

Our Great Barrier Reef

Traditional owners

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Traditional Owners hold a vast knowledge of the marine environment, marine animals, their habitats and their lifestyles.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the Traditional Owners of the Great Barrier Reef region. For over 60,000 years their traditional connections have been a part of the unique living maritime culture of more than 50 Traditional Owner groups along the coast of the Great Barrier Reef for thousands of years.

Torres Strait Islanders travelled through reef waters to trade with mainland Aboriginal groups along the east coast, and to collect resources for their subsistence lifestyle.

Their myths and legends of the sea

are expressed through dance and

song, and there are many creation stories for the region's islands and reefs.

Some of the Aboriginal tribes along the coast have dreaming stories from when their ancestors lived on the coastal plain near the edge of the present continental shelf. The ancient coastline was drowned by rising sea levels at the end of the last ice age. The sacred places and accounts of the past provide the connection to traditional clan areas and a rich heritage.

After 1788, Colonisation of Australia led to major changes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies, cultures and clan estates. Cultural activities and customary practices have evolved through the use of modern technologies and major changes in the world. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional customs and spiritual lore continue to be practised today in their sea country areas.

Traditions like hunting and gathering are of high cultural importance. The social sharing during special events that require traditional resources is also significant.

The cultural and economic importance of marine turtles and their value as food has given Indigenous people a practical understanding of their natural history and habits. Marine animal food resources such as turtles and dugongs strengthen Indigenous culture and demonstrate affiliation with tradition and traditional areas.

The activity of pursuing the turtle itself has great significance, and is an expression of the continuance of a long cultural tradition, with great importance in the hunting and social sharing of meat. The taking of turtles is restricted to hunting by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. A permit is necessary for traditional hunting.

Today, Traditional Owners are concerned about the future management of their sea country, and want to be involved through a number of management initiatives. Traditional owners are working with marine management agencies to develop a range of options to enable them to continue the evolution of their culture, and connection to the country for future generations. Traditional hunting, fishing and gathering activities in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park are being considered as part of the Representative Areas Program. To learn more about what you can do to help keep it great visit: www.gbrmpa.gov.au and www.reefed.edu.au

