



Protecting **SALTWATER COUNTRY**

The co-creation of three new marine parks in the culturally-rich Kimberley

Bardi, Jawi, Mayala and Dambeemangarddee people and the State Government have come together to declare three new marine parks in the Kimberley's Buccaneer Archipelago.

The parks are jointly vested in and managed by their Traditional Owners, who have partnered in their creation.

*by Samille Mitchell, Roanna Goater and Michael Higgins
with support from Rowena Mouda, Janella Isaac, Rosanna
Angus, Kevin George, Leah Umbagi and Kristy Burgu*



The sun is beginning to rise above turquoise seas on a wild and rugged Kimberley island as Mayala man Alec Isaac strolls across the island interior.

Bathed in golden early morning light, he stops at a bush, drops to the ground and begins to dig out its roots. These roots aren't for eating, but for crushing and putting into tidal ponds. The roots, he says, deoxygenate the water, leaving fish starved of oxygen and easier to catch and eat.

Alec's Mayala ancestors learned of the roots' trait and passed on the secret and other cultural stories to their children.

This rich Indigenous culture has remained strong through countless generations, handed down through stories shared around campfires, while riding surging tides to hunt sea creatures and while camping here, on Country, under star-strewn night skies.

Such rich Indigenous heritage and traditional know-how is now earning better recognition and protection thanks to this area's recent creation as a marine park.

Mayala Marine Park is one of three new marine parks that Traditional Owners and the State Government have created in the Kimberley's Buccaneer Archipelago. Together, Bardi Jawi Gaarra, Mayala and Maiyalam marine parks protect 660,000 hectares of island-studded seas.

The area's Traditional Owners jointly manage the parks with Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions staff, helping them to fulfill a cultural obligation to care for Country and do what Traditional Owners have done for tens of thousands of years—coexist sustainably with nature.



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Top Mayala Marine Park.

Photo – Peter Nicholas/DBCA

Centre Maiyalam Marine Park.

Photo – Michael Higgins/DBCA

Below Bardi Jawi Gaarra Marine Park.

Photo – Peter Nicholas/DBCA

Background Waves of the sea.

Photo – Andrey Armyagov/Adobe

Above right Mayala man Alec Isaac.

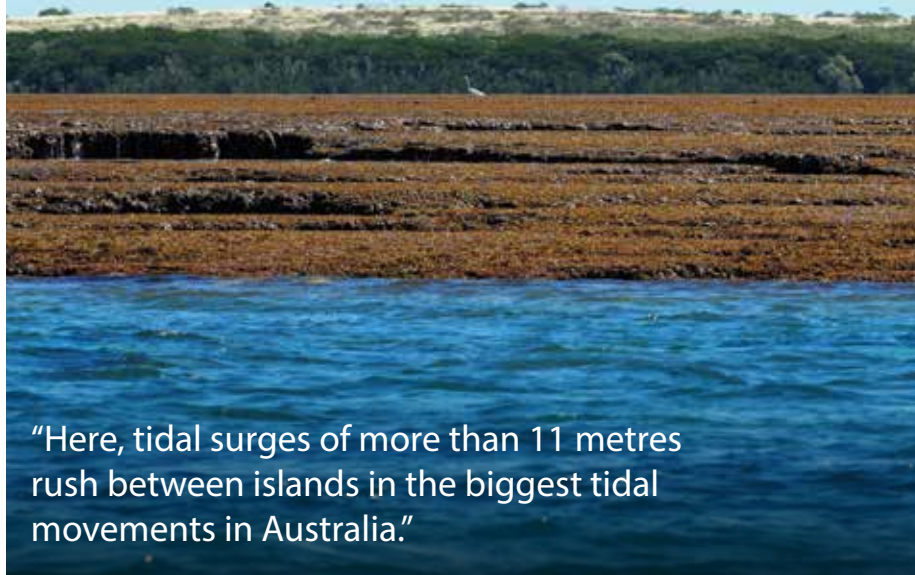
Photo – Samille Mitchell/DBCA

NATURAL BOUNTY

The Buccaneer Archipelago boasts hundreds of rocky isles rising above turquoise seas.

