
ABORIGINAL AFFILIATIONS WITH THE SEA IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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FIRST CONTACT

European exploration of Western Australia was initiated by the need to locate new areas for economic ventures including pearling, whaling and pastoralism.

One of the first areas 'to be explored was the Dampier Archipelago, on the, north-west coast, and it was here in February 1818, that Phillip Parker King intercepted three Aborigines paddling long vessels or 'marine velocipedes' near Goodwyn Island (King, 1969). F.T. Gregory subsequently explored the region which resulted in the first settlement being established in 1863 at Tien Tsin, later to be known as Cossack. Roebourne was established soon after and became the centre of government in the area.

In 1865 Europeans started to exploit the rich pearl shell beds in Nickol Bay and by the 1870s these easily accessible pearl banks were exhausted. The pearling industry focussed its attention on the deeper waters of Flying Foam Passage and as far south as Shark Bay and north to Derby. Local whaling bases, in conjunction with pearling settlements became widespread in the Archipelago. The metropolitan newspapers of the 1870s reflected their profitability. The government representative, R.J. Sholl, wrote in 1873 on a visit to Flying Foam:

"At the time of my visit there were engaged in the fishing 24 pearl boats and 47 smaller boats,' including dinghies etc. The industrial population consisted of 500 of whom 67 were white men and the remainder natives and Malays. There were, onshore, some 50 natives comprising old men, women and children. "
(Sholl, 1873).

Pearling fleets were operating from Roebuck Bay and King Sound in the Kimberley at this time. Interactions between Aboriginal people and the European-Asian pearlers often had disastrous consequences in terms of social impact. Aboriginal people were recruited as labour on the pearling fleets. The Lacepede Islands were used as a depot where Aboriginal people were kept prior to being sold to pearlers further down the coast (Green and Turner, 1984).

By 1868 there were, according to Sholl, 60 natives and 30 whites employed on the pearling boats in the Dampier Archipelago. By 1869, Aborigines were in great demand as divers, as exemplified by R. Thatcher; "Already hands are scarce and the much depised natives eagerly sought after." (Herald, 25.12.1869)

The methods used to "recruit" Aborigines for pearling often turned sour and consisted of kidnapping and mistreatment, sometimes murder (Runt, 1978.). Perhaps it was this attitude

which led to the murder of a policeman, his assistant and two pearlers by Aborigines in 1868. The end result of this incident was that Aborigines were relentlessly persecuted and shot by the settlers. D. Carley wrote that:

"It is very well known about Nickol Bay and the Flying Foam Passage, that on one day there were quite sixty natives, men, women and children shot dead. The natives showed me the skulls of 15 who were shot dead. Three of the skulls were those of children, and two of these small skulls had bullet holes in them."
(CS03679/86).

The wrath inflicted upon the Aboriginal inhabitants of the Dampier Archipelago was so severe that there are no accounts of Aborigines living traditionally in the area after 1868.

The development of missions in the Kimberley was aimed at preventing similar situations from occurring. The coastal Worora people were first affected by Europeans with the attempted settlement of the Camden Harbour Pastoral settlement in 1864. In 1912 a Presbyterian mission was established at Port George IV inlet, but by 1916 the mission had shifted to Kunmunya. The principal reason for this move was to remove the Aboriginal people from what the missionaries saw as disastrous liaisons between the Aborigines and the crews of pearling luggers (Green and Turner, 1984). By 1949, with pastoral stations occupying almost all of the Aboriginal land in the north Kimberley, Worora, Wunambal and Ngarinyin people lived in two major mission settlements, Kunmunya and Munja. Some people had travelled to Kalumburu and the Forrest River Mission (Oombulgari) prior to this period. The former people moved eventually to Wotjalum and thence to Derby to be resettled at Mowanjum.

The history of the Dampierland communities is strikingly similar. These coastal dwelling people were exposed to a wide range of effects from Aboriginal-European contact. Pastoralists took control of the well-watered lands to the east, displacing the Aboriginal people who fled to the coast. Interactions between Aboriginal people and the European-Asian pearling crews often had disastrous consequences.

