

# Module 4: Sea Country



# Marine Parks Cultural Heritage - Sea Country

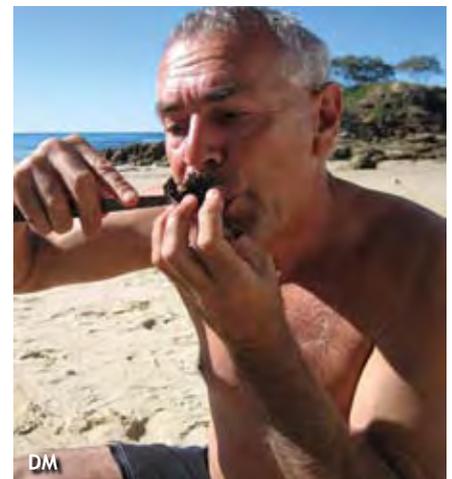
The sea country of New South Wales has strong significance for Aboriginal people living along the coast. For thousands of years, Aboriginal people have relied on the natural resources provided by the sea. The sea country, including islands, beaches, headlands, rocky shores, the ocean and estuaries, holds spiritual significance, and is central to their cultural practices and activities. Evidence of Aboriginal use of these coastal and sea environments can be found in many places, and includes large stone fish traps, such as those found in the Solitary Islands and Port Stephens-Great Lakes marine parks, middens adjacent to beaches and estuaries, and tool-making sites on rocky headlands.

The importance of sea country to Aboriginal people is reflected in their languages, use of cultural totems, artworks (including paintings), music and dances, and stories and Dreaming. Many coastal Aboriginal communities continue to collect sea tucker and plants, animals, shells and stones important for traditional medicine and healing, conduct ceremonies, and pass this knowledge on to the next generations. All Aboriginal objects, places and areas in NSW are protected under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*, and the NSW Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water is responsible for this Act.

In many marine parks in NSW, Aboriginal communities actively manage key sites, places and areas under agreements and management plans which allow them to continue using cultural resources.

## Sea tucker

Aboriginal communities in NSW still collect traditional foods from the sea, resources which they have relied upon for thousands of years. These foods come from all the different coastal habitats. For example, mangrove worms, yabbies, crabs and certain fish species are found in estuaries, pipis and cockles are found on beaches, turban snails, mussels, and oysters are found on rocky shores, and fishes and octopuses are found in the ocean. Aboriginal peoples' deep connections with and experience of nature allows them to know exactly when each food source is at its best for collection. This is known as a seasonal calendar. Aboriginal people use nature's indicators to tell them what foods to eat and when.



## Traditional harvesting methods

Always resourceful, Aboriginal people have developed many different methods for harvesting sea tucker, including, but not limited to, spears, nets, small traps, lines with hooks, and stone fish traps. Canoes made from the bark of trees such as eucalypts, mahogany and turpentine were often used to go fishing in.

Spears are the most widespread and common harvesting tool. They can be made either from lightweight materials, such as the grass tree and kurrajong, and heavyweight materials, such as eucalypts. Nets and traps are generally made of natural fibres, and fishing line from the inner bark or shredded leaves of various plants which, when twisted, can be very strong. Hooks can be fashioned from sharpened shells.



Fish traps are large structures built from rocks in the tidal zone of rocky shores. The traps are baited on the outgoing tide, and the smell attracts fishes into the traps on the incoming high tide. Once in the fish trap, the fishes are either collected in smaller traps or speared. Stone fish traps are generally used at certain times, such as when large quantities of fish are required for ceremonies or gatherings, and the men net, spear or trap the fishes. In some places, the poisonous sap or leaves of particular plants can be used to stun the fishes temporarily, making them easier to catch.

Dolphins are known to assist in the fish harvest at many coastal locations. When dolphins are seen, a gifted community member will sing to them. The dolphins circle the fishes and drive them onto the shore where they are netted. Sometimes fishes will be left stranded if the tide is outgoing at the time, and then they are simply collected from the beach.

## Middens

A midden is a mound made up of the remains of shells, fish bones, charcoal, the bones of mammals and, sometimes, tools. Middens are generally found at important sites where people from the area, or even neighbouring areas, have gathered. On the coast, they are found near places of good fishing or abundant shellfish, such as in estuaries, on beaches and dunes, and near rocky headlands. Middens vary in size, which reflects how they are used. Large middens may show they are used for large gatherings and ceremonies at particular times, while smaller middens may be regularly used by a family group. Due to the accumulation of debris, a midden that has been used over a long period of time can become very large. Excavation and carbon-dating have established that some middens are more than 4,000 years old.