They tower above the ocean in clusters of red rock, embracing white sandy beaches, verdant green mangrove stands, mudflats and rocky cliff faces. In the wet season, mighty waterfalls tumble from the cliffs into the sea.





“Here, tidal surges of more than 11 metres rush between islands in the biggest tidal movements in Australia.”

Fringing reefs have formed around many of the islands, hosting plants and animals that have evolved to tolerate the vast tidal movements. Unlike corals in other areas, the corals here can withstand exposure above the water line during low tides.

Closer to the islands, intertidal reef platforms nurture a myriad of invertebrate life, important cultural resources that Aboriginal people continue to harvest by hand at low tide.

Mangrove-lined creeks and seagrass meadows provide important nurseries for young sea life, including turtles, fish and birds. During different seasons, mammals including dugongs (*Dugong dugon*), Australian humpback dolphins (*Sousa sahulensis*), Australian snubfin dolphins (*Orcaella heinsohni*) and humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) traverse the open seas.

HIGHWAYS ON THE TIDES

If there's one natural element that characterises this region, it's the tides. Here, tidal surges of more than 11 metres rush between islands in the biggest tidal movements in Australia. The movement between narrow passages creates tidal streams of up to 10 knots, as well as swirling masses of backwater currents and dangerous whirlpools and tidal overflows.

Despite the tide's often treacherous nature, Aboriginal people have used tides and currents as highways with

great care and skill for millennia. Guided by an intimate knowledge of the tides, currents, seasons and stars, they would ride the tides on double log rafts, between different islands and hunting and harvesting grounds. Different rafts served different purposes—some served best for hunting, others for long ocean journeys in which they'd carry fresh water in baler shells.

BARDI JAWI GAARRA MARINE PARK

Bardi Jawi Gaarra Marine Park embraces the northern stretches of the Dampier Peninsula, north of Broome, and the western islands of the Buccaneer Archipelago. It is home to Bardi and Jawi people, known as gaarra, or saltwater people.

The Bardi and Jawi people have held native title over their traditional lands and seas since 2005. One year later, the Bardi Jawi Rangers group was established to support management of their land and sea Country, Traditional Owners' livelihoods and connection to Country. The creation of the jointly-managed marine park builds on their success by providing a marine park management framework, resources, opportunity, and the benefits of partnership with the State Government.

Bardi and Jawi people share traditional stories explaining the creation of the sea, islands, reefs and certain sea creatures.

Bardi and Jawi people

“We have used, relied on, enjoyed and protected Country over thousands of years and continue to do so today. Bardi and Jawi sea Country has always been, and continues to be, an essential part of Bardi and Jawi spiritual, social and physical existence. The Lore created religiously significant features in the sea that the madjamadjin [lore bosses] are required to protect. Traditional stories explain the creation of the saltwater and certain sea creatures.

Supernatural sea creatures such as the loolooloo [shark] have always existed to protect Bardi and Jawi people in their sea faring life. Bardi and Jawi people have always engaged in, and continue to engage in, shore fishing, collecting sea food from the intertidal zone, hunting odorr [dugong] and goorlil [turtle] in the shallows and from rafts with the goorlil [turtle] and odorr [dugong] being shared in accordance with traditional lore. Pearl shell is also collected and used as a resource for ceremony and trade.”



Above left Bardi Jawi Gaarra Marine Park. Photo – Matt Frances/DBCA

Above Kooljaman, Bardi Jawi Gaarra Marine Park. Photo – Michael Higgins/DBCA

Inset Bardi Jawi Cultural Dancers. Photo – Gabrielle Timmins/Kimberley Land Council



Discover more about the new marine parks

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Through the actions of ancestral beings in the creation period, rai [spirit beings] were placed through Country. Bardi and Jawi people believe that, before birth, they existed as rai. Rai are regarded as good or natural spirits but can cause trouble for strangers who visit or camp in the wrong place or visit areas without being properly introduced.

Bardi Jawi Elder Bugujul, whose Western name is Kevin George, says protecting this culture and Country is not just a personal desire but a cultural obligation.

