

Putting a value on wild harvest

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The value of rivers and wild food resources to Aboriginal people is the focus of new research that will help transform water management on Cape York in northern Queensland.



Credit: CSIRO

The project is a partnership between CSIRO and the Kowanyama Aboriginal Land and Natural Resource Management Office in the Mitchell River delta. Kowanyama Aboriginal lands cover more than 4000 square kilometres, including 50 kilometres of coastline on western Cape York.

‘Aboriginal people have a large stake in water resource planning and management based on their distinct cultures, ways of life and substantial land holdings,’ says Dr Sue Jackson, CSIRO Water for a Healthy Country Flagship researcher. ‘Yet, their interests and values in water are poorly understood by decision makers.’

Rodney Whitfield, from the Kowanyama Aboriginal Land and Natural Resource Management Office, says the Mitchell River delta is a food bowl for the Kowanyama people, who have long been concerned about the impacts of a range of activities on the delta.

‘Our research with CSIRO will increase understanding of the importance of river systems to Kowanyama's economy of 1400 people,’ says Mr Whitfield. ‘This information will also be crucial to our people’s effective management of Mitchell delta country.’

The research will record Aboriginal social and cultural knowledge relating to water, and will survey people to quantify the economic benefit households derive from their use of aquatic plants and animals.

‘What's special about this project is that Kowanyama’s Land Management Office values this research so highly, they’ve committed their own resources and expertise to collect data through a series of household surveys over the next two years,’ says Dr Jackson.

Mr Whitfield says the surveys will ask people questions such as how many fish they've caught or magpie goose eggs they've collected.

'After the data have been collected, we'll compare the total wild harvest with the cost of purchasing the same amount of food from the community store,' he says.

'With the results from this research, Aboriginal people will be able to sit at the table with other water users such as farmers and mining companies and have their water requirements factored into land-use decisions and water planning.'

As well as conducting the surveys, the project will contribute to the extensive work already undertaken by the Kowanyama Land Management Office to document traditional knowledge of river country, and to monitor river health in collaboration with other scientists.

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