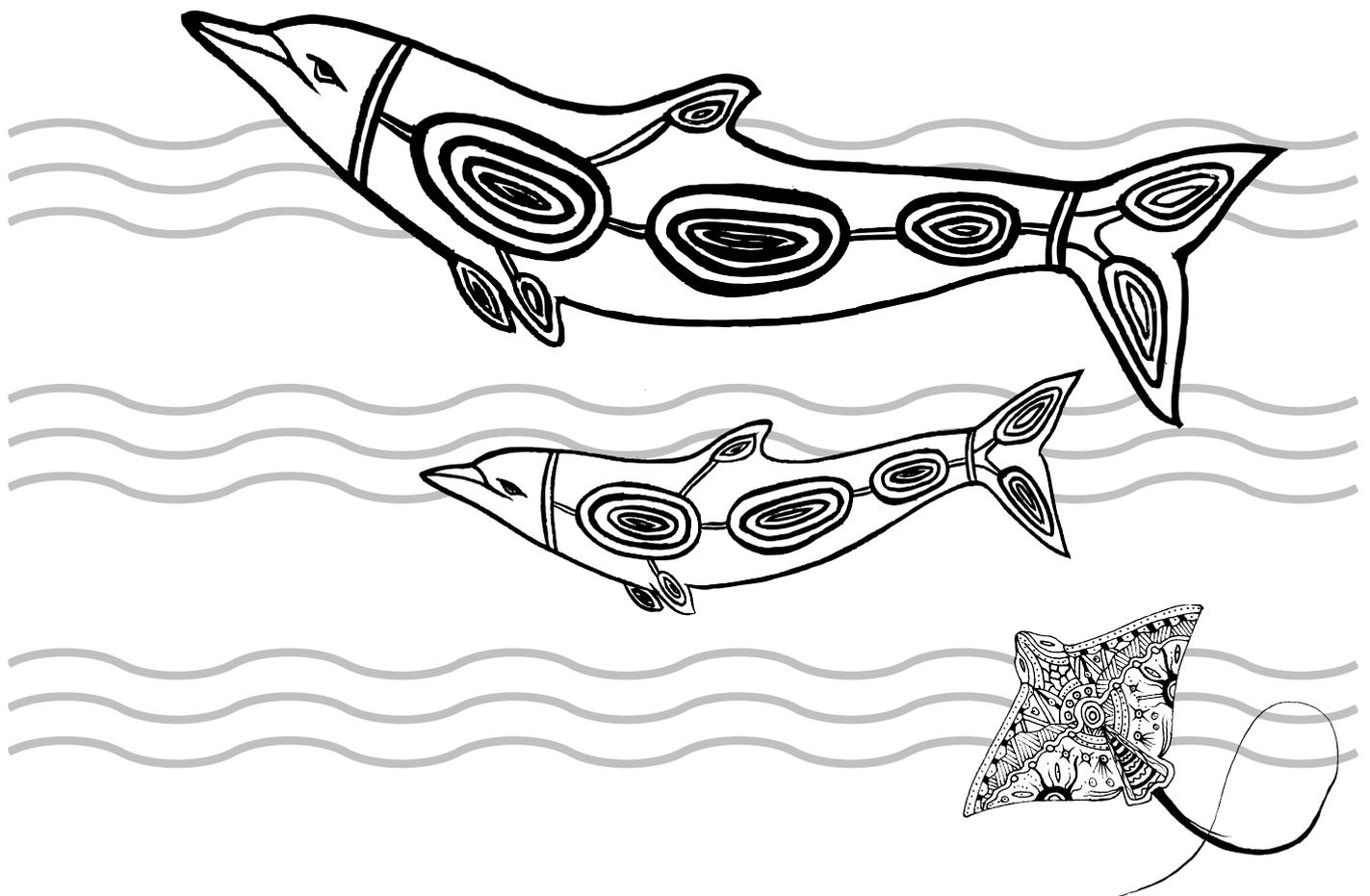
Shell middens reveal a lot about Aboriginal peoples' activities, both in the past and the present. The types of shells in a midden point to the kind of marine environment they were sourced from, and the time of year it is used. Each midden will have a different assortment of bones and shells, depending on what was abundant at that location. For example, estuarine middens may contain whelks, oysters, mussels, crabs and estuarine fish species, such as bream and flathead, whereas beach middens will mostly contain shellfish and fish bones from the rocky shore and beach. Middens range from thin scatters of shell to deep, layered deposits which have built up over time.

