

Sea Country connections

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."

MAYALTHA 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.

REEF Beat

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