

Sea Country connections

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.

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.



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

REEF Beat

Illustrations by Patricia Galvin and Shenoa Sultana



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