

Stone Fish Trap RE-DISCOVERED

In a remote corner of the world, east of Esperance, a stone fish trap has been re-discovered by Esperance Traditional Owners and an integrated research team operating within the Gabbie Kylie Foundation (National Trust of Australia, W.A.). The find is the first fish trap so far recorded in the wEsperance region. For Traditional Owner and Coordinator of the Foundation, Doc Reynolds, the find is a powerful reminder of his community's connection to Country. "I remember using this area as a child, with the Old People catching a good feed here all the time. The old fellas had a very complex understanding of the seasons, tides, and animal behaviour, and were able to utilize sustainable techniques to harvest a catch with great skill and efficiency."

The site comprises a number of placed stones across a tidal creek and estuary, that were most likely supported by wooden stakes and other fibrous meshing, that have long since deteriorated. The trap was created as a subsistence strategy, harnessing the natural tidal cycles of this estuary, whereby fish move in and out with the tides but then some are blocked by this fish trap; and are therefore more easily speared or caught. People traditionally fished and hunted in seasonal cycles, careful to not over-exploit any one resource, to ensure sustainable futures.

During a survey of this region in October 2012, local Elder Gail Yorkshire-Selby noticed a large stone protruding from the sand, though still partially submerged. The team investigated and identified a discrete alignment; waiting until low tide before excavating the beach sands and exposing the entire feature. They then busily went about photographing and mapping the feature before the high tide returned. The site was recorded and will be submitted to the Department of Indigenous Affairs who provide legislative protection of important heritage places. The Gabbie Kylie team will continue to monitor and manage this area.



Elders, archaeologists and field school participants work to excavate the stone fish trap before high tide returns (Photo D.Guilfoyle).

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photo: David Guilfoyle

Elaborate fish traps have been documented throughout the Southwest and South coast, most notably the heritage-listed fish traps of Oyster Harbour in Albany. It is difficult to determine how long these traps have been used, and further work is necessary to document the way people utilized the area and adapted to changing environments. During the mid-Holocene (c.a. 7,000 to 3,000 years ago), the local environment is likely to have had a different configuration associated with changing sea levels and coastal formation processes. Indeed, the Gabbie Kylie team and other archaeologists from the Western Australian Museum have documented archaeological sites and evidence of complex human occupation on several offshore islands; demonstrating that people were able to once walk through a vast coastal plain that is now the Islands of the Recherche Archipelago.

The fish trap site is one of hundreds of archaeological places, historic structures, and maritime sites being recorded and managed by the Esperance Traditional Owner community, together with various specialists, and with support from the Department of Environment and Conservation. Archaeologist David Guilfoyle (Applied Archaeology International) believes it is the integrated approach adopted by the Foundation that underlies much of the success of the program. “This

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works because we all have different perspectives but share the same goal – to learn how best to manage and protect our natural and cultural landscapes. We have Elders, young fellas, students, archaeologists, land managers, and botanists all in the field together. Everyone has something to contribute; everyone’s perspective is respected and incorporated into the field work and research.”

Genevieve Carey, a student from the University of Montana in the USA, who participated in this most recent field trip, believes the program is something special. “I was able to listen, learn and experience a great deal during my time on this field school. But more than that, I was treated not solely as a student,

but as an active member of the team. It was a great honor to work alongside the Elders and specialists in such a way, and experience the thrill of discovery and adventure together.”

The team was joined by Professor Steve Hopper, Winthrop Professor of Biodiversity, from the Centre of Excellence in Natural Resource Management and School of Plant Biology, within the University of Western Australia. Professor Hopper agreed that the holistic nature of the program, and working with the Indigenous community, is vitally important: “Sharing cross-cultural and cross disciplinary knowledge is a powerful way to achieve the best outcomes for caring for country and conserving biodiversity. It was a personally enriching and moving experience for me to join the elders, archaeologists and students on the Field School and explore plant life while learning about how humans lived and adapted to one of the world’s most beautiful and enigmatic landscapes.”

The program is also greatly supported by long-term partners, the Western Australian Museum (WAM). Representing WAM on the field trips is Ross Anderson, a maritime archaeologist who has been researching aspects of the early whaling and sealing period along the south coast. ‘The Gabbie Kylie Foundation (GKF) research and field school program aims for excellence in community development and natural and cultural heritage site management. In achieving its aims the GKF program is both grass-roots and academic in its philosophy, and represents all that is positive in cross-cultural sharing between Traditional Owners, researchers, students, and management bodies. The WA Museum is proud to be a supporter of the GKF program.’ The program is further supported by historical archaeologist, Renée Gardiner, managing director of Earth Imprints Consulting. Her work with the Traditional Owners is uncovering some exciting aspects of the more recent past through investigation of several remote homesteads (stay tuned for the forthcoming article).

The Gabbie Kylie Foundation was established in late 2007 to conserve and interpret the Indigenous heritage values of the south coast region and enable Traditional Owners to re-establish connections with country. In order to achieve these objectives, the Foundation has adopted a holistic, community-based approach that integrates education and training programs with on-ground conservation works. Field schools enable high school students, university students and members of the broader community to undertake on-ground



conservation work, while receiving instruction in archaeology, geography, restoration ecology, heritage conservation and landscape management. The program is supported by the W.A. Museum, the Federal Government’s Indigenous Heritage Program, and BHP Billiton. David Guilfoyle says the program is highly important and relevant. “Understanding the complex connections and knowledge people have of the land is the most important avenue of inquiry for our generation as we strive toward achieving ecological, economic and social sustainability. Western science and society is, in many ways, still trying to catch up to the complexity and ingenuity of Australia’s First Nations. A fish trap and a program like this one provide many insights. We only need open our eyes to the past to see sustainable pathways for the future.”

**To get involved or for more information,
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