



## Creating a blueprint for Traditional Owner partnerships in science

### The challenge

Traditional Owners have inherent rights and responsibilities for Sea Country. While AIMS researchers had been engaging with Traditional Owners about our research, we wanted an organisation-wide shift from engagement to genuine partnership.

### The approach

In 2019, AIMS developed an Indigenous Partnership Plan (IPP) which enshrined the principle of Free Prior and Informed Consent. That year, it was applied to the Woppaburra Coral Project: a five-year, \$11 million research partnership which investigated coral reef restoration strategies in reefs around the Keppel Islands in the southern inshore Great Barrier Reef. It was undertaken in partnership with the Woppaburra people, the Traditional Owners of the Keppel Islands who lost their connection to Country when they were removed from the islands in 1902.

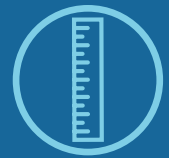
Beyond its scientific aims, the project embedded partnership activities designed to foster mutual respect, cultural exchange, and long-term impact. Activities included on Country workshops with 99 Woppaburra descendants, 28 of whom were visiting Country for the first time. They undertook hands-on coral spawning and aquaculture research. AIMS collaborated with Social Ventures Australia to undertake a social value analysis when the project concluded in June 2024.

### The impact

The project set a new benchmark for collaboration between government agencies and Traditional Owners, creating significant social, economic and cultural value.

For the Woppaburra people, the opportunity to return to Country was deeply healing and strengthened connections to family, culture and sea Country. The project also supported aspirations for training and employment, with outcomes including new qualifications and increased confidence to pursue careers on Country. It catalysed institutional change and demonstrated the value of Indigenous partnerships, not only in achieving scientific outcomes but in enhancing cultural competence, ethical research practices, and organisational reputation.

The analysis identified 24 material outcomes across six themes: establishing a genuine partnership, returning to Country, building pathways, learning about marine science, learning about Woppaburra culture and sharing the partnership model.



**BENCHMARK**  
FOR GOVERNMENT  
COLLABORATION WITH TOs



**STRENGTHENED**  
CONNECTIONS TO FAMILY,  
CULTURE & SEA COUNTRY



**NEW**  
TRAINING & EMPLOYMENT  
QUALIFICATIONS



**ESTABLISHED**  
GENUINE PARTNERSHIPS