



Environment,
Climate Change
& Water



Aboriginal Women's Fishing in New South Wales

A thematic history

This publication was written by Alex Roberts, with input from Kath Schilling.

Cover photo: *Unloading a boatload of fish on the Murray River, c. 1910.*
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Aboriginal readers are warned that this publication contains the names and images of some Aboriginal people who are deceased.

Published by:

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ISBN 978 1 74232 557 6
DECCW 2010/131
May 2010

Printed on environmentally sustainable stock

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1 Introduction

Fishing is, and always has been, an essential part of life for Aboriginal communities throughout New South Wales. The thousands of midden sites along the state's coastline and riverbanks attest to thousands of years of Aboriginal fishing and shellfish collection both before and after the time of European contact.



Figure 1 Middens at Garie Beach, Royal National Park
Source: Central Culture and Heritage Division, DECCW



Figure 2 Midden at Peery Lake, Paroo Darling National Park
Source: Otto Rogge, DECCW

The continuity of Aboriginal fishing practices since 1788 has been driven by three key factors. First, fishing has been considered a cultural rather than merely subsistence or recreational activity by Aboriginal people. Second, fishing became a crucial means of survival when other traditional practices were undermined by colonisation. Third, and closely related to this point, it has been possible for Aboriginal people to continue their fishing traditions because waterways have remained relatively accessible, especially in comparison to land for hunting and resource gathering. Rivers and the coastline were not colonised as quickly as agricultural land and became relative safe havens for Aboriginal people, just as their resources provided a means of subsistence and of supplementing insufficient government rations.



Figure 3 Fish engravings at The Basin, Kuringai Chase National Park

Source: Michelle Cooper, DECCW

In recognition of the deep social, cultural and economic significance which fishing has always held for Aboriginal people, the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water NSW (DECCW) has commissioned a review of historical (documentary) evidence for Aboriginal fishing in New South Wales in the post-1788 period. In an attempt to help redress a relative neglect of focus on Aboriginal women's perspectives in cultural heritage studies generally, and in recognition of the particularly important role Aboriginal women have always played in fishing and shell-fish gathering, the focus of this research was to be on Aboriginal *women's* fishing specifically.

The outcomes of this review are the present document and an annotated bibliography which lists, alphabetically by author, a large number of secondary texts which discuss or contain observations of Aboriginal women fishing in New South Wales. The present document takes the form of a 'thematic history' which discusses some of the common themes relating to past and present Aboriginal fishing practices. It is hoped that together, these documents will encourage a broad community understanding of Aboriginal fishing practices in New South Wales and a philosophic and practical recognition of the traditional and cultural fishing heritage of Aboriginal people and communities, including their access to and use of the fisheries' resources.

Aboriginal women's fishing: the limitations of documentary evidence

Aboriginal fishing practices are complex and diverse. They vary significantly across New South Wales, between the coast and inland rivers, as well as across the state from north to south. We have been able to capture only some of this here, though we note that our forced reliance on the observations of Aboriginal fishing by non-Aboriginal people means descriptions are not necessarily culturally informed and provide only limited insight into the intricacies of Aboriginal fishing practices in New South Wales. However for the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in particular, this is the dominant type of evidence available. The memories of living Aboriginal people provide deeper insight into Aboriginal fishing practices of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and highlight the continuities between past and present fishing practices. Excerpts from some published oral interviews with Aboriginal fishers have been included where possible, but the best way to gain a better understanding of the nature and extent of recent Aboriginal fishing would be through a dedicated oral history project.

The attempt to focus solely on the role of women as fishers in Aboriginal communities in New South Wales exposes further limitations in the source material for the history of Aboriginal fishing since 1788. In particular, the communal nature of much Aboriginal fishing and the gender-neutral language of many observers and historians have made this task difficult. While we have focused on women's fishing practices where possible, we have also included references to Aboriginal fishing which is not gender-specific. In reading this document it will become obvious that early British observers were very careful to notice the gender differences in Aboriginal activities and the evidence clearly shows that in much of New South Wales women were the key fishers in Aboriginal communities in the eighteenth century. However, later accounts do not contain this attention to gender and references to Aboriginal people become generalised. This is possibly due to Aboriginal women staying away from male settlers, with the result that their activities were no longer recorded in the diaries of colonists. It may also have been that non-Aboriginal observers became less interested in recording the every-day activities of Aboriginal people and began to focus on rituals. Johanna Kijas also suggests that cultural assumptions about the gender division of labour – such as AP Elkin's assertion that 'the men did the hunting while the women gathered the vegetables' – may have clouded observers' abilities to properly interpret what they saw.¹

It is important to note, however, that a decline in the recording of the activities of Aboriginal women does not mean that women stopped carrying on activities such as fishing. Indeed, as this document shows, fishing and other marine harvesting was and continues to be an important activity for Aboriginal women as a means of subsistence, a means of maintaining health, a social and cultural activity, and a means of spiritual connection with the land and water.

Despite these limitations, we trust these two documents will be of value to anyone interested in learning about the nature and context of Aboriginal fishing practices in New South Wales. The annotated bibliography and thematic history should be taken not as an authoritative or final word on the subject, but as an introduction into the source material relating to Aboriginal women's fishing in New South Wales. It is hoped that people who are interested in learning more about this subject can use these documents as a starting point for further research. It should be acknowledged, though, that there is still much research to be done in this area. In addition to oral histories, it would be particularly useful to examine the records of the Aborigines Protection Board on the subject of fishing, which has not yet been done. At the end of this document is a list of locations of further sources which we hope future researchers will utilise in extending research into this topic. The best place to start is at your local library.

1. Johanna Kijas, *Accidental evidence: sourcing historical documents about Aboriginal women's fishing in New South Wales*, Department of Environment and Conservation, Sydney, unpublished, 2006, p.6

2 Cultural practices

All aspects of life in Aboriginal societies were and often still are shaped by spiritual beliefs derived from the Dreaming. The Dreaming is central to the existence of Aboriginal people: it shapes their values, beliefs and relationships with other people and the natural environment.¹ The Dreaming explains the beginning of life; it encompasses stories about ancestors who made the landscape, plants and animals, and whose spirits still inhabit the natural world today.² It is the natural world that provides the connection between the people and the Dreaming. Adele Pring explains that '[t]his relationship to the natural world carries responsibilities for its survival and continuity so that each person has special obligations to protect and preserve the spirit of the land and the life forms that are part of it.'³ Frances Bodkin, a senior knowledge holder in the D'harawal community, notes that 'for thousands upon thousands of years, the stories were used as a teaching tool, to impart to the youngest members of the clans the laws which governed the cultural behaviour of clan members'.⁴ In this sense the Dreaming provides the framework for living and is embedded in every aspect of daily life. It permeates song, dance, storytelling, the kinship system, and food gathering and eating practices.

All activities associated with fishing and consuming fish and other seafood, including seasonal practices and restrictions on who can eat certain fish, can be guided by these Dreaming stories. Early colonial observers, for example, noted that methods of cooking fish were governed by cultural beliefs. David Collins observed a belief among local Aboriginal people that fish should never be cooked at night or else the wind would not rise.⁵ In the late nineteenth century Robert Mathews, a colonial surveyor and amateur anthropologist,⁶ observed that the Wongaibon people of western New South Wales believed that:

*a spirit or wicked person named Gurugula hovers about in the clouds and in the air overhead. If he smells the fat of any animal, especially fish, being burnt in the fire at night, he gets very angry. In order not to provoke Gurugula, all cooking is done in the day time; and even then the people are careful not to let any fat burn during the process.*⁷

Cultural practices also dictated who could eat certain fish and when. When schools of fish first arrived for the season young girls and uninitiated boys were forbidden from eating these fish. According to Mathews, '[t]he bones of fish during this period must not be given to dogs, but must be burned, otherwise "schools" of fish would go elsewhere.'⁸

Some of these cultural practices specifically related to pregnant women and fish, the most widely recorded of which is related by Mathews:

*If a woman who is enceinte [pregnant] were to eat forbidden fish at such a time, the spirit of the unborn babe would go out of its mother's body and frighten the fish away. If a male infant, it would have a fishing spear – if a female a yamstick – and stand on the water at the entrance to a fishing pen, or in front of a net, and turn the fish back. The fish are more afraid of a male infant, on account of its carrying a spear, than of a female. Although these spirit children are invisible to human eyes, the old men know they are present by the movements of the fish, and at once suspect some woman of having broken the food rules.*⁹

It was not only believed that pregnant women eating school fish would result in this food source becoming scarce, but also that it might result in deformity of the unborn baby.¹⁰ The restrictions on which fish women could eat when pregnant meant that their choice of food was limited. According to Janet Mathews, in some areas 'they could not eat snapper, bream or groper and could only eat rock-cod, flathead and leather jacket.'¹¹

It is evident that most British colonists did not understand the complex relationship Aboriginal people had with the natural environment. For example, David Collins, who arrived with the First Fleet as deputy judge advocate¹², considered such rules about cooking and eating fish to be superstitions and denied their links to religion or spirituality. However archaeologist Val Attenbrow points out that such customs were indeed based on spiritual beliefs.¹³ Furthermore, these codes of behaviour were informed by a sense of responsibility to respect and protect the natural environment and the spirits of the land.

This respect for the land and its spirits continues to be observed by Aboriginal people today. There is a strong awareness of the presence of ancestors in the landscape, and many Aboriginal women recount their experiences of sensing the presence of their ancestors and communicating with them when fishing. This creates a strong bond between Aboriginal people and the Dreaming, and also with the land. A close friend of Grace Roberts recalls her experience at Coraki off the Richmond River, where she went fishing with her sister in law:

There's a bend in the river, a lagoon, we cast out our lines and wasn't catching any fish, so I called out in our lingo and then we caught fish. But if I didn't call out, or get some of the old ones to call out, she would sit there all day and not catch fish. It is strange but it is true. It is a spiritual thing with us.¹⁴

Grace's friend and her people had a strong and special connection with this fishing spot; she explains how this relationship works:

When we go up to the lagoon, if we can't catch any fish I can talk to the spirits. That lagoon belongs to our people, so I can talk to them.¹⁵

Aboriginal people have a strong spiritual relationship with their Country; it guides fishing practices, both by helping people to catch fish in their own Country, by warning people away from bad or dangerous fishing spots, and ensuring future fish stocks.

