



**NATIONAL  
INDIGENOUS  
LAND AND  
SEA  
STRATEGY**

# **Discussion Paper: Bushfoods**



**Australian Government**  
Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation



**The ILSC GROUP**

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***This paper was informed by facilitated discussions with Joe Clarke (a local Arrernte man of Central Australia from Centrefarm, Aboriginal Land Economic Development Agency, Alice Springs) in combination with a written contribution from Professor Henrietta Marrie AM (an Elder of the Gimuy Walubara clan of the Yidinji people). The views expressed are for generating broader discussion and may not represent the position of the ILSC.***

*While we have the older people around with the ownerships and the correct stories [of Bush Tomato], they can record it and pass it on. When the older ladies take younger ones, they teach the lot, whether ground painting, body painting, however we transfer that information that is what we are going to do so we have a chance in a decade to have clear ownership. A pathway to ownership is important and it is the way it is.*

**Joe Clarke**

It has been estimated that First Nations peoples around Australia used approximately 10,000 native species for food, fiber, shelter and for ceremonial purposes. Today only a fraction of these species is being used by First Nations peoples and the wider Australian food industry.

One cannot talk about a particular bushfood species without considering the cultural context - the Traditional Knowledge - within which it exists. Every bushfood has its own creation story, its own song and dance and cultural knowledge that has been handed down by the ancestors for thousands of years. Some species have totemic significance, an enhanced relationship entailing ritual obligations for the person or clan for whom the species is a totem.

The challenge is: how do we bring these ancient foods into a contemporary industry while respecting and maintaining their cultural connections? For First Nations peoples, it's not just about money, it's about bushfood species being an integral part of their cultural identity and connection to country.

World-wide, Indigenous peoples complex traditional knowledge systems have been critical to the preservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of natural resources and the maintenance of ecosystems. An appreciation of Traditional Knowledge is emerging in the management of our diverse ecosystems through the employment of the skills and knowledge of First Nations Elders and Traditional Owner rangers.

It is also necessary to acknowledge the role of First Nations' women in providing the majority of food requirements in their communities. Supporting our First Nations women to record and maintain their bushfood practices is therefore critical for both protecting, transmitting and sustaining their traditional knowledge across generations.

## **1 Challenges**

Interest in and demand for bushfoods has been steadily growing over the last two decades to the point where supply is not able to meet demand. But First Nations businesses as suppliers are grossly under-represented in the supply chain comprising less than 1% of growers, farm managers and exporters across the native botanicals supply chain; and generating only 1% of the industry's produce and dollar value.

Indigenous people are mostly operating at the harvest end of the supply chain, receiving the lowest possible amount for native ingredients, while non-Indigenous businesses gain higher financial rewards by value adding during other stages of the supply chain, including processing, product manufacturing, packaging, warehousing, distributing, and selling and advertising. Value adding to the supply chain by incorporating the production, processing and packaging technologies and infrastructure will grow Indigenous operators' 'slice of the pie'.

There are also ongoing challenges around securing supply to meet the demand - with wild harvest requiring on country access and typically undertaken at a small scale. In the absence of the 'value add' processing and related elements, the return on small scale wild harvest produce may be insufficient to maintain, let alone grow, the enterprise.

The following areas need to be explored and addressed if First Nations communities and businesses are going to be able to participate equitably in the bushfood industry.



Indigenous Bush Food products.  
Photo Credit: Voyages Indigenous  
Tourism Australia Pty Ltd.

### 1.1 Lack of capital

Indigenous people generally lack the capital to either start up or expand their bushfood enterprises in an economic environment where they continue to be impacted by the historical legacy of dispossession and disempowerment. Often, they must also compete with industrial scale agribusinesses who are well placed to quickly mass produce, process and sell bushfoods in the market. Emerging Indigenous businesses are further handicapped by government and other funding bodies which often take a risk mitigation approach to funding, avoiding new ventures and start-ups with little capital.

### 1.2 Access to land

While many Traditional Owner groups have native title over their traditional land and sea country estates, this does not always translate into opportunities to participate in the bushfood industry. Much depends on the extent to which they have exclusive and/or non-exclusive rights over their country. For example, many native title holders have non-exclusive title over protected areas (state forests, national parks, etc) in which they can exercise limited rights to gather bushfoods, but not at commercial scale.

