

Activity # 1- Assessing Horticultural Crop Suitability for the Queensland Murray Darling Basin Study Area

Specific Biophysical Crop Information – Native food industry in Australia

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Activity 1 — Project Team

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The Native Food Industry in Australia

According to Robins et al 2008 the native food industry has grown slowly since its inception in the mid - 1980s. Native foods have proved difficult to commercialise. They have been difficult to commercialise agronomically because they are new crops without the benefit of existing established production systems, skills, knowledge and reliable plant material. Additionally they have been difficult to commercialise in the marketplace because native foods are innovative products without an established market or general consumer knowledge.

The majority of the produce is dried, frozen and/or further processed into value-added products. Native foods are essentially used in the broader food industry as a defining flavour to an existing food product or process—for example in condiments, sauces, biscuits and ice cream.

The main markets for native foods are in the hospitality and tourism food-service, industrial food manufacturing and retail industries.

The industry requires an ongoing and targeted focus on the further development of these markets in order to achieve critical mass and anticipated returns. It will only **succeed commercially** in the **long-term if native food and native food products** meet mainstream market needs.

Challenges

Robins et al 2008 state that the native food industry continues to face great challenges and must find timely solutions if it is to grow further. These **challenges** include:

- **supply issues—over and under supply**—not matched to market demand
- inconsistent and **unreliable plant material**—yield variability, attrition rates.
- establishing efficient and sustainable ways to grow and harvest the crops
- under-capitalisation of the industry is an issue
- **low economic returns to growers** through high costs of production and limited markets
- low economic returns to wild harvesters due to climatic and geographic constraints
- low economic returns to processors due to high cost of ingredients and marketing costs in limited markets
- establishing food safety and quality standards
- **low levels of cooperation, communication and information sharing** within the industry
- identifying appropriate ways to incorporate Aboriginal interests in the native food industry
- increasing **homogenisation of the food industry**, which has the potential to **marginalise niche foods/products**
- ongoing product and market development and increased awareness —native foods are still largely unknown in the domestic and global marketplace
- clear and **consistent industry marketing** messages
- establishing a market focus across all levels of the industry.

Opportunities

The native food industry **offers opportunities** at the agricultural level in farm **diversification** and the development of sustainable and environmentally appropriate agriculture

Market demand

Reliable information on market demand is very difficult to obtain: as the industry remains fragmented and unwilling to share information. Hugh MacIntosh (2008) observed that there are still “**significant amounts of semi- or sub-commercial** activity.

Further, the industry is **too small to be considered in the normal horticultural production statistics**



Native foods (Photo: Catherine de Witt, Stray Cat Images, Melbourne)

Although commercial production of many native plant foods is still in the development stage, sufficient demand for some species is encouraging commercial production. The quandong crop summary below contains a list of useful references and highlights some of the unique issues and challenges faced by the native food industry.

In the foreword to the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporations (RIRDC) report entitled “Innovative Products from Australian Native Foods” 2002, S Hearn the managing Director of RIRDC in 2002 expressed the following sentiment. “With the introduction of the image of native foods as a unique Australian cuisine in the 1980s, interest in native foods by the commercial restaurant sector has developed steadily both in Australia and overseas. However, the Australian native food industry is now at a critical stage. Unless sales are increased, an over-supply of some native foods may occur. Establishing a market focus and developing new market sectors will be the key to ensure a profitable future of the native food industry”

Niche markets and producers may exist in 2016 however the native food industry **still faces a number of the challenges** highlighted in this summary

References

- Forbes-Smith, M and J.E. Paton, 2002, "Innovative Products from Australian Native Foods", Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, Publication No 02/109
- Robins, J, Ryder, M, Hess-Bushmann, S, Macintosh, H, Read, C, Lethbridge, B, Hotson, A, edited by Salvin, S, Bourke, M, & T Byrne 2008, "*The New Crop Industries Handbook Native Foods*", Rural Industries research and Development Corporation Pub.No.08/021
- Web link: [RIRDC Info Services](#)

Disclaimer: The candidate crop information presented in this QMDB study area report (Activity 1) are based on the analysis of the published biophysical needs of the crops (e.g. temperature, frost sensitivity, chill requirement, water quality, etc.) and current climate records for the QMDB study area. The candidate crops are deemed suited to the study area where the biophysical needs are met either year round or for portion of the year and will allow crop production.