Father Duncan McNab arrived on the western shore of King Sound in 1885 to establish a mission at Disaster Bay. The mission was short-lived, but it introduced Aborigines to missionaries, whose aim was to protect the Aboriginal people from the exploitation of pearlers, pastoralists and miners. Missions were to have a lasting impact on the lives of the Dampierland people, with missions being established at Beagle Bay in 1890, Lombadina in 1892 and Sunday Island in 1899. When the Sunday Island mission closed in 1957 the Bardi were moved to Derby where they stayed until 1967. The time spent in Derby for the Bardi and Djawi people of the Buccaneer Archipelago, was a time of great unhappiness. Living on a town reserve at the edge of the salt flats, many people were for the first time exposed to alcohol and boredom. The lack of fish (the previous dietary staple), the number of sandflies and mosquitoes, inadequate housing and being away from their traditional homeland, promoted their move back to Sunday Island in 1967, and then to One Arm Point in 1972.

EARLY OBSERVATIONS OF COASTAL ABORIGINES UTILISING MARITIME RESOURCES

There are widespread records of Aboriginal people utilising maritime resources in Western Australia. I will briefly mention some instances here to 'provide a general overview.

In the south-west of Western Australia, Aboriginal people tended to utilise the lower reaches of estuaries for collecting fish. These people had no form of water **transport** and confined their activities to the sheltered embayments and rivers. 'It appears that certain, restrictions were placed on the procurement of particular fish species. **Whales**, however, 'were exploited by Aborigines taking full advantage of 'strandings by **Sperm** and **False Killer Whales**, whereby people would gorge themselves on the meat. **Seals** were dealt with in a similar way. Meagher and Ride suggest that the absence of seal colonies on the south-western mainland coast today and their presence on the offshore islands may be linked to the former predation by the Aborigines (Meagher and Ride, 1980).

Early accounts of the Marduthunera, Ngarluma and now the extinct Yaburara people in the **Dampier** Archipelago, reveal the preparation of mangrove seeds by boiling them in conch shells prior to removing **their** toxic properties by leaching (Harper, 1886; Hall, 1971; Bates, no date). Descriptions are given of spearing turtles by using short stabbing sticks (Stow, 1981). The use of nets appeared to be widespread among these coastal, people. A net from **Nickol** Bay exhibited in Perth in the 1880s measured 27 by 3 feet (Inquirer 23.2.1887). **These nets** were made from spinifex and there were different types utilised for different purposes. One described by Ridley in 1863 was **funnel-shaped**, and others resembled small stake nets made up of a **two-stranded** twine (Ridley, 1863). The use of drag nets from rafts offshore was also common.

People gathering for ceremonial purposes on islands, or to exploit **resources** such as turtle eggs in the breeding season, necessitated inter-island voyaging. There were several accounts of the log rafts used in the **Dampier** Archipelago by the Aboriginal inhabitants. King described in detail rafts comprised of two or three **short** mangrove logs tied together and being propelled by paddling with the hands (King, 1969). There are also inferences of the use of inflated turtles tied together as one man rafts (von Brandenstein, pers.comm., 1981).

The Wumambal and Gambre people in Admiralty Gulf exploited **the** islands and the reefs to the north and took particular, delight in boating skills and in the harvest of the sea (Crawford, 1983). The coastal Worora were in a similar situation, although the larger islands were permanently inhabited, as were the Montgomery Islands and the Sunday Island group (Crawford, 1983).

In discussing the **Bardi** people of One Arm Point and Lombadina, it is pertinent to note that the traditions and views observed earlier this century by people such as **Elkin** (1932) and **Worms** (1952), still hold true. today. The **Bardi** and **Djawi** **travelled** along the coast and island-hopped on mangrove wood double rafts.

The wood for the rafts being located only in restricted localities, special journeys of great distances were made in order to harvest suitable wood. Family groups often travelled on the one raft and groups of families travelled together from one locality to another.

