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Cultural History

QUEENSLAND: The Butchulla people are the indigenous people and traditional owners of Fraser Island. There were six clans in the Butchulla Nation and their territory extended through Fraser Island, Double Island Point, Tin Can Bay, Bauple Mountain and north to a point at Burrum Heads in Queensland.

The Butchulla's traditional name for Fraser Island was *K'gari* which loosely means paradise. According to Butchulla legend, Fraser Island was named *K'gari* after a beautiful spirit who helped *Yindingie* (messenger of the great god *Beeral*) create the land. As a reward to *K'gari* for her help, *Beeral* changed her into an idyllic island with trees, flowers and lakes. He then put birds, animals and people on the island to keep her company.

Early documented history of the people of Fraser Island is incomplete and open to debate and discussion. Aboriginal people closely guard many of their traditions, legends and laws and, after European settlement, much of the evidence of the Fraser Island people's way of life was destroyed either intentionally or through ignorance.

It is uncertain how long Fraser Island had been occupied by the Butchulla people. Evidence suggests that it is between 5,500 to 20,000 years. Population numbers are unknown though it has been said that during times of plentiful resources up to 2,000 people lived on the island with the stable number closer to 300 or 400.

The Butchulla people were governed by standards established by the Council of Elders (a group of mature tribesmen - the eldest of whom had voting rights) and generations of tradition. The Council oversaw visitors to the tribal lands and gave travellers permission to enter and depart.

The Council ensured both social and environmental laws were adhered to and was responsible for governing the totem system. Each member of the tribe was allocated a totem which represented a plant or animal. People were not allowed to hunt, eat or harm their totem or their family's totem except during war, special ceremonies or when crossing non-tribal lands. Totems were seldom vital food sources and the totem system helped protect resources that were scarce in the area.

Ceremonies, such as initiation ceremonies and corroborees, were important to the Butchulla people and their clans. During corroborees, traditions and legends were kept alive through story telling, singing, dancing and music. The Fraser Island people did not play the didgeridoo as favoured by northern Aboriginal tribes, however an instrument called a *bull roarer* was commonly used and women would often accompany singing and music by clapping their hands on their thighs.



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Male initiation ceremonies were held in a *bora ring* - a sacred ceremonial area. Young men were scarred across their shoulders and chest. This was known as *moolgarr*. As part of the initiation the younger men were taught by older tribal members. Women were strictly prohibited from watching any part of the initiation and if caught doing so were killed.

In turn, young girls were taught their skills and learned about womanhood from one of the tribe's older women. Females were usually married by the time they turned 14. The Butchulla people had little use for clothing although body and head decoration was common. Headdresses and body ornaments were made from feathers, shells and animal teeth.

Because of the mild Fraser Island climate, the Butchulla people did not always need shelters. In inclement weather, shelters were constructed from bark, stakes and sometimes hollow trees. Rock to make hunting and cooking tools had to be imported from the mainland and may also have come from a quarry on nearby Woody Island.

The Butchulla diet comprised mainly seafood. Fish were scoop-netted, trapped or speared after a lookout had sighted a school. Wongs (or pipi), a shellfish dug from the sand below the high tide mark, was also a favourite food. They could be cooked in a few minutes by placing the shells on the sand and covering them with leaves and grass, which was then set alight.

The Aborigines returned to the same places each year to feast and the discarded shells and bones from the seafood formed huge mounds or *middens* over hundreds, sometimes thousands, of years. These middens are common along the east coast. Dugong were hunted and turtles/turtle eggs were also a food source (although a turtle's nest was never completely robbed).

Plants provided an important source of starch for the Butchulla. Pandanus nuts, reed and grass seeds, yams and fern roots were regularly eaten. The fruit of the *Macrozamia* Palm was also eaten after it had been detoxified in running water for a number of days and then pounded into flour. It was forbidden to pick wild flowers as these had to be left for the bees, which provided honey.

The people of Fraser Island often went to the mainland for hunting or festivals. Boats were made from two slabs of bark joined together in a frame of saplings. Trees with canoe shaped scars can still be seen on the island, with good examples found near Dundonga Creek and inland from Happy Valley.

