

1.3 Efforts are in place to continually revive, reimagine, and enhance the presentation and interpretation of cultural heritage linked to wildlife.

In June, the Whales of the Whitsunday steering committee helped organise the region's first annual cultural Welcome Whale Event that was presented by Traditional Owners.

The event first came to inception at the March Steering Committee meeting (March minutes attached). From here, Traditional Owners were engaged to design the event, ensure all appropriate permissions were sought and set a date. The event was purposed to signify the start of Humpback Whale season in the Whitsundays and ideas for what the event would entail were proposed. Olivia Broadhurst, the Steering Committee chairwoman, presented the idea to the Traditional Owner Reference Group (TORG) and Aunty Anges spoke about trying to organise traditional dancers for the event (April minutes attached). By May, council had approved the event, an Indigenous artist for the piece had been found, and decorations and merchandise were being organised (May minutes attached). The week before the event it was decided there would be traditional dances with crowd participation, a whale art installation, the commissioned artwork would be interactive for families to add their handprints to on the night, there would be whale video and sounds on the big screen, and more (June minutes attached).

The event included a Traditional Welcome to Country, a Smoking Ceremony, an Indigenous dance ceremony welcoming whales to our region, stories from Traditional Owners about their connection to whales, the opportunity to participate in creating a traditional whale art piece (pictured), traditional song, video and audio of whales and the presentation of updated whale watching regulations by our regions Master Reef Guides on the outdoor bit screen. It was finished off with a kids movie, *The Whale and the Snail*. The finished art piece is now in the process of being sold to a local business where it will be hung on display in a public space so it can be observed and appreciated by the community. The funds are planned to go toward helping the Steering Committee continue to enhance and expand the Whales of the Whitsundays program.

Overall, the event was extremely successful, and we aim to make this an annual event for the Whitsunday community to get more involved in cultural heritage and their own linkage to the whales. The Steering Committee plans to engage Traditional Owner's and do a follow-up survey to see what they did and did not like about the 2023 Welcome Whale Event to gather ideas and strategies for future improvement.

In early August, there was the annual Great Barrier Reef Festival. When it launched in 2001 it was known as the 'Reef Festival' and was about marketing the Whitsundays as a destination to visit the Reef. Since then, the Whitsundays has become a major destination, with about 40 percent of those visiting the Reef doing so through our doorstep. The Reef Festival had changed in kind. Now, more than just a marketing tactic, the Festival also celebrates Indigenous culture and environmental education. In support of the Steering Committee, this year the festival's theme was whales!