



Australian Government

Great Barrier Reef
Marine Park Authority

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and the Great Barrier Reef Region

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the Traditional Owners of the Great Barrier Reef region. For over 60,000 years their traditional connections have been part of the unique living maritime culture, and today their traditional customs and spiritual lore continue to be practiced in their use of sea country and natural resources.



There are more than 70 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Traditional Owner clan groups situated along the Queensland coast from the eastern Torres Strait Islands to just north of Bundaberg. Each of these groups holds a range of past, present and future values for their land and sea country, and for surrounding sea countries. These values may be cultural, spiritual, economic, social or physical, or a mixture of these, and demonstrate continuing connections with the Great Barrier Reef region and its natural resources.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Traditional Owners hold a vast knowledge of the marine environment, marine animals, and their habitats. Resources from the sea, like those on the mainland, are utilised for different purposes.

Such marine resources have distinct cultural uses and are not only a commodity for some communities, they are a necessity.

As sea-faring people, 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, with only 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.

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 was covered by the last sea rise, more than 15,000 years ago thus forming the Great Barrier Reef.

A variety of cultural sites occur, including sacred sites, ceremonial sites, burial grounds, rock art sites, middens, fish traps, cultural

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landscapes and story places. These sites and accounts of the past, as well as artefacts of archaeological significance, provide a strong connection to traditional clan areas and a rich heritage that all Australians should be proud of.

The colonisation of Australia after 1788 led to major changes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies, cultures, lifestyles and use of sea countries. Cultural activities reflect the major changes occurring in the world and customary practices evolve as technology evolves. An example of this is the use of wooden canoes for fishing, collecting or hunting. These have largely been replaced by new technologies such as motorised boats, synthetic fishing lines and nets.

Under their customs, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Traditional Owners utilise natural resources for different purposes, the value of which is immeasurable. Traditions like hunting and gathering are of high cultural importance, whilst the social sharing during special events that require traditional

resources is also significant. Resources in these economies have a critical role as part of caring for culture and demonstrating connection to traditional areas.

Today, 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. It is imperative that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People are engaged in management of their marine estates and natural resources in order to continue the evolution of their culture and connection to country for future generations.

Indigenous Partnerships Liaison Unit

The Indigenous Partnerships Liaison Unit at the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority commenced operating in 1995. It provides both a cultural policy advisory service to the Authority as well as a critical link for engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in present and future management arrangements.

The Unit works with all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Traditional Owner groups throughout the Great

Barrier Reef. The Unit also consults with other government authorities through regular presentations and information sessions to the tourism industry, the fishing industry and conservation groups in order to build a greater understanding of Indigenous issues within Marine Park management.

The Great Barrier Reef 25 Year Strategic Plan details a vision for the future:

...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...

Through asserting their Native Title rights and interests in the Marine Park, Traditional Owners are working with marine management agencies to develop a range of cooperative management outcomes, which in turn will lead to a more holistic management approach towards the future in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

For Further Information

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