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Indigenous Connections with the Great Barrier Reef

let's keep it great

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Indigenous Connections with the Great Barrier Reef

Overview

For over 60,000 years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been part of the unique living maritime culture of the Great Barrier Reef region. Today more than 50 Traditional Owner groups live along the coast and islands from Bundaberg to Cape York Peninsula, and on to the islands of the Torres Strait. Their traditional customs and spiritual lore continue to be practiced today in the utilisation of their sea country areas and natural resources.

Due to their very long association with the region, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have acquired a vast knowledge of the marine environment, marine animals, their habitats and their lifestyles (Gray and Zann 1988; Benzaken, Smith et al. 1997). Resources from the sea, like those on the mainland, are utilised for different purposes. They have distinct cultural uses and are not only a commodity but a necessity for some communities.

As sea-faring peoples, Torres Strait Islanders travelled through the Reef's waters for trade with mainland Aboriginal groups along the east coast, as well as to collect resources for their subsistence lifestyles. To do this they travelled vast distances in outrigger canoes using the wind and the constellations as navigation guides. Their myths and legends of the sea are expressed through dance and song and there are many creation stories for the region's islands and reefs.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a unique maritime culture.

Some of the Aboriginal tribes along the Great Barrier Reef coast have dreaming stories from when their ancestors lived on the coastal plains near the edge of the continental shelf. This same area became the Great Barrier Reef after it was inundated during the last sea rise, over 8,000 years ago (Hopley 1982). The sacred places, middens, rock art and oral accounts of the past provide the connection to traditional clan areas (on land and sea) and a rich cultural heritage (Chase 1986).

Current Status

The impact of the European colonisation of Australia from 1788 disrupted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies and culture. Indigenous people have had to cope with various permanent negative impacts upon their lifestyle and culture as a result of the European occupation of their country (Breslin 1992). Most significantly many Indigenous peoples were removed from their traditional country. This dislocation from country has meant, in some cases, the loss of cultural knowledge for some peoples and has limited the way people engage in cultural activities for how they use and manage their sea country. The current geographic spread of Indigenous peoples in Queensland is very much an artefact of the forced relocation from traditional lands under successive Queensland Colonial and then State Governments.

Today Indigenous peoples comprise 5.7 per cent of the total Great Barrier Reef coastal population. The majority of the Indigenous population lives in the Cook, and

Hinchinbrook Shires and Cairns city. As a percentage of Local Government Area (LGA) population the LGA with the highest Indigenous proportion is the Cook Shire with an Indigenous population comprising 29.39 per cent of the region's total population. Hinchinbrook Shire follows with 17.53 per cent of LGA population. The Indigenous population as a percentage of the total population becomes progressively smaller in communities adjacent to the southern section of the Great Barrier Reef

Table 1. Indigenous Population of the GBR Coastal Communities in 2001

Region	Total Persons	Total Indigenous persons	Indigenous Population as Percentage of LGA
Cook	9,700	2,851	29.39%
Hinchinbrook	14,611	2,562	17.53%
Mareeba	18,096	2,099	11.60%
Cairns	133,199	11,062	8.30%
Johnstone	19,954	1,644	8.24%
Cardwell	11,443	716	6.26%
Thuringowa	51,140	2,851	5.57%
Bowen	13,698	748	5.46%
Douglas	17,887	976	5.46%
Atherton	10,621	547	5.15%
Rockhampton	58,382	3,006	5.15%
Townsville	94,739	4,556	4.81%
Burdekin	18,486	805	4.35%
Sarina	9,637	379	3.93%
Mackay	75,020	2,813	3.75%
Gladstone	26,835	952	3.55%
Eacham	6,250	216	3.46%
Fitzroy	9,553	328	3.43%
Bundaberg	43,549	1,406	3.23%
Livingstone	27,017	766	2.84%
Mirani	5,220	125	2.39%
Calliope	15,091	355	2.35%
Miriam Vale	4,914	98	1.99%
Broadsound	6,601	131	1.98%
Burnett	23,598	324	1.37%
Whitsunday	20,990	251	1.20%
Region Total	746,231	42,567	5.70%

Source: ABS, 2001 Census of Population and Housing, Basic Community Profile (BCP) - Second Release. (QRSIS database maintained by the Office of Economic and Statistical Research (OESR)).

Moreover, Indigenous peoples customary practices changed as western technology was introduced. For example, the use of wooden canoes and hand crafted implements for fishing, collecting or hunting have been replaced with technologies such as motorised boats, synthetic fishing lines and nets.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to utilise the natural resources of the Great Barrier Reef for many different customary purposes despite the dispossession from country faced by many people. Traditions like hunting and gathering are of high cultural importance as is the social sharing practiced during special events that require traditional natural resources (Smith 1989). Natural resources in these economies have a critical role in caring for culture and demonstrating connection to traditional areas.

