

Sea Country connections

Traditional Owners of the Great Barrier Reef

Who are the Traditional Owners of the Great Barrier Reef?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were the first to live in Australia, with archaeological evidence suggesting they occupied the continent more than 60 000 years ago. The Great Barrier Reef formed in the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and there is evidence of use of marine resources in the Whitsundays dating back 15 000 years.

Thousands of years before Captain Cook's ship *Endeavour* struck a reef near Cooktown, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples used the reefs, islands and mainland to fish, hunt and gather. As a result, Traditional Owners developed a strong bond with the Great Barrier Reef region, and their traditional customs and spiritual ties continue.

Australian Native Title law recognises the long-standing connection Traditional Owners have to their land and sea country, and this area of law ensures Traditional Owners' rights to continue their traditional practices are protected.

Today there are more than 70 recognised Traditional Owner groups living along the coastline of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The people belonging to these groups are the Traditional Owners of the Great Barrier Reef.

Timeline

60 000 years ago	Earliest evidence of human civilisation in Australia
40 000 years ago	Clear evidence of Aboriginal people living in south east Australia. A skeleton found at Lake Mungo was carbon-dated to be more than 30,000 years old
20 000 years ago	Last Ice Age
9000 years ago	The Great Barrier Reef begins to form during the most recent interglacial, high sea level period, when rising seas spilled onto the continental shelf
8000 years ago	Torres Strait Islands are formed when the land bridge between Australia and New Guinea is flooded by rising seas
6000 years ago	Shape of the Australian coastline is defined by present sea levels
1606	Earliest recorded contact with Europeans
1770	Australia declared <i>terra nullius</i> , and the First Fleet arrive 18 years later
1967	Commonwealth Referendum passes, ending Constitutional discrimination, and all Aboriginal people are counted in the national census
1978	Torres Strait Islands Treaty signed, which recognises traditional rights of its inhabitants
1992	Mabo decision overturned the concept of <i>terra nullius</i> , and recognised Traditional Owners
1993	International Year of Indigenous Peoples
1994	Commonwealth Games, Cathy Freeman holds both the Aboriginal and Australian flags during her victory lap
2000	The Sydney Olympics showcase Australian Indigenous culture to the world
2008	National Apology to the 'Stolen Generations' is delivered by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, for their "profound grief, suffering and loss" due to separation from their families

“ The sea, its natural resources and our identity as Traditional Owners, are inseparable... Our ancestors have hunted and fished in this sea country since time immemorial... Our concerns about the health of our people are directly connected to the ability of our people to access our traditional country. Being healthy means looking after our spiritual health and our physical health. ”

Girringun Aboriginal Corporation



An Elder shows children from the Thiithar group at Eilm Beach traditional spear throwing technique.

What does being a Traditional Owner mean?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples formed family based clan groups who claimed ownership over the land and sea where they lived, fished, hunted and gathered. This ownership remains today.

Traditional Owners identify with a particular area of land or sea country where their ancestors would have lived. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples do not need to physically live in their land or sea country to be a Traditional Owner of that area. As a Traditional Owner Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to use their sea country as their ancestors did.

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What is Sea Country



What do we mean by country?

The word *country* for Indigenous peoples means place of origin – culturally or spiritually, and includes all living things, beliefs, values, creation spirits and cultural obligations connected to that area. To Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples country is not only a place of belonging, but also a way of believing.

Sea country doesn't just refer to a geographical area. It includes all living things, beliefs, values, creation stories, spirits and cultural obligations associated with it. The boundaries of different sea country areas are often clearly defined by features like river mouths or rock formations.



Cultural connection to the sea is taught to each new generation.

“ In the Dreamtime, the rainbow serpent Gubal, moved through the Palm Island group and surrounding areas, leaving a track as he went. When the sea levels rose, a giant stingray came and found a place to stay. This makes the boundaries between Manbarra, Nywaigi and Wulgurukaba. ”

Walter Palm Island, Manbarra Traditional Owner, from *Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report 2009*

Traditional Owners connection to sea country

Some of the Traditional Owners 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. Their myths and legends are expressed through dance and song and there are many creation stories for the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park's islands and reefs. The deep cultural connection they have to the sea is taught to each new generation.

