

Indigenous medicine used to soothe a crocodile bite could gel in time to help Brisbane Olympics athletes

ABC Rural / By Tara de Landgraftt

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John Watson and Professor Ronald Quinn were recognised at the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering's 2023 national awards. (Supplied: Salty Dog)

"It's a little bit shorter now": That's how Nyikina Mangala elder John Watson describes his finger, which was severed by a crocodile as he hunted in Western Australia's remote Kimberley region.

But researchers from Griffith University are more interested in what happened straight after the bite.

Mr Watson took some bark from a mudjala mangrove tree, chewed it up and applied it to the wound for pain relief.

The pain relieving properties of the mudjala's bark have long been known by the Nyikina Mangala people.

Key points:

- West Kimberley elder John Watson used mudjala mangrove bark to soothe a wound after a crocodile bite
- The traditional knowledge was then passed onto researchers

"The mudjala tree is a numbing medicine," Mr Watson said.

- Researchers hope to create a gel using compounds from the bark, in time to treat athletes at the 2032 Brisbane Olympics

When word of this hunting expedition got back to the local lands council, they asked for Mr Watson's permission to pass on his story to researchers.

And now, thanks to Mr Watson, the properties of the mudjala bark might help ease the aches and pains of Olympic athletes.

'Stronger than morphine'

A team from Griffith University, led by Professor Ronald Quinn, has spent years researching the powerful active compounds in the mudjala bark, which contain both anti-inflammatory and pain relief properties.

Mr Watson said that after testing, researchers told him those compounds were "stronger than morphine".

The research team has been conducting trials and hopes to have a gel form of pain relief, made from the mudjala bark properties, available in time for athletes to use at the 2032 Brisbane Olympics.

The partnership between the university and Mr Watson's community in developing the product has recently been recognised by the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering, taking out the inaugural Traditional Knowledge Innovation award.



Watson and Professor Ronald Quinn were the inaugural recipients of the Traditional Knowledge Innovation Award. *applied: Salty Dingo*)

The academy's president, Dr Katherine Woodthorpe, said weaving traditional knowledge with Western science for a new approach to pain relief, exemplifies the game-changing application of Australian research.

"Australian innovators are changing the world for the better," she said.

Community benefits

While Mr Watson's experience has been the catalyst for the development of a new bush medicine pain relief gel, it is hoped the collaboration process will lead to more applications for traditional knowledge.

Mr Watson's son Anthony was next to him when the crocodile attack happened, and has been by his side as the community navigates intellectual property rights, as part of the process to develop the product, while maintaining Aboriginal ownership.



ikina Mangala man John Watson among the mangroves of West Kimberley. *(Supplied: Anthony Watson)*

"We got to learn a lot. It's still in development stage," Anthony Watson said.

"Hopefully, we will keep advancing with that process, working towards commercialisation in a big scale is going to be our next step.

"It has opened up the door for others to actually go down this industry and we want to promote the traditional knowledge to actually get into this industry."

Anthony Watson said Western medicine and science can help prove traditional medicines are safe, and support the anecdotal evidence passed down through generations.

After a gala dinner to recognise their successful collaboration, John Watson and Anthony have returned to the Kimberley, with hopes of helping other Aboriginal peoples take up opportunities to share traditional medicine with the world.

"We may be ambassadors towards getting other regions in the rest of the Kimberley towards opening up their products ... to get into the same

position that we are at."

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