Middens may contain evidence of stoneworking and stone artefacts. Stone occasionally came from a very different area, showing that it was traded or transported. Records show that shell or bone artefacts, such as fish hooks or barbs, can be found in the upper layers of shell middens.



## Artworks

Aboriginal art is part of a living tradition, perhaps the oldest and most continuous in the world. Like all forms of cultural expression, Aboriginal art is constantly adapting and changing with time. Even the traditional arts that express spirituality, land and Dreaming reveal the individuality of each artist and their ancestral footprint. The entire continent of Australia is covered by an intricate web of Dreaming. These Dreamings provide the framework by which Indigenous people live, and the powers which permit life to continue. Each tribe has its own Dreaming, spirituality and creation that permeates through its art, dance and story. Contemporary art forms also tell new stories that reflect a range of subjects, including politics, traditional tales, cultural awareness and the identity of Aboriginal people today.



*"Each year, when the mullet were running, one of the tribal elders would go to a point overlooking the ocean. They would call out in Gumbaynggirr lingo for the dolphins to help round up all the fish and bring them in so the tribal people could feast."*

as told to Tony Hart, Gumbaynggirr artist, by his grandfather

Many Australians are familiar with Aboriginal rock art and paintings. Some drawings are pictures chalked onto rock surfaces using dry pigments. Paintings use wet pigments, and are made by stencilling, finger painting, or by using makeshift brushes such as chewed sticks. The pigments or paints used in rock art are usually naturally-occurring minerals (like ochre), which are generally the product of weathering, and are often found on rocky headlands. These “paints” can last a very long time. Pictures on rocks are an important part of Aboriginal peoples’ songs, stories and customs as they connect them to the land. Paintings and drawings can still be found where they are protected from direct rain and sun, such as rock caves, rock shelters and cliff faces. The National Parks and Wildlife Service conserves many rock art sites, working with local Aboriginal community groups. If you visit rock art sites, please be careful not to touch or damage the art, and to show respect for the sites and surrounding areas.

Sand painting is a common art form in coastal areas, where coloured sands are used to create a temporary picture which is then washed away by the next high tide.

## ***Gatherings and ceremonies***

Aboriginal people celebrate times when food is plentiful, often inviting neighbouring groups to join the feast, or holding gatherings and ceremonies for births, deaths and initiations into adulthood. Depending on the occasion, some gatherings and celebrations occur at particular sites, which may be for men only or women only, or only at a specific place and time of the year. These gatherings and ceremonies typically involve music, song and dance, and are important today for networking and meeting up with neighbouring groups and communities. Aboriginal people often decorate themselves for ceremonies and celebrations using locally found ochre.

Gatherings and ceremonies are also important for teaching and transferring knowledge from one generation to the next, and thus they continue to be held and practised today. This knowledge may include how to read nature’s signs to know when certain foods are abundant, how to determine the best tides, and how to use plants and animals for medicinal purposes.

Music and dance are a very important part of ceremonies, and are often used to tell traditional stories and Dreaming, which always have an educational purpose. Dreaming songs and song-lines tend to have a series of verses that tell the story of an ancestor spirit, and a particular event or place, or may link a series of places or experiences. Often a ceremonial dance will be performed with the song so as to act out the story. If you listen carefully, the song-lines will tell you what you would see if you made the same journey.

Dance is a unique aspect of ceremonies which is learnt and passed down from one generation to another. To dance is to be knowledgeable about the stories of the ancestral heroes, although dancing, unlike painting and singing, is learnt at an early age.

Sources: Arrawarra Sharing Culture <[www.arrawarraculture.com.au](http://www.arrawarraculture.com.au)>; Yarrowarra Aboriginal Cultural Centre; the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water; the Garby Elders; Uncle Milton Duroux; Tim Cowan; Dee Murphy; and Alison Williams.

# Historic and Cultural Heritage of the Lord Howe Island Marine Park

## Note to teachers

There is no known occupation of Lord Howe Island prior to European arrival, so the Sea Country module does not directly apply to this education kit. However, teaching the significance of sea country is important, so please see any of the mainland marine park Sea Country modules, and use the information and activities as appropriate for your situation.

The other marine park education kits can be found at: [www.mpa.nsw.gov.au](http://www.mpa.nsw.gov.au) or on the interactive CD. Please contact the Lord Howe Island Marine Park office on 6563 2359 for a copy of the CD.

