

1.1 Cultural heritage linking people to wildlife demonstrates significant understanding and ongoing respect for wildlife and habitats.

The Ngaro, the Traditional Owners of the Whitsunday Islands and coastal region surrounding area, are Sea People. The Whitsunday Islands formed the centre of their lifestyle. They were known to have distinctive three-piece ironbark canoes, *winta* (picture attached), that they used for fishing expeditions and other journeys. Their diet consisted of sea turtles, dugongs, small whales, flying foxes, fowls, green ant, cockatoo apples, wild cherries, and more ([The Whitsunday Islands: Initial Historical and Archaeological Observations and Implications for Future Work, 1986](#)). Their ability to hunt larger sea mammals was only possible due to their development of barbed harpoons that enabled the Ngaro to kill their prey by exhausting it rather than them bleeding to death, which would have attracted sharks ([The Ngaro People of the Whitsundays, 2008](#)).

Evidence of Ngaro life in the region can be traced back as far as 9000 years, with the oldest archaeological sites in the Great Barrier Reef right here at Nara Inlet on Hook Island, Whitsundays (map and rock art attached). Archaeologists and descendants recognise that Ngaro history with the land goes back further, however evidence has been lost due to changing landscapes and much of the land being covered by the ocean and transformed into reefs and seabed.

There are Dreaming Stories associated with the islands; A Ngaro elder, Aunty Sue, tells the Dreaming of the islands like this:

“Long ago, there were no islands, only the vast blue of the sea. One day, the Rainbow Serpent passed through the water, laying her eggs as she went. Ancient observers of rising sun and setting moons, her eggs remain – they are the islands where you stand today.”

Due to the decimation and oppression of the Ngaro people, along with many other Indigenous family groups in Australia, many of their stories from the Dreaming, that had traditionally been passed down through song and dance, have been lost. The rituals, languages, and dialects that were once used to tell them have also been lost.

Fortunately, the people are strong and enduring; Recently Traditional Owners have started the process of bringing previously lost or unshared songs to the wider community. One song, which is about whales, has lyrics but has never been heard and the music and rhythm has been lost. Traditional Owners are in the process of considering re-writing the music to continue to pass their culture and knowledge on to the next generation.

To this day, locals of the Whitsundays are extremely connected to the ocean and the habitat it provides to countless species. Local people recreationally sail, fish, and snorkel the Whitsunday waters. They connect with nature by watching and reporting sightings of animals, including whales as they migrate through the waters and calve in the region. Living in or visiting the Whitsundays connects people to the beauty and diversity that this region offers.

Although restoring names that have been silenced by colonialism is slow-coming in the area, Whales of the Whitsunday Steering Committee members are committed to doing our part in supporting our Traditional Owners. One of our objectives for the course of our three-year management plan is to include Traditional Owners in the development of information that highlights the region's value to whales and the traditional knowledge that helps us to understand the history and culture of the region.

Today, [Indigenous rangers on the Reef](#) help the Reef Authority to protect cultural and heritage value, conserve biodiversity, and enhance the resilience of the Reef. The Indigenous ranger program is nationally accredited and provides rangers with the skills to ensure Marine Park users comply with its rules and traditional lore. It aims to intermix traditional knowledge with Western science to protect Indigenous heritage values and ultimately, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. [Leo Gabey](#), who is of Ngaro descent, is a park ranger based at Airlie Beach. He started with Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service as part of the Indigenous ranger program in 2012 as a chance to get more involved with his culture, to visit sacred sites, and to monitor tourism impacts on Country.

The Whitsundays is also part of a [Traditional Owner Reference Group](#) (TORG) that is committed to managing, maintaining, and protecting tribal lands and sea within the Mackay Whitsunday Isaac regions. They discuss, develop, and deliver opportunities to build capacity within the group and share cultural heritage and traditional environmental values and knowledge. As representatives of the seven Traditional Owner groups of the region (Ngaro, Gia, Juru, Yuwibara, Koinmerburra, Barada, Wiri) the TORG seeks to develop opportunities to reconnect with Country. They direct and participate in on-Country activities to restore and protect cultural heritage and are responsible for the dissemination of the material to the wider Indigenous community.

The TORG is also involved with Indigenous education in local schools. The Queensland Government Department of Education, Training and the Arts outlined [Indigenous Education and Training Futures](#). This plan has been implemented in Proserpine and Cannonvale State Schools. Part of this plan includes the addition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across the curriculum and schools increasing their [knowledge](#) of the local indigenous history. For the latter part of the plan, students visit Nara Inlet and learn about Aboriginal culture and plant uses.