



NORTHERN  
LAND COUNCIL

**MEDIA RELEASE**

*Our Land, Our Sea, Our Life*

## **Commercial fishing activity in Buckingham Bay reeled in due to inaction from NT Government**

20 September 2023

In March 2023 the Northern Land Council (NLC) received a letter from the Member for Mulka, Yingsiya Mark Guyula, relaying significant fisheries management concerns on behalf of families in the Buckingham Bay area of the East Arnhem region.

The member relayed that Yolngu families are worried about the amounts of fish that are being caught and wasted, and the vulnerable marine life that get caught in the gillnets.

From Wednesday 20 September 2023, Traditional Owners (TOs) of Buckingham Bay are limiting the amount of commercial barramundi activity in their intertidal waters and ending the waiver allowing commercial fisheries to operate without formal agreement.

This decision comes in response to inaction from the NT Government (NTG) in addressing TO concerns relating to gillnetting and sustainable fishing practices in the region.

Commercial barramundi fishing operators will no longer be able to fish the intertidal waters of Buckingham Bay. Agreements relating to barramundi fishing will not be processed until TOs are satisfied their concerns have been addressed by the NTG.

The change in access to the commercial barramundi fishery will not affect access for commercial fishing operators from other fisheries.

For years the NLC have been calling on the NTG to actively listen to TO concerns relating to fisheries management.

In 2022 the NTG amended the NT *Fisheries Act 1988* to reflect the rights and interests that Aboriginal people hold in relation to the fishing industry. This action is now perceived to have been symbolic, with the Government giving limited opportunities for Aboriginal people to provide input into fisheries management and decision-making practices where it concerns their sea country.

Despite assurances from the NTG that fish stocks are sustainable at a broad level, TOs are deeply concerned about the impacts of gillnetting and a decline in barramundi fish stocks in localised remote locations.

There is currently no quota for the commercial barramundi fishery.

The indiscriminate nature of gillnetting means that all types of fish are caught in large numbers, as well as other marine life including turtles, dugongs and dolphins, with the unwanted 'bycatch' being disposed of at sea.

TOs have witnessed concerning amounts of bycatch washing up on their coastlines, attracting crocodile activity and creating safety concerns for communities.

"Our people have been sustainably managing the seas for tens of thousands of years. These resources need to be managed in the right way so we can all benefit", said NLC Chairman Dr Samuel Bush Blanas.

"Traditional Owners have been raising concerns for a long time, but the NT Government doesn't want to listen. We want to work together, but the Government needs to demonstrate they are serious in engaging with, and listening to Aboriginal people", said Dr Bush-Blanas.

Dr Bush-Blanas hopes the changed access arrangement in Buckingham Bay will act as a wake-up call to the NTG, and a catalyst to include Aboriginal people in fisheries management decisions that affect their land.

Since the 2008 Blue Mud Bay decision, TOs have been afforded legal rights to the intertidal zone of Aboriginal land. In the 15 years since, TOs have allowed access to their waters through a series of waivers, allowing commercial operators to access areas without formal agreements or regulated compensation for the landowners.

TOs of Buckingham Bay are not easily making the decision to restrict intertidal waters to commercial barramundi fishing, understanding that the fisheries management framework impedes the industry from addressing these concerns directly.

However, TOs cultural responsibility to manage Country takes precedence to ensure resource sustainability.

"We want our environment to be safe because we need the food. We hunt sustainably, we hunt according to the seasons" said Traditional Owner Guyulen/Helen Guyula.

"We don't like current commercial practice - they throw the little ones or the ones they don't want back. We've found heaps of turtle, dolphin, crocodile and small barramundi washed up on the beach. Why get them all and then throw them away?" said Guyulen/Helen Guyula.

"With the change of access arrangements in Buckingham Bay, TOs are exerting rights that have been compromised since the Blue Mud Bay Decision. Their decision is in line with Australian law and cultural responsibilities, and will give the Country time to heal from years of commercial impact", said Dr Bush-Blanas.

"It's important that people understand this change in access isn't permanent. We want the NT Government to come to the table and address the concerns of TOs. If TOs can see that their interests are being respected, they will be able to respect other interests in return", said Dr Bush-Blanas.

TOs have advised there are no concerns with other fishing sectors within the Buckingham Bay area.

Recreational fishing access in Buckingham Bay will continue. Permits will now be processed through a Traditional Owner delegate permit system rather than automatic issue.

Access for the guided fishing industry remains the same.

**END**