Baler shells were used to carry water on these long voyages. Neap tides were the optimum tides used to island-hop, with people planning their voyages around their comprehensive knowledge of the currents and winds.

The Bardi and Djawi believe that ancestral beings travelled the seas and created the islands, reefs, sandbanks and marine species found within the sea. The adventures of these ancestral beings are recalled in song and story. The beings named all the features in the environment including particular places on the seabed where certain ritual activities occurred which, in some cases, resulted in ritual paraphernalia being left behind metamorphosing into particular marine features. Rituals were carried out by these ancestral beings from the north through the islands where certain named ritual sites were located. These rituals passed through the Dampierland Peninsula and travelled south along the coast to Broome, La Grange and south-east into the interior.

CONTEMPORARY USE OF THE SEA AND ITS RESOURCES

Aboriginal people resident in coastal communities tend to utilise marine resources of one form or another. Large regional centres such as Geraldton and Carnarvon have a high number of resident Aboriginal people, most of whom tend to be immigrants from inland areas. Some of these people fish for purely social reasons as well as economic ones. Onslow, Roebourne and La Grange are similar in the marine exploitation patterns. The methods used tend to be localised and on a small scale, supplementing people's meat-based diets.

Other centres, such as Broome, tend to be made up of coastal Aboriginal people. These people rely heavily on sea resources as these make up their traditional and preferred diet. People in Broome often spend a great deal of time netting and catching fish. In this area, fishing plays an important role in strengthening ties to the sea as well as providing an emotional outlet. There are approximately 8,000 Aboriginal people living in coastal communities in the central and north-west division, according to the 1981 government census. A large proportion of these people, especially those residing at Broome, Beagle Bay, Lombadina, One Arm Point, Kalumburu and Oombulgari, spend time exploiting marine resources.

The Bardi community at One Arm Point is the community that I would like to concentrate on for the remainder of this discussion. People in the community, which numbers approximately 140 adults divided into seven clan-based residential groups, spend a great deal of work and leisure time exploiting their rich coastal environment. I have already mentioned that the Bardi traditionally used the sea including the islands, bays, estuaries, tidal mudflats and reefs for a range of food gathering and ritual activities.

Fish, dugong and turtle are preferred dietary staples, with beef playing a 'lesser role in the Bardi diet. Older Bardi people reveal an acute awareness of environmental factors which may affect the procurement of marine species. There is an understanding of the tides, the times of resource availability and the characteristics of the species being hunted. One example of Bardi environmental awareness is reflected in how they divide up their seasons, which relate closely to prime times for exploiting particular marine resources, for example:

Barlgana alubur: March-April when the south-east wind starts and marks the beginning of the dry season.

Niyarda barlgana: May-August, the 'middle of the south-east wind when strong winds occur and the Dugong season starts in Mangala (July).

Djalalay: August-September, the south-east wind finishes and the westerlies start, the dugong season ends.

Lalin: October-December; westerly winds become strong. the weather becomes hot, married turtle time and ceremonies start.

Djandjala Balburgin: December, rain clouds come from the north.

Ungulgul: December-February, north-west wind blows, rainy season, married turtle season ends in January.

The knowledge of the seasons reflects the type of resources available for exploitation. The case of the green turtle, the main species hunted at One Arm Point is one example concerning this knowledge. The most productive period for hunting kulkil (turtle) is at low tide, at the beginning of Lalin, or at married turtle time. This is the time when turtles are mating and are found floating on the surface of the water and they tend to be quiet and not easily disturbed. They are also referred to as being 'fat' at this time, although turtles are generally hunted all year round.

Only men hunt turtles due to the ritual connotations associated with the procurement of this marine reptile; women and children often catch small turtles at low tide on the exposed reefs, in the tidal channels and lagoons (Green and Turner, 1984). Once a turtle has been harpooned, there are rites concerned with the butchering and distribution of the meat. Each anatomical feature of the turtle has a specific name, and some of these names also have ritual connotations. 'Fat' turtles are highly prized and are commonly hunted in specific locations offshore. Ritual places on the land are used both as viewing platforms to observe turtles prior to hunting, and also as increase centres where rituals are performed to ensure an adequate supply. Despite the abundance, of turtles in the area, people generally take only enough to satisfy their immediate family requirements.

