

Aboriginal history of the Coffs Harbour region

This document has been compiled by Coffs Harbour City Library by Liz Thomas (Special Collections Librarian), January 2013

Local Aboriginal information

The Aboriginal history of the Coffs Harbour region is remembered by the people, recorded in historical documents, and imprinted on the land.

Aboriginal Australia is divided into a number of nations, which can be further divided into smaller (Elders) tribal groups. The Gumbaynggirr people have occupied this land for thousands of years, forming one of the largest coastal Aboriginal nations in NSW. They were renowned as the 'sharing people' because their land was so rich that food and other resources were commonly shared with other nations.¹ The Gumbaynggirr Nation stretches from the Nambucca River in the South to around the Clarence River in the North and the Great Dividing Range in the West.² Gumbaynggirr is not only the Nation, but also the language group. There are a number of recognised clan groups within the Gumbaynggirr Nation, including; Garby Elders, Garlambirla Guyuu Girrwa (Coffs Elders group), Gumbular Julipi Elders and Bagawa. Further information on these clan groups or those not mentioned here should be sought from the Coffs Harbour Aboriginal Lands Council or a recognised Elder within the community.

There have been a number of alternative spellings for Gumbaynggirr, including:

Kumbaingiri,	Kumbainggeri,	Kumbaingir,	Kumbaingeri,
Kumbangerai,	Koombangary,	Koombainga,	Coombangree,
Coombyngura,	Gumbaingar,	Gunbaingar,	Gumbainggir

The arrival of Europeans and early settlement

On 15th May 1770 Captain James Cook sailed past what would later become Coffs Harbour, referring in his log to 'the small rocky islands between us and the land' which he named the Solitary Isles.³ Then on 10th July 1779 Captain Matthew Flinders, added another five isles to those which had already been discovered. However, neither of these explorers had reason to further examine this part of the coastline, and as a result, Coffs Harbour remained unreported for a further 70 years.

It was in about 1847 that Captain John Korff in his ship 'Brothers' took shelter in the lee of the southern headland during a southerly gale. His destination had been the Bellingen River but it was too dangerous to attempt a crossing of the bar in such weather, so refuge was sought 30 kilometres or so to the north. Korff was sufficiently impressed with the safety offered by the coastal configuration and the depth of the water to write a report, when in due course, he returned to Sydney. It is not known what form his report took, as no official documentation appears to exist. However, he is recognised as the discoverer of Coffs Harbour, despite the possibility that others used its shelter before he did.⁴

No European settlement occurred immediately following Captain Korff's 1847 visit to the future harbour. However, the authorities recognised the area's suitability as a port; for, with the passage of the

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Key library resources:

Coffs Harbour, volumes 1 & 2 by Neil Yeates.
The land of Ulitarra by J. S. Ryan.
Arararra sharing culture: project sheets.
Series: *Yarrawarra place stories*, books 1-5.
Oorrara: The orara: Dulegah many trees by Arlene Hope.
Gumbaynggirr dictionary and learners grammar by Steve Morelli.

Websites:

<http://libraries.coffsharbour.nsw.gov.au>
<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au>
<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au>
<http://www.arararraculture.com.au>
<http://trove.nla.gov.au>
<http://dawn.aiatsis.gov.au/index.htm>

Robertson Lands Act in 1861, the government forestalled any claims by prospective selectors to harbour-side land by reserving some 960 acres of it.⁵

The main settlement by Europeans in Coffs Harbour occurred in the 1870s to early 1880s, which was late compared to the adjacent areas of the Clarence in 1838 and Bellinger River Valleys in 1840-1860s. There were earlier forays into the Coffs Harbour LGA, with records of settlement in Woolgoolga and Orara in the 1860's. The reason for the relatively late settlement of Coffs Harbour was its difficulty of access; there was no navigable river and it was separated from the tablelands by the formidable escarpment of the Great Dividing Range.⁶

The first mid North Coast town to be established was at Grafton, which was well situated on the Clarence River. As a consequence, it is likely that the Aboriginal people of the Coffs Harbour area fared somewhat better than those nearer the major settlement areas whose populations were decimated by introduced European diseases and dislocated by early European settlement activity.⁷

The settlement of Europeans who followed, as the Mid North Coast was opened up, was not so peaceable with their arrival heralding a new era of tense relations between Europeans and Aboriginals in the region. Timber getters had begun to ply the major rivers of the Mid North Coast from the 1840s, and by the 1850s were well established on Nambucca and Bellinger Rivers. There was at least some cedar getting at Coffs Creek by Walter Harvie and George Tucker in 1865, with the camp set up by Harvie and Tucker being one of the earliest known semi-permanent settlements in the Coffs Harbour area. Timber getters often employed the services of Aboriginal bushmen who had the knowledge and skills to rapidly identify Cedar trees.⁸

It is perhaps not surprising that on the Mid North Coast by the 1850s, conflict had arisen between timber getters and the Aboriginals whose lands were being exploited, and reports of several 'outrages' against sawyers, committed by regional Aboriginals, began to arise. It was likely that, as was the case elsewhere, much of the so-called atrocities attributed to the Aboriginals were responses to the disturbance to their lands and the poor treatment that they, (particularly the women), received at the hands of the timber getters.⁹