It is also acknowledged that many First Nations peoples don't have access to their traditional lands, particularly in urban and rural Australia where their native title has been extinguished by the grant of freehold. This severely limits their opportunities to have access to land for wild harvesting or to produce crops. However, commercial access agreements might be negotiated for access to Crown land, protected areas, privately owned land, pastoral leases and mining tenements etc. so that they can start to wild harvest or produce bushfoods in a culturally relevant way.

### 1.3 Protecting value - misleading conduct by companies: an Indigenous Bushfood Industry Code and Certification System

There are some mainstream companies selling native botanicals whose branding and messaging lead consumers to believe that the company is owned by, or at least gives benefits to, Indigenous people. There are also many products on the market containing native ingredients with unverified statements about their nutritional content and quality. This makes it difficult for Indigenous growers and product sellers who sell high quality, tested and verified products. These sellers have lower revenue return, because they are competing with companies selling low-quality, high-priced products making the same claims about their nutritional value.

This raises the issue of perhaps establishing a First Nations Bushfood Industry Code of Practice with a system of certification possibly administered by the ILSC. This would parallel the Indigenous Art Code which includes certified memberships for dealers and Indigenous artists, and a labelling system which identifies ethical dealers and that the artworks on sale are produced by Indigenous people.

### 1.4 Protecting Traditional Knowledge - access to land & sustainability

Subject to any native title conditions that might apply, and relevant state and territory laws, anyone can apply for a permit to harvest native species on public land. There are concerns about both the sustainability of these activities and the lack of legal protections for the Indigenous Knowledge pertaining to the species where, for example, a non-Indigenous business applies for a patent.



Wild harvesting of Kakadu Plum (Gubinge) in the Northern Territory

*I want to keep young people learning about bushfoods...easy to say you need to teach young people to plant Bush Tomato. Hard part teaching lore, the cultural connection, learning the Aboriginal way and non-Aboriginal farming. Not leaving culture behind...teaching how to protect culture.*

Joe Clarke

*Can't talk about traditional food without talking about Traditional Knowledge... part of our whole traditional practices.*

Professor Henrietta Marrie AM





### 1.5 Business models aligned to culture

For many First Nations peoples and their communities, it's not all about making money – Indigenous businesses have different priorities. First Nations peoples have their own customs, traditions and cultures and yet must somehow fit within a capitalist, profit driven, growth culture. Indigenous businesses are often about different types of values – value for community and Country, as well as monetary value. It is necessary to respect and honour the cultures and identities of the many different First Nations and create enterprise structures and values in line with these cultures. This will enable the advancement and continuation of cultures and add value to the harvested products.

### 1.6 Encouraging young Indigenous people into the bushfood industry

Educational and employment pathways must highlight the business and cultural opportunities available for young Indigenous people to work within the bushfood industry, including working with Elders on country and learning about their culture and traditions while earning an income from the culturally-sustainable harvest, processing and marketing of bushfoods.

*[There are lots of] different little small industries [which] makes it harder for commercial industries to engage. We need a clear message and a clear story – at the moment we are all over the shop, at the moment we will be divided and conquered.*

Joe Clarke

## 2 Collaboration and Partnerships – The Way Forward

The bushfoods sector is currently diverse and fragmented and building partnerships with commercial industry partners is a challenge. Partnerships with research institutions are important – for example to develop raw product to market readiness – while bringing complimentary systems of knowledge together will help Indigenous people to develop and advance opportunities within the bushfood industry.

The coordinating role of the ILSC-funded First Nations Bushfood and Botanical Alliances Australia to support and build the bushfoods sector and work with partners such as the Australian Native Foods and Botanicals will be critical to taking the industry as a whole forward.

## 3 Related Discussion Papers

Indigenous Cultural & Intellectual Property (ICIP), Investment Capital and Caring for Country Discussion papers are available at [www.ilsc.gov.au](http://www.ilsc.gov.au).



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A feedback report summarising what we have heard from you and how we will use this important information will be available on the website.



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