Different locations provide different marine resources. For example, Wanburura is a stand of mangroves on the east side of Ring Sound. This is one location where the Bardi people collect wood for rafts. The nearby island Djanuwan is used for constructing the rafts as it is a good camp and also provides turtle eggs in season. Mayunlambuli is a dugong hunting area.

Biyana is a shelling ground for alngay (trochus), while Milbugaran is a campsite and is also a place for observing married turtle, as is Mirlimirl. Ungalgun is a reef for gathering alngay. Muruldullum is a nesting ground for sea birds, and eggs.

are collected there in season. **Raluralu** has married turtle, a good camping area and fresh water, etc. Thus the **Bardi** view of their world reflects these prime locations for exploiting marine resources located in each estate or **Buru**.

Cultural restrictions also apply to the hunting of dugongs. It is believed that dugongs were once human and ritual songs and stories corroborate this belief. Before a dugong was butchered the hunter would draw lines upon the carcass in charcoal according to traditional patterns. Ritual songs were sung as the dugong was butchered. The portions of meat were then distributed to persons in various kin relationships to the hunter. This practice has ceased, much to the dismay of the older **Bardi** men at One Arm Point. They see a need to keep these traditional practices alive in their community. The south-east wind brings the dugong into the waters surrounding Dampierland where they apparently stay for three months before returning to areas in the north-east.

People in One Arm Point have travelled up to sixty kilometres to hunt dugong in seas which do not traditionally belong to them (Green and Turner, 1984).

Marine species are named and additional names may be given to fish species at specific times in their life cycles. These names also have, in some cases, ritual connotations. As with turtle and dugong, a complex system of taboos applies to the catching, distribution and consumption of certain species of fish. Some marine species have mythological connotations and are linked to celestial features.

Today there are several examples of commercial exploitation by the **Bardi** people of their marine resources. Some of these ventures have been successful whilst others have not. The **Bardi** community has been issued an experimental fishing licence. It is not possible for the community to hold a commercial fishing licence since the boats in the community do not meet with survey requirements and none of the Aboriginal men have gained the necessary certification to hold marine licences. The community keeps monthly records of all people taking fish for sale, recording the species and weight of fish caught. At present fish can only be sold locally; however, it is the intention of the community to sell fish to regional centres in the Kimberley. The main fish caught include bream, Spanish flag, barramundi, snapper, cod, blue bone and queenfish. The numbers caught each month depend largely on the motivation of the fishermen.

The **Bardi** attempted to enter professional fishing by utilising large boats. They bought two boats, both of which came to an untimely end. The situation reported by Owen Stanley, with regard to the **Tiwi's** attempts to establish a fish trading company in 1970 reflects the **Bardi's** attempts. As in the case of the **Tiwi**, operations by the **Bardi** based on a more simple technology such as the use of dinghies and outboard motors, and the need to catch fish only when they want to, is proving to be more successful in the long term. The Beagle Bay community is establishing a fishing based tourist enterprise whereby community members take tourists fishing and camping along the coast. The success of this venture has not yet been ascertained.

The Bardi have also established a moderately successful industry for the collection of trochus shell. They clean and sell the dry shell in Broome where it is sent to the United Kingdom and made into jewellery. A bag weighing eighty kilograms has a market value of eighty dollars, five dollars of which returns to the community. Strict size regulations are enforced with only shell which measures between sixty five and one hundred millimetres in length being taken.

The trochus industry is operated at an individual rather than a community level. Collectors must hold a licence issued by the Fisheries Department and the community. A committee has been established at One Arm Point, with members from each of the seven resident clan groups, meeting to discuss measures to prevent over-exploitation. Potentially large quantities of shell can be collected from the rich reefs. One person can collect 180 to 190 kilograms of shell per day. Men usually shell in pairs, using a 14 foot dinghy. Each boat with its crew has the potential to carry up to four hundred and eighty kilograms of shell to their processing plant each day.