Cultural beliefs

Spiritual beliefs are expressed through stories or myths as well as through rituals, rules and customs. There are many Aboriginal stories associated with water and waterways in Australia, such as that about the creation of the Murray River, which forms the border between New South Wales and Victoria. According to local Aboriginal Dreaming stories, the Murray cod created the Murray River. There are regional variations to the stories but there is a similar general narrative. The Murray cod was said to have been chased from New South Wales to Lake Alexandrina in South Australia by the hunter of creation times, and during this chase the bends and banks of the Murray River were formed as the fish thrashed along.¹⁶



Figure 4 Murray cod

Source: G. Schmida, DPI

The Ngarrindjeri people of the Lower Murray River and Coorong areas of South Australia share this story about the creation of the Murray River, and another story explaining the abundance of fish in the Murray River. The Ngarrindjeri creation story was recorded in 1940 by anthropologist Professor Ronald Berndt from the late Albert Karloan, who was then aged seventy five years and was also the last surviving fully-initiated man of the Managri clan belonging to the Jaralde. Albert Karloan recounted the story:

The ancestral hero Ngurunderi paddled his bark canoe down the small creek which was later to become the River Murray. He had come from the Darling, following the giant Murray cod. As this fish swam, its tail swept aside the water, widening the river to the size it is today. When Ngurunderi paused to rest the cod swam on into the Lake, and he gave up hope of catching it. Then he thought of his wife's brother, Nepele. Quickly getting into his canoe he rowed to Bumondung, and from there called out to Nepele, who was sitting on a red cliff named Rawungung, Port McLeay. Nepele pushed out his canoe, rowed it to some shoals, and waited with spear in hand. The cod swam down towards Nepele, who speared it opposite Rawungung and placed it on a submerged sandbank there. When Ngurunderi arrived they cut up the cod into many small pieces, throwing each into the water and naming the fish it was to become. Finally they threw the remaining part into the lake saying 'keep on being Murray cod'.¹⁷

Fishing provided an opportunity for adults to teach children Dreamtime stories such as these. Indeed it was a chance to pass on general knowledge about rivers and coastal areas. Historian Heather Goodall, in her study of Aboriginal women and the rivers of north western New South Wales, found that many Aboriginal women in the area continue to use fishing as an opportunity to teach young children. Women take the children fishing on the river and teach them about the life of the river – the fish, birds, turtles and other wildlife. They also teach them the stories of the river: ‘the complex web of mythology about creation and the continued enlivening of the landscape through which the creative ancestors travelled.’¹⁸

Passing on knowledge to younger generations often took the form of teaching children songs or stories. In the 1960s, Janet Mathews recorded some songs taught to Aboriginal children about fishing. Percy Davis grew up in the Tuross River area and learnt a song that ‘calls on Gurrugumar, the westerly wind to blow and flatten the seas so the fish can be caught.’¹⁹ Mathews also recorded Aboriginal entertainer Jimmy Little Snr singing a song about ‘gathering oysters taught to him by his mother from Wallaga Lake.’²⁰

As well as creation stories and songs about fishing, children were often warned to stay away from dangerous places or situations through stories about bunyips and water dogs. These stories served to warn children away from deep waterholes and to discourage them from staying out at the river after dark, but this does not mean the stories were not based on authentic cultural beliefs about the spiritual world. Children were generally told that bunyips resided in the deepest part of water holes. When he was eight, Ken Upton, a descendant of Yellowmundee, was told by elders that a Bunyip lived in the deepest, coldest, darkest part of the waterhole, where it waited for ‘unwary children who went in the deep end of the pools’ and would capture them and take them to his underground lair forever.²¹ Stories of bunyips living in deep waterholes waiting to devour unwary children were especially prevalent along the Murray River, and according to environmental historian Paul Sinclair, many non-Aboriginal settlers and travellers in the nineteenth century suspected that bunyips did exist, as they encountered unknown animals and landscapes.²²

Stories about bunyips and water dogs endured into the twentieth century. Lola Dennis, whose family fished regularly as she was growing up on the Brewarrina Mission in north western New South Wales, remembers being told of and seeing a water dog at the local river:

*[T]he story goes that if you didn't get yourself home before sundown, then you would see this dog near the water. It was some sort of spirit it was. They would tell us about it, warn us and so we never stayed out after sundown.*²³

Alma Jean Sullivan of Bourke remembers seeing a spirit when she was ten, similar to the water dog described by Lola Dennis, sitting on the riverbank after dark staring at her and her parents; her people call it *Moodagutta*.²⁴ Mary Williams from Gundagai tells how these beliefs about water dogs and bunyips continue to shape her behaviour to this day:

*[E]ven today when the sun's going down, and my husband and I are fishing, we get out of there before sundown.*²⁵

Malgun

The Aboriginal custom of finger tip removal – *malgun*, observed in coastal New South Wales, especially in the Sydney region – was a source of curiosity for colonial observers. Initially the British were unsure why some women and girls in coastal areas were missing the first two joints of the little finger on the left hand. In the absence of an obvious explanation some colonists misinterpreted the custom and created their own explanations for the practice. For example, Captain Arthur Phillip, of the First Fleet, interpreted finger tip removal as follows:

It was now first observed by the Governor that the women in general had lost two joints from the little finger of the left hand. As these appeared to be all married women, he at first conjectured this privation to be part of the marriage ceremony; but going afterwards into a hut where were several women and children, he saw a girl of five or six years of age whose left hand was thus mutilated; and at the same time an old woman, and another who appeared to have had children, on both of whom all the fingers were perfect. Several instances were afterwards observed of women with child, and of others that were evidently wives, who had not lost the two joints, and of children from whom they had been cut. Whatever be the occasion of this mutilation, it is performed on females only.²⁶

Watkin Tench, another member of the First Fleet, also drew links between finger tip removal and marriage, but was confused to see young girls who had obviously undergone the custom:

The custom of cutting off the two lower joints of the little finger of the left hand, observed in the Society Islands, is found here among the women, who have for the most part undergone this amputation. Hitherto, we have not been able to trace out the cause of this usage. At first we supposed it to be peculiar to the married women, or those who had borne children; but this conclusion must have been erroneous, as we have no right to believe that celibacy prevails in any instance, and some of the oldest of the women are without this distinction; and girls of a very tender age are marked by it.²⁷

Although Phillip and Tench both initially assumed that finger tip removal was indicative of marriage, they were inquisitive enough to realise that their assumption was ill-founded. Other colonists, however, were less discerning and less willing to let go of their own cultural assumptions about which acts were important enough to be symbolised by permanent bodily markings. RE Bertrodano, who visited the Clarence River in 1864 taking notes for the London University, insisted that finger tip removal was in fact a reflection of a woman's marital status.²⁸ This interpretation of *malgun* is indicative of the fact that British observers were influenced by their own cultural assumptions when interpreting Indigenous customs; in this case assuming that marriage is an important act worthy of permanent marking.

By the time John Turnbull visited Sydney in 1800, most white settlers realised that *malgun* was related to fishing. Turnbull describes the practice:

Whilst the female child is in its infancy, they deprive it of the two first joints of the little finger of the right hand; the operation being effected by obstructing the circulation by means of a tight ligature; the dismembered part is thrown into the sea, that the child may be hereafter fortunate in fishing.²⁹

This custom of amputating a small portion of the little finger of young girls to mark them out as fishers was also practiced further north in the Port Stephens region, and was observed into the 1860s. William Scott, who grew up in Port Stephens and counted the 'lads of the tribe' as his 'playfellows',³⁰ explains how this practice was related to fishing:

*An Aboriginal woman, Fanny, who was a servant of our family for many years, was in her girlhood days dedicated to the art of fishing. When quite young, a ligature was tied about the first joint of her left finger very tightly, and being left there for a considerable time, the top portion mortified and, in time, fell off. This was carefully secured, taken out into the bay, and, with great solemnity, committed to the deep. The belief was that the fish would eat this part of the girl's finger, and would ever, thereafter, be attracted to the rest of the hand from which it had come.*³¹

According to Scott, at least one woman from each tribe was usually dedicated to fishing through the *malgun* operation. These women were not only defined as fishers, but also as the makers of fishing lines so that 'the virtue accruing from her innate powers over fish' were 'communicated to the lines she made.'³² Scott had no doubts that the *malgun* operation was effective, saying that Fanny 'was indeed a wonderfully lucky fisher.'³³

Turnbull and Scott's accounts of *malgun* demonstrate that women were in fact the designated fishers in Aboriginal societies in coastal New South Wales in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This directly challenges the stereotypical notion that men with spears were primarily responsible for fishing. Women were largely responsible for fishing in coastal New South Wales, and were designated as such both symbolically through the absence of two joints of their little finger, and practically, as this joint removal was said to aid fishing ability.

1. Val Attenbrow, *Sydney's Aboriginal past: investigating the archaeological and historical records*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2002, pp.126–7 and Adele Pring (ed.), *Women of the Centre*, Pascoe Publishing, Apollo Bay, 1990, pp.174–5
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16. Paul Sinclair, *The Murray: a river and its people*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 2001, p.122
17. Ronald M and Catherine H Berndt, *The world of the first Australians: an introduction to the traditional life of the Australian Aborigines*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1988, p.245

18. Heather Goodall, 'Gender, race and rivers: women and water in northwestern NSW', University of Technology, Sydney, a paper delivered to the Fluid Bonds symposium, National Institute for the Environment, ANU, 13 October 2003, p.7
19. Beryl Cruse, Liddy Stewart and Sue Norman, *Mutton fish: the surviving culture of Aboriginal people and abalone on the south coast of New South Wales*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2005, p.27
20. Beryl Cruse, Liddy Stewart and Sue Norman, *Mutton fish*, p.27
21. Val Attenbrow, *Sydney's Aboriginal past*, p.130
22. Paul Sinclair, *The Murray: a river and its people*, p.120
23. Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Walgett and Collarenebri*, DEC NSW, Sydney, 2006, p.86; see also Fay Sands' story, p.42
24. DEC NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Bourke*, DEC NSW, Sydney, 2005, pp.26–7
25. DEC NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Brungle and Tumut*, DEC NSW, Sydney, 2004, p.46
26. Captain Arthur Phillip, *The voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay*, London, 1789, pp.79–80
27. Watkin Tench, *Sydney's first four years: being a reprint of 'A narrative of the expedition to Botany Bay' and, 'A complete account of the settlement at Port Jackson'*, Library of Australian History in association with the Royal Australian Historical Society, Sydney, 1979, pp.49–50
28. RE Bertrodano, 'Description of an Aboriginal tribe' in Isabel McBryde (ed.), *Records of times past: ethnohistorical essays on the culture and ecology of the New England tribes*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1788, p.283
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30. William Scott, *The Port Stephens blacks: recollections of William Scott*, Chronicle, Dungog NSW, 1929, p.5
31. William Scott, *The Port Stephens blacks*, pp.7–8
32. William Scott, *The Port Stephens blacks*, p.8
33. William Scott, *The Port Stephens blacks*, p.8

3 Fish and seasons

There was a huge variety of fish in the Sydney region in the eighteenth century. Although British colonists rarely identified the specific fish species they saw, possibly because they didn't have the knowledge base to do so, there are some rare references to bream and mullet being caught in the Sydney region. William Bradley was one of the few colonists to write a detailed description of fish species. He noted that Aboriginal women caught 'jew fish, snapper, mullet, mackerel, whiting, dory, rock cod and leatherjackets, although sharks and stingrays were always thrown back.'¹

Luke Godwin and Howard Creamer's archaeological and ethnographic study of Aboriginal people in the area around Yamba on the north coast of New South Wales listed a number of fish as part of the staple diet of local Aboriginal people prior to 'white settlement in the area', including mullet, bream, flathead, flounder, whiting, jewfish, tailor, swallow tail, cobra worms, pipis, oysters, crabs, swans eggs and beach worms (for bait).² Further inland, yellow-bellies, cod and catfish were in great abundance for Aboriginal people living on freshwater and muddy rivers.