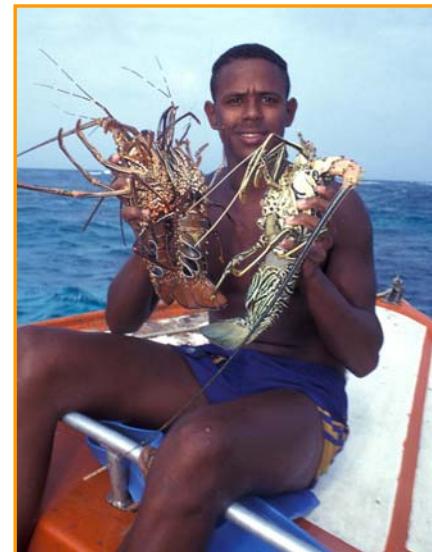
Elderly Indigenous people often say that the Great Barrier Reef is different from when they were younger and that there are now fewer dugongs and green turtles. This decline in numbers is supported by scientific studies (Marsh, Eros et al. 1999; Marsh and Lawler. 2002; Limpus, 1999). Scientists conclude that urgent measures must be taken to stabilise numbers and to reverse the decline for future generations. All human-related mortality issues must be addressed to ensure dugongs and green turtles remain an integral part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tradition and custom as well as these animals being recognised as part of the suite of the natural World Heritage values of the Great Barrier Reef.

A major change to the nature of Indigenous peoples relationship with Government over the management of the Great Barrier Reef is Native Title. The legal situation regarding native title over sea country is dynamic. The *Croker Island* decision of 2000 which confirmed native title over sea, but not recognising Indigenous claims to exclusive use and control of sea country, is an example of the emerging complexity associated with Native Title and the management of marine areas. The Yanner case also set precedents for native title law. Hunting rights were recognised as part of the bundle of customary rights Native Title Holders Traditional Owners of country have in accordance with Native Title (George, Innes and Ross 2003).

Today, therefore, Indigenous peoples are recognised as the Traditional Owners of various tracts of sea country by virtue of their Native Title rights to both land and sea country. Traditional Owners are concerned about the future management of their sea country and want to be involved through a number of Marine Park management initiatives. Many Traditional Owners are not on country and their involvement in management is a challenge for agencies such as GBRMPA. It is important though that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People are meaningfully engaged in management of their marine estates and natural resources in order to continue the practice and the continuation of their culture and connection to country for future generations.

Addressing Indigenous Management Issues

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) supports traditional use of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (GBRMP) and recognises its important role within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tradition and custom. The GBRMPA understands the need to actively engage with Traditional Owners to develop effective cooperative management arrangements for a range of marine park issues.



Traditional Owners are concerned about the future management of their sea country and want to be involved through a number of Marine Park management initiatives.

The [Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975](#), the [Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Regulations 1983](#) and zoning plans provide for traditional use of the GBRMP to continue. Zoning provisions provide for ‘as of right’ access in most circumstances, and for permits to be obtained where the Traditional activity involves hunting, fishing or gathering in zones where those activities would not generally be allowed. Regulations also require the GBRMPA to address the need to protect the cultural and heritage values held in relation to the GBRMP by traditional inhabitants.

In 1994, the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975* was amended to include a fourth member on the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, being a “member appointed to represent the interests of Aboriginal communities adjacent to the Marine Park. Dr. Evelyn Scott, the former Chair of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation has held that position since its creation.

The [Indigenous Policy and Liaison Unit](#) (IPLU) at the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority commenced operating in 1995. The unit provides a cultural policy advisory service to the Authority as well as being the vital link to engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in present and future management arrangements.

The *Great Barrier Reef 25 Year Strategic Plan* details a vision for the future of:
...a community which recognises the interests of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders so that they can pursue their own lifestyle and culture, and exercise responsibility for issues, areas of land and sea, and resources relevant to their heritage within the bounds of ecologically sustainable use...

Management initiatives and Co-Management

In 1997, the Hopevale Community, north of Cooktown, began work on a *Turtle and Dugong Hunting Management Plan* (Hopevale Aboriginal Council and Nursey-Bray 1999). The Plan is designed to ensure that the harvest of green turtles and dugongs is maintained at a sustainable and culturally appropriate level. In 2000 this plan was launched and Hopevale received the Prime Minister’s Environment Award for Community Leadership for its “Guugu Yimmithirr Bama Wii: Turtle and Dugong Hunting Management Plan.”

In 2001, the GBRMPA started in initiative of working with Traditional Owner groups for traditional reef names. The name “Bandjin Reef” represents the Traditional Owners who maintain strong connections to the Hinchinbrook marine region. IPLU were involved in the historic negotiations between the local traditional owner group, community, State, and Federal Governments in relation to the naming of this group of eight reefs situated off Cardwell.

Co-management presents opportunities for combining and respecting Indigenous property rights and responsibilities in environmental management. Essentially co-management arrangements are negotiated among the stakeholders – hopefully to mutual satisfaction – so that arrangements can be customised to each circumstance (George, Innes and Ross 2003).

Traditional Owners from all areas of the Great Barrier Reef are working with marine management agencies to develop a range of cooperative management outcomes. These outcomes will, result in a more holistic approach towards the future management of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

Indigenous cooperative management of the Great Barrier Reef has been progressed as a reef-wide initiative since 1999. The initiative stems from two sources:

- calls from Indigenous groups for meaningful roles in the management of the Great Barrier Reef; and secondly
- from decisions by the Great Barrier Reef Ministerial Council. In July 1999, the Great Barrier Reef Ministerial Council requested the preparation of a costed, multi-agency strategy for developing cooperative management with Indigenous people for the Great Barrier Reef.