“The [marine parks] help us Traditional Owners to continue our life in a traditional customary way as well to look after the resources that looked after us, to look after the environment that looked out for us,” he said.

“We have a duty of care and obligation to look after our Country that has been passed on—we have to do this. It has been the wishes of our Elders who have left us, and have left us with this Country. We need to keep that healthy for our future generations.”

MAYALA MARINE PARK

The 315,000-hectare Mayala Marine Park comprises an extensive network of hundreds of islands, submerged lands, seabeds and saltwater about 200 kilometres north-east of Broome.



The Mayala people’s native title over their land and sea Country was recognised in 2018, 20 years after their claim was lodged with the Federal Court. Like the Bardi, Jawi and Dambeemangarddee people, Mayala’s decision to include all of their sea Country within a marine park is significant for their community.

The Mayala people believe the power and creative energy of ancestral beings shaped their Country and these ancestral beings continue to reside within special places, along with the stories and evidence of their deeds and the spirits of their unborn children.

Mayala woman Maagkin, or Janella Isaac, says the new park helps her people maintain their connection to Country.

“The sea means everything to us, the sea is our home, it’s got our resources,” she said.

“We have so much connection to the sea, what’s above the sea and what’s below. That’s why the marine park is very, very important to us as a people, as traditional people.”

MAIYALAM MARINE PARK

Maiyalam Marine Park adds a further 47,000 hectares to the Kimberley marine reserves. It borders the existing Lalang-gaddam Marine Park in the east of the Buccaneer Archipelago and is managed under the same management plan as Lalang-gaddam.

Maiyalam Marine Park is so named for the word ‘maiylam’, which means ‘between islands’ or ‘a gap through’ in reference to the sea passages between particularly dramatic and rugged clusters of islands.

The park protects culturally and naturally important areas including the Oobeeyal Special Purpose Zone, which is rich in cultural stories and has long served

Mayala people

“Mayala are saltwater people. We have a unique island culture and deep knowledge of the complex currents and tides to navigate between our islands and across our sea Country. This knowledge comes from our long association and living relationship with Country as it has changed over thousands of years. Our name comes from the spinifex grass that grows on the islands—we used this on top of our ngirray [shelters] to protect us from the rain and keep us warm.

Living on small islands with little game and few large mammals or freshwater sources, our people lived primarily off the sea, adapting tools and technology to harvest sea resources for survival, using the loo [currents] tides and stars to navigate through Country. Our Lore has kept our Country and our people alive since milonjoon [from long ago] and we are here because of our ancestors and their care for Mayala Country. We follow our own cultural governance structures and kinship systems.”



Above Gararr (Mermaid Island), Mayala Marine Park.

