Florabank Guidelines

Module 2

Working with Indigenous Australians: Seed Knowledge, Partnerships, Intellectual Property and Permissions

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How to cite these Guidelines

Commander LE (Ed.) (2021) 'Florabank Guidelines – best practice guidelines for native seed collection and use (2nd edn).' (Florabank Consortium: Australia)

How to cite this module

van Leeuwen S, Lullfitz A, Wrigley D (2021) Florabank Guidelines Module 2 – Working with Indigenous Australians: Seed Knowledge, Partnerships, Intellectual Property and Permissions. In 'Florabank Guidelines (2nd edn).' (Ed. LE Commander) (Florabank Consortium: Australia)

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The update of the Florabank Guidelines was funded by the New South Wales Government through its Environmental Trust, as part of the Healthy Seeds Project, and administered by the Australian Network for Plant Conservation (ANPC). It was overseen by the Healthy Seeds Consortium consisting of representatives from the ANPC, Australian Association of Bush Regenerators, Australian Seed Bank Partnership, Centre for Australian National Biodiversity Research, Greening Australia (GA), NSW Department of Planning Industry and Environment, Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust, and the Society for Ecological Restoration Australasia. The Florabank Consortium which will oversee implementation of the Guidelines consists of the Australian National Botanic Gardens, ANPC, CSIRO and GA.

Key points

Partnerships should be flexible but include agreed roles and responsibilities of each partner and establishing a shared purpose with clear goals and anticipated outcomes. Partnerships can be mutally beneficial.

Permission must be obtained to access Indigenous managed lands and collect seeds.

Engagement with Indigenous Australians to obtain access to Indigenous Knowledge and to undertake research with them must adhere to the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent as endorsed by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Introduction

This module acknowledges that Indigenous Australians are the first people to use seed in Australia. Traditional and contemporary seed use by Indigenous Australians is outlined. The importance of partnerships is explained, as well as intellectual property, commercial issues, and seeking permission to collect on Indigenous lands.

Traditional and contemporary seed use by Indigenous Australians

Traditional seed use

Continent-wide, and for millennia, seeds have been important to Indigenous Australians for many aspects of traditional life. Seeds are a universal component of traditional diets (Hallam 1991, Pascoe 2014, Walsh 1990) and feature in traditional story, ceremony, and cultural identity. For example, in south-west Australia, Hassell (1975) relays a Noongar creation story in which grinding of *Acacia* seed is a central theme, while in tropical northern Australia, Bradley (2006) describes the vital role of cycad seed kernels in Yanyuwa cosmology.

A wide diversity of plant taxa are sources of edible seeds for Indigenous Australians. Mildwaters and Clarkson (2020) identified over 220 species with seeds that varied greatly in size, shape and hardness that were traditionally used for food, while in the Great and Little Sandy Deserts, Walsh (1990) recorded 51 plant species in which the seeds are a food source for Martu people, including grass, sedge, herb and woody taxa. Processing of seed for eating often requires the use of grinding stones to create a flour or paste that can be eaten in a variety of cooked or raw forms, but are often cooked into bread or damper (Bradley 2006, Clarke 2005). Grindstones dated to at least 30,000 years in western NSW and 25,000 years in Kakadu, suggest that seeds have long been a component of the diets of Indigenous Australians (Pascoe 2014).

While seeds have been utilised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout Australia, they are particularly dominant in traditional diets of peoples from arid Australia, where various groups have gathered, processed, stored and even possibly cultivated grass seeds for millennia (Pascoe 2014). Tindale (1974) identified an Aboriginal 'grain belt' based on early European records and linguistics (Figure 1) where grass seeds were a staple dietary component and their harvest and processing were prominent traditional activities. While the seeds of some taxa (e.g. *Santalum acuminatum*, *Acacia* and *Hakea* spp.) feature seasonally in southern Aboriginal Australian diets and cultural identity (Clarke 2003, Lullfitz et al. 2017), the proportion of seeds compared to roots in southern traditional Aboriginal diets is smaller than in the arid interior (Gott 2008). The seeds of cycad species are of importance in Aboriginal diets throughout Australia, although most are toxic without processing in accordance with specific local protocols that may include leaching in water or soil (Asmussen 2008, Bradley 2006, Smith 1982).

