

Reef

Dugong Education & Information Strategy in Indigenous Communities 1997 – 1999

A Report on an Information Strategy
Conducted by the Indigenous Cultural Liaison Unit
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For a long time Indigenous coastal people have relied on dugongs as a cultural resource. For Indigenous people the dugong has spiritual, cultural, social and economic affinity in everyday life. As a cultural resource it also provides for social identity and attachment to tradition. However due to a variety of impacts, most of which are produced by people, the population of dugongs in the area between Cooktown to Bundaberg has shown a dramatic decline.

This report is a summary of the dugong education information strategy implemented by the Indigenous Cultural Liaison Unit (ICLU) of GBRMPA during 1997 and 1999.

Some of the issues raised within this report should be taken as a general representation of Indigenous feelings towards an issue such as dugong and the broader management and Indigenous involvement in the management.

It is apparent through issues raised by communities that traditional use and cultural attachment to the reef is of great importance and will always be a concern to Indigenous people. Indigenous people consider their rights and interest are being controlled or eroded by the activities of management agencies and increasing use of the reef by others.

The answer to these concerns relies on the methodology and approach GBRMPA and Government take in dealing with them. The critical component is perhaps involving Indigenous people in management programs and this may go some way to improving management for critical resources such as dugongs.

Perhaps the greatest tool that we have as a management agency is education. Education and information will help displace the levels of ignorance and complacency on all sides and should serve as a two-way flow.

Cultural Loss

The conservation of the turtle and dugong and the management of impacts represents the collective goal of all interest groups. It should be understood that Indigenous people have an obligation to be involved in management of dugongs and turtles for, if they disappear, then another aspect of Indigenous culture has disappeared.

Recommendations

Recommendation One:

This program should continue to be supported and should extend to incorporate turtles and other critical resources as well as dugongs.

Recommendation Two:

Indigenous involvement in management should continue to be explored and developed, with the aim of establishing co-management with Indigenous groups.

Recommendation Three:

GBRMPA should continue to build on existing relationships and support communities where positive actions have established working understandings with Indigenous groups.

Recommendation Four:

GBRMPA should commission reports and research to update understanding of Indigenous issues and aspiration for involvement in management of the Marine park.



INTRODUCTION

This report is a summary of the Dugong Education and Information Strategy (DEIS) conducted by the Indigenous Cultural Liaison Unit of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA). The program consisted of two phases; the first phase was undertaken between March and July 1997 and an updated information session, known as phase II was delivered in from April to July of 1999.

The DEIS sought to provide Indigenous communities who may have an interest in dugongs with information on the decline in dugong numbers within the Southern GBR (Cooktown south). Between March and July 1997, a total of 15 presentations were delivered to Indigenous representative bodies and communities adjacent to the southern GBR area. Phase II was conducted between April and July 1999 and during this period a total of nine presentations were delivered to many of the same communities as in phase I.

The presentations were primarily aimed at providing comprehensive and appropriate information on the facts detailing the decline, threats, impacts, proposed actions and management for dugongs in the southern GBR.



BACKGROUND

Critical natural resources, such as dugongs, play an important and diverse role in the lives of many coastal Indigenous peoples.

Dugongs fulfil important social functions including being a food source for contemporary cultural observances such as funerals and weddings. The dugong has spiritual significance, and is found in the stories of many coastal Indigenous communities. Dugongs also have economic value because they provide sustenance, particularly for isolated communities where a nourishing diet is essential but often difficult to attain due to isolation and high costs. Furthermore dugongs give strength to culture and demonstrate an affiliation with tradition and traditional areas (Hunter & Williams 1998).

Decline of dugongs

For a long time Indigenous people have relied on dugongs, and maintenance of Indigenous hunting activities has been shown to be sustainable if the population is not threatened by other impacts. Dugongs now have to contend with many other impacts including loss of habitat and coastal development, and many of these threats are produced by human activity (Hunter & Williams 1998).

Research has shown that dugongs in the southern GBR have declined by 50 to 80 per cent. Many Indigenous people who have relied on dugongs have noted that dugongs are no longer found in the numbers they once were in local areas (Marsh 1996).

While this decline had been noted many people were unaware of the extent by which the dugong population has declined in the overall southern GBR. The task was to deliver information on the decline in a form that would be culturally appropriate.

Delivery of this information was identified as a primary requirement in order to raise the Indigenous communities, level of awareness of the dugong decline and to have them assist in dugong recovery plans.



THE STRATEGY

Phase I of the strategy aimed to provide information. Phase II sought to update the information from phase I, build capacity within communities to deliver information sessions to community and school groups and to facilitate bringing Indigenous concern and issues back to GBRMPA. This was achieved by the following means.

- Responding to findings of the decline of dugong numbers in the Southern GBR (Cooktown south) by initiating a community education strategy
- Developing a culturally appropriate education and information package, specifically targeting Indigenous Communities, and presentation of the package, to identified Indigenous communities adjacent to the marine park. The package focused on:
 - research findings;
 - dugong biological and ecological information;
 - causes of dugong mortality; and
 - future management actions and options for the Indigenous involvement.

