

Balarrgan — A Hub of History

Part 1 – Balarrgan and the Butchulla

Balarrgan is the name Aboriginal people had applied to the area that had become known as “North White Cliffs” and “McKenzie’s Jetty” or just “McKenzie’s” from the first European contact in 1842. **Balarrgan** is located two kilometres south of the Kingfisher Resort. **Balarrgan** was a centre of Aboriginal culture. It features prominently in early Fraser Island recorded history. This Backgrounder (No 71) is the first of a series on this focal point for *K’Gari* (Fraser Island) history, important to both black and white.

It is believed that Aboriginal people arrived in Australia more than 60,000 years ago. They progressively spread from the north-west to occupy the whole continent and Tasmania. Although the oldest middens found on *K’Gari* (Fraser Island) date back only 5,500 years when the sea levels rose to their present height, many of the older archeological evidence would have been erased by the rising waters. Aborigines have probably occupied *K’Gari* (Fraser Island) including the **Balarrgan** precinct for many thousands of years. They would have witnessed many very significant environmental changes resulting from climate change and sea level changes over the millennia. However the changes Aborigines wrought on the landscape during their occupation are minor when compared with the impacts resulting from European colonization. While the evidence of post contact environmental impacts may not be quite as evident on *K’Gari* (Fraser Island), they have been very significant.

From all surviving accounts, the North White Cliffs area (known to the Butchulla as **Balarrgan**) was an epicentre of their culture. From that strategic vantage point, they would have witnessed the lowest sea levels that science has identified as about 10,000 years ago and the highest about 6,000 years ago and lived through the fluctuations between. They witnessed dramatic climatic changes.

Since Europeans discovered *K’Gari*, **Balarrgan** has featured in most of the more notable historic events connected with Fraser Island. **Balarrgan** was in turn the site of the first Christian Mission on the island, a Quarantine Station for gold-miners rushing to Gympie, a State run Aboriginal settlement which was the subject of Fraser Island’s first major land use conflict, a sawmill and the epicentre of Forestry operations. During World War II, it was a centre for training commandoes. It remains strategically placed, close to both Fraser Island’s major tourist attractions and Kingfisher Resort. **Balarrgan** is now a vital part of the Fraser Island World Heritage area.

Landform and Sea-level changes over millennia

For much of *K’Gari*’s history, it was a mainland sandmass similar to Cooloolool today. Windblown sand accumulated there for more than 800,000 years. 25 million BP (Before Present), significant volcanic activity had created conspicuous landmarks. Remnants include Indian Head (*Takky Wooroo*) and Waddy Point (*Binngih*). About 2 million BP, sand transportation began along the coast and aeolian (windblown) sand blown in from the eastern seashore and deposition began to mass around these pivotal rocky outcrops.

When widespread global glaciation occurred, sea-levels fell significantly allowing a much greater supply of sand from the former sea bed to be added to the growing sandmass. Over the millennia, there were several episodes of dune building due to fluctuating sea levels and eons of accretion of new sand on the eastern side of the sandmass. Great volumes of sand accumulated in the dunes behind what is now Indian Head. Then climate change again intervened.

A transition from cold to warm climate 140,000 BP caused the ice caps to melt and sea-levels to rise to their

highest known levels. This was about one to two metres higher than present.



Balarrgan 1920

For the next 120,000 years (the Holocene epoch) the sea levels rose and fell with the coming and going of various ice ages. About 10,000 BP the ice age began to wane causing the sea levels, estimated to have been about 120 metres lower than present, to start to slowly rise. Most of what is now Hervey Bay was dry land and the coastline was many kilometres offshore. The Mary River would have been a fast flowing stream cutting a deep gorge through the landscape near Balarrgan. The Mary River could not flow northwards because it was blocked by a range (now Woody Island and the associated syncline). That turned the river southwards down what is now Great Sandy Strait and then east just south of what is now Inskip Point. The islands at the northern end of Great Sandy Strait would have been a high rugged range of rocky hills running south-east to north-west including what is now Duck and Woody Islands.

The sea-level slowly rose between 10,000 years and 6,000 years before present at approximately the same rate it is predicted to rise due to the present global climate change. The Mary River slowed down filling up the once deep valley with sediment and creating floodplains. Eventually sea-levels rose high enough so that some of the river’s flow could go over the previous high barriers that the Mary River Heads and Woody Island had posed and reach the newly formed Hervey Bay. *K’Gari* was an island again.

It was during this period as the rising sea eroded the sand away at the cliffs that the large sandblows such as are now seen along the eastern coast of Fraser Island were created. The process of eroding the steep beach-front cliffs energized formation of active sandblows. This process is best demonstrated at Carlo Sandblow near Rainbow Beach.

As the sea level rose, Hervey Bay filled. Coastal Aborigines lost former territory as some land drowned and the shoreline receded. Groups such as the Ngulungbara (based at Sandy Cape) would have seen about ninety percent of their territory submerged as they moved back into the Sandy Cape area.