Hunting, fishing, collecting, and looking after culturally significant sites have always been an important part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. These activities are deeply rooted in their traditions and customs. Continuing these traditions is of high cultural importance, and key to preserving the connection between the past, present and future. It establishes a strong sense of self identity, and most importantly, a connection to place. Sea country is also important to the subsistence lifestyles of Indigenous peoples.

Rainbow serpent belief

The Aboriginal rainbow serpent belief is one of the oldest continuing religious beliefs in the world, dating back several thousand years, and features in the Dreaming stories of many mainland Aboriginal groups. It is always associated with watercourses, such as rivers, creeks and lagoons, and is the protector of the land and its people, and the source of all life.

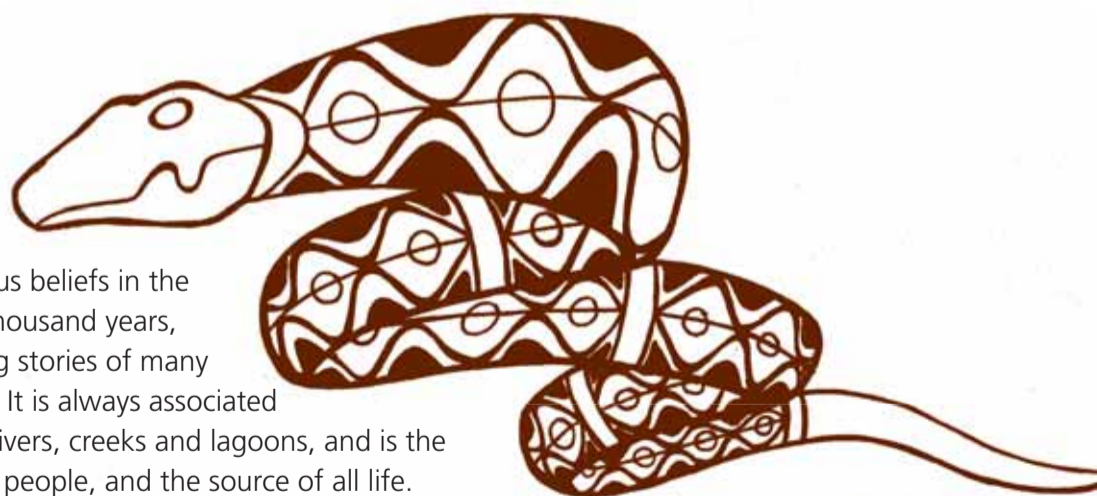
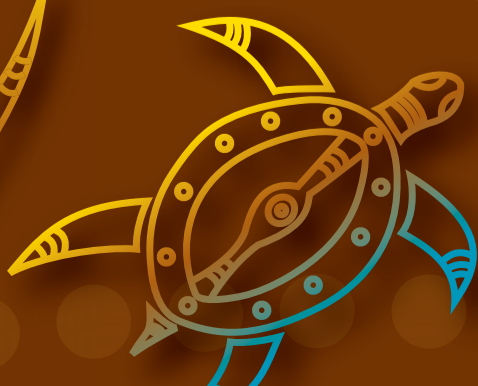


Illustration by Evan Ivy

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Traditional Sustainable Use of the Sea

Seasonal calendars

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples rely on the seasons to indicate the breeding cycles of certain marine species, and the best times to hunt or fish for certain animals. The opening and closure of seasons were marked by ecological events, like the flowering of particular plants or the arrival of migratory birds.

Indigenous groups in the central north Crocodile Islands of Australia generally recognise six major seasons in the yearly cycle of natural events. Their calendar is most easily represented as a circle and represents a view of their environment during the conduct of their hunting activities, ritual life and the annual cycle of movement across the land and seascape. Other Indigenous groups have developed similar systems, which reflect the cycle of life, plants, animals and sea creatures in their land and sea country.