Sea Forum, a collective of Aboriginal Traditional Owners from the Southern Great Barrier Reef (from Cooktown south), presented to Government in 1999 a discussion paper outlining ways forward for co-management (Sea Forum 1999).

The impetus of the Sea Forum discussion paper and the Ministerial Council Decisions led to the formation of a Senior Officials Working Group to address the issue of Indigenous co-management in the GBRMP. The Working Group comprised senior officers from the GBRMPA, [Queensland Department of Premier and Cabinet](#), [Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service](#), [Queensland Department of Primary Industries](#), [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission](#) (ATSIC) and the [Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development](#).

The Great Barrier Reef Ministerial Council considered proposals put to it by the Senior Officials Working for Indigenous cooperative management strategies in June 2001. The Ministerial Council subsequently directed GBRMPA to provide a report to it on how to get more Indigenous community rangers into the field; and how to develop appropriate cooperative management arrangements with Indigenous communities to address the conservation of turtles and dugongs.

To address this Ministerial direction, a new system for managing traditional use of marine resources in the GBRMP is being proposed. This system will be implemented through the review of zoning plans being undertaken in conjunction with the [Representative Areas Program](#). It is proposed that the basis for this management system will be the development of A Traditional Use of Marine Resources Agreement (TUMRA). These TUMRA's will be formal agreements with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Traditional Owner groups who assert rights and interests in an area of the GBRMP.

A feature of the TUMRA's is that they will provide a process for building an accredited agreement for a range of Marine Park management issues that the Traditional Owner group will be able to be involved in managing. These issues would include such topics as threatened species conservation in a specified area, traditional fishing in high conservation zones, administrative processes for permits or future act notices and management planning based on cultural and heritage values.

Communication Processes and Cross-Cultural Education

Due to the distribution of the region's Indigenous population and the remote nature of some of the communities, an effective communication strategy is critical to GBRMPA working with Indigenous peoples. Initiatives include:

- the development of an interactive Indigenous reef website called reeftribes. The website will provide information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Traditional Owner groups by providing web pages based on the theme of 'past, present and future' reef culture and cooperative management relationships and;

- the *Sea Country* Newsletter which is produced by the GBRMPA. This is an important communication tool used to inform Indigenous communities about the Authority's programs. *Sea Country* was originally distributed to communities on Cape York Peninsula focusing on the rezoning of the Far Northern Section rezoning program. The newsletter now has a broader distribution to reef wide Indigenous communities with major emphasis on the [Representative Areas Program](#) and other management issues.

As part of GBRMPA's cross cultural education program, a cultural education camp to Goold Island was organised for Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) and GBRMPA staff in 2002. The Girringun Elders and Reference group at Cardwell were contracted to provide the cultural learning outcomes as well as the camp logistics with the assistance of the QPWS vessels. The camp provided excellent opportunities for sharing and understanding Aboriginal cultures, traditional rights and interests in the Marine Park and how to facilitate the development of better working relationships in the future.



Cross-cultural education provides an excellent opportunity to learn about Aboriginal cultures.

Summary:

- Indigenous natural resource use and management along the Marine Park is diverse and ranges from Traditional Owner groups asserting their Native Title rights and interests to Indigenous policy development through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.
- The last five years has seen the GBRMPA move from working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Councils and Corporations to developing working arrangements with Traditional Owner groups based on a Native Title legislative framework.
- This period saw a strong push from Native Title Representative Bodies, the Sea Forum, and the Great Barrier Reef Ministerial Council towards developing cooperative management arrangements with Traditional Owner groups.
- The GBRMPA is taking the initiative of developing a legislative base for cooperative management agreements for traditional and cultural marine park use through the Representative areas program. The past five years has also seen strong support for cross cultural education programs covering a wide range of Indigenous Marine Park issues.
- The development of Traditional Use of Marine Resource Agreements in tune with biodiversity conservation principles and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander maritime culture will provide the GBRMPA, Traditional Owners and the diverse range of stakeholder groups, with a sound basis for moving forward into partnerships and developing cooperative Marine Park management arrangements in the future.

Further reading

Cultural heritage and history

- http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/corp_site/key_issues/conservation/cultural_heritage.html
- <http://www.env.qld.gov.au/environment/culture/>
- <http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/publib/footprints/footprints.htm>

General Information

- http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/corp_site/info_services/publications/newsletters/se_a_country_news/
- <http://www.abc.net.au/message/tv/default.htm>
- <http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/services/information/indigenous.htm>

Partnerships, policy and government

- <http://www.indigenous.gov.au>
- <http://www.indigenous.qld.gov.au>
- <http://www.capecyorkpartnerships.com>
- <http://www.balkanu.com.au>
- <http://www.nntt.gov.au>

Research publications about the Great Barrier Reef are also available at:

- http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/corp_site/info_services/publications/index.html
- <http://www.reef.crc.org.au/publications/techreport/index.html>

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