Figure 5 Mangrove crab
Source: A. Gosling, WetlandCare Australia

Despite the abundance of fish and fish species, Aboriginal people did not and do not limit their consumption of marine species to fish alone; shellfish such as pipis, cockles, oysters and muttonfish (abalone), turtles (and their eggs), eels, crayfish, yabbies, plus many other saltwater and freshwater species formed important parts of Aboriginal diets and cultural practices, and where possible, continue to do so.

Turtles were a particularly important freshwater food which were abundant in rivers in central New South Wales in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and could be caught fairly easily by children. Evelyn Powell recalls that the Macquarie River was 'chockablock' full of fish when she grew up there in the 1930s and '40s, and that 'we'd cook up and eat' both long-necked and short-necked turtles.³ Ann Flanders-Edwards recalls diving for turtles as a child on the Nambucca River:

When I was young, we lived along the riverbank. We were champion swimmers. If we saw a turtle we'd just dive in and get it, if it was lunchtime and if we were hungry, we'd just cook it up, right there by the river.⁴

Archaeologist Val Attenbrow also notes that eels and freshwater mussels were 'widely eaten in the hinterland'.⁵ Colonial author and naval surgeon Peter Cunningham wrote of Aboriginal people who waded into rivers during dry summers 'and actually drag out cartloads ... including immense eels'. Some of the women interviewed for the DECCW's Aboriginal Women's Heritage series also recalled eating eels freshly caught from their local rivers.

Grace Coombs, who grew up in the Nowra area, recalled that it was her mum who fished for freshwater eels: 'She'd bring them home, clean them and cook them up; they were like fish, white fish'.⁶ Vilma Whaddy Moylan and Jessie Williams, both born on Stuart Island, also talked of regularly eating eels and catfish from the Nambucca River in northern New South Wales when they were younger and the river was healthier.⁷



Figure 6 Eastern long-necked turtle
Source: R. Nicolai, DECCW

Aboriginal names for fish species

According to William Scott, the Aboriginal people of the Port Stephens area called fish 'muckeroo'.⁸ He also recorded the specific names of other species:

<i>beerah</i>	<i>crab</i>	<i>peewah</i>	<i>mullet</i>
<i>billorn</i>	<i>stingray</i>	<i>punnoong</i>	<i>shrimp</i>
<i>coopere</i>	<i>bream</i>	<i>tarrahwarng</i>	<i>flathead</i>
<i>cooprar</i>	<i>porpoise</i>	<i>toonang</i>	<i>eel</i>
<i>coorahcumarn</i>	<i>turtle</i>	<i>toorarcle</i>	<i>shark</i>
<i>kirrepoontoo</i>	<i>torpedo-fish</i>	<i>turrahwurrah</i>	<i>jew-fish</i>
<i>kurrangcum</i>	<i>snapper</i>	<i>wirrah</i>	<i>cray-fish</i>
<i>nonnung</i>	<i>oysters</i>		

There were, however, significant language differences throughout New South Wales, so the vocabulary of Aboriginal people in the Sydney region as it related to fish names differed to that of those from Port Stephens. Val Attenbrow has collated a list of Aboriginal names for different species of fish as recorded by early British colonists in the Sydney region:

<i>badoberong</i>	<i>small tadpole-like fish</i>
<i>barong</i>	<i>prince fish</i>
<i>cagone</i>	<i>toad fish (poisonous)</i>
<i>cowerre</i>	<i>large flathead</i>
<i>karooma</i>	<i>black mackerel</i>
<i>maromera</i>	<i>zebra fish</i>
<i>mullinagul</i>	<i>small flathead</i>
<i>murraynaugul</i>	<i>flathead</i>
<i>waaragal</i>	<i>mackerel</i>
<i>wallumai</i>	<i>snapper</i>
<i>waradiel</i>	<i>large mullet⁹</i>

These lists reflect both language differences between Aboriginal groups in New South Wales and the varying availability of different fish species in different regions of the state.



Figure 7 Long-finned eel
Source: G. Schmida, DPI

Fishing seasons

As well as noting the variety of fish species available in New South Wales, British settlers were struck by the abundance of fish, and the fact that fishing was such a significant subsistence activity for the Aboriginal population. Most British colonists' observations of Aboriginal fishing seasons recorded that although Aboriginal people fished and collected shellfish all year round, they fished more in summer than in winter. Archaeologist Sharon Sullivan found that early settler accounts for the Richmond–Tweed area of the north coast all suggest that coastal Aboriginal people 'moved inland in winter, living on rain-forest products, and returned to the coast in spring when the fish shoals became plentiful.'¹⁰ Other evidence, however, indicates that for many coastal Aboriginal communities in New South Wales the winter months were in fact the best fishing months, especially in the warmer waters of the north coast. For example, it has been recorded that on the far north coast, from about April to late September, 'the sea mullet migrates in enormous shoals northward along the beaches.'¹¹ Due to the fact that the sea mullet migrated so close to the shore, it was relatively easy to catch, and was a significant food source during the winter months for those Aboriginal communities on the north coast. Bream were also abundant up north in the winter months. Laurie Ferguson of Yamba remembers that 'bream were caught in the trap at Angourie' and 'winter was the best time for this fish.'¹²

From their observations of the ease with which Aboriginal women caught fish in Sydney, early British colonists assumed that fish could be easily obtained. However, it took the new settlers a long time to understand the fishing seasons in New South Wales; to know which times of year certain fish migrate along the coastline and when they were most abundant. Initially, members of the First Fleet experienced much frustration due to their lack of such knowledge and their consequent inability to catch fish. Watkin Tench, who arrived on the First Fleet, lamented what he considered to be the unpredictability of fishing in Port Jackson, and complained that he spent all night fishing for little result. He said that he and other 'professed fishermen' had 'never fished in a country where success was so precarious and uncertain.'¹³ Evidently the early British colonists struggled because of their lack of knowledge of the local fisheries.

In contrast, it is clear from both historical accounts and contemporary oral histories that Aboriginal people had and continue to have a thorough understanding and knowledge of the fishing seasons. At Port Stephens in the late nineteenth century, William Scott observed: 'By some unerring instinct the blacks knew within a day when the first of the great shoals [of sea mullet] would appear through the heads.'¹⁴ Further north, Grace Roberts and other local Aboriginal people continued to have an intimate relationship with the Richmond River, knowing which fish were plentiful according to seasonal variations in plant life. Roberts' biographer Alice Becker explains:

*The river was and still is a very happy place for these people and they have a rare knowledge of the fishing in the district. They watch the flowers: when the white ti tree is in full bloom the dogfish are biting; it is the flowers that tell when the turtles are fat and plentiful; and when certain clouds appear in the sky it is time for bream ...*¹⁵

Frances Bodkin's compilation of D'harawal stories and knowledge demonstrates the way in which D'harawal people used seasonal indicators to guide their fishing practices. The appearance of the 'golden yellow flowers' of the Kai'arrewan (*Acacia binervia*), for example, indicated that fish would be running in the rivers, 'and on moonless nights the tidal rivers will echo with the delighted cries of the People as they catch the delicious prawns which inhabit the shallows'.¹⁶ In contrast, the flowering of Burringoa (*Eucalyptus tereticornis*), which signifies the coming of cold weather, indicates 'that it is a time when the people are not permitted to eat shellfish such as prawns, crabs, yabbies, mussels, pipis, lobsters or periwinkles'.¹⁷ The buds of the waratah and first appearances of flying foxes in the skies indicate the lifting of these restrictions, and 'feasting on the beaches and river banks occurs'.¹⁸



Figure 8 Yabby at Urumbilum River, Bindarri National Park
Source: J. Turbill

The seasonal arrival of certain fish species also prompted large gatherings of Aboriginal people from across different regions, and could be an occasion for celebrations. Ronald Heron, from the lower Clarence Valley described the way Green Point turned into a 'meeting point' for people from across the region when the mullet were running:

*It would be nearly like the main Christmas week ... They'd have parties of men out getting kangaroos. You'd have another party just concentrating on fishing, you'd have a group of women getting yams etc.*¹⁹

Seasonal knowledge about fish has been noted as the particular province of women in the Tweed Valley, where women 'knew the time of the year by changes in plants. For example, when certain plants were in flower, they knew the crabs would be fat or that the mullet would be running'.²⁰ This expert knowledge of fishing seasons was part of Aboriginal peoples' intimate relationship with the natural environment they inhabited and has continued as knowledge is passed on to younger generations.

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4 Fishing methods and equipment

Aboriginal people in New South Wales used a variety of fishing methods and equipment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many of which continued into the twentieth century and were adapted or altered to incorporate new technologies and materials introduced with colonisation.

Prior to and shortly after 1788 women were the main fishers along the Sydney coast, where they caught fish with hooks and lines. The prominence of Aboriginal women in fishing was widely recorded in British accounts of life in Port Jackson. These accounts also noted the gendered differences in fishing methods: women fished with hook and line, men fished with spears.¹ According to Sandra Bowdler, archaeological evidence suggests that Aboriginal women became increasingly involved in fishing after the introduction of the shell hook some 600 years ago.² By the time the First Fleet arrived in 1788 women were the main fishers in Aboriginal societies in the Sydney region.

A variety of fishing techniques

The dominant image of Aboriginal fishing projected in British and European art and literature was, and often still is, a man catching fish with a spear. In the Port Jackson area men generally fished with spears from the shore or from a canoe. In the Sydney region fishing spears were called 'mooting' or 'mootang' by Aboriginal people, and 'fizz gigs' by the British.



Figure 9 Aboriginal children in canoe, Port Macquarie, 1905

Source: Thomas Dick, Bicentennial Copying Project, State Library of NSW

Women both made and fished with lines and hooks. This method was not used everywhere in New South Wales, but was employed from the mid-north coast, including Port Stephens and the Hunter region, down to the south coast.³ Fishing lines were usually made out of young kurrajong trees by the designated fisherwomen. Writing in 1929, William Scott described how the Aboriginal women of Port Stephens made their fishing lines:

*The bark would be stripped carefully from the tree and soaked in water until the outer portions could be readily scraped off with a shell. This left a white, flax-like fibre, very tough and strong. The women twisted this fibre to the required thickness and length by rolling it on the front part of the thigh with the hands.*⁴

According to Scott, these fishing lines were incredibly strong and 'capable of landing the heaviest of edible fish.'⁵

Shiny crescent-shaped lures or hooks made from pieces of shell were usually attached to the fishing line. Women were also responsible for making these shell fish hooks. William Bradley described the way fish hooks were made in Broken Bay in the late 1700s:

*One of the women made a fishing hook while we were by her, from the inside of what is commonly called the pearl oyster shell, by rubbing it down on the rocks until thin enough and then cut it circular with another, shape the hook with a sharp point rather bent it and not bearded or barbed.*⁶

Many shell fish hooks and their remains have been found by archaeologists along the NSW coastline between Port Stephens in the north and the Victorian border in the south. According to archaeological evidence the fish hooks used along the NSW coast varied in size from about 13 to 50 mm, most of them having 'small notches on the shank end for securing the line.'⁷

Women in New South Wales generally fished with hooks and lines while seated in canoes. Canoes were a source of great interest for early British settlers, who frequently commented on them in their diaries. For example, GB Worgan, a surgeon who arrived with the First Fleet, wrote that each 'tribe', depending on its size, had six, eight or ten canoes, and that they were mainly used by women.⁸ Indeed, women were seen fishing in canoes outside the heads of the estuaries – that is, between Port Jackson and Broken Bay – as well as inside the harbours. Many British descriptions of canoes convey a sense of awe and disbelief that what they regarded as crude vessels were so seaworthy and effective.

