

Sea Country connections

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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Illustrations by Patricia Galvin and Shenoa Sultana



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