This information was seen as a fundamental requirement to communities decision making processes.

- Assisting with developing community's capacity to continue to deliver information to community and school groups.

Principle Aim

To develop an understanding with Indigenous people of the dugong decline and agree to mitigate hunting as a threat to the long-term survival of dugongs in the Southern GBR.

Other Key Aims

- To develop Indigenous involvement in management to ensure the recovery of dugongs to sustainable hunting levels.
- To provide (when available) updated information on developments relating to dugongs.
- To work cooperatively with Indigenous communities to raise awareness of the status of dugong and to generate support for future or existing management systems.
- To ensure that GBRMPA became aware of Indigenous people's concerns and issues relating to dugong and the environmental and cultural impacts.
- To develop community capacity to continue delivery of information.

Delivering the Strategy

Presentations were delivered to identified Indigenous groups from Cooktown south. During this time a total of 15 presentations were delivered.

The communities to which presentations were delivered covered most major towns and Indigenous communities from Cooktown to Mackay (see attachment A). Phase II, conducted from April to July 1999 has seen ten presentations delivered to communities from Cooktown South.

Both Phases were delivered by oral presentation using the Dugong Information Kit developed by GBRMPA. Overheads containing information on the biology of the dugong, population decline, threats/impacts and management actions, were used in Phase I. Phase II was an update of this information using slides.



ISSUES & FEEDBACK

There were many issues that people highlighted during the presentations and most were common to all communities. These issues have been compiled to highlight discussions raised at the presentations. A summary of these discussions follows.

Indigenous Involvement in Management

There is a general recognition from within Indigenous communities of the diminishing dugong population. However it is only based on community perceptions within their local area and most do not see the broader scale of the decline of numbers in the whole region.

Participants in the presentations felt that this situation will remain until there is greater community involvement in management. This was identified as a major issue in all forums.

Communities identified their possible roles or involvement in cooperative agreements or council of elders committee's to manage permits and programs for community rangers.

An overall consensus highlighted that developing any management mechanism needed to be culturally appropriate while also meeting the need for dugong and green sea turtle conservation. This would be achieved through a formalised process with recognition of Indigenous people through policy by the management agencies.

Communities were adamant that if they were going to embrace management practices and voluntarily cease hunting then there must be honest commitment to address all impacts on dugongs.

Many Indigenous groups noted that the views of Indigenous people needed to be honestly looked at and taken into account. Participants asked questions such as, 'Will it be the same with management? Will it just be a token gesture? Will there be strong commitment for management and funding for an Indigenous involvement program?

Recognition of Indigenous Knowledge

Communities often mistrust the scientific procedures used by researchers, and there are particular concerns about how the number of dugongs are calculated during aerial surveys and the accuracy of the methods used.

There was also a general recognition from communities of the scientific information and research on dugongs. However, people felt there is little acknowledgment by the scientific community of the valuable role traditional knowledge can play in management and research practices.

Participants felt that their traditional knowledge needs to be recorded and should form

the basis of any research and management program. This was seen as one of the important factors for the correct culturally, appropriate management of dugongs.

Strengthening Commitments

Communities felt that there is a need to develop education programs that concentrate more on the cultural and social values of dugongs rather than the need to hunt or to have a plentiful supply. This was seen as a solution that addresses the issue before it became a problem. These programs needed to be aimed at the younger members, who do not necessarily observe the cultural customs of traditional sharing.

COMMUNITY-BASED MANAGEMENT INITIATIVES FOR MARINE TURTLES AND DUGONGS

This outline accompanies the report on the DEIS and highlights some of the action and activities that Indigenous communities have initiated or developed with GBRMPA in the recent past. Many of these actions include management of turtles and dugongs as part of management hunting activities.

Kuku Yalanji Marine Resource Committee

Kuku Yalanji, the traditional owners of the Mossman area established a Marine Resource Committee for the management of traditional hunting permits issued by QPWS and GBRMPA. The primary purpose of the committee is to regulate the Government permits issued for hunting of turtles within their traditional hunting area.

- The group has engaged in turtle research and monitoring.
- The Kuku Yalanji stated strongly that no permits for the hunting of dugong be approved off shore their traditional area. (This was prior to any recognition of a decline in dugong numbers and before the ministerial council decision to not issue permits for traditional hunting in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park).

Current Status:

Ku Ku Yalanji Marine Resource Committee have been regularly conducting assessments of community hunting permit requests for the take of turtles in their traditional estate for about four years. In the last two years they have received from GBRMPA a total of \$4000 towards administration costs. However, GBRMPA's contribution only covers less than a quarter of the annual administrative outlay for the effectiveness the program. Added to this is the increase in cost outlay and the program is now in danger from being under resourced.

Hopevale

- The Hopevale community north of Cooktown are in the process of developing their management program for traditional take of turtles and dugongs with a strong focus on education, community participation and ownership of the process outcome.
- The focus of this management plan is to ensure GBRMPA and QPWS legislative and regulation requirements fit into community law. The community's main aim is to work towards cooperative management with QPWS and GBRMPA on the community's terms.