The main seasons of this calendar are:

DHULUDUR THE PRE-WET SEASON

"The fires are small and isolated now. The winds are mixed up, each blowing at different times, often within the same day. The male thunder shrinks the waterholes and the female thunder brings the rain called Dhuludur."

BARRA'MIRRI THE GROWTH SEASON

"Heavy rain comes every day and the plants grow quickly. Soon there is heavy growth throughout the whole bush."

MAYALTA THE FLOWERING SEASON

"There is very little bush food. There are a lot of plants that flower, bright sunny days and sometimes rain."

MIDAWARR THE FRUITING SEASON

"The grasses are forming seeds. It's the season of fruiting plants and the east wind signals the beginning of the time of abundant food."

DHARRATHARRAMIRRI EARLY DRY SEASON

"The nights are cool and there is mist early in the mornings. Large flocks of mudlarks arrive and the south east wind, Buluna, swings further south to become the wind Dharratharra."

RARRANDHARR THE MAIN DRY SEASON

"The warm south east wind blows as the pandanus fruit begins to fall to the ground. As soon as the stringybark tree flowers, snakes lay their eggs and all types of honey can be found."

From Ochres to Eel Traps

Sustainable use for future generations

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have always used the sea, and developed their skills and practices to ensure the natural resources of the Great Barrier Reef were managed in a sustainable manner. They have always been conscious of making sure there was enough food for their families and future generations by taking only what they needed, and were even selective about the sex and maturity of the animals taken in order to allow the population to grow.

“I've got to make sure that after our Elders are gone, we keep our cultural heritage intact, we look after the cultural heritage sites like fish traps and story places that are very important to us as a group.”

Darren Butler, Bandjin Traditional Owner, from Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report 2009

Traditional lore

Along the Great Barrier Reef coastline Traditional Owner groups rely on customary and traditional lore to manage traditional use of resources. Traditional lore dictates the rules surrounding hunting, gathering and fishing.

These sea country management tools are still used by Traditional Owners today to maintain sustainable use of marine resources. Neighbouring Traditional Owner groups respect each others' sea country areas and only hunt, fish, and gather in their own areas, unless permission has been granted from the neighbouring group. Today some groups employ community rangers to manage sea country, and work with government to ensure the sustainable use of marine resources.

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Traditional Use Today

What is traditional use?

Traditional use of marine resources is defined as activities which are part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultures, customs or traditions. Traditional use of marine resources activities may include fishing, hunting, collecting (such as shellfish), looking after cultural and heritage sites, storytelling, ceremonies and trade.



Traditional hunting techniques have adapted with changes in technology.

Changing technologies

Just like any other society, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have embraced advances in technology, and moved with the times. Many Traditional Owners today use new technologies such as GPS tracking, modern equipment and motor powered boats to fish.

Fishing and hunting

Traditionally spears used for hunting and fishing had handles made from wood, such as native guava, and had spears made from black palm wood sealed with beeswax and red ochre. The tips were made from stones, stingray spines, or bones. Today traditional-style spears are still used, but are usually made from materials introduced after European settlement, like bamboo for the shaft, steel prongs, or fishing lines and nets.

Continuing cultural traditions

Even though Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples might now use more modern tools, these activities are still considered traditional. While the method used in these activities may have changed, the purpose remains the same.

The activities are the key to preserving the connection between the past, present and future and most importantly a connection to place. It is the practice of fishing, hunting and collecting, and the social aspects of preparation, cooking, sharing and eating, that are important rather than the way in which the food is caught. Hunting for culturally significant animals, such as dugong and turtles, using modern equipment is still a traditional practice, provided that it is undertaken by Traditional Owners in their own sea country.



A Torres Strait Islander can be seen casting a net for bait on Thursday Island.

