

Traps, Tackle and Trawling: A Study into the Evolution of Fishing on the South Coast of Western Australia

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Abstract

Albany has a long history of human population, dating back some 19,000 years. During this period, land usage and how people have derived a living from it have changed dramatically. Populations have come and gone as has industry, but one thing has remained throughout this time in some capacity, and that is the exploitation of fish as a subsistence or commercial resource.

1.0 Introduction

In the past, not a great deal of time has been devoted to the archaeological survey of fishing and the fishing industry along the south coast of Western Australia. My research attempts to address this situation by fulfilling the first stage of a heritage strategy, created in conjunction with the Western Australian Museum Albany. This has involved a study of fishing technology and associated artefacts and material remains in the study area, which encompasses the coast and estuarine systems from Peaceful Bay in the west to Cheynes Beach in the east.

2.0 Pre-European Resource Use

Unlike other communities situated along the eastern and northern coasts of Australia, the Aboriginals of Western Australia did not have the use of any form of water craft (Ferguson 1987: 124). On this basis, it was assumed that they did not exploit the abundance of resources available to them in the ocean and estuaries. As will be duly revealed, this could not be further away from the truth.

2.1 Role of Fishing in Traditional Society

Aborigines were strictly a hunter-gatherer society, moving around the landscape in accordance with weather patterns and the abundance of resources to be found in each location. Smith (1996: 21-22), describes this usage of the environment as 'resource scheduling.' In the study area mammals and fish were available on a year round basis, with roots, nectar and grubs, which form their staple diet, being found more seasonally. From this it can be inferred that Aboriginal movement into the protected hinterland regions of the south coast would be more closely linked to seasonal change and the inclement weather, particularly during the wetter seasons, than any decline in resource availability.

Aside from being an essential source of protein in the south coast hunter-gatherer's diet, fish were also a useful resource for large gatherings of people for ritual purposes. This is supported by the fact that recognised fishing grounds can be found near prominent ceremonial locations such as at Oyster Harbour, Point Possession and Wilson Inlet. In winter 1845, Neill witnessed a large gathering near Wilson Inlet, when the mullet were running in large quantities:

...the different tribes, from all parts of the coast, assemble there, by invitation of the proprietors of the ground (*the Murrymin*), who make great feasts on the occasion. The fish attains a weight of three and a half pounds, and a fat one yields about three quarters of a pound of oil, which the natives use for greasing their heads and persons (Neill 1845: 426).

Another unique feature of fishing for traditional communities was that it was not gender specific. Activities, such as hunting and fossicking for roots and seed were allocated according to gender (men hunting, women foraging) and was usually an individualistic activity. This is in contrast to fishing which was done communally by both males and females (Meagher & Ride 1979: 72).

2.3 Fishing Technology



In another contrast to the eastern states, the Aboriginals of the West did not have the use of nets or fish hooks (Cooley 1987 & Ferguson 1987: 124). They instead made use of tidal weirs, traps, spears and fish drives (Dortch 1997: 16-17). Fish weirs can be found in Oyster Harbour (Figure 1, courtesy of the WA Museum Albany), at numerous locations up the Kalgan River and two large complexes on Wilson Inlet. Other weirs may be located near Little Grove on Princess Royal Harbour (Gillies 2005 pers. com.); the build up of silt, however, may be hiding such structures, as is beginning to happen to the Oyster Harbour fish weir.

There is evidence of a wooden fish trap situated on the King River (Knapp 2005 pers. com.), which at first glance seems to be positioned at the mouth of a stream running into the River. Traps such as this were designed to catch fish as they were "forced downstream by discharge of winter rains" (Dortch 1997: 16). Unfortunately my view was restricted to the opposite side of the bank, as the trap is on private property and during my stay on site I was unable to gain closer access. This provides scope for future research, as the presence of any wooden structure, let alone wooden traps that have genuine Aboriginal association are extremely rare. This site has recently been registered with the Department of Indigenous Affairs.

Other techniques used to catch fish leave little evidence in the archaeological record and as a result an archaeologist has to rely on the accuracy of diary entries of explorers and early settlers. Such sources reveal that groups of Aborigines would corral schooling fish into hurriedly created pens made out of branches, before using their spears to catch a meal (Anon 1834: 335). They would also make use of rock and sandbars which reach out into the sea. From this point the Aborigines would grind up crabs "into fragments with a little stone and throw them into the sea to attract fish" (Neill 1845: 424), which would then be speared.

Branches pulled from tea trees would also be used to catch fish. In this case they were not used for corralling purposes, rather the branches were slapped on the water to release the oil which would anaesthetise the fish and have them floating on the water for easy collection (Gillies 2005 pers. com.).

The most exciting piece of information I came across in relation to Aboriginal fishing technique was provided by long time Albany resident Janet Kneebone. Her grandparents, the Shirleys', were one of the first farming settlers in the Torbay district, taking up land on what is now Lower Denmark Road, Elleker, in the late 1800s.

When the red gum flowered, it was a sign for the Aborigines that it was the beginning of the season, *Metelock* (Drummond 2005: 5), which also marked the start of the salmon migration along the south coast. On the basis of this seasonal marker, Aborigines from Tambellup and Cranbrook in the Albany Hinterland packed up their few belongings and made their way to the coast. This region, being more than a hundred kilometres away from their fishing grounds, would have taken a couple of days to walk. One of their camping grounds, used the night before they hit the coast, was the Shirley's farm in Elleker. Here, behind the gravel pit found on the property, the Aborigines would hold a Coroboree, which was of a noted volume that would keep the children awake till all hours of the night. The following morning they would make the final part of their journey to Muttonbird Island, where the men would begin to spear salmon as they passed close to shore. The women in the mean time would be pooling water on the flat section of rocks, found opposite the Island, to evaporate the salt water. Once enough fish were caught, they were gutted, and the now crystallised salt would be rubbed into the flesh. Once this was done, the fish would be wrapped in silver grass from the slopes near the Island, in preparation to be carried back to the Cranbrook and Tambellup areas (Kneebone 2005 pers. com.).

