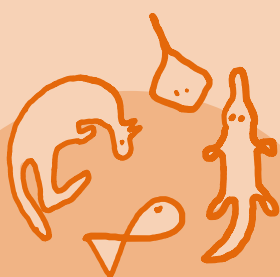


4 Indigenous food systems

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1 AUSTRALIA'S INDIGENOUS FOOD SYSTEMS



65,000+ years experience managing complex, sustainable, nutritious and equitable food systems



Diverse and locally specific food systems that reflect the unique social, geographic, environmental and cultural contexts of Indigenous Australia



Embedded in Country

Indigenous food systems are embedded in ancestral land, water and sky ecosystems that provide food and nutrition for all things on Country



2 CHALLENGES

- **Access to Indigenous and healthy non-Indigenous food sources** consistent with Indigenous food security desires
- **Harmful data practices** continue to reproduce misleading and decontextualised narratives

3 OPPORTUNITIES

- **Advance culturally relevant and appropriate data**
- **Build Indigenous-led research agendas**
- **Align food-related policy** with Indigenous priorities and values





KEY POINTS

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) Peoples have managed complex, healthy and equitable food systems since time immemorial.
- Indigenous food systems are highly diverse, embedded within more than 250 locally specific language, cultural and family systems.
- Advancing culturally relevant and appropriate data will enhance the ability to report definitively on the state and resilience of Indigenous food systems.
- Prioritising bottom-up reporting that engages and reflects the diverse food system priorities of Indigenous communities will foster more authentic, inclusive and effective outcomes.

The following viewpoints are those of the lead author and were not written as a part of a consultative process. They are based on their current experiences as an Indigenous (Jabirr Jabirr) researcher involved in the Food Systems Horizons initiative. Input from other studies was incorporated into this insight in partnership with the non-Indigenous co-author, and the final version was reviewed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous reviewers.

4.1 Unique aspects of our Indigenous food systems

It is difficult to report definitively on the state of Indigenous food systems. This is due to a lack of culturally relevant and appropriate data and data-gathering methodologies to under-

stand and monitor Indigenous food security. In lieu of an ability to report on Indigenous food systems, this section provides a brief overview of the unique aspects of Indigenous food systems, future research and reporting priorities.

Indigenous Peoples have managed complex, healthy and equitable food systems since time immemorial. Indigenous food systems are embedded within a network of more than 250 locally specific language, cultural and family systems (cultural groups) bound to designated parts of the Australian continent. Indigenous Peoples' food systems are embedded in 'Country' (ancestral land, water and sky ecosystems) and encompass the presence of, and relationships with, all living, non-living, human and more-than-human elements (Poelina, 2024; Sherriff et al., 2022). Healthy Country is intrinsically linked with Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) Peoples' health and wellbeing (Cresswell et al., 2021). Caring for Country – and managing it – fosters ongoing cultural and spiritual connections with Country while providing access to food resources that are essential to Indigenous Peoples' health and wellbeing.



Indigenous Peoples have managed complex, healthy and equitable food systems since time immemorial.



The diversity of Indigenous Peoples around the world means there is no blanket definition for Indigenous food systems (FAO, 2021). The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) (2021, p.2) suggests that Indigenous food systems generally ‘involve the totality of human agencies (knowledge, strategies, techniques, values, sharing) for the production, generation, utilisation, access, availability, stability and management of food that is nutritious, culturally and spiritually fulfilling and sustainable for future generations’.

The ongoing process of colonisation has disrupted and reshaped traditional Indigenous food systems. As a result, Indigenous Peoples rely on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous food (Deen et al. 2025). Indigenous Peoples see an important role for both traditional and non-traditional foods in supporting food security. Members of Aboriginal communities at a Good Food Systems project meeting in 2010 (Menzies School of Health Research, 2016, p. 1) made the statement:

Food security for us is when the food of our ancestors is protected and always there for us and our children. It is when we can easily access and afford the right non-traditional food for a collective health and active life. When we are food secure we can provide, share and fulfil our responsibilities, we can choose good food knowing how to make choices and how to prepare and use it.

