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Department of Agriculture,  
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## **Milestone 1 Summary report: Jacob Valley**

### **Research Topic: Bush food enterprises and business opportunities for Indigenous community development.**

The Bush food industry has seen massive development and expansion in recent years, with the continued assimilation of bush food enterprises into the mainstream Australian food market seen in the expansion of individual businesses, restaurants, and even tourism ventures. As the industry continues its upwards trajectory, concerns surrounding the level of involvement and input Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals have in controlling the way their traditional foods are used and produced have surfaced, especially their ability to establish Bush Food enterprises independent of foreign influences and the protection of their rights to these culturally significant foods from exploitation. Currently, first nations people are significantly underrepresented in the bush food industry: the 2019 Indigenous Native Foods Symposium revealed that Indigenous Australians represent less than two percent of the entire Bush Food industry supply chain (Turner, 2021).

This research focuses on the challenges faced by first nations Australians aspiring to become involved within the industry and how well they are able to establish themselves in the face of structural inequality, insufficient support systems, and lack of robust processes to safeguard Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property and Indigenous Ecological Knowledge. Understanding how these issues can be resolved to allow for further first nations representation in the industry and bolster further participation is vital in providing more successful outcomes for Indigenous owned enterprises and in creating better livelihoods for first nations Australians. The main aim of the work is to create a more accommodating space in the bush food industry for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and help form a system where their input and involvement guides the progression of the industry.

Encouraging further representation and involvement by first nations people is made difficult due to numerous challenges that obstruct entry into the industry. One of the main identified challenges that discourage Indigenous participation and involvement, present throughout the literature, is hesitancy to enter the industry due to the fear of exploitation of traditional knowledge, culture and products (ABC, 2022, Lee, 2012, Elkin, 1951). This hesitancy is endemic and rooted in a long history of exploitation of traditional knowledge and severe mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This history has led many to prioritise and value the protection of their cultural and traditional integrity, customs and livelihood over participation and involvement in the bush food industry (ABC, 2022, Keen, 2010, Wessell, 2017).

This tenacity in safeguarding Indigenous knowledge and culture is reflected in a report published by the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development WA: Protection of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge for bushfood businesses (2021), where the report highlights the tension between increased commercialization to meet demand for native foods and the preservation of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property and Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (DPIRD, 2021). This



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tension and demand / supply dynamic is also expressed in a report done by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, "Assessing Horticultural Crop Suitability for the Queensland Murray Darling Basin Study Area", where supply issues were found not to match market demand (David Carey, 2016). This is in turn due to other issues, such as inconsistency in organic materials and low levels of cooperation, communication, and information sharing within the industry (David Carey, 2016). On a more structural note, the report emphasizes the need to identify more traditionally appropriate ways to incorporate first nations interests in the native food industry.

This aligns with what was found in the literature. While there are support systems for first nations individuals in the bush food industry, they often fail to deliver significantly successful outcomes for bushfood businesses as they fail to recognise and understand the complex needs, motivations and aspirations of business-oriented Indigenous individuals (Lee, 2012, Lingard and Martin, 2016). Through the Indigenous Native Food Program QLD, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entrepreneurs have the opportunity to further develop and commercialise their bush food products and create scalable Indigenous native food businesses. The grant features a wide range of support for applicants to discover new opportunities in the commercial expansion of new native food products, create new products from existing resources, and identify what resources may be limiting businesses from commercial production and providing these, such as equipment, raw materials, food safety infrastructure, and labelling (Business.gov.au, 2022). However, as discovered by Lee-Ross and Mitchell (2007) in their examination of entrepreneurship activities of the Torres Strait Islands, businesses and the motivations behind them are highly varied and more specific, tailored support systems are needed to address the specific motivations of Indigenous groups as not to homogenise the industry and the people in it (Lee-Ross and Mitchell, 2007). Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage should be a major priority for state governments. Support systems for Indigenous Australians need to become more diversified, localized, and imbued with cultural and traditional understandings of knowledge systems, social relations, and further appreciation of the customary sector of Indigenous bush food businesses.

Literature on this topic is consistent in the notion that first nations people are often homogenised, all perceived as sharing the exact same values, attitudes, beliefs, norms, and traditions (Lee, 2012, Lingard and Martin, 2016). The immense importance of connection to country means that motivation and aspiration to enter the bushfood industry are incredibly localized, with bush foods highly varied and subject to a myriad of customary laws and kinship systems. While support for bush food businesses acknowledge the extremely important connections between first nations individuals and their country, they then fail to reflect this within the support structures for first nations people and create a system where the support offered is not aligned with localized first nations interests or beliefs.

Further support is also needed in assuring the safeguarding of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property and Indigenous Ecological Knowledge. As stated earlier, hesitancy to get involved in the industry stems from fear of further exploitation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, culture, and products. Confirming this protection requires the involvement of a wide array of disciplines and professionals, spanning from Anthropologists to Legal Experts to Cultural Knowledge Brokers. The injustices of the past cannot be allowed to be repeated. The bush food industry is one of



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the most potentially significant outlets for first nations Australians looking to explore business development and entrepreneurial activities. The sector offers a wide range of opportunities and has the capacity to enhance community development, promote Indigenous culture and identity, and create awareness around the amazing range of edible foods available in the Australian environment. Altering the support available and ensuring the protection of Indigenous interests by involving more first nations people in decision making processes that directly affect them may help make the market more accessible and accommodating for first nations individuals, meaning that more first nations representation is seen within the industry.

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