Effects on the distribution of plants through transport and propagation of seeds by Indigenous Australians is increasingly apparent to the scientific community (Lullfitz et al. 2020, Silcock 2018). For example, a Noongar Elder of WA's south-coastal region suggests that inland stands of *Acacia cyclops* (of which seeds are stored and eaten) are indicative of traditional camp sites, especially places occupied by women (L. Knapp 2017, pers. comm.). Some examples of such activities were recorded in early European history. For example, Hassell (1975) recorded Noongar women of south-coastal WA communally gathering and processing *Acacia* seeds (in this case *A. microbotrya* and *A. acuminata*), while numerous early Europeans observed the processing of grasses among Aboriginal peoples of central Australia (Clarke 2003, Kimber 1984, Pascoe 2014). Recent genetic studies of some Aboriginal food plants have revealed distribution patterns best explained by the human-facilitated movement of seed, including in *Adansonia gregorii* in the Kimberley (Rangan et al. 2015), *Castanospermum australe* in northern New South Wales (Rossetto et al. 2017) and *Livistona mariae* in Central Australia (Kondo et al. 2012).

Figure 1. The Aboriginal grain belt identified by Tindale (1974) based on early European records and linguistics (adapted from Tindale (1974) by C. Miskell).

Contemporary seed use

Given their comprehensive knowledge of native plants, Indigenous Australians are well placed to develop enterprises which use this knowledge such as those based on bush products that include seed harvesting, native plant nurseries, and bush foods. However, Indigenous Australians currently represent only 1-2 percent of the bush foods market. Hence, there is a great opportunity to develop new enterprises based on native plants (Woodward et al. 2020).

Partnerships, intellectual property, commercial issues and permissions

Partnerships between seed purchasers, scientists and non-Indigenous seed collectors, and Traditional Owners and local Indigenous seed collectors

Mutual benefits between stakeholders interested in developing enterprises based on Indigenous knowledge are imperative. These partnerships take time to develop, and require trust and relationship building. If the project is time sensitive (e.g. seed collection for a specific project), ensure that sufficient time is invested into building the partnership. Where funding cycles provide for short project timeframes, building relationships with Indigenous Australians over multiple projects can help to build trust and may provide the necessary time to properly consult and identify Indigenous priorities. Partnerships may also require protocols and agreements (Woodward et al. 2020). Researchers should be aware that a power imbalance may exist in partnerships.

One such partnership example is an Indigenous-led, seed collection business. Successful programs or businesses require reasonable investment and honest upfront co-design with the Traditional Owner group to ensure the key aspects of Country, culture and connection underpin the design of the work (i.e. it does what Traditional Owners want the program to do, not the other way around). Some groups may need a capability partner to provide support for governance and business management, including data management, the use of the data, and technology. Supporting skills development through accredited training in seed collection, storage, processing and subsequent usage, for example in landscape restoration, is encouraged.

Respecting intellectual property, and commercial issues when working with Indigenous Australians

Conservation practitioners have a responsibility to ensure their research and on-ground projects include considerations and actions that respect Indigenous cultural and intellectual property (ICIP). In recent decades, Indigenous Australians have seen an increase in interest in Indigenous cultural practices, knowledge and cultural objects. This has included a substantial increase in the exploitation of Indigenous communities and the traditional knowledge they hold in relation to medicine and bioprospecting (Janke 1999).

Often, the work of conservation practitioners is delivered on a not-for-profit basis, with no commercial benefit realised by the project team. However, some projects may result in commercial benefits (e.g. new methods or products) as a result of research or other activities undertaken with the collected seed. It is therefore important that a respectful and ethical co-design process that clearly articulates to all stakeholders what seeds can be used for, what form any benefits arising from the work will take, including legacy material or data, and how

these benefits will flow back to Indigenous Australians. This information should be captured in partnership or other collaborative benefit-sharing agreements (Woodward et al. 2020). English may be an additional language for some Indigenous Australians. Consideration should be given to translating relevant information into local languages where possible to improve access to, or acceptance of, agreements, communication and knowledge products developed through partnerships and collaborations (AIATSIS 2020).

Obtaining permission to access Indigenous managed land or use Indigenous knowledge or plant material will require authorisation from the relevant Traditional Owners. The process to request approval will be different depending on the land tenure and governance structures that have been established to manage such requests. It is important you research what procedures must be followed and what permits are required for the area in which you are seeking to operate. This includes identifying which Traditional Owner groups need to be consulted in order to obtain permission to collect.

Engagement with Indigenous Australians to obtain access to Country, Indigenous knowledge (Traditional Ecological Knowledge – TEK, Indigenous Bio-Cultural Knowledge - IBK) and to undertake research with them must adhere to the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) as endorsed by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP 2007). This principle confirms the rights of Indigenous Australians to give or withhold consent to a proposal that may affect them or their Country. It also maintains that once consent is given, they have the rights to withdraw that consent at any stage. Furthermore, FPIC enables Indigenous Australians to negotiate the conditions under which a proposal will be designed, implemented, monitored, and evaluated. Outcomes from the application of FPIC support the Australian Government's Closing the Gap initiatives and also promote the universal right to self-determination by all Indigenous Peoples.