Canoes were generally made from bark that was softened and shaped by the use of fire and then tied together at the ends. Stays were placed across either end of the canoe so that it maintained its shape. 'A hearth of clay was made in the centre for cooking freshly caught fish and a source of warmth and light at night.'⁹ Canoes were both a means of transport, and an essential piece of equipment for Aboriginal fisherwomen, especially at times of year when fish were not abundant, as they allowed women to fish in the deeper waters away from the shoreline.

Another traditional Aboriginal fishing method, usually utilised in freshwater rivers or billabongs, was to poison fish using the leaves of a number of local wattle species (*Acacia implexa* and *Acacia longifolia*).¹⁰ In the mid-nineteenth century, John Henderson, a squatter in the Macleay district, reported that Aboriginal people used what he called 'smart weed' to stupefy fish in small pools.¹¹ In 1901 it was recorded in the journal *Science of Man* that the Coombangaree people on the north coast caught fish in freshwater by poisoning it. There was a detailed description of this practice:

*A weed called Bumbil Bumbil is collected and tied into small bundles. With a small bunch in each hand they dived under water and rubbed them together. This was quickly repeated. The poison from the weed so affected the fish by making their eyes smart so much that they could hardly see, and they would shortly after float to the top of the water where the Aborigines would spear and catch them.*¹²

Another way of stupefying fish was to beat together the leaves from a tree called 'Cutiga' until a lather was formed, and then dive under water and rub it together as with the Bumbil Bumbil weed, whereupon the fish would gradually float to the surface.¹³ These poisoning methods had no effect on the edibility of the fish.

The collection of shellfish also provided a crucial source of food in Aboriginal societies and was usually done by women. Both fresh and saltwater crustaceans were collected either by diving for them or by feeling for them with one's toes in the mud or sand. These collection techniques continue to be passed on to younger generations and utilised today. Evelyn Crawford, a Baarkanji woman, describes the way she and her ancestors in western New South Wales caught mussels in the creek:

*We'd go into the shallow water, walk around in the mud and we'd feel the mussels, hard and lumpy. They travel in a line, five or six one behind the other. We'd dive down, pull 'em up and chuck 'em on the bank. The smallest kids heaped them up ready to take home.*¹⁴

The collection of shellfish was an activity often carried out by groups of women or children. It was one of the many instances of communal fishing in Aboriginal societies.

Communal fishing

Fishing was usually a communal activity when traps and weirs were used. Net fishing was often communal too. Whole families, or groups of families – men, women and children – banded together to catch large quantities of fish using these methods. Fish were often caught in traps or nets in order to provide food for entire families or communities. For example, in the 1830s, the former convict Obed West saw Aboriginal people using weirs made of sticks and brushes at Mullet Creek near Lake Illawarra to trap fish for a large gathering.¹⁵



Figure 10 Aboriginal fish traps made from rocks, Darling River, 1938
Source: La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria



Figure 11 Fish trap at Arrawarra
Source: Caroline Ford, DECCW

Fish traps or weirs were used both in rivers and on the coast. The complex of stone traps in the Darling River at Brewarrina in north-western New South Wales is probably the best surviving example of fish traps remaining in the state. This series of traps is very old and has been constructed so that the fish are caught, or trapped, as the flood waters recede. According to zoologist Theodore Roughley, '[s]everal tribes had the right of fishing in this dam, though each tribe was strictly forbidden to take fish from any portion not allotted to it. The principal fish caught were Murray cod, callop, silver perch and freshwater catfish. They were recovered from the traps either by hand, net or spear, and during times of flood they were dived for.'¹⁶



Figure 12 Silver perch

Source: G. Schmida, DPI

Robert Mathews encountered many fish traps during his travels in New South Wales and Victoria in the nineteenth century, and described the way they generally functioned:

*These are made by tying together bundles of tea-tree, and laying them close together like a wall across a creek or narrow shallow arm of the sea. These walls or barricades are slightly above the surface of the water. A gap or gateway is left in mid stream so that the fish can pass through, and when a sufficient number are enclosed, the gateway is blocked off by other bundles of tea-tree.'*¹⁷

In many instances Aboriginal people combined several techniques in their pursuit of fish. Lancelot Threlkeld, a missionary in the Hunter region in the 1820s and '30s, described the way 'sprigs of bushes' were laid out in a 'zig-zag' pattern across the streams, 'leaving an interval at the point of every angle where the men stand with their nets to catch what others frighten towards them by splashing in the water.'¹⁸

In rivers and waterholes, an alternative to gathering fish in nets after they had been trapped was to trawl the river with a large net. Fishing nets in the lower Darling area 'had reed floats and were weighted at the bottom with lumps of fired clay. The entire community dragged them through waterholes' to catch various types of fish.¹⁹ Such fishing nets, although used for communal fishing, were usually made by women using a method similar to that for fishing lines.²⁰ Net fishing in New South Wales was engaged in by both men and women, but in other parts of Australia, such as the Darwin area and western Cape York, fishing with nets was a predominately female pursuit.²¹

Another more or less communal fishing method, which was also female dominated, involved calling on porpoises to herd schools of fish into the shallows so that they could be speared or netted. Fay Pattison, who grew up on the Forster Reserve, recalled being told that in the Forster–Tuncurry area 'Aborigines years ago used to talk to the porpoise in the lingo and tell them to round the fish up and they'd bring the fish in.'²² Writing in the 1980s, Ruby Langford recalled an experience from her childhood in the 1940s when, one Christmas, she and other Aboriginal people from Casino had gone to camp on the coast at Yamba:

Early one morning I was walking along the beach and again I heard the woman singing, chanting on high notes, calling out. It was someone from the Maclean mob at Yamba, they said. In a while I could see her, quite an old woman, very black, standing on top of the cliff.

I walked along listening to my feet squeaking in the sand and the woman singing above me. A fisherman who'd come from the mission near our camp walked past me and I asked him what the woman was doing. He said she was calling the porpoises in, she did it every day during the holidays.²³

Communal fishing methods are not a thing of the past. They continued to be employed by Aboriginal communities into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Fishing traps at Point Plomer in the Macleay River Valley were used regularly for communal fishing up until the 1960s.²⁴ Many women in the Port Stephens area were taught to make traps to catch fish when they were children. Worimi woman Carol Ridgeway Bissett remembers 'when we were kids we'd make our own traps, we'd put them out around there (Soldiers Point) and the next morning when we went back we'd have a feed of leatherjackets.'²⁵ Inland at Wagga Wagga, Pat Dacey remembers catching lots of fish with nets in the channels on the outskirts of town in the 1950s and '60s.²⁶ In some Aboriginal communities, such as those on the south coast, communal fishing methods were turned into commercial practices; whole families used nets to catch fish and worked together to dive for and gather abalone to trade and sell.²⁷

The impact of European settlement on Aboriginal fishing techniques

British settlers, particularly Governor Macquarie in the period 1810 to 1822, tried to encourage Aboriginal communities to enter into trading ventures by providing them with western-style fishing nets and boats. Despite this encouragement to adopt new fishing techniques, Aboriginal people continued to use many of their traditional fishing techniques and equipment. Even in the Sydney area, where the impact of the arrival of the First Fleet was most immediately felt, and where the new settlement quickly dispossessed Aboriginal communities of their land and disrupted their traditional lifestyle, Aboriginal people continued to fish using traditional equipment and techniques. Aboriginal people in the Sydney region, especially on the Cooks River, continued to fish with spears as late as the mid-1830s. Visitors to the colony observed '[t]he use of bark canoes and the practice of having a small fire in the canoes when people were out fishing' up until the 1840s.²⁸

As British settlement expanded, areas of land and water that were accessible to the Indigenous inhabitants became smaller, traditional food sources were removed through land clearance, and Aboriginal people in the Sydney region were increasingly forced to engage with the non-Indigenous society and its economy.²⁹ Fishing was one of the few pre-contact practices that Aboriginal people could continue to pursue for subsistence, and it also offered an avenue for entry into the introduced economy: fish could be sold, or traded for other items of food, clothing or equipment. Denis Byrne and Maria Nugent note the importance of coasts and waterways for Aboriginal people in the Manning Valley and Forster areas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

In a period in which Aboriginal people were increasingly restricted in their movements on land, and increasingly subject to white surveillance there, the waterways of the coast, the rivers, and lakes provided greater scope for freedom of movement. The waterways of the lower Manning had been the highways for white settler movements in the mid-nineteenth century, but as the area's road network expanded these same waterways receded into the background of settler existence. Frequented mainly by commercial fishermen and oyster farmers, to a certain extent they became a refuge for Aboriginal people ...

Crown water reserves (100 feet wide) along the edges of some parts of the river provided access to the river bank for Aboriginal people to moor their fishing boats and dry their nets on the wooden racks they constructed.³⁰

In the late nineteenth century, the Aborigines Protection Board also assisted some Aboriginal fishers by providing them with boats and fishing gear, on both the north and south coasts.³¹ There is some suggestion that government attempts to encourage Aboriginal men to pursue fishing as a commercial venture by giving them boats, fishing nets and fishing lines led to a decline in the role of women as the fishers in Aboriginal communities. It is possible that the British assumption that fishing was a male activity undermined the role of women as fishers in Aboriginal society to some extent, but certainly did not stop women fishing altogether.

Despite some assistance from the Aborigines Protection Board, in the early to mid- twentieth century many Aboriginal people who lived on missions and reserves did not have access to conventional or traditional fishing equipment. In these circumstances, many women recall constructing innovative fish hooks, lines and sinkers when fishing as children. Gladys Walford of Walgett recalls making hooks out of safety pins,³² while Eileen Peters remembers fishing at Angledool and Brewarrina using sinkers made from mud or old bolts.³³ Joyce Hampton's family used similar tools when fishing the Darling River near Menindee in the 1930s:

We mainly caught yellow-belly and catfish. We used a cord type of line. You had to buy it. It wasn't like today's fishing line. We used old car bolts and things like that for sinkers. And we'd get the corks off wine bottles to use as our floats.³⁴

Isabel Flick also remembers fishing as a child on the Barwon River, where people would 'make their own lines out of anything – especially the set lines, whatever they could find they'd fix up and make their own hooks out of wire.' Furthermore, she recalls that instead of nets, 'some of the older women got into the streams and actually caught fish in their dresses. Our Granny did that, and Old Granny Kate – they'd do those kind of things, you know'.³⁵

Such techniques demonstrate the adaptive nature of Aboriginal fishing since 1788. Aboriginal fishers continue to combine traditional knowledge and techniques with 'modern' methods and equipment to maximise their catch.