The passing of the Robertson Land Act (1861) contributed to the break up of many large pastoral holdings throughout NSW and encouraged the arrival and spread of free settlers. Among the first places to be settled along the Mid North Coast after the passing of the Act were the prime agricultural and grazing areas, headlands, river frontages and fertile valleys. These were similarly the most sought after places of the Aboriginal inhabitants and this competition for land and resources lead to additional tensions between new European settlers and the traditional owners.¹⁰

The effects of European settlement on the Aboriginal people of the Mid North Coast from the 1860s was devastating. The establishment of towns and the subsequent clearing and fencing of rural properties impacted on traditional movements of Aboriginal groups and Aboriginal people were forced to the fringes of the areas being settled. In addition, Aboriginal populations were greatly diminished by the introduction of European diseases. In the vicinity of Coffs Harbour, it has been suggested that European disease, probably measles or small pox, killed large numbers of local Aboriginals after the commencement of closer settlement.¹¹

The regional hostilities had eased by the late 1800s and a new era of European-Aboriginal relations had commenced. Devastated by the aforementioned dislocation and depopulation due to small pox, neglect and violence against them and with reduced access to traditional food resources and reserves, Aboriginal groups became more dependant on Europeans to provide them with food, clothing, shelter and employment.¹²

Routines and way of life

The historic daily activities of the mid-north coast Aboriginals have been well documented. As might be expected, the more vigorous tasks such as hunting and tree climbing fell to the men, while the women and children were responsible for collecting simple food items as well as domestic chores including the manufacture of bags, nets and small implements.¹³

The rainforest timbers were used for shields, clubs and spears; but the shields were not ornately carved as was common elsewhere in Australia. The leaf sheaths of Bangalow palms were used as water and honey carriers by simply folding each sheath into a U and inserting a sharpened stick through the top of the two arms, so as to form a handle and provide rigidity. The women made nets from long strands of fibre obtained from bark of the wild hibiscus bushes which grow along the creeks. They used these for catching fish, including shoals of mullet. When moving camp the men carried the weapons, but the task of transporting the camp paraphernalia as well as the children, was the responsibility of the women. Babies were wrapped in soft tea-tree bark, slung in a woven bag and supported on the mother's back by a band passing round her forehead.¹⁴

Gatherings and ceremonies

Aboriginal people celebrated times when food was plentiful, often inviting neighbouring groups to join the feast, or holding gatherings and ceremonies for births, deaths and initiations into adulthood. Depending on the occasion, some gatherings and celebrations occurred at specific sites, which might have been restricted to one gender or the other, and may have only occurred at a particular time during the year. These gatherings and ceremonies typically involve music, song and dance, and are important today for networking and meeting up with neighbouring groups and communities. Aboriginal people often decorate themselves for ceremonies and celebrations with locally sourced ochre.¹⁵

Gatherings and ceremonies are also important for teaching and transferring knowledge from one generation to the next, and they continue to be held and practiced today. This knowledge may include how to read nature's signs, to know when certain foods are abundant, how to determine the best tides, and how to use plants and animals for medicinal purposes.¹⁶

Music and dance are a very important part of ceremonies, and are often used to tell traditional stories and Dreaming, which always have an educational purpose. Dreaming songs and song-lines tend to have a series of verses that tell the story of an ancestor spirit, and a particular event or place, or may link a series of places and experiences. Often a ceremonial dance will be performed with the song so as to act out the story. Dance is a unique aspect of ceremonies which is learnt and passed down from one generation to another. To dance is to be knowledgeable about the stories of the ancestral heroes, although dancing, unlike painting and singing, is learnt at an early age.¹⁷

The Garby Elders believe that the brolga was taught to dance at their corroborees. For this reason, the brolga dance is still performed today, and the men of the Garby Elders keep dancing so they never forget the steps.

Food and migration

It has been suggested that the movement of Aboriginal groups due to seasonal resources were not as necessary, and therefore not as common, on the North Coast as they were in less equable climates. Historic recollections however, indicate that there was at least some seasonal movement and some local relocation in any given year.¹⁸

Coastal visits were made when the mullet were running in late autumn and early winter. The fruiting of the lilly-pilly (wild cherry) trees occurred at that time too, resulting in a nutritious and well balanced diet for local Aboriginals. The lilly-pillies grew in profusion behind the sand dunes, in semi shaded gullies and on rainforest margins bordering the whole mid-north coastal plain and were relished by the Aboriginals.

Originally, the Woolgoolga lilly-pillies were believed to have been called wei-gul-gas by local aboriginals, thus providing the most probable origin of the village's name.¹⁹

The areas about Boambee and Bonville Creeks were especially rich sources of food. Not just lilly-pillies, but also Bangalow palms, native grapes, roly-poly trees and other plants were readily available. Pigeons were a rich source of meat, being brought down with throwing sticks, with fish and oysters being harvested from the streams whilst pipis could be gathered on the beach.²⁰

There were quite a number of Aboriginals camping in the Moonee area in the early days, where they had shelters near the sand dunes on the north end of Moonee Beach. Their main camps were back towards the hills. One camp was near where the Coffs Harbour Gun Club is now, which is typical of the low hills and slopes used for main camps. Many other sites are known in the Moonee Creek area. Soon after the settlement of Moonee, the Aboriginals slowly began fading out of the area, and by the 1890's stopped returning altogether, except for the odd short stay of two or three families at various times.²¹

