenous Peoples.
Australian Government: National Fisheries Plan, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment 2022-2030	The National Fisheries Plan aims to ensure the future of fishing, aquaculture, and seafood is a shared vision that aligns with the Government's strategic planning, prioritisation and investment. The plan further aims to provide a framework and vision for the sustainable growth and development of Australia's fishing and aquaculture, and seafood community for the future.
Fisheries Research Development Corporation Research and Development Plan 2020-2025	Fisheries Research Development Corporation (FRDC) is a national thought leader in shaping fishing and aquaculture in Australia through investment, management, research and development. This strategy highlights the plan for capacity building, shaping culture, building relationships and establishing shared principles and values with the community over the next five years.
Fisheries Research Development Corporation: Annual Operational Plan 2022-23	This plan aims to provide an annual outline and detail of how the FRDC meets Australia's vision of fishing and aquaculture by supporting the collaborative, vibrant fishing and aquaculture community and creating various benefits from aquatic resources.
Northern Territory Government: Coastal and Marine Management Strategy 2019-2029	This 10-year strategy highlights a vision and outline of how to provide, protect and maintain healthy, productive coasts and seas. This incorporates recognition of the cultural significance of marine resources and their contribution to lifestyle and livelihoods. In addition, the strategy includes recognition of the rights and interests of Aboriginal landowners, support management, and conservation of coastal and marine areas, including the natural resources and sustainable industry for the benefit of the NT economy.
Northern Territory Government: Department of Primary Industry and Resources Fisheries Division Strategic Plan 2019-2022	This strategy guides actions to achieve sustainable development, utilisation and protection of aquatic resources. The intention is to provide clarity around the medium-term business focus of the Fisheries Division. In addition, the strategy identifies actions to build and retain the capacity and skills of NT fishing.
Northern Territory Land and Sea Action Plan 2022-2024	The strategy focuses on the land and sea ownership and delivery of Aboriginal Peoples economic and social aspirations in the NT.
Northern Territory Seafood Council Strategic Plan 2018-2023	The key focus of this strategy is to restore commercial rights and position the industry to regain social license to operate. This is actioned by implementing key programmes involving identifying risks and opportunities for the NT Seafood Council and inshore fisheries to secure access, sustainable fishing and increased market value.
Fisheries Research Development Corporation: Shaping Fisheries Research Development Corporation 2020-2025 R&D Plan	This strategy summarises the historical performances of commercial wild catch, aquaculture, Indigenous, recreational and post-harvest fishery sectors using a situational analysis to inform future FRDC vision.