## European arrival

Lord Howe Island was accidentally discovered in 1788 by Lieutenant Henry Ball of the HMS *Supply*, one of the 11 First Fleet ships. Lieutenant Ball named the Island after Earl Howe, the first Lord of the Admiralty from 1783 to 1788. The Island was uninhabited when inspected in March 1788, but the abundance of turtles and birds inspired Lieutenant Ball to establish the Island as a stopover point for supplies. Turtles were only used up until 1790 to supply the colony at Sydney; however, whaling established itself as an Island industry in the 1830s, with ships from America, the United Kingdom and Europe anchoring at the Island until a decline in whaling in the 1860s. The first European residents arrived in 1834 to establish a whaling supply station, and later the Island serviced a variety of trading ships.



## Turtle harvesting

In 1834, within three months of settlement, the NSW colony was struggling to survive. Faced with famine and disease, Governor Phillip was reluctant to divulge the exact location of Lord Howe Island to the departing nine vessels from the First Fleet, jealously guarding Lieutenant Ball's find as a provisioning port solely for Port Jackson. Concerned with the rapid advance of scurvy amongst their men, the captains of the three ships, *Charlotte*, *Lady Penhryn* and *Scarborough*, which were heading to China, were determined to find the Island and to secure urgently needed supplies. On 17th May 1788, the three ships found Lord Howe Island and an abundance of fish and birds. However, they were disappointed that the green turtles they had heard so much about had migrated for winter. Live turtles were valuable as a food resource as they could be carried on board for extended periods, thus providing fresh meat for part of their journey.

Lord Howe Island turtles were deemed necessary in the colony of Sydney's long fight for survival. Hunting parties landed on the Island and generally remained two to three days, the longest recorded stay being 15 days in January 1790. The quantity of turtles taken in a single expedition varied, and some did not survive the shipboard journey between Lord Howe Island, Norfolk Island and Port Jackson. The largest number of turtles captured was between 20 and 30, and this was by no means an easy feat. When the turtles



were awake and in deep water, they were impossible to catch, but those turtles sleeping on the surface of the sea or close to the beach were the ones targeted for “turning”, the term used for capturing the turtles. Harnesses were often secured to the limbs of larger turtles to prevent them from struggling against their captors as they were carried to the boats.

The turtles that the party “turned” weighed upwards of 150 pounds each, and were greatly sought after by the settlement in Sydney as food, for the purpose of reducing the scurvy which was prevalent amongst the inhabitants.

Subsequent voyages to the Island to secure supplies of turtles were only successful in capturing 18 turtles; four were left at Norfolk, three brought to Sydney, with the remainder dying during the voyage. During the next visit by the HMS *Supply* (in January 1790, bound for Norfolk Island), only three turtles were secured in 15 days, and it was decided that the settlement at Sydney could not depend on Lord Howe Island for turtle meat. Although parties had previously been left on the Island overnight, this was the first occasion on which it had been continuously occupied for such a period. Shortly after, settlements at Sydney and Norfolk commenced to flourish, scurvy disappeared, and the Lord Howe Island turtles were no longer a necessity.

### **Seabird and seabird egg harvesting**

Seabird and egg harvesting were carried out by the early settlers as the local bird species, particularly wedge-tailed shearwaters, or muttonbirds (below), were unafraid and easy to catch. Muttonbird eggs were harvested during a set harvest season, then divided among the locals, with many eggs and birds preserved for later eating. Muttonbird feathers were also utilised for bedding.



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## Fishing activities

In terms of food provision, fishing was also a vital activity for the local community. Early settlers used lines made from the kurrajong tree (also known as the cottonwood tree), with grubs or muttonbird flesh as bait. As boating developed, offshore fishing was possible, with bluefish (right) – now protected on the NSW coast – a prominent target species. A small shark fishing operation opened in 1930 for only a year, but other fishing operations supplied mainland Australia during World War II. During this time, Chinese traders were known to harvest sea cucumbers from the Island's waters.



## Shipwrecks and flying boats

Shipwrecks in the waters surrounding Lord Howe Island are plentiful. Fifteen shipwrecks have been positively identified and were surveyed in 2002 by the NSW Department of Planning, Heritage Office.

Flying boats (bottom left) serviced the Island from 1937 until 1974, when the airstrip was completed. The locals who travelled on them have very fond memories of the service which brought them closer to mainland Australia. The remains of a Catalina flying boat (bottom right) can be seen from a walk from Old Settlement Beach.

Lord Howe Island Marine Park has a rich and diverse European cultural heritage, and a wide variety of historically significant sites, many of which are accessible by walking and or snorkelling.



For more information, visit the Lord Howe Island Marine Park office or the Lord Howe Island Museum.



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