The Bagawa clan, who were based in the Bucca Creek-Nana Glen area, are reported to have spent the winter months on the coast around Moonee, before returning home in the summer.²²

It has been suggested that, whether inland in summer or on the coast in winter, Aboriginal camps on the Mid North Coast were apparently relocated approximately monthly to allow the resting of favoured sites and to take advantage of different foodstuffs. The type of accommodation depended on location and season.²³

Tree climbing was of great importance in obtaining food, such as honey, opossums and koalas. The method adopted on the Clarence which was presumably the same as that followed in the Coffs region, was that the climber, with tomahawk in belt, used a tough pliable vine about 2cm in diameter obtained from the rainforest. A loop was tied for the left hand; then with the vine passed round the tree and the free end held in the right hand, the climbing started. With rough barked trees, such as Bloodwoods, climbers 'walked' up heights of 80 to 100 feet from the ground to the first branches with apparent ease. The 'walk' was really a series of jerks, toes pressed against the bark and the body lurching towards the tree thus slackening the vine and enabling it to be jerked upwards a couple of feet or so every stride. On slippery, smooth barked trees shallow toe-holds were commonly cut all the way up, with the first one or two being prepared before leaving the ground.²⁴

Flying foxes were often taken from the trees too, but rainy days were generally selected for their capture, as they would not fly in such conditions. In locations where flying foxes roosted by the thousand, hauls 'as great as could be carried away' were obtained. The fresh corpses were cast on a blazing fire to singe off their fur; then they were withdrawn and bled, and after disembowelling, put back into the fire and roasted. This was the usual cooking procedure for captures of flesh animals.²⁵

Animals with valued skins, such as koalas and opossums were, however, skinned before being put in the fire. The skins were scraped and rubbed with fat and ashes, and eventually sewn into rugs, using a bone needle and thread made from the long, tough fibres of sinew taken from kangaroo tails.²⁶

Honey was a much prized delicacy among Aboriginal people. Whilst the native bees' honey was popular, the honey made by the imported European bee was more highly sort after, with any resultant beestings being considered a price worth paying.²⁷

According to R. S. Ryan, for ground hunting:

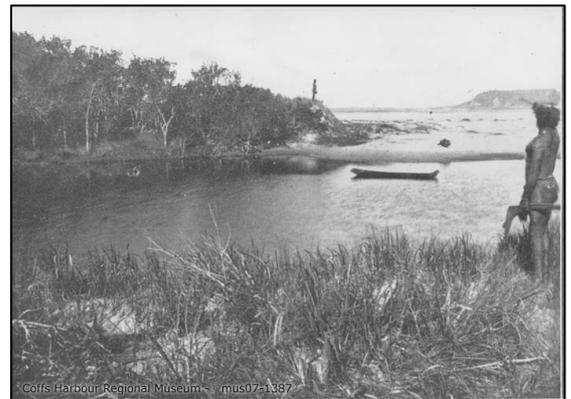
For game, they had opossums, kangaroo and wallaby, rat kangaroo and bandicoot, porcupines and snakes, flying foxes, together with any kind of birds they could get; a good supply of fish in Summer and large mussels from lagoons. The echidna was looked upon as a delicacy and was carefully cooked by being rolled in clay and baked in ashes, so that the quills came off with the clay after cooking. The Aboriginals ran down kangaroos single handed, following them for hours until they were exhausted and could be speared. At certain seasons they drove the kangaroos to some place where they had fastened nets to trees and added wings of brushwood in some narrow valley. The whole tribe took part in

*these drives, young men being posted along the drive to take up the running and force the terrified creatures into the nets, where they were soon despatched with spears and waddies.*²⁸

According to George England, the Gumbaynggirr people had it 'pretty good' around the Moonee area. During the winter months huge schools of sea mullet moved along the coast. Sharks drove them close to the shore where they were easily speared by men and boys. Pipis in countless thousands could be found in the sand of the beaches, while along the rocky headlands many kinds of shellfish could be obtained easily by good swimmers.²⁹

At Moonee, kangaroos, pademelons and wallabies were easily trapped by being driven into the triangle formed by the creek and the surf. At high tide the creek presented a long swim for those animals which tried to escape by swimming across. While a few youths patrolled the far side of the creek, any animals which attempted to escape by swimming could be cut off and killed while still in deep water as their swimming movements were slow. The animals were driven into the stream near the entrance of the creek where they were killed and a good supply of food obtained.³⁰

In the sandy soils along the bank of Moonee Creek, a number of corkwood trees attracted large numbers of pigeons in the autumn when the berries were ripe. By waiting beneath the low branching trees the hunters were able to kill the pigeons as they fed a few feet above them. The seed pods of the mangrove trees also provided much food in the winter-spring period. These cotyledons were cooked in a pit in which stones had been heated. The berries were covered with bark and soil and after half an hour or so they were ready to eat. In lesser quantities were lilly-pillies, pigface, strawberries, and the native plum.³¹



Fishing

The Gumbaynggirr people have always depended on the ocean for food and other resources. Traditional knowledge, which is still in use today, has been passed down through generations about how to catch different fish, when to catch them, and which bait types to use.³²

Many different fishing methods are used by the Gumbaynggirr people to catch fish. In the past, men would fish off the rocks or beach using hooks fashioned from the shells of turban snails (gugumbal), abalone and other molluscs found on rocky shores. These shellfish were harvested as a common food source, and later, rocks were used to sharpen the broken shell fragments into fishing hooks and other useful implements. The sharp shells were also made into tools for gutting and cleaning the day's catch. The fishing line was often made from the inner bark of the cottonwood hibiscus, which when twisted tightly, was renowned for its strength.³³