“ Before you go hunting you've got to talk in language, ask permission. You ask permission from the spirits to guide you... When I go hunting I give something that is with me to the sea – drinking water I give to the sea, some food I give, that's in our culture. That's how you get everything easy for you – because you ask the sea for permission again. If you don't ask, you won't get. You have to treat the sea with respect. ”

Walter Nona, from *Elders: Wisdom from Australia's Indigenous Leaders*, Cambridge University Press

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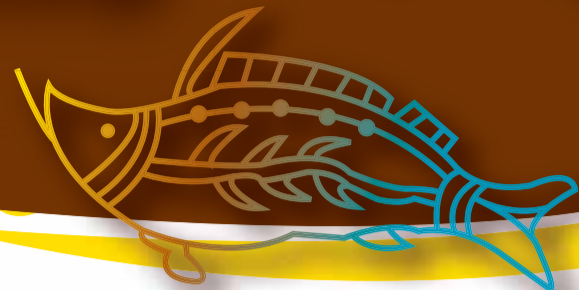


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Traditional Owners Looking After Sea Country Today

Caring for and protecting sea country

Traditional Owners have always had a unique respect for their land and sea country, recognising the importance of having a minimal impact on the environment in which they live, fish and hunt. This cultural tradition continues today with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples actively caring for their sea country, to leave a legacy for future generations to practice age old traditions and customs as part of their culture.

Traditional Owners have a wealth of knowledge about the Great Barrier Reef, which has been passed down from generation to generation, for thousands of years. This knowledge includes complex information about marine and coastal ecosystems, and practices for their sustainable use, with an overarching responsibility to protect and care for their sea country.

Today Traditional Owners continue to play an important role in caring for their sea country through:

- Turtle, dugong and seagrass monitoring programs
- Reporting sick, stranded and injured animals
- Maintaining cultural heritage sites
- Managing sustainable take of culturally significant animals
- Weed control programs
- Feral animal control programs
- Co-management arrangements with government agencies
- Formal agreements developed with Traditional Owners to ensure marine resources are being used sustainably



Artworks, such as this bark painting with dugong, illustrate Traditional Owner's connection to the sea and its creatures.

“ The land and the seas, the resources we take from it and what we give back to it, how we regulate it, the practice of hunting, the keeping of our laws, the rights of passage over all areas of country, these are customs which have continued over countless generations. It is our obligations and the right of our people to continue living on the land and sea. We have withstood the tests of time, invasion, drought and change, and the tides of time have not washed away our sovereign rights over country which we lawfully inherit from our forefathers. ”

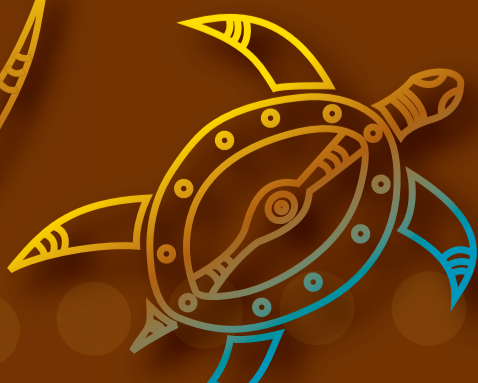
Mervyn Jukarn Johnson, from Traditional Owner aspirations towards co-operative management of the Great Barrier Reef



Today Traditional Owners work closely with government agencies, including the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, to protect and care for their sea country.

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Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Connection to Sea Country

Formation and history of the Torres Strait Islands

The Torres Strait lies north of the tip of Cape York, forming the northern most part of Queensland. Eighteen islands, together with two remote mainland towns, Bamaga and Seisia, make up the main Torres Strait Islander communities, and Torres Strait Islanders also live throughout mainland Australia.

The Torres Strait Islands were formed when the land bridge between Australia and Papua New Guinea was flooded by rising seas about 8000 years ago. The Torres Strait Islands are made up of small volcanic islands in the east, low lying cays on the central islands and larger continental islands off the tip of the Cape York Peninsula.

Torres Strait Islander peoples are made up of five major cultural groups, with two distinct languages; Meriam Mir in the east, and Kala Lagaw Ya or Kala Kawa Ya in the central and western islands.

A seafaring people

Torres Strait Islander people use the sea, and interact with neighbouring coastal Aboriginal people of Queensland and the Northern Territory, as they have done for thousands of years.

