

Sea Country connections

Traditional Owners of the Great Barrier Reef

Who are the Traditional Owners of the Great Barrier Reef?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were the first to live in Australia, with archaeological evidence suggesting they occupied the continent more than 60 000 years ago. The Great Barrier Reef formed in the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples and there is evidence of use of marine resources in the Whitsundays dating back 15 000 years.

Thousands of years before Captain Cook's ship *Endeavour* struck a reef near Cooktown, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples used the reefs, islands and mainland to fish, hunt and gather. As a result, Traditional Owners developed a strong bond with the Great Barrier Reef region, and their traditional customs and spiritual ties continue.

Australian Native Title law recognises the long-standing connection Traditional Owners have to their land and sea country, and this area of law ensures Traditional Owners' rights to continue their traditional practices are protected.

Today there are more than 70 recognised Traditional Owner groups living along the coastline of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The people belonging to these groups are the Traditional Owners of the Great Barrier Reef.

Timeline

60 000 years ago	Earliest evidence of human civilisation in Australia
40 000 years ago	Clear evidence of Aboriginal people living in south east Australia. A skeleton found at Lake Mungo was carbon-dated to be more than 30,000 years old
20 000 years ago	Last Ice Age
9000 years ago	The Great Barrier Reef begins to form during the most recent interglacial, high sea level period, when rising seas spilled onto the continental shelf
8000 years ago	Torres Strait Islands are formed when the land bridge between Australia and New Guinea is flooded by rising seas
6000 years ago	Shape of the Australian coastline is defined by present sea levels
1606	Earliest recorded contact with Europeans
1770	Australia declared <i>terra nullius</i> , and the First Fleet arrive 18 years later
1967	Commonwealth Referendum passes, ending Constitutional discrimination, and all Aboriginal people are counted in the national census
1978	Torres Strait Islands Treaty signed, which recognises traditional rights of its inhabitants
1992	Mabo decision overturned the concept of <i>terra nullius</i> , and recognised Traditional Owners
1993	International Year of Indigenous Peoples
1994	Commonwealth Games, Cathy Freeman holds both the Aboriginal and Australian flags during her victory lap
2000	The Sydney Olympics showcase Australian Indigenous culture to the world
2008	National Apology to the 'Stolen Generations' is delivered by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, for their "profound grief, suffering and loss" due to separation from their families

“The sea, its natural resources and our identity as Traditional Owners, are inseparable... Our ancestors have hunted and fished in this sea country since time immemorial... Our concerns about the health of our people are directly connected to the ability of our people to access our traditional country. Being healthy means looking after our spiritual health and our physical health.”

Girringun Aboriginal Corporation



An Elder shows children from the Thiithar group at Eilim Beach traditional spear throwing technique.

What does being a Traditional Owner mean?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples formed family based clan groups who claimed ownership over the land and sea where they lived, fished, hunted and gathered. This ownership remains today.

Traditional Owners identify with a particular area of land or sea country where their ancestors would have lived. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples do not need to physically live in their land or sea country to be a Traditional Owner of that area. As a Traditional Owner Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to use their sea country as their ancestors did.

REEF Beat

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