A Learning Experience: engaging traditional owners in dugong research in Torres Strait
Dugong research in Torres Strait

Aerial surveys

Satellite Tracking
Mabuiag

- Community asked to be involved
- Research agreement negotiated but not detailed
- Young inexperienced female project leader - not Indigenous or from island
- Rangers worked directly with scientists
- Islander participants not comfortable with discussing issues with project leader
- University team appeared reluctant to accept local advice
- Islanders appeared lazy to scientists with tight timeline and limited funds
- 5 dugongs caught and tagged and new catching technique developed
ABC 7.30 Report on Indigenous hunting

- Lead reporter masqueraded as scientist with hidden camera
- Mabuiag did not wish to collaborate further with scientists
Boigu

• More comprehensive research agreement
• Co-project management: male research team leader and TSRA staff
• Traditional owners – paid through university -slow
• Catching technique more culturally appropriate
• Daily debriefings
• But sea conditions unsuitable - no dugongs
Badu

• Even more comprehensive research agreement with Mura Badulgal RNTBC after protracted negotiations
• Co project management (with a male researcher) with TSRA staff
• Traditional Owners paid same day through community council
• 6 dugongs tracked with dive computers
Collaboration between Mura Badulgal, TSRA & JCU
Islander Learnings

• Hunting is male business – male project leaders important
• Co-project management with TSRA staff
Learnings JCU

• Negotiating detailed project agreement with ‘right’ people essential
• Needed to trust outcome of Islanders’ insistence on right to veto release of results
• TOs must be paid quickly
• Multiple communication products required:
  • Islanders
    • Posters, local media, TSRA Board (dinner), community presentations by rangers and researchers
  • Reports to all relevant government agencies
  • Academic journals
Questions?