The first step in making a net to catch fish is to gather the plant fibres. The inner bark from certain trees, such as the Hibiscus and Kurrajong, was cleaned and split and spun into strong two-ply string. The string was then knotted or looped to start the net, adding more length to the string until the net was complete.³⁴

In fresh water, poisoning of fish with Bumbil Bumbil weed was one method used for their capture. An aboriginal, keeping his eyes and mouth shut for his own protection, dived under the water and rubbed bunches of the weed together, and soon after stricken fish would float to the surface and be easily caught. Fish were also speared from bark canoes, and 'drives' along shallow streams were made by Aboriginals advancing in line abreast to a netted endpoint.³⁵

For special occasions, gatherings or ceremonies, a greater catch of fish was needed. At these times, the men would use canoes to fish from. Canoes were commonly carved from the trunks of honeysuckle

Banksia trees that grew in the Coffs Harbour area. One of these canoes, dated back to 1880, is on display at the Yarrawarra Aboriginal Cultural Centre.³⁶

The Arrawarra Headland and stone fish traps

The Arrawarra Headland, as well as the stone fish traps and associated areas at Arrawarra are very important to the Garby Elders, their families, and the wider local Aboriginal community. It is an area where traditions and knowledge relating to ceremonial places is passed on and a rich place for collecting shellfish, and other natural resources for eating.³⁷

Arrawarra Headland and stone fish traps are positioned within the Solitary Islands Marine Park and are prominent features on the landscape. The main fish trap is constructed of stone from the headland and is about forty feet square and three feet deep. Arrawarra Headland is comprised of metamorphosed sedimentary rocks of the Coffs Harbour Beds. There appears to be a second fish trap a few feet to the north but it does not rise above the lowest level of stones.³⁸

"Arrawarra" means meeting place and the Garby Elders and peoples hold strong attachments to the ocean and shores in the Arrawarra area. Arrawarra Headland, including the stone fish traps, the associated rock platform and landscape features located on and around the headland, have been used for thousands of years for cultural activities such as gatherings, story telling and resource use. Traditionally, the stone fish traps have provided an effective means of capturing fresh fish, while the rock platform has provided food and medicines for many families including a range of shellfish, in particular the Googoombull or Turban shell. The trapping of fish, hand collection, spearing and line fishing have been, and still are, an integral part of the Garby way of life.³⁹

The age of the fish traps is unclear. There are reports of their use dating back to 1908 and 1931. The local Aboriginal community, in particular the Elders, hold memories and stories of their people using the Arrawarra stone fish traps, however, they were constructed before they were born. Excavation of a shell midden in the vicinity of Arrawarra Headland identified a very large number of fish bones. The fish species, their size and their processing methods were all compatible with those predicted to result from the use of a stone fish trap.⁴⁰

The mode of operations of the Arrawarra fish traps is said to have included baiting with scraps of shellfish or meat. The fish entered through an opening in the seaward wall and once large numbers were inside, the entrance was blocked. The operation was carried out at high tide; then as the tide fell, men entered the traps with nets and sticks making a 'rather crowded scene'.⁴¹

The use of the stone fish traps in recent times is restricted to special occasions such as Easter and Christmas, as well as 'once in a blue moon'. According to the Garby Elders, the blue moon occurs when there are two full moons in one month, and when two high tides occur in one night; on this night, the fish traps are used. Fishing takes place only after approval has been given by the Elders, who also need to be present. A range of fish species are targeted, in particular, mullet, luderick, bream, flathead and whiting.⁴²

*'In our culture only men use the fish traps. We bait up the traps with cunji, or we go fishing and put fish heads in there too, and we put the bait bags in when the first high tide runs out, so all the bait smells go out to the fish and the fish come in for a feed – Uncle Milton Duroux'*⁴³

Aboriginal people believe the stone arrangement was always used as a fish trap. Some non-Aboriginal people believe it has been constructed much more recently. Stones which create the trap have been moved, altering the original arrangement. Some non-Aboriginal fishermen say their relatives created the arrangement as a boat harbour. The fish trap was taken off the register of NSW NPWS Aboriginal sites in 1988, but the Yarrawarra Aboriginal Corporation has applied to have it re-instated. The stone arrangement and rock platform is now protected by inclusion in the Solitary Islands Marine Park, along with the plants, animals and physical environment of Arrawarra.⁴⁴



Arrawarra fish trap

(Sourced from ABC Online Indigenous - Programs - Message Stick - Waters of the Arrawarra)

Stone Artefacts

Many tools, such as axes, grinding stones and cutting knives were made from stone. Stones with sharp edges were highly sought after. These were usually made using a process called knapping, whereby small chips and flakes were broken off the edge of a rock; this not only produced small cutting stones but also axes (wagaarr). Wagaarr were commonly used to cut wood but could also be used as hunting weapons. The cutting edge of an axe is sharpened by grinding it smooth using a coarse sandstone grindstone.⁴⁵