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5 Cooking and eating fish

Fish and other types of seafood, especially oysters and pipis, made up an important part of the diet of Aboriginal people living in the Sydney region and along the waterways and coast of New South Wales. Early observers, who were located predominately in the Sydney region, believed that fish was the dietary staple for coastal Aboriginal people.¹ This seems to have been the case along the entire coastline of the state. Clement Hodgkinson, who surveyed the Macleay River region in northern New South Wales for the government between 1840 and 1842, observed the importance of fish in the diet of local Aboriginal people.² Fish and seafood continued to be a crucial part of the diet of Indigenous Australians into the twentieth century, when it was a vital supplement to mission rations.

Ways of cooking fish and shellfish

Watkin Tench, who travelled to Australia with the First Fleet, observed the way the Aboriginal people of the Sydney region prepared fish for eating:

They begin by throwing the fish, exactly in the state in which it came from the water, on the fire. When it has become a little warmed they take it off, rub away the scales, and then peel off with their teeth the surface, which they find done, and eat. Now, and not before, they gut it; but if the fish be a mullet, or any other which has a fatty substance about the intestines, they carefully guard that part, and esteem it a delicacy. The cooking is now completed, by the remaining part being laid on the fire until it be sufficiently done.³

This cooking method described by Tench, and also observed by other British colonists, endured in various forms into the next century. For example, William Scott, who grew up and lived in the Port Stephens region between 1844 and 1873, described a similar method of gutting and cooking fish in the fire, which he considered a good method 'for the natural juices were preserved within the fish, and the flesh tasted better than when treated any other way.'⁴

In the twentieth century, Aboriginal people continued the tradition of cooking fish and shellfish as soon as it was caught on the river bank or beach. Many Aboriginal women from across New South Wales remember cooking fish and shellfish on river banks and beaches as soon as it was caught. Amy Marshall Jarrett from Bellingen recalls going fishing with her uncle, who cooked the fish for them to eat: 'As soon as we'd catch a feed, he'd make a fire, shove a stick through the mullet's mouth and shove it over the coals. He'd just put it on leaves or bark and just skin it.'⁵ Rose Fernando from Collarenebri also has childhood memories of cooking fish on the river bank immediately after catching it. They would 'roll them up in mud and stick them in the fire.'⁶ Shellfish were also cooked in this way. Muriel Davis used to 'take a sheet of tin down to the beach when digging for pipis and I would light a fire on the beach, put the tin on fire and cook the pipis straight on the sand.'⁷ June Smith, who used to go diving for mussels in the Warrego River in north-western New South Wales, recounts that she would 'cook them right there on the river bank.'⁸ These oral recollections show just how widespread the practice of cooking fish and shellfish immediately on an open fire continued to be in the twentieth century. It occurred in the north and south of New South Wales, and on rivers as well as in coastal areas.

One of the reasons for cooking fish where and when it was caught was to return the remains to Country and show respect for Country. This is clearly a significant influence on Aboriginal cooking practices. Anthropologist Debra Rose Bird explains: 'The food that people get when they go hunting is consumed, and the remains are handled with respect. When Nancy goes fishing, she cooks the fish on the coals, and then she burns the bones.' Nancy explains that this is because 'it come from that Country, so we leave 'im there, burn 'im up.'⁹

Aboriginal children were taught to cook fish in this way. Lola Murray of Walgett recalls:

My grandfather taught me how to cook fish ... he put the fish in gum leaves, then he put it on the coals in the fire and he covered it up with ashes. Another time he covered the fish in mud then put that in the ashes. It bakes it you see. The mud goes hard and when you pull the mud off, the scales and all come away and you're just left with the flesh.¹⁰

The traditional Aboriginal method of cooking fish in bark, leaves or mud on the fire was gradually adapted as new cooking equipment became available. Barry Morris has examined the introduction of new cooking materials and implements into Aboriginal life, a process he calls 'creative bricolage'.¹¹ Morris argues that in the area of cooking it was not the cooking methods that changed with colonisation, but rather the materials used. Traditional Aboriginal methods of cooking fish in the ashes or toasting fish on a 'baral' – a grill-like structure of sticks above a fire – were altered with the introduction of new materials. Morris says that people started using 'what they call grid iron; wire which was bent to form a grill to be placed on sticks, and in later years it was the shelves of fridges (discarded refrigerators)'.¹² June Smith, who grew up north of Bourke, remembers her mother incorporating western equipment into traditional cooking practices: 'my old mother she used to get the gum leaves, put them on the coals and put the gridiron over the top of them, then whatever she's cooking went on top of that, even fish.'¹³

Smoking and drying fish

Although cooking fish fresh from the water was common, and usually the preferred method, there was often the necessity of preserving fish for later use. In mid-1788, William Bradley, a naval officer who arrived with the First Fleet, recorded in his diary that he saw a large group of Aboriginal people near Botany Bay who had 'a quantity of dried fish with them'.¹⁴ Archaeologist Val Attenbrow speculates that drying fish was probably a means of storing it for times of scarcity, although it is unknown whether it was a routine means of storing food for winter. There is little written historical evidence that drying fish was a common practice in the Sydney region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, indeed Bradley's description is prefaced with the information that this was the only time he had observed the practice.¹⁵

While the drying of fish may not have been widely observed by the British in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there is much evidence to suggest that the practice continued and was widespread among Aboriginal communities in the mid-twentieth century. Many women from the Port Stephens region recall that their parents smoked fish for winter storage, and there is also some evidence that this occurred at Wreck Bay on the south coast of New South Wales, where fish was often 'filleted, smoked and stored in the chimney until needed'.¹⁶ Oral evidence suggests that smoking fish was a means of ensuring that families had enough food to sustain them through the winter months when fresh fish were not always readily available. It also reveals that smoking fish was often an activity in which all family members helped out (supported by Bradley's description of a large group of Aboriginal people gathering to smoke fish). Val Merrick from Port Stephens recalls:

My dad used to have a smoke hut – to smoke the fish, mainly mullet. And it was lovely too. My brothers and everyone helped with the smoking. We had to clean the fish and hang it up for so many days, then salt it down. That got us through the winter.¹⁷

Similarly, Gwen Russell, who also grew up in the Port Stephens region, describes how her family smoked mullet for the winter:

You just open them up and take out all the gut. Salt them down with that strong salt, that rock salt, and let it sit for a while. After awhile you hang them up and let all the salt drip off, then you hang them in the open fireplace for smoking. And that would see the family through the winter. We had more than enough fish for winter and it would never go off because smoking protects it. My grandmother loved the mullet and the taylor; she used to do it like that, (smoking it).¹⁸

Rather than smoking fish in the chimney, Carol Ridgeway Bissett, also of Port Stephens, remembers her father 'drying fish over the open fire. Smoking it so that we could have fish at Easter time and all through the winter.'¹⁹

It is probable that the practice of smoking fish became more common in Aboriginal communities, such as that at Port Stephens, during the mid-twentieth century both because storing fish on a long term basis became more viable with the adoption of houses with chimneys or other storage spaces, and because it was necessary for Aboriginal people to supplement their diet with wild food resources because government rations were inadequate. Indeed, Carol Ridgeway Bissett says that smoking fish was a necessity: 'coming from a big family we had to supplement our diet.'²⁰ It may also have been the case that by the mid-twentieth century catching fish and collecting seafood were one of the only viable means of supplementing rations, as land previously used for terrestrial hunting was increasingly inaccessible. This would have necessitated the smoking of fish for winter consumption in areas where fish were generally less abundant in the winter months.

A culture of sharing

Integral to Aboriginal fishing and cooking practices is a culture of sharing. The Aboriginal culture of sharing the fishing catch is not a tradition that has faded, but, as oral recollections reveal, has endured through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. This culture of sharing seafood is, however, threatened by some of the contemporary restrictions regulating fishing in New South Wales (see chapter 8).

The culture of sharing food was a key to survival for many Aboriginal communities in New South Wales, especially for people living off meagre government rations. Val Merrick recalls that this was the case in the 1940s and 1950s at Karuah mission in Port Stephens, where she was born:

My dad was a fisherman and so was his father Herb Lilley. They would supply the mission with plenty of fish. And fish was the main source of food at Karuah. We always had seafood to eat and there was always sharing in this community – we always shared what we had – I think it was just a blackfellows way. But people really relied on that sharing.²¹

Granny Bonn remembers 'a lot of sharing on the mission when we went out and caught fish.'²² Similarly, Rita Timbery-Bennett, who grew up at Hill 60 and the Official Camps around Port Kembla, recalls the importance of sharing food and remembers, in particular, that 'Big gropers were cut up into huge steaks and shared around to all the households.'²³

As well as sharing fish with families throughout a community, a key aspect of the Aboriginal culture of sharing food is the practice of collecting or catching food for elderly members of communities who are no longer able to do so themselves. Elaine Sturgeon from Wreck Bay remembers collecting pipis on the beaches of the south coast: 'We'd cook them up, roast them on the fire and share them with the elderly people.'²⁴ This traditional practice of collecting pipis for the extended family is under particular threat from legislation that restricts the number of pipis any one person can collect. The traditional practice of collecting abalone is similarly threatened.

Despite changes in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, such as government restrictions on fishing and collection of seafood, and the movement of many Aboriginal people to urban areas, there is an ongoing desire among Aboriginal communities to continue the culture of sharing. Gwen Russell, talking about her experience living in Port Stephens, emphasises the continuing importance of the tradition of sharing food in Aboriginal communities:

*All the community people fished. And when you got a big catch of fish, you shared it. Sharing was a big part of life. They still do that sort of thing now. You know, if someone went out and got a feed of fish, and if it were more than they needed, they'd share it with everyone in the community. The fish was there to have. It was the same with the prawns; same with whatever we'd get.'*²⁵

This culture of sharing the catch is closely related to the practice of not over-fishing. There is no need to over-fish in a culture where sharing is the norm, and at the same time such a culture fosters a sense of community rather than selfishness. Jenny Wright explains this aspect of the culture when recounting her childhood experiences of catching yabbies at Lightning Ridge in northern New South Wales: 'There was enough for everybody. You just didn't get greedy and take it all, not back then. You only took what you needed for a feed.'²⁶

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23. DEC NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Wollongong*, p.45
24. Wreck Bay Community and Kath Renwick, *Geebung and snake whistles: Koori people and plants of Wreck Bay*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2000, p.13
25. DEC NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Port Stephens*, p.44
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6 Why fish?

Fishing has always been a vital part of economic and cultural life for the Aboriginal people of coastal and inland New South Wales. Fishing was an important source of food and trade in the pre-contact period and this continued through the early colonial period and into the twentieth century. It was also an essential means of supplementing income, surviving dispossession, and entering the white economy. Culturally, fishing has always played an integral role in the social, spiritual and ceremonial life of Aboriginal communities.