Torres Strait Islander peoples are seafarers who navigate by the stars and use dugout canoes and outriggers to travel across their sea country. Sea country was used as a place for trade, hunting, fishing, gardening, ceremonies, warfare, traditional lore, art, music, dance, sacred ceremonies and storytelling.

The story of Nageg and Geigi, a mother and her son, is a creation story of the Tig Dowareb Clan of Mer (Murray Island) in the Torres Strait. It tells how Nageg and Geigi became what are now known as the triggerfish and the great trevally.

Intersection of the Torres Strait and the Great Barrier Reef

Torres Strait Islanders have a wealth of knowledge of the marine landscape, and the animals which inhabit it. Different marine life, such as turtles and dugong, were hunted throughout the Torres Strait in the shallow waters. They harvest fish from fish traps built on the fringing reefs, and inhabitants of these islands also embark on long sea voyages to the eastern Cape York Peninsula. Although the Torres Strait is located outside the boundary of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, it is here north-east of Murray Island, where the Great Barrier Reef begins.

Food from the sea is still a valuable part of the economy, culture and diet of Torres Strait Islander people who have among the highest consumption of seafood in the world. Today, technology has changed, but the cultural use of the Great Barrier Reef by Torres Strait Islanders remains. Oral and visual traditional histories link the past and the present and help maintain a living culture.

Artwork

One of the most distinctive art works of the Torres Strait Islander people is the mask. Each type of mask has a specific name, which describes the mask's purpose or ceremony for which it was made. Masks are made out of wood or turtle shell and designed to cover the head or face. In designing a mask, birds and marine creatures are used as well as human faces. Masks were made for rituals to increase garden produce, for hunting success, sorcery and initiation.



Masks and feather headdress, or dhari, were used in rituals and dance, and were often highly decorative.

Dance

Torres Strait Island peoples' dances reflect elements of the sea, fishing and the environment. One particular dance is the Shark Dance from Mer (Murray Island). The Shark Dance is an important ceremonial dance traditionally used for initiations. Their costumes can be real works of art, employing feathers in a very artistic way, as in the dhari, feather headdress. The dhari originally came from Papua New Guinea, and was probably used as an item of trade between the two nations.

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Aboriginal Peoples' Connection to Sea Country

Aboriginal peoples tradition of trade

Aboriginal peoples used the sea to fish, hunt and gather food for their families. Trade between clan groups was often carried out across the sea, and was vital to Aboriginal existence, as it improved the quality of life for clan groups.

Stones, ochres, tools, ceremonial items and other resources not normally available in one area could be obtained through regular trade with other clan groups. Trade required people from different areas and different cultures to respect each others' rights, boundaries and cultural values. It enabled the development of relationships between neighbouring groups by providing an avenue for settling disputes, meeting to discuss traditional lore, and share Dreaming stories and gifts of respect.

Artwork

Artworks such as paintings and carvings can be found in rock shelters, sacred sites and on ceremonial implements, as well as on everyday objects. In paintings, different coloured ochres were used in different areas and traded between groups. Older artworks found in rock shelters often show people and events as well as spiritual beings, patterns and abstract figures that do not physically exist in nature as we know it. Many artworks have been found that contain paintings or carvings of sea creatures, reptiles, birds and other animals.

The Flinders Group National Park, situated off the east coast of Cape York Peninsula in Princess Charlotte Bay, is the sea country of the Yiithuwarra Aboriginal people. Here rock art sites on the islands depict the intensive contact between the Yiithuwarra and Europeans during the late 1800s and early 1900s. The sites are dominated by motifs of marine creatures and post-contact ship paintings. In contrast, the rock art of the Ngaro people in the Nara Inlet of the Whitsunday Islands is described as non-figurative, or abstract art, which does not depict animals or humans.

“ We have a lifelong spiritual and physical connection to the land and sea... a lifelong responsibility to our ancestors to care for land and sea country... Through countless generations, our forbears have passed down traditional knowledge of the islands and their natural resources, the seasons, the tides and ocean movements, the flora and fauna, and also what used to be here.”