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research provide an excellent starting point that articulate a process and suite of practices for meaningful engagement and reciprocity with Indigenous Australians and/or their communities. Furthermore, Indigenous Engagement and Participation Strategy Guidelines prepared by the National Environmental Science Program (NESP); Our Knowledge, Our Way Guidelines by the Northern Australia Environmental Resources Hub of NESP, CSIRO and Northern Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (Woodward et al. 2020); and the Guidelines for Collaborative Knowledge Work in Kimberley Saltwater Country prepared by the Kimberley Land Council and Western Australian Marine Science Institute (WAMSI) further articulate how engagement and participation with Indigenous Australians should be undertaken.

Conservation practitioners need to ensure that Indigenous Australians are involved in, co-design and ultimately lead activities and actions that impact upon them or their land. It is their basic human right. That is, Indigenous Australians want things done with and by them, not to them!

A communication plan can be co-developed to keep the people and community you are working with informed throughout the life of the project. The plan should outline what can be written about the project, what can be made public and when and who can speak publicly, and who should be acknowledged. Consideration should be given to translating a communication plan into local languages other than English.

Sharing benefits from genetic resources – the Nagoya Protocol

The *Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization to the Convention on Biological Diversity* (Nagoya Protocol) is an international agreement aimed at providing for the fair and equitable sharing of benefits from the utilisation of genetic resources and traditional knowledge. Australia is a signatory to the Protocol although has not yet ratified the objects of the protocol through legislation. However, the Australian Government and some states and territories have implemented domestic measures through their respective environmental legislation that provide some consistency with this international agreement (SCBD 2016).

Permission for scientific collecting on Commonwealth-owned land such as Kakadu and Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Parks require a Part 8A permit under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (1999).* Part 8A permits, like those issued by jurisdictional governments, are intended to provide confirmation that the resources collected were accessed consistent with FPIC principles and on mutually agreed terms. This means that Traditional Owners have been consulted and are aware of the reasons for accessing such materials and are entitled to receiving a benefit from the use of the collected material, and traditional knowledge (DoE 2014).

Seeking permission to collect on Indigenous lands

Land management, conservation and restoration practitioners must be aware of their statutory and moral obligations to obtain permission from Indigenous Australians to undertake activities on lands, in particular the Indigenous Land Estate, well prior to the commencement of such activities. As mentioned previously such permission should be obtained in lined with the FPIC principles.

The Indigenous Land Estate in Australia is large and expanding rapidly, in particular the Indigenous conservation estate, as demonstrated by the more than 76 Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA) that contribute to over 44% to the National Reserve System (DAWE 2020). Simultaneously, the Indigenous Land Estate is growing as a consequent of the continuing successful resolution of Native Title claims, confirming the rights of Indigenous Australians to land (through exclusive and non-exclusive determinations). With more than 45% of Australia now part of the Indigenous Land Estate, 452 register Native Title determinations covering over 38% of the continent, 1,228 registered Indigenous Land Use Agreements covering 33% of the continent (National Native Trust Tribunal 2019) and numerous joint-management agreements between land management agencies and Traditional Owners over National Parks and other conservation areas in existence, it is only appropriate and right that practitioners engage with and involve Indigenous Australians in their programs.

Navigating a path to permissions can be challenging, is time-consuming and is founded on building and maintaining a culturally appropriate relationship with Traditional Owners. Key objects should be:

- Adherence to and respect for the FPIC principles.
- The genuine uptake and acceptance to guidelines, protocol and principles, in particular local or placed-based requirements, for working with Traditional Owners, some of which may be perceived as unnecessary 'black tape' impeding the research approval pathway.
- Acknowledgement of Elders as experts of their Country, who are respected for their opinions and remunerated appropriately along with other Indigenous community members when their opinions are sought.
- Build cultural competence among non-Indigenous participants, especially those practitioners who may be resistant to change.
- Allow sufficient time to establish a strong foundation of trust upon which mutual respect can be built. Relationships are critical and conscious effort must be directed towards their maintenance.
- The relationship should be throughout the life cycle of the project/program, not just at the beginning in the conceptual thinking and approval process. It is an interactive process for the entire life cycle of a program, which should include all facets of knowledge exchange particularly towards the conclusion of the program.
- Include acknowledgements in publications.
- Consider language and mode of communication.
- Material Transfer Agreements for taking samples or similar, and permissions for recordings of people in film, sound recordings and photography.
- If working on Country, engage and renumerate Indigenous people for leading through Country.
- Consider privacy issues, and secrecy – for example, some data about where material is collected and what material is collected may be sensitive, some Traditional Knowledge may need to be kept secret (men's or women's business).