The Bardi people are acutely aware of the damage caused by the Indonesians who fish and collect shell from the reefs. Whole populations of trochus were decimated by Indonesians on Sunday Island and the Roe Islands.

The Bardi have considered establishing their own trochus hatchery, to repopulate areas of reef which are continually exploited. Research and infrastructure costs remain prohibitively expensive at the present time. Plans for the sale of the dried trochus meat were under way but the Japanese buyer was not making the processing of the meat a viable proposition to the Bardi people. Recent plans to make jewellery and to carve shell in the community are being considered in order to create more long term local employment.

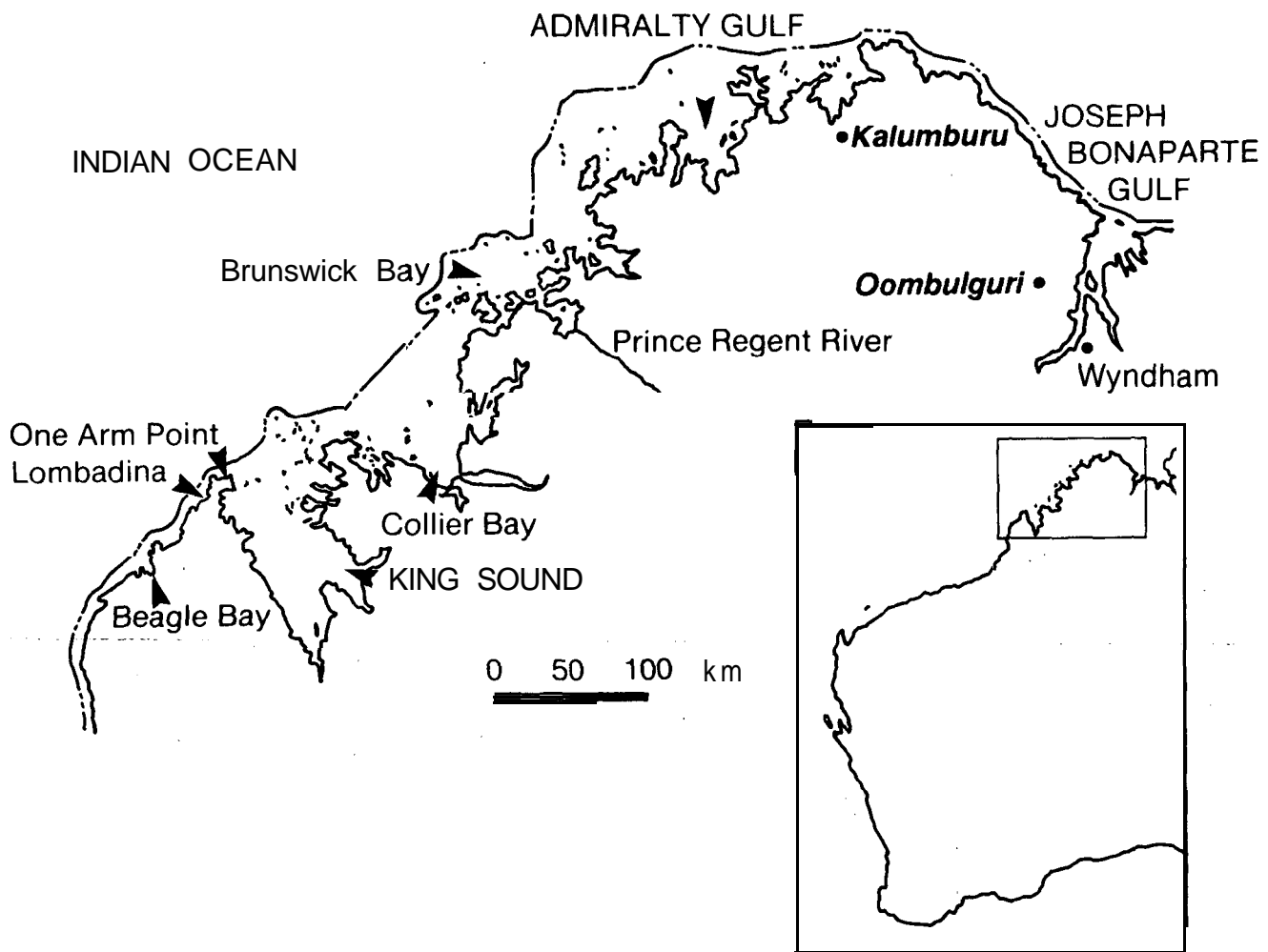
On the whole the Bardi economy is heavily dependent on the local marine resources. Bardi people are looking towards the future with a view to self-management of their local environment on a scale which will ensure increased local employment. Unfortunately, government initiatives in these matters are slow and have offered little return for the Bardi to date.