This is intriguing for many reasons. Firstly, it highlights the ritual involved with Aboriginal fishing expeditions, even in historic times. But more significantly, it reveals that Aborigines were capable of actively preserving food to be consumed at a later date, rather than merely burying whole fish as other sources state (Anon 1834: 335).

3.0 European Resource Use

Europeans had been visiting the shores of King George Sound intermittently since it was first surveyed by Dutch sailor Peter Nuyts in 1627 (Griffiths, Lauder and Chinnery 2003: 1). It was not until Christmas Day 1826, however, that the south coast area was formally acquired by the British, in a move to prevent France from laying claim to a portion of Australia.

One of the first orders in the newly proclaimed territory was to do a seine haul in the harbour, and put on a feast for the local inhabitants:

A number of natives having come to the settlement in the morning the seine was hauled on purpose to give them a feast; about three hundredweight was taken of Capital Fish. The day proved fine and the whole went off well (Lockyer in Garden 1977: 17).

For the early settlers, fish use was confined to a subsistence resource as the settlement on the Sound struggled to take hold. This was due to the fact that Albany and surrounding areas were plagued by

poor soils and domesticated animal fatalities (Glover, Knight et al 1979: 3). However, the usefulness of fish as a resource during this period became increasingly irrelevant to the extent that the settlements two seine nets were left to rot, having not been used since the first couple of years of settlement (Garden 1977: 97).

In the ensuing years, Albany became the primary port for mail steamers and an important bunkering and water facility. This provided a vital market for local fishermen who would sell their product to the cooks aboard the ships. It was not until the end of the 19th century, however, that commercial fishing became a legally recognised industry.

3.1 Start of the Commercial Fishery

In 1899, the government passed the first Fisheries Act which also coincided with the opening of the Albany Refrigerating Works. Located near the gas works and Parade Street (Griffiths, Lauder and Chinnery 2003: 38), the Ice Works, in combination with the building of the Great Southern Railway in the late 1800s, opened up greater markets for the fledgling industry in Albany. The most important of these was servicing the goldfields and surrounding areas which attracted the interest of the newly arrived fishing families of Mouchemore and Smith.

Professional fishing activities were carried out in most of the estuaries found along the south coast, but the initial stages of the industry leave few traces. Shacks, net drying racks and boatsheds such as those at the mouth of the Denmark River, from the Smiths fishing early operations, have now been replaced by caravan parks and other commercial activities. One endearing legacy from this period is the Mouchemores' fishing boat, the Wildflower.



When the Mouchemore family arrived in 1895, they brought with them two boats, the Wildwave along with the Wildflower to fish the local waters. The Wildwave was sold and later wrecked in Deep River, near Walpole, while the Wildflower remained active into the 21st Century. The 25 foot carvel and clinker built boat was ideal for the local conditions, and as a result other boats such as the IMG (built in 1903) replicated the design. The Wildflower (pictured) is currently moored at Emu Point and is in need of conservation work.

3.2 Post World War II Boom

After the cessation of hostilities in 1945, the fishing industry experienced renewed growth. This included the creation of large scale salmon beach seining operations, numerous unsuccessful attempts at establishing a trawling industry, a brief stint as a tuna fishing port as well as now housing a flourishing mulie fleet.

The salmon industry, due to its success as a fishery, had the greatest impact on the landscape. Numerous beaches along the south coast were subsequently opened up to access the salmon and, in turn, the new access roads created by the fishermen attracted tourists and then permanent settlers to these areas. Shacks from the early days in the 1940s and 1950s still remain at locations such as Cheyne Beach and Parry Beach, as do net drying areas and other associated artefacts.

Unfortunately, there is not enough space here to devote to all the findings of this research, so I will elaborate on some of the more unusual inventions created to help improve the industry along the south coast.

The first is a jet boat with axle and wheels. In salmon fishing a jet boat, or row boat, is used to pull a seine net, of which one side is anchored on the beach, around a school of fish. Once around the salmon, the boat heads for shore and the remaining end of the net is either pulled in by hand or vehicle. The boat with wheels attempted to shorten this process by hitting land and pulling in the net in the one motion. This, as it turns out, was not to happen in reality. The hybrid boat was tried on two occasions at Nornalup Beach, unfortunately sinking on both attempts, consigning it to the junk heap (Pinniger & Ebert 2005 pers. com.)

Another invention involved simplifying the tuna poling process. Tuna fishing was a tough and potentially dangerous job, especially for those who went out fishing alone. The 'Automatic Fishing Machine' could sense when a tuna was on the line and was then able to sling the fish out of the water and on to the deck of the boat before then falling back in the water to catch the next fish. Initial use of the machine were a success, however the force with which it was able to pull the fish out of the water saw the tuna fly the length of the boat, over the bow, and back into the water. Further modifications were made to include a net placed across the boat to catch the fish as they were released from the machine, and it soon became operational (Daniels 2005 pers. com. & Albany Advertiser 1975: 1). This, however, was unlike the tuna industry itself which ceased to exist after the mid 1980s.

3.0 Conclusion

The long and varied history of fishing along the south coast of Western Australia presents researchers with an abundance of potential projects. This is highlighted by my own general survey of the region which has unveiled many interesting artefacts and stories of which I have elaborated on but a few. However, work must now begin in attempting to preserve this history, in such a form as dedicated museums, to ensure this way of life is somehow preserved before it begins to disappear.

4.0 References

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4.1 Personal Communications

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