Acknowledging the above guidance, practitioners should seek advice and assistance to access Country from jurisdictional land tenure, land management and biodiversity conservation agencies. Notwithstanding the legislative requirements to have seed collecting permits and in many jurisdictions land entry/access permits such agencies may also be able to advise on the most appropriate organisations to contact when seeking to engage with the Traditional Owners.

The key bodies who can advise on organization and communities that represent Traditional Owners and the Indigenous Land Estate are the 15 Native Title Representative Bodies (NTRB) across Australia (e.g. Kimberley Land Council, Central Desert Native Title Support Services, Torres Strait Regional Authority). Details for the 15 NTRBs can be accessed via the Native Title representative bodies and service provides website at the National Indigenous Australian Agency or via the National Native Title Tribunal where a map is also available depicting the spatial extent of each NTRB.

NTRB will typically not provide permission to access Country but will direct inquiries to the appropriate Prescribed Body Corporate (PBC) (e.g. Yawuru Native Title Holders Aboriginal Corporation, Gunaikurnai Land & Waters Aboriginal Corporation, Djiru Warrangburra Aboriginal Corporation), community organisations or community representatives who have the cultural authority to speak for Country, authority which has be approved by Elders following a culturally appropriate community consensus process. Information on the location and contact details for the 221 PBC across Australia can be found at the PBC.

There are numerous Indigenous land and sea management peak organisations that can also be consulted. Examples include:

- Aboriginal Carbon Foundation
- Alinytjara Wilurara Natural Resource Management Board
- Cape York Institute
- Desert Support Services
- Firesticks Alliance
- Indigenous Desert Alliance
- Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation
- Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa
- North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance
- 10 Deserts Project

In addition to the above contacts, it would also be appropriate, and may be necessary, to seek permission from the relevant Traditional Owner Ranger group, who are the day-to-day managers of the land that a practitioner may wish to access. Rangers can provide local advice that may be pertinent in respect to access and local condition such as the trafficability of local roads, availability of water, local flowering/seeding condition and the need for caution given wildfires or planned managed-fire burning operations.

There are currently more than 123 Traditional Owner Ranger groups operating in Australia, a number that is increasing as new Native Title determinations are endorsed, new IPAs are declared and Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUA) are enacted. A list of the Ranger groups and interactive map can be found on the National Indigenous Australian Agency's website at https://www.niaa.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/environment/indigenous-land-and-sea-management-projects_old.

Note that in instances where conservation practitioners wish to access Country that is jointly managed through an Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) (e.g. Walyarta Conservation Park in the southern Kimberley is jointly managed through an ILUA between the Western Australian Conservation and Parks Commission and the Nyangumarta-Karajarri Aboriginal Corporation) or a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) (e.g. – MoU between the Southern Snowy Mountains Aboriginal Community, the Victorian National Parks and Wildlife Service, and the Victorian Officer of Environment and Heritage for the Kosciuszko National Park South) then all partners of the joint management agreement need to be consulted. However, it is acknowledged that final approval typically rests with the principal authority in such agreements which is typically the Crown.

Concluding remarks

Indigenous Australians have been using seeds for millennia, and continue to do so in the present day. Traditional knowledge about seeds held by Indigenous Australians needs to be valued and recognised, and land management, conservation and restoration practitioners have a responsibility to ensure on-ground projects respectfully maintain Indigenous culture and protect intellectual property.

Developing meaningful long-term partnerships with Indigenous Australians requires time, trust and respect. Agreeing on each partner's roles and responsibilities is important, and these can be captured in formal project or collaboration agreements. Seeking the right permissions to access Indigenous lands and collect seed is critical remembering that different land tenures will require permission from different decision-making authorities. Commit to taking the time to talk with Indigenous Australians about your intentions for collecting. Ensure that you respectfully explore ways and subsequently co-design and co-deliver projects that address Indigenous priorities and result in mutual benefits for all involved.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Amelia Martyn Yenson, Jen Silcock, Teagan Goolmeer and Terri Janke for reviewing this module and Paul Della Libera for his input. Thanks to Craig Miskell (CAM Graphics) for adapting Figure 1.

Online resources

Permits – accessing biological resources in Commonwealth areas
http://www.environment.gov.au/topics/science-and-research/australias-biological-resources/permits

Nagoya Protocol
https://www.cbd.int/abs/

Australian Business Guide to Implementing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People
https://unglobalcompact.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Australian-Business-Guide-to-Implementing-the-UN-Declaration-on-the-Rights-of-Indigenous-People_FINAL.pdf

Ethical research | AIATSIS
https://aiatsis.gov.au/research/ethical-research

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