

Freshwater project fuses Indigenous and Western knowledge

Wagiman Traditional Owners from the Pine Creek area in the Northern Territory have released a poster that documents cultural and scientific knowledge about the fish species of the Daly River in the heartland of Wagiman country.



Credit: Michael Douglas

Traditional Owner Mona Liddy said both the Wagiman and researchers from the Tropical Rivers and Coastal Knowledge (TRaCK) program had benefited from the project, now in its sixth year.

‘It’s been really good to bring young and old people back together on country, and documenting the names of fish in a language which fewer people are speaking nowadays is a way of keeping that language and culture strong,’ Mona said.

‘There have been other benefits for the Wagiman people in terms of employment and education, whether it was TAFE training for the rangers involved, people using the work towards their own studies, or kids using it as part of their high school projects.

‘It’s also been a learning curve for both groups, coming up with techniques for documenting that knowledge, to provide something that can be really useful for government.’

Since 2006 the project has included fish surveys twice a year, among many other workshops and events. TRaCK aims to continue the work to provide a long-term data set for the Daly River.

TRaCK Director Michael Douglas said information gathered through the project is already being used by the Northern Territory Government and results from the fish surveys will be used to monitor changes in the river over time.

‘It’s a real breakthrough in terms of combining Indigenous and Western science knowledge and giving recognition to and getting greater appreciation for the value of Indigenous knowledge.

‘But it’s a symbol of a much broader story, and that is about bringing together those two different types of knowledge to produce information which is now being used by government to set water allocation targets.

‘There was a species of fish – the freshwater sole – that we came across that the Wagiman hadn’t seen before, but they knew all the others and I was amazed by the subtle differences they were aware of in some of the fish species.

‘For example, they knew straight away when we came across the juvenile and adult forms of a particular fish, where taxonomists had thought they were two different species for decades.

‘It’s been a real success in terms of collaboration, and the project has certainly influenced the other work of the entire TRaCK program and the work we will undertake in the future.’

Source: TRaCK

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