Wooden Artefacts

Spear shafts for hunting and fishing were made from trees and plants such as the grass tree and cottonwood hibiscus. Tree branches were cut using stone axes, and the outer bark was stripped away. In some cases, parts of the outer and inner bark were separated to make string. The inner branch was often hard, and only the straightest branches were used to make spears. If a hard, strong timber was selected, the end of the spear (gamay) was sharpened into a point. Bark panels for making nguura (huts) were taken from the large swamp mahogany trees (bulurrga) in the area. Trees that are identified as having been used for these cultural purposes are protected as Aboriginal Sites.⁴⁶

Death and burial sites

In many cultures it is thought that as a result of death the spirit or will separate from the body. In Aboriginal culture a number of rites had to be observed in order for this separation to occur smoothly. There is little information regarding the rites of death in this region compared to other parts of Australia. The information that is available relates to material aspects such as the nature of the graves and the orientation of the bodies, rather than the behavioural aspects such as the nature of the rites themselves.⁴⁷

At the time of early European settlement, bodies were buried in a tightly contracted crouching or sitting position, generally upright. They were often wrapped in bark and there are references to limbs being tied together. This is supported by information from Aboriginals living in the region today.⁴⁸

At the time of first European settlement Aboriginal graves in large parts of NSW were marked by the presence of trees whose trunks had been carved with designs which identified or commemorated the person buried (Dendroglyph). In this way they were similar to headstones. In some areas trees were still being carved at grave sites in the late 19th century, but as Aboriginal people increasingly moved to fringe camps and reserves other ways were found to commemorate those who had died. One example of this is the use of sea shells which were used to decorate graves along the coast. Decorative or symbolic seashells have ancient origins and were used to symbolize fertility⁴⁹

New beliefs merged into Aboriginal culture, they did not replace it: smoking ceremonies were often carried out in conjunction with Christian rites and often people were buried in a crouched or sitting position rather than in the extended, horizontal Christian position. After 1788 the objects that relatives placed in the grave with the deceased reflected the new things which had become valuable in people's lives. Alongside a stone hatchet there might be pieces of bottle glass flaked into shapes useful for cutting meat and working wood; coins and crockery were sometimes placed in graves as well as clay pipes for smoking tobacco.⁵⁰

The breaking and tying of limbs is a method of discouraging the dead person's spirit from wanting to return to its old body. In the case of three burials found at Tabulam in 1933, limb bones had been broken before burial. There is little evidence as to whether it was customary to have one or two stage burials. In a two stage burial the flesh was removed from the bones by exposure and temporary burial and the bones were then often wrapped in a bundle and buried or deposited in caves. The fact that with most burials the bones of the skeletons were not separated from the flesh suggests a one stage burial was practiced.⁵¹

Cave burials were not practiced at or after the time of European contact. However, several such sites are found in the Richmond-Clarence area and it thus seems likely that there have been changes in the customs relating to the disposal of the dead.⁵²

Sometimes the dead were buried in burial grounds which belonged to clans and were situated in areas frequented by clan members. Individual graves or small groups of graves are also found. There is some evidence that powerful 'clever men' may have been buried on their own because of the danger their spirits could pose to the spirits of other bodies. Graves themselves were often marked by stone or earth mounds and sometimes nearby trees were carved.⁵³

Among the many farming reserves in NSW was that at Stuart's Island on the lower Nambucca River where families of Gumbaynggirr people had farmed the alluvial soil since 1883. When in the 1960s the Aborigines' Welfare Board leased the island to a golf club a fairway was constructed over the graves in the children's cemetery, much to the distress of the surviving family members who had been forced to leave the island.⁵⁴

Dreamtime and sacred sites

Sacred sites were generally located near significant topographic landmarks which the Aboriginal community believed had mythological characteristics associated with it. These sacred sites were where ceremonies or religious rites were performed, and are largely unknown to the non-Aboriginal community. These sites are precious to the Aboriginal community as so many of their sacred sites have been destroyed over the years as development encroached on their traditional lands.

The Gumbaynggirr dreamtime stories speak of Yuludarla, the first man. Because they believed that he looked like the sun, a group of men from one tribe chased Yuludarla, who, in order to escape capture, laid out rivers. Each time the men crossed these rivers, Yuludarla changed their language to confuse them. Some men were left behind at each river. In the north, the men that remained spoke Bunjalung. Further south, when he laid down the river, the men left behind spoke Yaegel. At Nambucca, the men that made it south of the river spoke Dhanggati, and those left between the Clarence and Nambucca rivers spoke Gumbaynggir.⁵⁵

Gittain Mirera (moon falling) and Muttonbird Island

Muttonbird Island is associated with a Dreamtime story concerning the moon falling into the sea. The Gumbaynggirr people named the island Gittain Mirera, which means moon falling. In some seasons the moon rises from behind the island when viewed from Beacon Hill.⁵⁶

The Aboriginal story tells of a Dreamtime giant who guarded the island and



kept the muttonbirds on the island for the local people to feed upon. Only elders could go onto the island and then only at king high and low tides. It was forbidden to go alone.⁵⁷

The huge mythical guardian would use the moon to form tidal waves, riptides and floods if the rules were broken. In this way the muttonbirds were not over-harvested and remained as a food source for the people in the future.⁵⁸

Look-at-me-now Headland

Look At Me Now Headland, located at Emerald Beach, also plays an integral part in the creation story of the local Aboriginal community. This headland has additional importance because caves located on this headland are rain increase sites, where traditional ceremonies would be held to encourage rainfall in the surrounding area.⁵⁹

The local Elders' maintain knowledge of mythological sites, dreaming routes, ceremonial sites and have knowledge of campsites from archaeological work throughout the Coffs Harbour region.

