

## SEA TURTLE CONSERVATION AND SOCIAL OUTCOMES THROUGH INDIGENOUS INITIATIVES AND COLLABORATIONS IN AUSTRALIA\*

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Successful long-term conservation programs often depend on locally engaged stakeholders where nature assets have inherent conservation, cultural or monetary values. This is especially true for Indigenous Australians who have intricate cultural links to sea turtles through lore, food, ceremony, songs, stories, dance, art, health and conservation. Over the last 30 years in Australia, changing attitudes and government policies and recognition of Indigenous Knowledge globally have led to many initiatives, public policy changes and different operational behaviours that have increased support for local on-country management including through two-way knowledge systems and jointly managed protected areas. In Australia, this progress is the result of many factors including the Native Title Act 1993 which preserves native title rights and interests of Indigenous people and does not prohibit activities such as hunting, fishing, gathering or cultural or spiritual activities (including the take of turtles). To support this, many groups have developed community management plans to ensure, that in these modern times, cultural and community needs are met in a sustainable manner. In addition, the expansion of Australia's protected area network over the past two decades has occurred across different government jurisdictions with many areas jointly managed with Indigenous groups (e.g. <https://www.dpaw.wa.gov.au/parks/aboriginal-involvement/91-joint-management>). Added to this are 78 Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) established since 1999 which are areas of land and sea managed by Indigenous groups to protect biodiversity and culture. Many have healthy country plans (e.g. <https://wunambalgaambera.org.au/healthy-country/healthy-country-plan/>) and employ rangers through various government and non-government sources. The perspective of western scientists has also changed over decades with many recognising the value of two-way knowledge systems and Indigenous collaborations for joint outcomes which is acknowledged in Australia's marine turtle recovery plan (<https://www.awe.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/recovery-plan-marine-turtles-2017.pdf>). This includes recognising that many Indigenous groups lead their own effective monitoring programs (e.g. li-Anthawirriyarr Rangers Gulf of Carpentaria, Torres Strait, Mapoon <https://apps.des.qld.gov.au/land-sea-rangers/?ranger=mapoon>) and work collaboratively with diverse partners on research and monitoring initiatives. A recent example is the North West Shelf Flatback Turtle Conservation Program ([www.flatbacks.wa.gov.au](http://www.flatbacks.wa.gov.au)) which has collaborated with over 13 Indigenous groups to deliver shared outcomes including employment and education opportunities. The Western Australia Marine Science Institute (<https://wamsi.org.au/research/programs/kimberley-marine-research-program/>) also had successful collaborations across the Kimberley with legacy outcomes including a formalised process for research engagement. Following this the Indigenous Saltwater Advisory Group (ISWAG) formed which is

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a non-binding consortium of 9 Indigenous groups to develop solutions to conservation problems with a unique turtle and dugong conservation initiative developed in 2021 (<http://www.mosaicenvironmental.com.au/iswag.html>). The benefits to turtle conservation from these collaborative initiatives include project continuity, better planning, onground implementation, more complete knowledge and community support. Added to this are the equally valuable social outcomes in remote parts of Australia related to education, school attendance, local job prospects and opportunities, health, community cohesion and community finances which could be enhanced further through broader cross-discipline and cross-sector collaborations, and could in part, contribute to Australia's "Closing the Gap" (<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/>) targets for Indigenous Australians.

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