At this stage I feel it is pertinent to discuss what the Dampierland community hoped was to be their first attempt at acquiring marine management through the efforts of the Aboriginal Land Inquiry and the proposed Land Rights Bill.

THE ABORIGINAL LAND INQUIRY

1983 saw the beginning of an attempt by the West Australian Government to address the issue of Aboriginal Land Rights. One of the terms of reference was as follows; "The Inquiry will consider the extent to which waters adjacent to granted lands should be protected for the use of Aboriginal people."

Figure 1. Map of the Kimberley coast showing the extent of State jurisdiction.



In order to answer this term of reference, the **Aboriginal people** of Beagle Bay; Lombadina and One Arm Point **united in the common** goal to **have** their traditional **rights to sea** recognised by the Government with a **view to self-management**.

The communities argued the case that their members had interests in the land and sea, that people exploited certain marine resources, and that they had an intimate knowledge of their environment. Substantial evidence was given as to the **existence** of ritual and mythological sites in the sea. Davis and Prescott (1985) substantiated their claims with supporting evidence from the Northern Territory. **The communities** felt that areas of sea should be closed for **their use**, in order to protect **the economic**, ritual and mythological sites, within them. They felt that **European professional fishermen** should not be able to fish in **these closed** areas and they said that existing pearling leases should be controlled by the **communities**. The **concept** of **Aboriginal rangers** patrolling the seas to ensure that no **illegal** fishing occurred and to ensure that the shell beds and **fishing** areas were properly monitored was suggested.

The Commissioner, Paul Seaman QC, recognised that these people did have strong claims to protect the sea for their use. He recommended that water should be protected for Aboriginal people for uses which were still a part of traditional life. Traditional life was defined to include access to traditional activities connected with significant areas in, or associated with, the sea, or customary modes of foraging or fishing **in or** near the sea (Seaman, 1984). Seaman accepted that these Aboriginal people had due claim on a traditional basis to areas of seas in and around the Dampierland Peninsula and he recognised that people who today hunted dugong and turtles with dinghies and outboard motors were still hunting in **a traditional** mode.

Substantial evidence was submitted by the communities in order to convince the **Inquiry** of their claims to the sea. These claims were accepted by the **Commissioner**. Unfortunately, neither the Aboriginal communities nor, I **suspect**, the Commissioner, realised the depth of the anti-Land Rights feeling in the wider community and **that** the issue had become politically expedient. The failure of the Land Bill to be passed in the Lower House of Parliament **reflected** this concern.

The lack of Land Rights and tenure to the **sea means that** these Aboriginal **people will have** to seek alternative means to protect and manage **their marine** environment.

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WORKSHOP DISCUSSION

The discussion covered the following points:

Research on traditional uses of marine resources in Western Australia is only recent in response to Land Commission information requirements; there is currently little research underway and there is a danger of knowledge being lost.

Remoteness of the area limits research.

The extent of current use of the sea in traditional ways differs amongst communities, and varies according to degree of access to the sea.

All communities considered as fishing to some extent traditionally are located in the tropics.

People will hunt dugongs where available, but this plays a small part in their diet in comparison to fish and turtles.

The **Bardi** people have stories about Brew Reef which lies about 50 km offshore. It was noted by a participant that changes in technology may have affected the perceived extent of territory.