Axe factory

Aboriginal stone artefacts have been collected in the district since early settlement by interested amateurs and have been recorded by archaeologists during survey and excavation over the last 30 years or so. In the vicinity of the Coffs Harbour area, stone artefacts have been recorded at numerous locations including major stone-working sites at Look-At-Me-Now Headland at the north end of Moonee Beach.

In the 1960s, W. I. North located what was described as an axe factory with a midden on the southern side of the Look At Me Now Headland (at the northern end of Moonee Beach). As well as containing stone artefacts, the midden contained remnants of mud whelk, pipi and turban shells, with bones from wallaby, dingo and shearwater and pieces of ochre. Over 1,000 stone artefacts were recorded at the site, and all were produced from beach pebbles (greywacke, mudstone, siltstone and some sandstone) available within close proximity to the site. This site has since been destroyed by sand mining.⁶⁰

The combined action of southerly gales, accompanied by 19 inches of rain which fell in June 1967, and subsequent wind erosion of the high sand dunes to December 1970, exposed many implements which spilled out as the covering sand was blown inland. The assemblage was characterised by many large and small knapped implements including uniface hand-axes and choppers. Knapped examples include Worimi, Horsehoof and Sumatra types. Only two bi-face ground-edge axes were found and these at the extreme northern boundary of the site.⁶¹

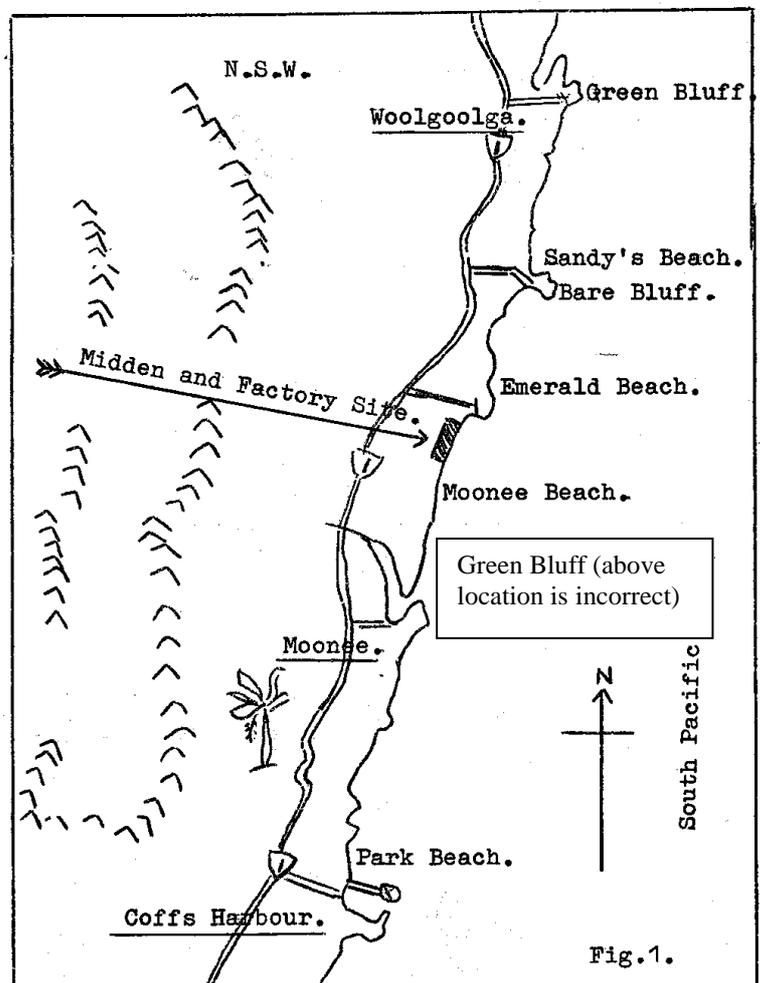


Fig. 1. Map showing situation of midden and factory site at Moonee Beach, Mid North Coast, New South Wales. Diagram sourced from 'Aboriginal stone implements from Moonee Beach, Mid North Coast, NSW' by W. A. Rogers, p4.

The presence of layers of different kinds of shells, some animal bones, thousands of chippings and broken pebbles, were evidence of the former presence and use of the site as a factory and midden by Aboriginals and their ancestors, over a long period of time.⁶²

Middens consist mostly of food refuse and they have been overshadowed in the public eye by more spectacular sites such as paintings and bora grounds. They are, however, of great importance because of the amount and variety of information which they contain.⁶³

The Arrawarra Midden

The Arrawarra midden lies a few hundred metres north of Arrawarra Headland at the entrance to Arrawarra Creek. The midden began eroding rapidly during the 1990s, when measures were put in place to try and protect it. These included a temporary fence in 1994; matting that was used as a cover and an artificial dune that was constructed in front of it to prevent further damage. In order to document and preserve its cultural significance and heritage, the midden was excavated in November 1997 by members of the Yarrawarra Aboriginal Corporation, archaeologists from the University of New England, and local volunteers. They carefully removed and documented all material, which is now stored at the Jalumbo Cultural Heritage Unit. The excavation was timely as the remainder of the midden washed away in 1999.⁶⁴

Charcoal dating indicated that the midden was deposited between 930 and 1,342 years ago, and had not been greatly disturbed since its formation. The midden mainly contained shell fragments, fish and animal bones, river stones and stone artefacts, and small amounts of charcoal, wood and seeds.⁶⁵

The results of the excavation found turban shells, mud whelks and oysters. The most common fish were bream and tarwhine, all of which appeared to be medium-sized. Other fish species included snapper, whiting, blackfish, mullet, flathead, tailor and trevally. Bones of various land animals were also discovered, including snake, wallaby, bush and marsupial rat, and echidna.⁶⁶

Red Rock massacre

Red Rock Headland is located approximately 40km's north of Coffs Harbour, and is remembered as a massacre site.