Indigenous Peoples demonstrate strength and resilience in maintaining food security despite facing systemic barriers within the Australian food system, which does not yet fully support their needs (Wilson et al., 2020). A key challenge

for the Australian food system is enabling access to Indigenous and healthy non-Indigenous food sources consistent with Indigenous food security desires.



Indigenous Peoples demonstrate strength and resilience in maintaining food security despite facing systemic barriers within the Australian food system.

4.2 Reporting on Indigenous food systems

Advancing culturally relevant and appropriate data will enhance the ability to report definitively on the state and resilience of Indigenous food systems. Palawa Professor Maggie Walter (2018) explained the ongoing harmful data practices experienced by Indigenous Peoples. These included BADDR data: Blaming, Aggregate, Decontextualised, Deficit and Restricted (Walter, 2018). The continued engagement and reproduction of BADDR data continues to reproduce misleading and decontextualised narratives related to Indigenous Peoples. Table 1 provides an overview of the characteristics of BADDR data compared to Indigenous data needs.



DOMINANT BADDR DATA

INDIGENOUS DATA NEEDS

Blaming data

Data contrast Indigenous/non-Indigenous data, rating the problematic Indigene against the normed Australian as the ubiquitous pejorative standard.

Lifeworld data

We need data to inform a comprehensive, nuanced narrative of who we are as peoples, of our culture, our communities, our resilience, our goals and our successes.

Aggregate data

Data are aggregated at the national and/or state level, implying Indigenous cultural and geographic homogeneity.

Disaggregated data

We need data that recognise our cultural and geographical diversity to provide evidence for community-level planning and service delivery.

Decontextualised data

Data are simplistic and decontextualised focusing on individuals and families outside of their social/cultural context.

Contextualised data

We need data inclusive of the wider social structural context/complexities in which Indigenous disadvantage occurs.

Deficit, government-priority data

Data reprises deficit-linked concepts that service the priorities of government.

Indigenous-priority data

We need data that measure more than problems and address our priorities and agendas.

Restricted access data

Data are barricaded by official statistical agencies and institutions.

Available and amenable data

We need data that are both accessible and amenable to our requirements.

Table 1: BADDR data outcomes versus Indigenous data needs. Source: Adapted from Walter (2018); Australian Indigenous Governance Institute and Maïam nayri Wingara (2018).



Examples of existing Indigenous food- and nutrition-related reporting¹ can be found below:

- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (ABS, 2022–23)
- Closing the Gap Information Repository (Productivity Commission, n.d.)
- Northern Territory Market Basket Survey 2021 (Department of Health, 2022).

Culturally relevant and appropriate data need to be negotiated with Indigenous peoples to report on the state and resilience of Indigenous food systems.

4.3 Future priorities

Indigenous-led research

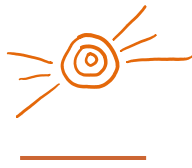
Legitimacy remains an overwhelming imperative for reporting on Indigenous food systems. Extensive consultation with diverse Indigenous Peoples is required to identify legitimate research priorities to support reporting on Indigenous food systems. Indigenous-led research agendas are critical to building the baseline knowledge and evidence to support healthy and equitable Indigenous food systems.