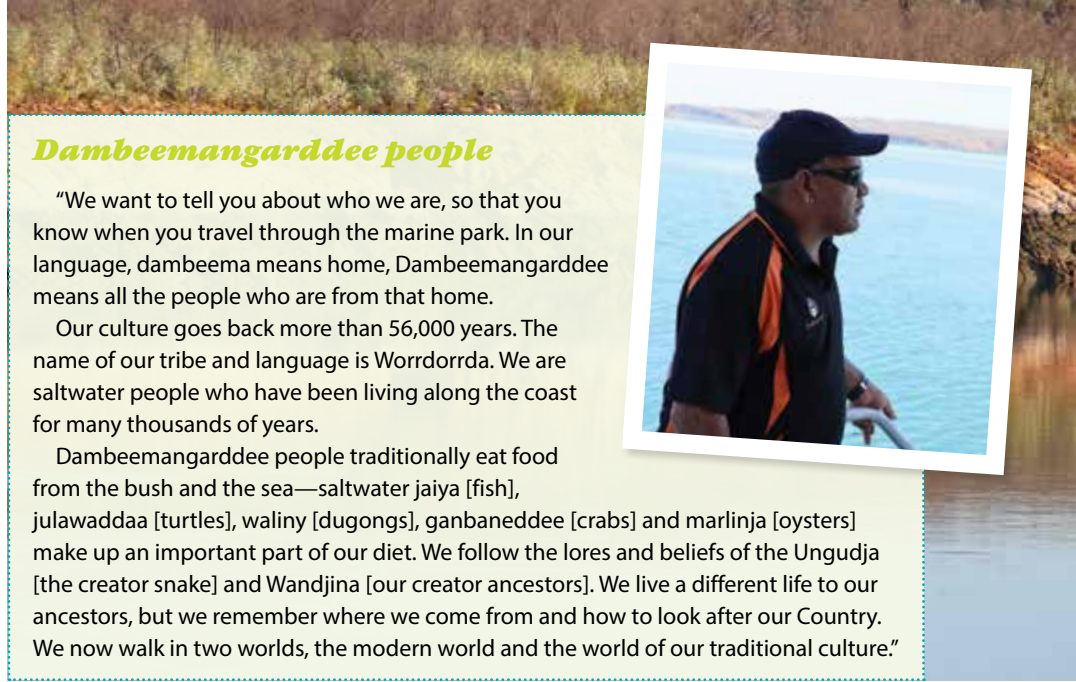
Photo – Samille Mitchell/DBCA

Left Mayala Marine Park.

Photo – Gina Lincoln/DBCA

Inset Mayala woman Alexis Vincent examines a reef exposed by the tide.

Photo – Peter Nicholas/DBCA



Dambeemangarddee people

“We want to tell you about who we are, so that you know when you travel through the marine park. In our language, dambeema means home, Dambeemangarddee means all the people who are from that home.

Our culture goes back more than 56,000 years. The name of our tribe and language is Worrorra. We are saltwater people who have been living along the coast for many thousands of years.

Dambeemangarddee people traditionally eat food from the bush and the sea—saltwater jaiya [fish], julawaddaa [turtles], waliny [dugongs], ganbaneddee [crabs] and marlinja [oysters] make up an important part of our diet. We follow the lores and beliefs of the Ungudja [the creator snake] and Wandjina [our creator ancestors]. We live a different life to our ancestors, but we remember where we come from and how to look after our Country. We now walk in two worlds, the modern world and the world of our traditional culture.”

as a site for traditional fishing and hunting. It’s particularly revered for its culturally important waddaroo [reefs] and jindirm [mangroves] which provide nursery areas for jaiya [fish] and serve as sites for customary activities.

Nearby Garngarngaddaj (Strickland Bay) and Duddgoo (Graveyards) special purpose zones also project sites rich in cultural significance.

Deputy Chair of the Dambimangari Aboriginal Corporation and Dambeemangarddee Traditional Owner Leah Umbagi says being on Country is key to keeping such stories alive.

“When we are on our own Country we feel connected, we feel powerful, we feel rich because everything is around us,” she said.

“The marine park has given us protection of the Country, which is good, and we’re really grateful that we get that protection and our rights and our say on what’s important to the Country.”

CARING FOR COUNTRY—NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

For the Traditional Owners, the new marine parks don’t just protect the natural environment but also cultural history.

They support Traditional Owners to co-exist with the land and sea in the way of their forefathers—hunting traditional food, protecting sacred sites and conducting on-Country ceremonies.

This provides opportunity to pass such traditions on to their children, helping to maintain cultural practices and traditions.

Traditional Owners also hope to ensure a brighter future for their people, with new opportunities for culturally and environmentally sensitive tourism, ranger programs and the ability to share this special part of the world with visitors.

With such plans, you get the impression the ancestors would approve.

With the sun rising higher in the morning sky, Mayala man Alec Isaac says

it’s being here on Country that helps him best connect to the spirit of his ancestors.

“I feel closer to them here,” Alec said, patting his heart.

“They’re always in my heart and, for some reason, being here, you can feel them, their presence.

“[The marine park] will help us keep this area preserved... that’s what they [the ancestors] have been doing for thousands of years.”

Top left Yalgoon, Maiyalam Marine Park. Photo – Peter Nicholas/DBCA

Above right Maiyalam Marine Park.

Above inset Dambeemangarddee man Geoff Nevill. Photos – Gina Lincoln/DBCA

Below Bardi, Jawi, Mayala and government representatives at Ooloogijii (Lachlan Island). Photo – Michael Higgins/DBCA



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