The Garby Elders speak of the regretful interactions between their people and the Europeans, the most notable being the Red Rock Massacre of the 1880s. Europeans are said to have chased the Gumbaynggirr people from their camp at the river to the headland, where many innocent people lost their lives. Red Rock is referred to as 'Blood Rock' by the Garby Elders, who regard this as an extremely sacred site and a place for reflection. A memorial has been established on the headland to mark the event and recognise the brutality that occurred at the site.⁶⁷

Tony Perkins, in Red Rock camping and exchange, remembers:

Somewhere between Blackadders Creek and Casson's Creek all the creek beds were full of those reeds and stuff and these policemen came along on horses. And she said all the men were there and the women, they were washin' a' that sort of thing. Ans she reckons that's where, she said they shot that man, men there. She reckoned that when they chased them they went down through to Red Rock and she said the men was goin' across, swimming across the river there. And she said up here where they started and down there she reckons, she's told me, she said the water it was red, just red, where they used to shoot 'em when they were in the water tryin' to get to the other side. She said they shot them in the water and she said that water was just red, it was blood in there. She grabbed the baby, and the women they hid in these rushes on the creek banks. But she reckons it was the worst thing she ever seen in her time, and that they just came along and started shooting. It was red in the river, where they tried to get across the river and the only reason why they survived was because under Red Rock headland is a cave that comes back out and the cave actually did go all the way back under Red Rock to Jewfish point, it came back out and the men actually got around into there, went under and came back up and that's the only way most survived.⁶⁸

Below is the text inscribed on the memorial cairn at Red Rock Headland:

In memory of the victims and survivors of the Blood Rock massacres. Understanding their sacrifice will make us stronger.

We as Gumbaingirr people have survived many conflicts over ownership of our traditional lands, including a massacre where many were driven off the headland at Red Rock (Blood Rock).

Gumbaingirr descendants, especially women, still avoid this headland. The significance of this place and the rebirthing of our culture will never be forgotten.



Reserves

In 1882 the Aborigines Protection Board of New South Wales was established and the first reserves were set up in the region. Bellbrook reserve was gazetted in 1883, Burnt Bridge in 1898 and Nymboida in 1910. Aborigines in New South Wales were not forced by law to live on reserves but were compelled to do so by economic circumstances which made it nearly impossible to live without government rations. These reserves also provided a modicum of protection against the racist and often belligerent attitude of the white community.⁶⁹

Although Aborigines lived on the reserves mostly through coercion rather than choice and despite the fact that reserves were a symbol of oppression they were nevertheless, enclaves of surviving aboriginal culture. To supplement the meagre government rations people still hunted and gathered wild 'bush tucker' in the surrounding countryside, ensuring that some of their traditional skills and knowledge survived. The generations who grew up on the reserves often maintain strong emotional ties with these places. A key factor in those ties is that many of the reserves contain Aboriginal cemeteries wherein the relatives of many Aborigines from the Coffs Harbour region today are buried.⁷⁰

A number of small reserves had been lobbied for by Aboriginal people who asked for farming land in their own country. They had at first functioned as safe-havens and were controlled by Aboriginal people, with a number of farms being established at Bellingen, Urunga and Nambucca. However, by the 1920s, many Aborigines were forced off this land by the Lands Department, as the demand for these successfully farmed lands by returning soldiers increased. This stripping away of their farmlands for the Soldier Settlement Scheme was often seen as the second dispossession for Aboriginal people. As a general rule Aboriginal soldiers were not able to access land through this land scheme.⁷¹

Forced migration was a common experience of north coast Aborigines through to the 1940s. For example Urunga people had been forced onto trucks in 1937 and removed to the new government reserve at Burnt Bridge north of Kempsey. Another reason for moving was the increasing demand of white families to have Aboriginal children removed from public schools. The formal policy of NSW Department of Public Instruction was that any complaint from a European parent was grounds for removal of all Aboriginal children from that school. In New South Wales pressure for removals from white parents was greatest on the north coast and Aboriginal families found themselves reluctantly moving to towns or reserves where schools were available.⁷²

In 1936 Aboriginal parents at Corindi, north of Coffs, found themselves faced with this demand. The white parents confessed their request was not based on health or moral grounds but that it 'just didn't seem right that the two racial groups mix freely'. In a rare occurrence the school teacher did not support the parents and the school remained open to the Aboriginal children. Because of the small number of students, half of whom were Aboriginal, the school would have had to close if the removal had been successful.⁷³