Examples of research priorities that need validation and refining include:

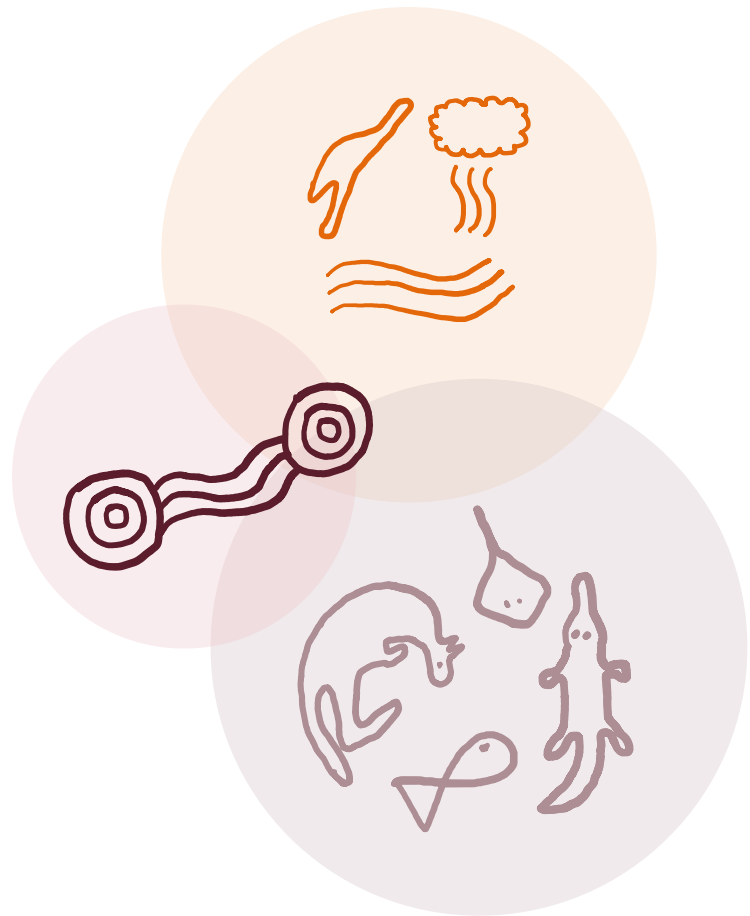
- the existing and potential future contribution of Indigenous foods to Indigenous Peoples' health and wellbeing
- culturally appropriate and relevant food security monitoring and evaluation tools (e.g. exploring strategies to incorporate food security monitoring and reporting into existing Indigenous organisations or land and sea management programs)
- the relationships between food-related policies and Indigenous food and nutrition security as well as health and wellbeing
- strategies to support Indigenous led and owned bushfood enterprises, along with research into how Indigenous foods could contribute to broader food systems.

These recommendations can be found in reports summarising government engagement with Indigenous communities, including the National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities discussion paper (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2024), the Gather + Grow Action Plan for 2023–2032 (Health and Wellbeing Queensland, 2023), the Food Summit report (Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory, 2021) and the Report on food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2020).

¹ Reporting only by government agencies. Does not include research studies that have examined the prevalence of food insecurity.



Targeted investment in Indigenous-led and inclusive approaches to Australia's food system reporting is needed to ensure food system measures and methods align with Indigenous priorities and cultural protocols.



Future research and reporting

Many improvements to Indigenous food systems research and reporting could be made. A first step is greater emphasis on Indigenous co-designed reporting based on methods that can assess if and how the food system meets the requirements of diverse Indigenous Peoples. Commitment to place-based research that strives to deliver positive local outcomes and supports Indigenous self-determination should support this bottom-up, needs-based approach.

Targeted investment in Indigenous-led and inclusive approaches to Australia's food system reporting is needed to ensure food system measures and methods align with Indigenous priorities and cultural protocols. Greater focus is needed on research that addresses the

systemic causes of food insecurity affecting Indigenous Peoples and the factors that support and empower their role and agency in the Australian food system.

Lastly, better coordination of Indigenous research projects is needed to reduce duplication and fragmentation of engagement with Indigenous Peoples. Appropriate time and resources need to be allocated to building long-term relationships with Indigenous Peoples that extend beyond individual project timelines. These relationships must account for the burden Indigenous Peoples carry when participating in research projects. This will lay a foundation for greater authenticity, meaning and ownership.