Subsistence

Officers of the First Fleet noted the importance of fishing to Aboriginal communities in the Sydney region. Indeed, according to Attenbrow and Steele, 'fishing is the most frequently mentioned subsistence activity of the local Aboriginal people' in the diaries of the First Fleeters.¹ Watkin Tench wrote that fishing 'seems to engross nearly the whole of their time' because it formed a chief part of their subsistence.² Colonial observers continued to comment on the key role of fishing within the Aboriginal economy and its importance to the survival of Aboriginal people into the nineteenth century. John Turnbull, a sailor in the merchant service who visited Port Jackson in early 1800, noted in an account of his voyage that the 'principal subsistence' of the Aboriginal people was 'drawn from the sea and rivers.'³ Further north in Port Stephens, it was clear to William Scott that 'the business of fishing was perhaps the most important of all to the natives. In the piscatorial art they were highly proficient, using both lines and spears.'⁴

Aboriginal communities continued to rely heavily on fish for subsistence well into the twentieth century. In her study of the Paroo River in north-western New South Wales, Heather Goodall found that in the twentieth century Aboriginal people became increasingly dependent on the river, as racial segregation in towns became more prevalent:

Riverbanks offered safety and respite from the surveillance of town police and were convenient camping sites where water carrying could be minimised. Aboriginal poverty also enforced greater dependence on the river as a source of food, increasing the degree to which people chose to fish for pleasure and as a solace from the stresses of township living.⁵

This situation was replayed throughout the state, where Aboriginal communities were often dependent on rivers for sustenance and solace during the mid-twentieth century as people were forced onto reserves and missions, and often segregated in towns. Seafood was often the main food source for Aboriginal people living on missions and reserves. Lynette Simms from the Roseby Park mission on the south coast of New South Wales explains the importance of fish for subsistence:

We didn't know what it was like to have meat and baked dinners, as a regular thing, not back then. We lived on fish and seafood. We'd get rations and I can remember our going to get them, but they mustn't have been very much. It was fish we lived on.⁶

Although not on a mission, Vivienne Green from the town of Wellington on the Macquarie River had a similar experience, and recalls that her family was 'pretty self-sufficient' and 'lived off the river'.⁷

To supplement income

In addition to supplementing their meagre rations with fish, Aboriginal people often supplemented their income by fishing. In the 1920s and '30s, the Aboriginal population of the Reserve at Fingal Head supplemented their rations with seafood, and men on the Reserve, 'wherever possible, obtained work which mainly consisted of farm labour ... and also commercial fishing' to supplement their income.⁸ It was also common for Aboriginal people on the south coast of New South Wales to engage in seasonal work picking peas and beans in the Bodalla area and further south, and to go fishing when fish were abundant. At Wreck Bay fishing was 'the most important source of self-generated income for the community'.⁹



Figure 13 Fishermen at Wreck Bay, 1959.

Source: National Archives of Australia: A1200/18, 11493151

In Aboriginal communities such as Wreck Bay, fishing was conducted on a large scale and the community supplied fish to local markets. Small-scale fishing by individuals was also essential in supplementing incomes. For example, in the late 1920s at the Cumeroogunga mission on the Murray River:

Doug Nicholls, who was to become a pastor and governor of South Australia, remembered walking shoeless with his mother on cold mornings through frost-brittle grass. He remembered stepping in his mother's footprints where she had broken the ice ahead of him; she drew a fishing line after her and the fish she caught gave them money necessary to add a few small amenities to their home.¹⁰



Figure 14 Cook Island from Fingal Head
Source: Caroline Ford, DECCW

Collecting and selling bait to non-Indigenous fishers was another way in which Aboriginal people supplemented their incomes. At Port Stephens in the mid-twentieth century Viola Brown remembers digging for worms for bait, and 'if you got any extra you sold them to the bait shop and that was a bit of extra money for food, for the family.'¹¹ A woman named Marie remembers that her family used to go to Red Rock (near Corindi, on the coast north of Coffs Harbour) for holidays at Christmas time partly because the influx of holiday-makers provided her family with a good opportunity to boost their income by selling bait: 'my father'd say we'll go down cos we'll make a bit of money with the worms.'¹² Indeed, several Aboriginal people interviewed about their history of attachment to the Yuraygir National Park landscape recalled how they gathered worms from the beaches there when they were children.¹³

Della Walker recalled that her father made a living for the family by catching beach worms in the Yamba area:

Holiday times he would get these orders. Certain ones would say, 'Oh, Rocky, would you get me some sea worms, about four or five pounds of worms?' Dad would go and make himself busy. We had a horse named Bobby and Dad used to ride it out to Shelley Beach [now in Yuraygir National Park] to get the orders. He'd come back with two or three cans of worms and sow them up in paper packets, then sell them for so much a packet. That's how we made money, with the worms that he caught along the beach. We'd all go down and watch him. He'd show us how to catch them, then we'd have a go.'¹⁴



Figure 15 Lake Arragan, Yuraygir National Park

Source: John Lugg, DECCW

Further south in the area near Forster Fay Pattison remembers, as a young girl in the 1940s, collecting and selling worms to tourists for bait. She and other children 'used to sell them to the tourists because they used them for fishing. I had a bike. I'd go up the street, to the cottages on Little Street. They'd be waiting.'¹⁵

Creating souvenirs from shells, or 'shellwork', was also a source of income for some families at La Perouse on Botany Bay. Beryl Beller recalled collecting shells as a child for the local women, who would:

*sit around in a circle and sort the shells into sizes and colours. The different shells they used were muttonfish, starries, beachies, buttonies, courie, pearl, fan conk, small cockle and small pipis. They would then cut out cardboard shapes like the Sydney Harbour Bridge, hearts and babies shoes. They would glue them into their shapes and cover them with the shells we collected ... The women also made brooches. They would cut the muttonfish (abalone) shells into shapes of Australia and boomerangs. These shells were polished until they shone and then a pin was glued on the back to finish the brooch.*¹⁶

Another La Perouse community member said that some of these were sold to David Jones, Melbourne, and 'even overseas'.¹⁷

Trade and commercial fishing

In the nineteenth century fishing was a key means by which Aboriginal people could enter the colonial economy. Fishing was one of the few traditional activities that Aboriginal people were able to continue after colonisation. In most areas of New South Wales hunting on traditional lands became almost impossible because Aboriginal people were driven off their land by the expansion of settler farming. Settling of the New South Wales immediate coast was often not as intensive until the 1960s and '70s and much of it remained accessible to Aboriginal people, as did many river banks. Fishing offered both a means of continuing cultural activities and traditions in the face of colonisation and dispossession, and a means of surviving in a changed society by entering into trading partnerships with local settlers. Aboriginal people on various parts of the coast took advantage of their superior knowledge of the cycle of the fishing seasons and of where the best fishing spots were, and began to catch fish to trade with local non-Indigenous residents. In January 1837 Aboriginal fishers supplied fish to the Coolangatta Estate 'for which they received three pounds of flour'.¹⁸ Records show that in the 1830s, Aboriginal men and women 'often brought in fish and crayfish for the residents of Jamberoo [in the Illawarra area] for which they received tea and sugar'.¹⁹

Gradually, as the nineteenth century proceeded, this bartering relationship changed into a trading partnership with Aboriginal people selling fish to local white residents for money rather than in exchange for goods. For example, in August 1874 Samuel Elyard of Nowra wrote of purchasing 13 fish from local Aboriginal people.²⁰ This was fairly small-scale trading, but by the 1890s the Aborigines Protection Board recorded that 'Aboriginal residents of Greenwell Point raised a "fair" amount of cash selling fish to local inhabitants'.²¹ This was also the case in communities further south, such as Ulladulla, Bega and Eden. The Aboriginal fishers at La Perouse were so successful in the 1890s that according to Michael Bennett they threatened the market-hold of non-Aboriginal commercial operators.²²

The initial trading of fish to settlers laid the foundation for Aboriginal communities' entry into the commercial fishing industry in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rita Timbery-Bennett's great grandfather George 'Trimmer' Timbery started up a commercial fishing operation on the south coast in partnership with William Saddler after 1876. Their commercial fishing operation 'supplied both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities with fish' until the 1940s.²³ Most of the historical studies relating to the role of Aboriginal people in the commercial fishing industry have focused on the south coast of New South Wales, however, there is evidence that Aboriginal people were involved in commercial fishing in other areas of the state. In the Tuncurry–Forster area on the mid-north coast Aboriginal fishers regularly sold fish to local commercial fishers in the late nineteenth century.²⁴

Involvement in the commercial fishing industry became increasingly important to the economic position of coastal Aboriginal people in the first half of the twentieth century. According to Brian Egloff, who has studied Aboriginal fishing on the south coast of New South Wales, 'Fishermen are known to have operated at La Perouse, Port Kembla, Ulladulla, Batemans Bay, Moruya and Bermagui as well as at fishing camps between these major centres'.²⁵ Historians have tended to focus on Aboriginal fishermen, however there is a lot of evidence to suggest that commercial fishing was a family enterprise in Aboriginal communities. It was relatively common for Aboriginal children to help with domestic and commercial tasks, especially when living in large residential camps on reserves or missions.

This was not only the case with fishing, it was also common in the pastoral industry in the nineteenth century.²⁶ In the early 1900s, the Aboriginal community around the south coast gathered mutton fish (abalone) to trade with the Chinese. Ossie Cruse, whose father and uncles were involved in this industry, describes how the whole family was involved in the enterprise:

They used to take the meat out of the shell and while they were doing this it would really be a family gathering, where men would be diving, gathering the mutton fish, bringing it to shore and women and kids would be lighting the fires. And they'd have these big drums to put the mutton fish in. They'd boil it for about three or four minutes and this would take all the impurities off the outside of the mutton fish, and they would come out of the boiling water looking a nice golden brown. Then the mutton fish would be laid out on the rocks in the sun to dry.²⁷

The drying process took two to three days then the mutton fish were placed in corn bags and sold to the Chinese for export. This large-scale commercial enterprise involved the entire family: the women and children who dried and packed the mutton fish were as vital to the process as were the men who dived for them.

There is evidence to suggest that whole families were also involved in commercial fishing enterprises on the mid-north coast of New South Wales in the twentieth century. Amy Marshall Jarrett of Nambucca used to go fishing with her Uncle Benji, who was 'the first Goorie [Aboriginal] around here to have a fishing licence.'²⁸ Children and women often helped to haul fishing nets and sat on sand dunes or headlands looking out for shoals of fish and signalling to those on the water in boats when fish were spotted.

There were also individual Aboriginal women who were prominent in the commercial fishing industry. Probably the first recorded instance of the involvement of an individual Aboriginal woman in the commercial fishing industry was that of Mrs Lizzie Malone of La Perouse, who was one of the few Aboriginal women to own a fishing boat in the nineteenth century. According to Michael Bennett, Mrs Malone did not fish herself because she had bad knees, but in the late 1880s, 'she let her boat out to other Aboriginal people in return for money or fish.'²⁹ In *Mutton Fish: The surviving culture of Aboriginal people and abalone on the south coast of New South Wales* Jean Squires, who lived on the Moruya River, recounts her involvement in the commercial fishing industry on the south coast. She came from a fishing family, the Brierlys, and her grandparents taught her how to fish from a young age.³⁰ Jean Squires recounts the way she juggled caring for her children and fishing:

And many a time I dragged a big cane pram with two of the babies in it along the Bingie there, just fishing in the night-time for salmon. Hand-lining. When it was too rough to fish, I always had a hand-line, I had a kid on my back, another one in my arms, going along the beach.³¹

Like many other women from fishing families, Jean Squires made her living from commercial fishing. The stories of Aboriginal women involved in the fishing industry are often subsumed under those of men, obscuring the fact that Aboriginal women often played important roles in family fishing enterprises.

