



HEALING SEA COUNTRY AND RESTORING THE REEF WORKSHOP WITH TRADITIONAL OWNERS

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The *“Healing Sea Country and Restoring the Reef”* workshop brought together Traditional Owners (TO’s), the Ningaloo Department of Biodiversity, Conservation, and Attractions (DBCA), MARS Sustainable Solutions, and the Minderoo Foundation. The workshop began a process of defining aspirations for healing of Sea Country, the role of restoration in joint management of the reef between Traditional Owners and the DBCA, and opportunities for TO’s to engage in restoration trialling.

This workshop served as an important starting point for ongoing conversations and efforts. It created space for Traditional Owners to talk about their perspectives and values, and discuss opportunities for meaningful Traditional Owner engagement during restoration experiment planning and implementation. Findings from this workshop are synthesized in this report and are intended to help inform future engagement around restoration activities within the broader context of Joint Management between DBCA and the TO Joint Management Body (JMB), as well as researchers and TO communities in Ningaloo.

This workshop was designed and delivered through the [Resilient Reefs Initiative](#) and the [Resilience Accelerator](#) program, a partnership with between the Great Barrier Reef Foundation and the Center for Resilient Cities and Landscapes at Columbia University.

WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

- Bring together Traditional Owners, the DBCA, and researchers to co-learn about restoration and opportunities to engage with it from around the world
- Listen and learn about TO’s aspirations for reef health and healing, how restoration may relate to health and healing, and explore how TO’s would like to engage in restoration and caring for sea country in Ningaloo
- Articulate aspirations that guide potential future restoration and early co-design of trial goals, siting, planning, design, implementation, engagement and monitoring processes
- Begin to understand the social acceptability of restoration techniques
- Scope TO partner role in MARRS Reef Star trial and build and support a working relationship between MARRS, Minderoo, DBCA, and JMB
- Begin to define role of the JMB and process for restoration planning to inform Reef Restoration Trialling Framework

WORKSHOP LEARNINGS

What are the core aspirations for reef healing and management?

- **Land and sea country must be managed together.** Healing the reef means management of land and sea country together, including revegetation of both land and sea.
- **We know what's coming, so let's plan now** and avoid the worst impacts of climate change. Funding and management should be proactive in order to avoid piecemeal approaches and unsustainable efforts.
- **Maintaining the health and safety of the reef today** is as important as healing it from damage. Prioritize maintaining the health of the reef, and then healing the reef where necessary.
- **Reef healing means setting up the next generation** to lead the way in stewarding land, sea, and culture. Mentor the younger generation, create opportunities for skills, training, and employment, and preserve and transfer cultural knowledge for future generations
- **Cultural and biocultural landscapes need to be recognized, valued, and integrated.** Activities should ensure that care, protection, and safeguards are in place to preserve cultural values.
- **There is an aspiration to showcase traditional culture and display it with pride.** Activities should take opportunities to incorporate indigenous design (e.g. utilising the shapes of cultural totems or animals like madjun and manta rays) and Traditional Knowledge (e.g. use of indigenous materials).
- **Benefits of projects must be accessible and shared.** Meaningful engagement requires capacity and skill development and employment opportunities during implementation, maintenance, and monitoring. This might include, for example, training for lab work, in-water monitoring or collection and sampling of coral fragments, dive certifications or other professional or technical skills development.
- **Adequate resources should be made available to build sustained capacity of the TO community** to make well-informed decisions and support sea country healing. Resources made available, such as through training and education as well as adequate funding and adequate consideration of logistics involved (e.g., travel, sitting fees, accommodations), will ensure participation and value.

How do Traditional Owners want to be involved in restoration activities?

- **Intergenerational involvement** and engagement of the younger generation in healing the reef. Young people are critical to 'leading the charge' in managing and healing country. Drawing on the knowledge of ancestors, a circle of elders can guide and mentor the younger generations involved in long-term sea country management.
- **On-country knowledge-sharing.** Traditional Owners have a deep cultural understanding of Nyinggulu and its ecosystems, which can be shared with the younger generation, management agencies and researchers when TO's apply traditional knowledge to current ecosystems on-country.
- **Training and career development** to support full-time career pathways in sea country management. TO's can be well positioned to lead or support the design, construction, and implementation of projects through a dedicated and funded Sea Ranger program, cadetships and traineeships (rangers, lab assistants etc), TAFE courses and other skills development opportunities. A key aspiration is increased full-time jobs and careers pathways for Traditional Owners working on-country.

- **Indigenous design.** TO's can guide the design aspects of reef restoration, such as through incorporating indigenous materials, totems and motifs that have cultural importance into the design of the project. These methods will provide avenues for education or cultural values and knowledge of Sea Country.
- **Traditional Owner-led projects.** TO's aspire to design, manage and maintain sea country management projects, such as coral gardens.

How should managers and researchers engage with TO's in the future?

- **Meaningful co-design - TO's should be engaged in the early stages of planning.** Co-design means that TO's are involved in the early stages of planning and given meaningful opportunities to influence and be involved in the design and delivery of projects, such as through: goal setting, site selection and prioritisation, technical and aesthetic design, construction, implementation, maintenance, education & ongoing reef or project monitoring.

Culturally and spiritually significant places need to be given careful consideration. Sites like the eastern side of the gulf, Bundegi, Vlamingh Head, Yardie Creek, Winderabandi, the outer reefs between Norwegian Bay and Pt. Cloates and between Pt. Cloates and Coral Bay, the inshore area from Yalabia to Miniminiurra, and Bruboodjoo are of particular importance.

TO observations of reef impacts can guide where restoration might be worthwhile.

Areas where there are corals washing up (for example, at Point Maud Brooboodjoo, Yalabia, Miniminiurra) might indicate impacts from tourism or erosion, and therefore inform restoration activities.



- **Appropriate governance.** In the near-term, projects should be brought to the JMB for initial discussion, which will then advise on further engagement.
- **Free, Prior and Informed Consent:** FPIC is a principle protected by international human rights standards that state, 'all peoples have the right to self-determination [and] the right to freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development'. Traditional Owners expect that information that is relevant and appropriate will be provided, along with meaningful opportunities for discussion, before consent is provided.

What's next after this workshop?

Following the workshop, the DBCA and JMB will work together to ensure that TO aspirations are integrated into the review of project proposals and implementation strategies as they are proposed by researchers. This will include:

- Review and approval of this workshop report;
- Gain permission for this report, or parts of this report, to be shared internally or externally with researchers and project proponents; and,
- Continued discussion with TO's about involvement in future stages of the proposed MARRS Reef Stars/Minderoo restoration project at Bundegi.

WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

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*"WE ARE GOING ON A JOURNEY TOGETHER –
THE WHOLE LOT OF US."*

HAZEL WALGAR