Living in the old camps

According to Yeates, in the main those aboriginals who had not succumbed to disease and could not find work made crude camps on the outskirts of the white-inhabited settlements. They used cast-off clothing and subsisted on meagre government rations, along with the occasional blanket hand-out by the police, plus whatever they could beg, borrow or steal to make life easier. Their shelters were made from discarded corrugated iron, cut-down kerosene tins and off-cuts from nearby mills. Even the most basic hygiene was lacking.⁷⁴

In Coffs Harbour, camps of this type were located on the south bank of Coffs Creek in the vicinity of the present Olympic swimming pool; on the sand dunes between the mouth of the creek and the harbour; and on the south side of the harbour near the Deep-sea Fishing Club. The camps were near bush tucker and culturally significant sites, while the creek and surrounding forests provided fish and game.⁷⁵

A permanent campsite which the aboriginal people had established on land on the south bank of Coffs Creek, adjacent to Gordon and Duke Streets, came under public scrutiny following the war. Concern was felt for the lack of sanitation with consequent risk to public health.⁷⁶

Even though the Aborigines Welfare Board considered the camps to be problematic and unsightly, the aboriginal families living in the camps saw them quite differently. The camps provided a strong sense of identity and freedom, providing aboriginal people with a link to the past that continues to shape their lives in the present. The camps were gathering places that connected aboriginal families to the wider cultural landscape in and outside the Coffs Harbour region. Families living along Coffs Creek had many family connections to other aboriginal settlements, such as the camp that had developed at Dung Hill during the 1940's. Dung Hill camp was located at the southern end of Coffs Harbour jetty, which overlooked the north coast railway line to the west.⁷⁷

Many of the problems associated with the camps were not exclusively those of the town camper. One problem is the non-aboriginal community's perception of aboriginal people. There is little or no appreciation of the history and culture of aboriginal people, nor is there much understanding of the factors which forced some aboriginals to live in a camp environment.

Improvement of the local aboriginals living conditions developed into a continuing saga. In March 1946 a sub-committee of the Shire Council reported that it had inspected 'the uncontrolled settlements of white and coloured populations north of Coff Street and east of Duke Street on Crown reservations'. The committee searched for a more suitable site for the settlement of the 'coloured population' but as this was unsuccessful, it was decided to make formal application for land acquisition to the Aborigines' Welfare Board in Sydney.⁷⁸

When, in the following month, Council was asked by Mr T. J. Jordan, who lived near the camp, to install a water tap for the campers' use, Council replied that the matter was already being attended to. Council had indeed applied to the Aborigines' Welfare Board for money to upgrade facilities. In July the board advised that £55 had been contributed, subject to Council at least matching the grant. This was agreed to, with the result that not only a water supply, but sanitary and garbage arrangements were to be provided.⁷⁹

Following a visit to Coffs Harbour by officers of the Aborigines' Welfare Board in April 1947 news was received by the Shire Council in May that the Lands Department had approved portions 108, 109 and part of 110, an area of about 8 acres on the western side of the Highway, just north of the Forestry Depot, as an Aboriginal settlement. Over a year later (Nov 1948), Mr Vincent MLA informed the Council that the site was 'not entirely suitable'.⁸⁰

Meanwhile conditions at the creek-side camp had worsened. In a comprehensive report on camping generally within the town boundaries, the Health Inspector reported to Council's October 1948 meeting that additional campers, not only aborigines, were moving in each week; that the camps were dangerous

to the health of the entire population; and that the camps at the creek site had encroached onto Coff Street 'within a few feet of dwellings on the south side of that street'⁸¹

Many fringe dwelling camps were demolished during the 1950s so Aboriginal people would have to move into State housing. These areas of land were rarely conserved because the government considered they had little aesthetic appeal or historical significance, despite the emotional link to this land felt by the Aboriginal community that lived there. During the 1950s, under the authority of the Aborigines Welfare Board, the Aboriginal Welfare Committee moved Aboriginal people from places such as the old camps at Coffs Creek to a State housing estate, consisting of eight houses on the Pacific Highway north of Coffs Harbour:

'... But I remember the grown-ups, the people that were living there, saying: "The welfare's going to move us out there. They're going to put us in these lovely new homes ..." and yeah, I know it was the Welfare Board that moved them and from my understanding of that move, the people that was living down at the old camp had to be married to go with those houses, so yeah, I don't know and I don't think nan did, because it was something where you moved when welfare said: "Move!" and there wasn't any negotiating, there wasn't any communication, it was: "This is what's happening and this is where you're going ...". It was, like, the 50s, this is when you did what welfare told you ... I think you look back, go back into that time when Aboriginal people were being taken away from, you know, like taken ... Well, take the old camp for example where the people lived, they took them from there and put 'em out to Wongala [to the State housing estate] because the white man wanted that land and there was nothing Aboriginal people could do'. (Interview with Aunty Sue Hoskins, 14 January 2005, Coffs Harbour)⁸²

The Gumbaynggirr people had been the sole occupants of the Coffs Harbour region for many thousands of years, only having to co-exist with white people from the 1870s onwards. They have a long and proud history which includes rich cultural and spiritual traditions. Unfortunately, many of these traditions were either altered or taken away completely once the Gumbaynggirr people were forced to co-exist with European settlers from 1870s onwards. The mistaken belief that European culture and values were 'best' and the subsequent push for Aboriginal people to comply with them had a devastating affect on their social, physical and spiritual lives.

Disclaimer

The information in this document has been sourced from a number of publications, which include both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives.

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