Social activity

Fishing was also an important social activity for Aboriginal women. Many Aboriginal women have childhood memories of going fishing with their mothers, aunts and other women. As a child at the Cumeroogunga Mission Margaret Tucker went cray fishing with her 'Mother, Aunt, two or three eighteen year old girls' and other children on special occasions when the women could finish work early.³² The women on the mission fished to relax and socialise. Fishing provided an important escape from mission life.

For many Aboriginal families fishing was a means of socialising while undertaking other essential activities. Florence Kennedy remembers that her granny combined fishing with washing clothes in the river:

*I remember how Jim and Ted used to carry the clothes down to the river for washing. I remember how our granny would take her fishing line down and we'd stay down there in the bush until the washing was done.*³³

Similarly Ronald Heron notes that at Christmas time, which was often a time of unemployment for Aboriginal people, fishing was both a social activity and an important food gathering activity.³⁴ Betty Bungie, who moved to Purfleet from Nambucca in 1950, fished with her husband and children nearly every weekend. She fished for pleasure and to feed her family.³⁵

Fishing continues to be an important social activity for Aboriginal women today. Lola Murray from Walgett explains how going fishing with other women and her family still plays an important role in her life:

*Sometimes my sister Mavis will pick me up or me and Aunty Mavis will walk down here. Or sometimes we walk down to the weir. Sometimes my eldest son Mark takes us, or we jump in the car with my other son Jason, and go out to Yellowbelly Point. We just set up there and we try to be really quiet and wait for the fish to bite.*³⁶

Fishing also continues to play an important part in the life of Colleen Perry from the Port Stephens region. She is a keen fisherwoman who fishes for pleasure and to socialise. Colleen Perry describes her love of fishing and fishing experience:

*[T]here are not many places in Australia where I haven't fished. I like going inland to Wilcannia and to Menindee to fish in the Darling River when the fish are biting. I like the big rough shell crays you get out of the Murrumbidgee. I've also been out on the ocean fishing – it's great.*³⁷

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7 Fishing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries

Throughout the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first century, fishing has been part of the lifestyle in coastal and riverside Aboriginal communities. The continuing importance and significance of fishing to Aboriginal people, and women in particular, is not always recognised by historians or fishing authorities. This began to change in the 1990s, when Brian Egloff and others commenced research into Aboriginal fishing on the south coast of New South Wales as part of preparations for the defence of seven Aboriginal men charged with breaches of the NSW *Fisheries Act 1935*.¹ The historical evidence collected for this case 'shows continuous fishing activity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by numerous families occupying land between Batemans Bay and Eden.'² Understandably, this research is focused entirely on fishing traditions on the south coast, and is also predominately about men's fishing practices. It is, however, important to note that fishing is a significant activity for Aboriginal communities across New South Wales, not just on the south coast, and that it holds significance for Aboriginal women as well as men.

Fishing was one of the main family social activities in Aboriginal communities in the twentieth century, it was also a favourite leisure activity for children, and an essential forum for passing on environmental knowledge from one generation to the next.

Family fishing expeditions

Many Aboriginal women remember fishing as children in the mid-twentieth century; they remember it not just as a subsistence activity, but as an occasion for fun family expeditions. For Alma Jean Sullivan of Bourke such family fishing trips instilled in her a love of fishing:

*Every weekend the family would go down fishing at the Bourke weir. Both my parents fished. They were darn good at it too ... We kids played and fished. I have good memories of those years. And so that's how I started fishing and I've never stopped since.*³

Dot Martin, also from Bourke, fondly remembers fishing with her family. She enjoyed 'just being down there at the river with the family. You know, just fishing and having a good time.'⁴ Isabel Flick used to go to the river with a large group of women and children every Monday for 'wash day': 'all the women and children went to the river to wash, swim, fish, cook and I guess enjoy their kids. We sometimes went at sunrise and came home at sundown.'⁵

Family fishing days also featured prominently in the recollections of several of the contributors to a book about the Aboriginal community at La Perouse. One contributor recalls travelling 'with our parents to Kurnell on the ferry and on foot across the sandhills to Cronulla to gather shells. We'd stay the night and come home the next day. We'd fish and gather pipis and get mutton fish [abalone] over there.'⁶ Another contributor remembers going with their mother and other children on outings to Congie, 'fishing and getting mutton fish and periwinkles. We'd cook them on the rocks and have fun fishing.'⁷

Children

Children fished for family outings, for fun, and also as a way of contributing to the family economy. Louise Davis from Wollongong recalls: 'From the age of five years I was harvesting the shellfish and I collected pipis, mussels, and oysters too.'⁸ Muriel Davis' mother used to send her and her sister to the Port Kembla beach to collect pipis in a sugar bag.⁹ Similarly, Alma Maskell-Bell's mother 'used to tell us to go up the sandhills [at Port Kembla], down to the beach and get a feed of pipis. We just had to get home before dark. She told us to put a stick in the sand so that we would know what time it was from the movement of the tide.'¹⁰

Isabel Flick remembers all the children being encouraged to have a go at fishing. Furthermore, she recalls that at Toomelah, in the mid-west of New South Wales, the girls were taught to fish, while the boys were taught to hunt:

I learnt a lot about getting baits for fishing, the best way to put a worm on the hook, what were the best berries and fruit to eat, what was dangerous. And Granny used to take us down one side of the river, around the bend, to go fishing. And it was real fun times ...¹¹

Passing on knowledge

Aboriginal children were, and still are often taught how to fish by older women and men in the community. Just as Isabel Flick remembers being taught to fish by Granny, Dot Martin remembers her grandfather taking her fishing.¹² This reflects the tradition of learning in Aboriginal communities. Janet Mathews explains that traditionally Aboriginal children were often taught by 'the old people who had time to help the children.'¹³ Heather Goodall has shown how Aboriginal women in north-western New South Wales continue to use fishing as an opportunity to pass knowledge on to the next generation.¹⁴ They regularly take children down to the river to fish. Goodall explains the importance of fishing trips as a forum for passing on knowledge:

Fishing is an opportunity to teach children about the life of the river, not only about the fish but about the birds, the craybobs, mussels, worms and turtles which you might notice as you sit for hours waiting for a bite. But these are also opportunities to teach them the stories of the river, the complex web of mythology about creation and the continued enlivening of the landscape through which the creative ancestors travelled.¹⁵

Indeed, Aboriginal women throughout New South Wales continue to pass on their fishing knowledge to younger generations. Val Merrick from Port Stephens has a keen sense of continuing traditions. She remembers collecting oysters as a child and her mother cooking them in a curry, 'I still have that today with my kids and we spend a lot of time out at Stockton Bight fishing. Nowadays we take our grandkids out there, and they have a wonderful time, there in the sand hills, fishing and getting a few pippis, So they still carry on our traditions.'¹⁶ Similarly, Colleen Perry, also of Port Stephens, used to take her children crabbing; now her daughter teaches her own son how to catch crabs.¹⁷

Alma Jean Sullivan from Bourke tries to instil a sense of respect for the river and the environment in the young people of the area:

Today I sometimes come down to the river with the young ones and I try to pass on the things I've learnt and the things I know. I want them to understand that they have to love the river and they have to give it respect. They have to do that first, and then they will grow to understand how dangerous it can be and how bad things can become if we continue to take under size fish or if we continue to pollute the river.¹⁸

This continuing tradition of women passing on knowledge about fishing and the environment to the next generation is crucial in maintaining cultural practices and well being. It also serves to demonstrate the continuing cultural significance of fishing to Aboriginal women and communities throughout New South Wales.

1. Michael Bennett, 'The economics of fishing: sustainable living in colonial New South Wales', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 31, 2007, p.87. Bennett provides a survey of literature related to Aboriginal fishing on the south coast of New South Wales.
2. Michael Bennett, 'The economics of fishing', p.87
3. Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Bourke*, DEC NSW, Sydney, 2005, p.26
4. DEC NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Bourke*, p.14
5. Isabel Flick and Heather Goodall, *Isabel Flick: the many lives of an extraordinary Aboriginal woman*, Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, 2004, p.13
6. *La Perouse: the place, the people and the sea: a collection of writing by members of the Aboriginal community*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1988, p.39
7. *La Perouse: the place, the people and the sea*, p.61
8. DEC NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Wollongong*, DEC NSW, Sydney, 2004, p.21
9. DEC NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Wollongong*, p.3
10. DEC NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Wollongong*, pp.7-9
11. Isabel Flick and Heather Goodall, *Isabel Flick: the many lives of an extraordinary Aboriginal woman*, p.33
12. DEC NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Bourke*, p.12
13. Janet Mathews, *Totem and taboo: Aboriginal life and craft*, Collins, Sydney, 1979, p.61
14. Heather Goodall, 'Gender, race and rivers: women and water in northwestern NSW', University of Technology, Sydney, a paper delivered to the Fluid Bonds symposium, National Institute for the Environment, ANU, 13 October 2003, p.7
15. Heather Goodall, 'Gender, race and rivers: women and water in northwestern NSW', p.7
16. DEC NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Port Stephens*, DEC NSW, Sydney, 2004, p.22
17. DEC NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Port Stephens*, p.31
18. DEC NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Bourke*, p.27

8 Modern obstacles to traditional fishing practices

Fishing continues to be an important activity for Aboriginal women and Aboriginal communities today. However, since the second half of the twentieth century there have been an increasing number of obstacles to Aboriginal fishing. Environmental changes and pollution have changed fishing conditions, access to traditional fishing spots has become increasingly difficult, and restrictions have been imposed on fishing and the collection of seafood.

Pollution and environmental changes

Changes to major rivers throughout New South Wales due to salinity, pollution, overuse and over-fishing, have dramatically affected the ability of Aboriginal women to carry on traditional fishing practices. In some cases it has been possible to adapt to environmental changes. For example, the Gumbaingirr People of Corindi Beach continue to fish as a means of acquiring food and as a social activity. Yet, they no longer fish from the lake as their ancestors did because it is polluted, instead they fish from the beach and headlands.¹ In other cases it is no longer possible for Aboriginal women to continue to fish as their ancestors did. In the Lower Clarence Valley region, for example, mineral sand mining which commenced in the 1970s has damaged many beaches in the region, rendering them an unsuitable habitat for pipis, which Aboriginal women and children had previously collected on a daily basis.²

Perhaps the most widespread impact of environmental changes and pollution has been a decline in the abundance of fish stocks. Vilma Whaddy Moylan, who grew up on Stuart Island, Nambucca, remembers her Aunties catching fish in the river for their daily meals, but this is no longer possible: 'the river was good then but now, today it's just so sad. I could nearly cry when I think about it.'³ Similarly, Evelyn Powell has noticed a decline in fish stocks in the Murray and Macquarie Rivers, which interferes with traditional fishing practices:

The rivers are terrible now. It is nothing like when we used to live on the banks of the rivers in Dubbo, the Macquarie. My mother-in-law and myself would have got fish for breakfast. You'd go down there, fish with a line, be down there for about fifteen minutes, up you'd come with a couple of yellow-bellies, cod or catfish.⁴

The decline in fish stocks has meant that in many areas of New South Wales fishing is no longer a viable way for Aboriginal women to provide food for their families and communities.