It has been well documented that the Butchulla people, along with thousands of tribes from all over Queensland, attended a bunya festival for months on end. The festival was held every three years in line with the ripening of the bunya pine nut crop. This was a good time to swap knowledge, songs and traditions with other tribes.



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Captain Cook first sighted the Fraser Island Butchulla people during 1770 and named Indian Head - a rocky outcrop on the eastern beach - after them. Captain Matthew Flinders was one of the first European men to have contact with the islanders in a series of peaceful meetings between 1799 and 1802.

Escaped convicts came in contact and occasionally lived with tribes in the area. In 1842, Andrew Petrie led a small government survey team to the Wide Bay area and shortly after this colonisation began. Colonisation by Europeans caused great conflicts with the Aboriginal people as the European settlers did not understand or respect their tribal boundaries, their social structure or the importance to them of their environment.

Land was cleared and agricultural practices established which in turn disturbed the natural supply of food cycles of the native people. Traditions and hunting methods had to be altered for survival. Clans in the area attempted to resist early European settlement by throwing spears, rocks and other weapons at the settlers.

Occasionally shepherds and flocks were attacked and killed. The local settlers became wary and in 1850 police patrols were organised. Spears quickly proved to be no match against rifles and the Aborigines were forced to retreat to Fraser Island where patrolmen, with limited bush skills, found it difficult to capture them.

In 1850 an estimated 1,800 to 2,000 Aboriginal people were on Fraser Island. In 1860 the island was gazetted as an Aboriginal reserve, but this status was revoked only two years later when the timber industry commenced. Conflict and disease took their toll and by 1872 Aboriginal numbers were down to 435, falling to only 230 by 1880.

During 1897, government policy dictated that Aborigines in Maryborough and surrounding areas were to be relocated to an Aboriginal station at White Cliffs, on the western side of Fraser Island. This station was soon moved further north to Bogimbah Creek and by 1900 people from more than twenty different tribes, from as far away as Townsville, were living there.

Conditions were poor and food was scarce. Nothing improved when the Australian Board of Missions took over the Bogimbah Creek station in February 1900. Life became far more regulated, prayer meetings were held twice daily and strict duty rosters were set up. One day a week was set aside for recreation.

Diseases, such as measles, mumps and venereal diseases, were having a disastrous effect and malnutrition was common. In 1904 the Bogimbah Creek station was closed. It is not known how many people died there as no statistics are available and grave sites were destroyed when a timber camp was established there in 1905. In July of 2014, Queensland scientists used ground-penetrating radar to search for the century-old burial ground and found some graves. There are no current plans to excavate them,

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however the discovery of the site will enable its protection.

There are now only a handful of surviving descendants of the Fraser Island Butchulla people. Their history is an important part of Fraser Island and today efforts are being made to find, recognise and manage cultural sites so that future generations can learn, understand and respect the Butchulla way of life.

The end of October of 2014 saw in an historic day in Fraser Island's history as the Federal Court of Australia conducted a special on-country sitting at Kingfisher Bay to award Native Title over the land and waters of Fraser Island to the traditional owners of the land - The Butchulla.

More than 400 Butchulla people from Hervey Bay and surrounding areas were in attendance as Federal Court Justice Berna Collier gave out copies of the native title determination to Elders during the event. Traditional music and dance demonstrations took place near a campfire; kids celebrated on the beach; and the smell of the smoke from the ceremonial smoking ceremony added to the atmosphere which really was quite remarkable.

This decision is a significant achievement for all of the local Butchulla people who have worked for many years to be recognised as traditional owners of *K'Gari*, as the island is known to them. This ruling allows the Butchulla people to hunt, fish and camp on the island as well as conduct traditional ceremonies (but doesn't affect existing rights on the island in terms of freehold land, National Parks and conducting tours).

The team at Kingfisher Bay is very supportive of this recognition of a very important aspect of the island's history and are excited to see what the future brings. The decision should also see Butchulla opinions on island management and protection having a heavier weighting, and open up opportunities for them in terms of economic development on the island.

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Media Contact:

media@kingfisherbay.com Phone +617 3032 2809