After the Dreaming

Butchulla territory: According to Tindale's maps of Aboriginal territories of Australia before the appearance of Europeans, three tribes dominated the Great Sandy Region. The central section of *Kgari* (also reported as "*Carree*" and "*Carina*" in early records) was occupied by the Butchulla (or Batjala) whose mainland territory extended to Bauple Mountain. The Butchulla certainly were located both where the city of Hervey Bay and Maryborough now stand as well as most of Fraser Island including Balarrgan. According to linguists, all Aborigines on Fraser Island spoke the Butchulla dialect of the Kabi language.

There is some uncertainty about the status of the other groups included on Tindale's map and whether there were clans within the Butchulla or separate tribes. The map shows the Ngulungbara occupied all of the northern part of Fraser Island from Sandy Cape down to Wathumba. Some Ngulungbara claim to have been a separate tribe but there are reports of inter-marriage with Butchullas. The southern part of *K'Gari* and most of the Cooloola sandmass were occupied by the Dulingbara (or as Bracefell reported them the Doombarras). Bracefell also claimed that Woody Island ("*Dooliwa*") was occupied by the Woomaburrahs. There is some uncertainty as to whether the Woomaburrahs were a family group of the Butchullas or a separate cultural group.

The early descriptions of K'Gari Aborigines were that they were generally well built with good muscle. Their hair was usually jet black and the men grew bushy curly whiskers and moustaches. They ranged in height from 5 feet to 6 feet but averaged 5ft. 6ins. The women averaged 5 feet. Both sexes were extremely agile and very strong, and all went naked except for pubic aprons which were sometimes worn. For protection from the cold, rain or insects, fat from fish or animals, often mixed with ashes, was rubbed on the body. The main ornament was a piece of seashell of elliptical shape, hung around the neck.



The natives lived by a harsh and complicated social system with numerous taboos and rituals of great importance to every member of the tribe. Polygamy was

legal and widely practiced. A man could not marry a woman of his own clan and children belonged to the clan of the mother. To express sorrow in time of mourning both men and women would gash themselves with sharp stones and other implements. The natives of Fraser Island possessed the same type of weapons and implements as their mainland neighbours, except for the woomerah.

Their canoes were made from the bark of trees. These were used for trips for fishing and hunting dugong and turtle. The remnants of the millennia of Aboriginal culture on *Kgari* now are their middens, gunyah and canoe trees and a few other tree markings that the astute observer may notice.

Balarrgan from river overlook to seashore: When *K'Gari* was joined to the mainland Ballarrgan would have been a high point overlooking a huge bend in the Mary River in a deep valley below. By about 6,000 years ago, the sea levels had risen to form Hervey Bay. While most of the Mary River's discharge continued to flow south, some could bypass the barrier now represented by Woody Island and flow into Hervey Bay. Balarrgan situated beside the very productive estuary of Great Sandy Strait and opposite the mouth of the Mary River became a major centre of local Aboriginal population and culture. It would have been then probably one of the most productive areas of *Kgari*. Butchulla territory would not have changed much except that part of it was submerged under Hervey Bay and Great Sandy Strait. Most of the land that once would have stretched beyond the Mary River now was a much larger waterway.

The Butchulla were healthy vigorous people who appeared not to use spears as much as scoop nets which they used to catch fish. Their culture was essentially based on the sea and its harvest. Evidence of this is still to be found in the numerous middens of shells of oysters.

There has always been a concentration of Aboriginal populations where there was an abundance of food and the richest areas for food were most frequently along the coast. Dating of all known coastal middens show that none are older than 5,500 years. A number of archaeological sites along the west coast of Fraser Island have also been recorded. Middens along the sheltered shores include mainly oyster shells (*Ostreidae sp.*) whelks (*Pyrazus ebeninus*) and a variety of crustaceans. These remnants of great feasts would have been almost certainly only deposited after the present coastline was established.

Prior to the destruction of their tribal life the natives were governed by a Council of Elders who determined punishments, conducted in-quests, taught and explained the laws, customs and beliefs of their tribe. They also organized revenge expeditions. The Kabi tribe of which the Butchullas were a sub-group was regarded as being fierce and hostile. They practiced cannibalism. They ate the flesh of those killed in combat and those who died at any early age as a ritual act.

Dr. Norman Tindale noted: "*This island would have been one of more densely occupied areas of Australia, exceeded only by the Kaiadilt of Bentinck Island. Such densities seem possible chiefly when fish and reef products are freely available.*"

Edward Armitage, in describing the cultural richness noted, "*They have preserved in their campfire songs and corroborees very accurate memories of historic events one hundred and sixty years ago.... Composing songs the blacks have no idea of rhyme or metre; it is simply prose set to music, but their sense of tune and time is perfect ... They have a very correct ear for harmony...*"