Problems of access

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Aboriginal communities were frequently forced off land considered fertile for agriculture and pushed towards the coast or riverbanks. As Heather Goodall notes, this continued into the second half of the twentieth century, when a decline in pastoralism and Aboriginal employment in pastoralism forced many Aboriginal people off the land: 'the riverbanks have been one of the few remaining places where Aboriginal people can freely go.'⁵ The resources found in rivers and the ocean thus continued to be crucial for survival. Since the late twentieth century, however, coastal areas and riverbanks have increasingly been developed for commercial and residential purposes. This has interfered with Aboriginal fishing practices and has meant that traditional camping and fishing spots are now often inaccessible.

Since the 1960s, Aboriginal people at Wreck Bay on the south coast of New South Wales have felt pressured by large-scale commercial fishing enterprises to vacate fishing areas that they consider to be their own.⁶ The dominance of large-scale commercial fishing obviously impacts the viability of Indigenous commercial fishers, but it also affects traditional communal fishing practices. Ossie Cruse, from Eden, explains how Aboriginal camping spots, which are intimately linked to fishing, have gradually become inaccessible to the local Aboriginal community:

one by one you would see camping places fenced off, and 'No Camping' signs put up. There are very few areas left to camp. If you go there camping you're facing a fine.⁷

Such limits on access to camping and fishing spots are prevalent throughout New South Wales. Aboriginal people in the Camden Park area have been denied access to fishing spots on the Nepean River since the mid-1970s when land beside the river was sold for residential development.⁸ Rose Fernando of north-western New South Wales described how problems of access have affected her fishing activities:

A special fishing place we had was up near the cemetery, and today – it's fenced off – but it was a place where all the people seemed to go. Right up that river there from where the white rocks go, we'd all go fishing. That was our place, but as I say, today it's all fenced off and we can't get in there. We don't have a fishing place today.⁹



Figure 16 Nepean River

Source: Anne Jelenik, DECCW

Restrictions

Official fishing regulations and restrictions have affected Aboriginal fishing practices since the mid-twentieth century. The introduction of designated fishing seasons on the Murray River in particular had an impact. However, authorities often did not vigilantly enforce such early restrictions, and Aboriginal people were able to evade or resist them. Margaret Tucker, who grew up near Deniliquin in southern New South Wales, remembers her mother challenging such restrictions when confronted by a police officer for fishing out of season:

*The senior officer gave a little cough, but Mum kept her eyes on her line. 'Do you know you can be fined heavily for fishing? It is closed season'. Without looking at the policeman she replied: 'Yes, I know, but fish has been my people's food all through the ages, and it is my food too, and I am hungry.'*¹⁰

Such instances of defiance and the ability of Aboriginal communities to stand up for traditional fishing practices have become increasingly difficult since the 1990s, as restrictions on fishing and the collection of seafood, in particular abalone and pipis, are carefully policed by NSW Fisheries officers. These restrictions are generally aimed at maintaining fish stocks and protecting commercial interests.

There is some recognition by government agencies, however, of the need to make exceptions for the traditional cultural fishing practices of Aboriginal people in New South Wales. Section 37 of the *Fisheries Management Act 1994* allows for Aboriginal people to obtain permits to take fish for Aboriginal cultural community events, although these permits are only issued for one-off occasions. The state's Whole of Government Framework for Cultural Resource Use aims to ensure that 'Aboriginal People have opportunities to access Government managed lands and waters in recognition of their culture and for supporting their connection with the land.' The operational guidelines currently being developed by the Department of Primary Industries, Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water, and the Marine Parks Authority are designed to increase Aboriginal people's access to water for fishing, and collecting marine and freshwater resources.

Restrictions on the number of pipis and abalone that can be collected have had an impact on the diet of Aboriginal people, and crucially, also on the social and cultural activities of Aboriginal communities. Family social gatherings often revolve around fishing or seafood collection; restrictions on such activities therefore have a detrimental affect on social activities. Beryl Cruse has pointed to the social impact that restrictions on abalone collection on the south coast of New South Wales have in Aboriginal communities:

*Well the law not only changed the food chain its sort of broken that family gathering up, that we used to do and go out doing, making a day of it. Or even a full weekend, we'd camp on the beach.*¹¹

Furthermore, restrictions prevent Aboriginal people from continuing traditional practices such as gathering food for elderly members of communities and sharing food. BJ Cruse objects to restrictions that dictate that each person may collect only ten abalone precisely because 'there's no system in place for the old people to have their young people go and get their food chain for them like they used to.'¹² Similarly, women in the Port Stephens region lament the fact that they can no longer collect enough pipis or fish to feed their whole families because of restrictions. Val Merrick of Port Stephens explains the effect of restrictions on her family: 'now we can't do what we used to do – like getting bait and fishing. We can't run a net out to get enough food for our families any more.'¹³

Restrictions have also prevented Aboriginal communities from continuing traditional fishing methods. Carol Ridgeway Bissett describes this:

*The thing is – we can't fish like we did when we were kids because for a start there are so many restrictions. Aboriginal people can't use things like they used to. Like fish poisons. That was just the sap from different trees, used to stun the fish in water holes and even in salt water. We can't use traps now. Not that we had a lot of traps, but we had a couple and traditional nets.*¹⁴

The prevention of traditional fishing practices through restrictions also hinders the ability of Aboriginal communities to maintain a spiritual connection with the water, their culture and identity. As Val Merrick points out, being barred from collecting mud worms for bait or pipis to eat is not only an inconvenience, 'it hurts' not being allowed to do these things.¹⁵

Although in some instances traditional fishing practices have had to be modified in response to environmental changes, problems of access, and government restrictions, fishing continues to be an important cultural, social and economic activity for Aboriginal women and Aboriginal communities. Fishing is of enduring cultural significance for Aboriginal people in New South Wales. It is a means of continuing traditional and cultural practices, such as communal sharing of food; a means of passing on knowledge from one generation to the next; a means of recognising and maintaining a strong spiritual connection with the water; and a means of maintaining culture and identity.

1. Barry Morris, 'The Gumbaingirr peoples of Corindi Beach, Part two: anthropology study', in Mary Dallas and Barry Morris, *Archaeological and anthropological study of an option of the Corindi Beach sewerage scheme*, report to NSW Public Works Department, Coffs Harbour, 1994, p.18
2. Ronald Heron, *My Aboriginal people and our culture: aspects of Aboriginal cultural heritage of the Lower Clarence Valley*, report prepared for the Lower Clarence Aboriginal Youth Service, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and Australian Nature Conservation Agency, 1993, p.24
3. NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Nambucca*, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Sydney, 2003, p.24
4. Anthony English and Louise Gay, *Living land living culture: Aboriginal heritage and salinity*, Department of Environment and Conservation NSW, Sydney, 2005, p.51
5. Heather Goodall, 'Gender, race and rivers: women and water in northwestern NSW', University of Technology, Sydney, a paper delivered to the Fluid Bonds symposium, National Institute for the Environment, ANU, 13 October 2003
6. John Wilkinson, *NSW fishing industry: changes and challenges in the twenty-first century*, NSW Parliamentary Library Briefing Paper No.11/04, September 2004, p.47
7. Beryl Cruse, Liddy Stewart and Sue Norman, *Mutton fish: the surviving culture of Aboriginal people and abalone on the south coast of New South Wales*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2005, p.26
8. Department of Environment and Climate Change (DECC) NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Nepean*, DECC NSW, Sydney, 2007, p.10
9. Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Walgett and Collarenebri*, DEC NSW, Sydney, 2006, pp.113–14
10. Margaret Tucker, *If everyone cared*, Grosvenor, London, 1977, p.34–5
11. Beryl Cruse, Liddy Stewart and Sue Norman, *Mutton fish*, p.101
12. Beryl Cruse, Liddy Stewart and Sue Norman, *Mutton fish*, p.95. In 2009, no more than 2 abalone may be collected by any person without a commercial licence.
13. DEC NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Port Stephens*, DEC NSW, Sydney, 2004, p.27
14. DEC NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Port Stephens*, p.40
15. DEC NSW, *Aboriginal women's heritage: Port Stephens*, p.25

9 Location of sources for further research

The following is a list of places where further resources can be accessed.

Libraries

State Library of NSW and the Mitchell Library

Macquarie Street, Sydney, NSW

<http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/>

You can find information about the libraries' collections and search their collections on their website. Some books from the State Library of NSW may be available to you in your local library through inter-library loans. Inquire at your local library about this service.

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)

Acton Peninsula Lawson Crescent, Acton, ACT

<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/collections/overview.html>

The AIATSIS library holds the most comprehensive collection of print material on Australian Indigenous studies in the world; it also contains sound recordings, films and videos. You can access information about the collections, subject guides and the library's catalogue on the AIATSIS website. This website also includes a list of links to other web resources.

Australian Indigenous Index

INFOKOORI is an index to the *Koori Mail*, a national fortnightly newspaper published in Lismore, NSW, that focuses on the Indigenous people of Australia, from May 1991 to date. It is also an index to biographical information from various magazines including: *Our Aim* (1907–1961), *Dawn* (1952–1969), *New Dawn* (1970–1975) and *Identity* (1971–1982).

This database can be searched online at: <http://library.sl.nsw.gov.au:1084/search/>

University of Sydney Library

<http://opac.library.usyd.edu.au:81/search/>

The papers of AP Elkin, noted anthropologist, long-term president of the Association for the Protection of Native Races, and member of the Aborigines Protection Board of NSW, are held at the University of Sydney Library, and can be searched through the special collections database.

Local libraries would also hold much of the secondary literature.

<http://www.nswnet.net/databases/libweb.cfm>

Pictorial databases

Picman

<http://www2.sl.nsw.gov.au/picman/>

Picman is an online database, which allows you to search the picture and manuscripts collections of the Mitchell Library.

Picture Australia

<http://www.pictureaustralia.org/>

Picture Australia is an online database of pictures, on which you can search the picture collections of many institutions in Australia.

Archives

State Archives of NSW

<http://www.records.nsw.gov.au/state-archives/>

The State Archives of NSW are the official archives of the state of New South Wales. The archives contain records relating to NSW government business, including the records of NSW government departments and boards. It holds the records of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines (1883–1940) and for the Aborigines Welfare Board (1940–1969).

The State Archives has several indexes and guides to aspects of their collection relating to Indigenous communities at: <http://www.records.nsw.gov.au/state-archives/resources-for-indigenous-people/indigenous-communities>

These records were not consulted for this project, but it is likely that the records of the Board of Protection of Aborigines would contain information about the allocation of fishing equipment to Aboriginal communities at Wreck Bay, La Perouse, Forster, Taree, and other coastal communities.

National Archives of Australia

Queen Victoria Terrace, Parkes ACT

<http://www.naa.gov.au/index.aspx>

The National Archives document the full range of Australian Government activities since Federation in 1901, and also include significant nineteenth-century records dealing with activities that were transferred from the colonies to the Commonwealth.

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