

The ancient stone fish traps are a prominent feature on the northern side of Arrawarra Headland. Although these fish traps have always been used by the Garby Elders to capture fish, during the 20th Century they were also used by local commercial fishers to keep live lobsters for sale.



Did you know?

The sap of the milky mangrove (a tree that grows between the fish traps and Arrawarra Creek) is poisonous and causes severe skin irritation and, if it comes into contact with your eyes, it can cause temporary blindness.

Following establishment of the Solitary Islands Marine Reserve in 1991, harvesting at Arrawarra Headland, including the use of the fish traps, ceased. The review of the zoning plan in 2002 resulted in the establishment of a special purpose zone for traditional use. Traditional harvesting was reintroduced at Easter 2006 in accordance with a Conservation Plan.

Using the Stone Fish Traps

The use of the stone fish traps in recent times is restricted to special occasions such as Easter and Christmas, as well as 'once in a blue moon'. According to the Garby Elders, the blue moon occurs when there are two full moons in one month, and when two high tides occur in one night; on this night, the fish traps are used. Fishing takes place only after approval has been given by the Elders, who also need to be present. A range of fish species are targeted, in particular, mullet, luderick, bream, flathead and whiting.

"In our culture only men use the fish traps. We bait up the traps with cunji, or we go fishing and put fish heads in there too, and we put the bait bags in when the first high tide runs out, so all the bait smells go out to the fish [and] the fish come in for a feed."

Uncle Milton Duroux

◀ Photo

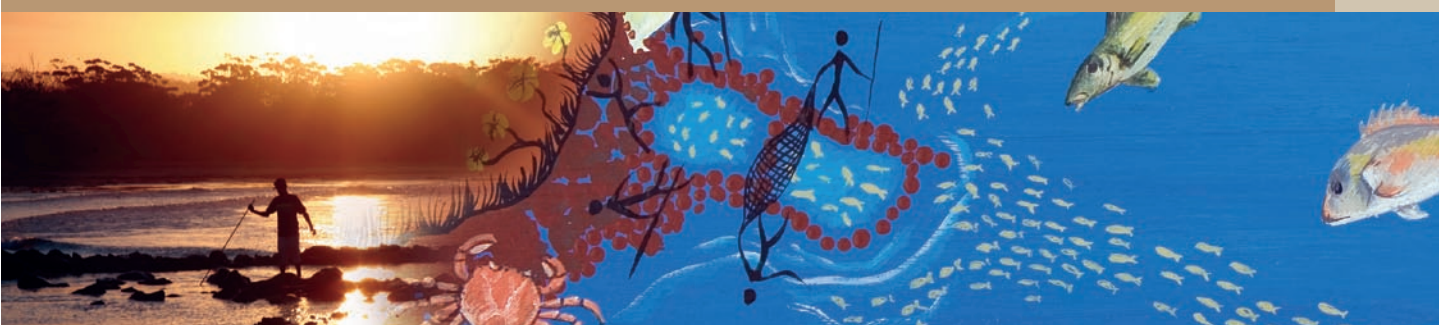
Tarwhine is a common schooling fish that was often caught in the stone fish traps.



Importance and Conservation

The stone fish traps were taken off the register of NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service Aboriginal sites in 1988, until the Yarrawarra Aboriginal Corporation applied to have them reinstated. All of Arrawarra Headland, including plants, animals and the fish traps, is now protected and respected as a site of Indigenous significance.

FACT SHEET 3 Stone Fish Traps



The excavation of a nearby midden suggests that fish heads were used as bait. Oral history indicates that shellfish and cunjevoi were also used. Fish nets were traditionally made using woven fibres of the native cottonwood hibiscus trees (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*), and traps were constructed using running postman vines (*Kennedia rubicunda*). The fish that were not captured in the nets were then speared.



◀ Photo

The sap from the milky mangrove can be used in the fish traps to stun fish.

The Milky Mangrove

The presence of a milky mangrove (*Excoecaria agallocha*) between the stone fish traps and Arrawarra Creek is unusual as these trees are generally restricted to estuarine environments. It is thought that this tree was transplanted there by ancestors of the Garby Elders for its use in the stone fish traps. It was customary to crush the leaves of the milky mangrove and spread them in the fish traps at low tide. When the tide came in, bringing the fish, the sap would stun the fish and make them easier to catch and spear.



◀ Illustration

A painting by local Aboriginal artist, Alison Williams, depicting the 'singing in the dolphins' to help harvest fish.

Singing in the Dolphins

Stories have been passed down discussing 'singing in the dolphins', who would round up the fish into the traps.

"The women, they'd go out into the water, wade out to their waists and sing, to sing in the dolphins, and these dolphins would bring in the fish into the traps, and then the men did the fishing using the traps."

Uncle Milton Duroux

Photos: Adam Davey; Steve Smith.

Lingo

birraangi: go fishing
 bulbiny: nets
 buluunggal: mullet, fish
 gaayi: bream
 giidany: moon
 jurruwiny: whiting
 mayaray: fishing net
 muniim: stones
 muyambiya: fishing by torchlight, spear fish at night
 warraagan: blackfish
 yaalgirr or miijan: flathead
 yamaarr: edible fish

▼ Photo

Nets and vine traps are still used to harvest fish in the fish traps.




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