

Ethical and Effective Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

Aboriginal and Torres Strait people have cultural and traditional practices, that must be observed, understood, respected and engaged with as an essential, ongoing part of a research process.

It is becoming more broadly understood and acknowledged that Indigenous people have certain rights associated with, and based on the prior occupation of their country. These include the right to maintain and develop cultural practices to address spiritual, cultural, social and economic needs, and right to determine courses of action in relation to use and management of aquatic and terrestrial biological resources*.

Indigenous ecological knowledge is a fundamental pillar for the sustainable environmental management of the natural resources of the tropics. There should be implicit consideration of this sector in any research projects, unless there is clearly no link.

There are approximately 70 Aboriginal Traditional Owner clan groups whose land and sea country include the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and coastal ecosystems. The Torres Strait has 20 Traditional Owner groups, eight land and sea Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) and seven Traditional Use of Marine Resource Areas (TUMRA) are identified within the geographical region of the RRRC.

While it is not feasible to develop a generalised set of protocols, there are some common themes to consider before, and throughout the carriage of research projects that involve or have the potential to impact on Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island peoples:

1. Consultation, negotiation and mutual understanding
2. Respect, recognition and involvement
3. Benefits, outcomes and agreements
4. Cultural and intellectual property

While researchers should be aware that many Indigenous Australian communities and groups have their own set of protocols in place, the resources listed below are very useful. What all these models have in common is the explicit recognition and commitment to respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural values and principles.

Resources and further reading

- *References to rights were derived in part from the 'Convention on Biological Diversity' (www.cbd.int/convention/) and the 'United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples' (<http://social.un.org/index/IndigenousPeoples/DeclarationontheRightsofIndigenousPeoples.aspx>)
- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies
- Desert Knowledge CRC Protocol for Aboriginal Knowledge and Intellectual Property
- National Health and Medical Research Council, Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research - 2003
- Guidelines for ethical and effective communication for researchers working in Torres Strait
- NT Government, Indigenous Marine Ranger Engagement Guidelines

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