Woppaburra peoples, from Woppaburra Aspirations Statement, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority

Ceremonies and food

For thousands of years Aboriginal people have harnessed their sea country for ceremonial purposes and subsistence living. Evidence of coastal Aboriginal people drawing inspiration from their sea country for songs, dances and storytelling is abundant.

Many coastal Aboriginal clans could tell what marine animals and plants could be harvested by looking for signs in surrounding environment. For example, the flowering of a particular plant could indicate the seasonal abundance of particular species which could be fished or hunted for food.



Trade between clan groups improved the quality of life, and allowed them to share stones, ochres, tools, ceremonial items, and food.



This ochre painting of a turtle can be found in a cave on Stanley Island.

Dance

The dances of Aboriginal people are interpretations of stories about the community, of the sea, of the land, of relationships, and of the culture of the people. Each group has different dances that tell different stories. Usually dance imitates land and sea creatures, especially those that represent totems or the environment. For example dances could mimic sharks, kangaroos and waves, or they could also be about courtship, hunting or paddling out to sea.

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Cultural Sites

Have you seen any...

Along the Great Barrier Reef coast, and throughout Australia, there are many cultural heritage sites that offer an insight into the history of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Sometimes these sites are easy to see, and other times they are not. The preservation of these sites is important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. While you are enjoying the Great Barrier Reef have a look around and see if you can spot any of the following:

Middens

Areas where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples lived in coastal environments, identified by middens – or mounds of leftover shell, bones and other organic material from meals. These provide evidence of the types of food people of the area used to eat, and also what type of animals existed in the area. By dating the leftover material scientists can confirm how long the site has existed, and often surrounding areas show evidence of the lifestyle of a particular group at that time. If you look around a midden site you might see a quarry, an axe head or grooves left in surrounding rock.

Grinding stones

These are slabs of stone used in food preparation to crush and grind bulbs, berries and seeds for cooking. The lower stones have a worn groove where the food was ground while the upper smaller stones can be flat or rounded and usually have more than one smooth side. Grinding grooves were also formed when axes or other tools like wooden spear tips were made or sharpened.

Fish traps

Designed to catch fish and other aquatic animals, fish traps were made from rocks, branches or wickerwork. Working fish traps still exist throughout the Great Barrier Reef. One of these is still used by the Bandjin people in the Hinchinbrook Channel. The fish are lured into the traps at high tide and as the tide recedes the fish become stranded within the rock walls, making it easy for them to be caught. These fish traps are thought to be about 2000 years old and some are around the same size as two football fields.



An Elder points out traditional stone fish traps found at Scraggy Point.

Dreamtime creation sites

These include modified sites, or natural features of the landscape that possess special significance because of their role in Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander beliefs. Knowledge of Dreamtime creation sites is not usually public knowledge.

Burial grounds

Burial grounds are of high cultural and heritage significance to Indigenous peoples. Rising sea levels have meant that many old burial grounds and sites are now underwater. The knowledge of where these burial grounds are located, is retained by many Traditional Owners. Erosion along the coast and islands has exposed some burial sites and remains. For this reason Traditional Owners have conducted traditional reburials within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Region.



Rock art on Flinders Island shows evidence of contact with European ships, as well as land and sea creatures.

Rock art

Rock art includes paintings, carvings and drawings in caves or on rock surfaces that tell stories of everyday and significant events, and in some instances formed parts of ceremonies and rituals. Artworks containing paintings or carvings of sea creatures, reptiles, birds and other animals have been found signifying the influence of the natural environment on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Rock art provides a record of history. Evidence of the First Fleet, and even explorers that came before them, can be found in many rock art sites throughout the Great Barrier Reef region.

Tree scars

Aboriginal people used trees for many purposes including removing bark from trees to make coolamons (wooden dishes), shields, canoes, shelters, medicine and twine. Toe-holds were cut into trees for ease of climbing, to catch possums and collect honey or grubs. Scars on trees vary in size, from half a metre for shields or coolamons, to more than two metres for canoes and sheets for shelters. The outer bark of trees was often removed to create a surface for tree art where designs were carved into the inner wood, often marking burial or initiation sites.

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