

Indigenous management of dugongs and marine turtles in Northern Australia

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Northern Australia is one of the last great strongholds for marine turtles and dugongs on the planet. With home ranges that cross borders and seas, these migratory species face a diverse range of threats and impacts that, collectively, have decimated populations elsewhere around the world. Maintaining Australia's great herds of dugong and marine turtle requires effective partnerships, networks and collaborations that span northern Australia and indeed the SE Asian region.

Northern Australia is also home to some of the longest running, intact land and sea management regimes in the world. Indigenous communities of northern Australia maintain long-held rights and responsibilities for land and sea management and continue to enjoy dugong and marine turtles as a significant natural and cultural resource. There are numerous examples demonstrating the skill of Indigenous Australians in combining traditional and contemporary skills, knowledge and expertise for better resource management, and for north Australia Indigenous land and sea managers are the only management presence.

The NAILSMA Dugong and Marine Turtle Project (DMTP) is about Indigenous communities across northern Australia working together to protect threatened sea turtles and dugongs and their coastal habitats. Indigenous rangers and community members from the Kimberley, Northern Territory, Gulf of Carpentaria, Cape York and Torres Strait are working with government organisations, scientists, industry and other stakeholders to map and protect sea grass beds; clean beaches and rescue stranded wildlife, tag turtles and monitor turtle nests; record and share traditional knowledge about turtles and dugongs; and educate and raise awareness about the need to look after turtles and dugongs. Building local capacity and sustainable partnerships to support ongoing community activities are essential to the NAILSMA DMTP.

The NAILSMA DMTP represents a recognition by government that effective and sustainable management of dugong and marine turtle requires a community-based approach that builds on the strengths, skills and expertise of Indigenous people and is driven by the concerns and issues identified by Indigenous people. The collective expertise of the Indigenous participants in the project coupled with the networks facilitated through NAILSMA and the partnerships being forged with government and other stakeholders, is making significant contribution to the sustainable management of dugong and marine turtle.