- A draft plan was handed to the Chair of GBRMPA on 27th September 1999. The details for implementation of the plan are currently being developed by the community.

Current Status:

The Hopevale Hunting Management Committee is in transitional phase with people increasingly involved in the tagging (JCU) project. However, the changing of the guard of Project Officer has meant some additional adjustments for the community. The transition and the monitoring program proposed for this Christmas hunting season will need support from GBRMPA in terms of on ground participation by ICLU staff.

Bowen

- Girudala have established a Council of Elders to manage their traditional hunting permits.
- The Darumbal Noolar Murree Corporation, representing the people around the Shoalwater Bay region (which also happens to be an important dugong habitat), have taken the initiative to enter into a formal agreement with GBRMPA. The Darumbal have agreed not to undertake traditional hunting activities until such time that the next survey is carried out and/or dugong numbers have reached sustainable hunting levels.

A number of communities are aware of concerns regarding turtle and dugong management. Many are starting to explore options for cooperative management. Each region has different traditions and cultural constraints, mixed and diverse indigenous representative groups, issues and environmental concerns. The conservation of the turtle and dugong and the management of impacts represents the collective goal of all interest groups. Indigenous people have an obligation to be involved in management of dugongs and turtles for if these animals disappear then another aspect of Indigenous culture also disappears (Hunter & Williams 1998).

Whilst the ICLU program has concentrated on the communities and areas listed in attachments A and B, it should be noted that the program needs to expand to many other areas along the coast. The program has been limited by a lack of resources. This program has demonstrated that it can be effective and that more needs to be done. However, a substantial increase in funding is required in order to undertake, and indeed achieve, a more inclusive and successful program. It may be false economy not to adequately fund the program given the declining status of dugong in the Southern GBR and the critical importance that each animal will have on maintenance of the population.



RECOMMENDATIONS

This program has highlighted the need for similar initiatives. As stated earlier education is perhaps our greatest tool in management. In order to maintain what this program has developed we should consider what has been achieved with the limited resources available. Below are recommendations which can form the basis for continuance of the program and pave the way for other such developments.

Recommendation One:

This program should continue to be supported and should extend to incorporate turtles and other critical resources as well as dugongs.

Note: With the support of the Conservation Biodiversity group, ICLU can continue to build on the existing program. Many Indigenous groups are actively wanting to develop their own education programs and we can provide support by encouraging and providing resources such as information, presentation material and limited training.

Recommendation Two:

Indigenous involvement in management should continue to be explored and developed, with the aim of establishing co-management with Indigenous groups.

Note: Indigenous groups, through representative bodies such as Sea Forum, are establishing processes for Indigenous involvement in management. GBRMPA should be aware of these developments and build on the Ministerial Direction (June 14 1997) to enter into co-management with Indigenous people for the protection of dugong.

Recommendation Three:

GBRMPA should continue to build on existing relationships and support communities where positive actions have established working understandings with Indigenous groups.

Note: Through ongoing liaison and trust-building in communities, ICLU have established working and meaningful relationships with communities including Hopevale, Kuku Yalanji Mossman and Giringun in Cardwell. The process for establishment with some communities has been long, and has involved spending a considerable amount of time in communities. These communities have shown positive action for management of critical resources such as dugongs and turtles and have demonstrated the valuable role that they can play in management. GBRMPA should continue to support and encourage this for it may take only a minor shift in focus for these relationships to dissolve.

Recommendation Four:

GBRMPA should commission reports and research to update understanding of Indigenous issues and aspiration for involvement in management of the Marine park.

Note: Most of the material that has been produced on Indigenous people and involvement with the Marine Park was developed in the past decades. The relationships are constantly changing and evolving, and GBRMPA needs to maintain their understanding of the use of the Marine Park and aspirations for involvement in management of Indigenous people.

ATTACHMENT A

Consultation Phase I of the Strategy April May 1997

Cooktown

Wujal Wujal Community

presentation

Mossman Gorge community

presentation

Cairns - Gaingurra community

presentation

Townsville - Birrigubba people

received packages

Mackay Birrigubba

presentation

Mackay Yebera Dilli

presentation

Yarrabah Community

presentation

Cardwell Girringan Elders Reference Group

received packages

Ingham Hinchinbrook community

received packages

Palm Island

presentation

ATSIC Regional council - Townsville

presentation received package

Girudala CoE

presentation

Also requested presentation to schools within their traditional area
(Proserpine/Bowen area)

ATTACHMENT B

Consultation Phase II of the Strategy April July 1999

Cooktown Gungarde

presentation

Mossman Gorge community

presentation

NQLC

brief on program

Townsville - Birrigubba people

received packages

Mackay Birrigubba

received packages

Mackay Yebera Dilli

presentation

Cardwell Giringan Elders Reference Group

presentation

Palm Island

presentation

Girudala CoE

presentation

Dumbul Noolar Murrie Corporation

presentation

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