

Archaeological Legacy on Fraser Island

In 1975 archaeologist Dr Peter Lauer said, *"Barring a few areas that might be inundated through natural forces, it is likely that you would find on every acre, some object (artefact)."* He had carried out his doctoral studies at Lake Mungo and said that Fraser Island was at least as significant. In the 40 years since, middens along the East Coast have been obscured by casuarina plantations, some relics have been pilfered and many scar trees have been lost through fire, age and negligence. This backgrounder No 72 by John Sinclair (October 2015) describes the progressive loss of K'Gari's rich Aboriginal archaeological legacy.

The Bjelke-Petersen era deliberately turned a blind eye to the Aboriginal legacy on Fraser Island. The evidence of the Aboriginal occupation of the island was everywhere and well known. During the 1950's New York based archaeologist Prof Mervyn Meggitt on a fishing trip with Charlie Sinclair wandered into the blowouts littered with stone artefacts and identified and recovered stone axes. By the end of the 1960s most of the more obvious large artefacts had been removed. Aborigines also placed human remains in the hollows of old K'Gari trees (Petrie). The have now all disappeared.

Turning a blind eye: The Queensland Government appointed Honorary Aboriginal Wardens who were responsible for helping to enforce the Queensland's Aboriginal Relics Preservation Act of 1967-1976 to protect "relics" from unlawful interference. They were also responsible for locating and recording and even marking significant archaeological sites. However the Queensland Government decreed that nobody from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs nor any of their voluntary wardens should even go to Fraser Island to assess its archaeological values. This would be to prevent identifying anything that would impede the operations of the sandmining industry.

Lauer evidence: Dr Peter Lauer, an anthropologist at the University of Queensland agreed to make an assessment and present his findings to the Inquiry. Peter's doctoral studies had been based on archaeological studies at Lake Mungo. He wasn't constrained by the politics surrounding assessing the cultural heritage of Fraser Island. A rushed weekend visit to the island during the Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry yielded some great discoveries, including a clay pipe in a midden north of Orchid Beach that had great archaeological significance. He was able to go on to give critical evidence to the Inquiry on how significant Fraser Island was in archaeological terms. FIDO barrister, Lew Wyvill pointed out, *"If mining companies were notified of (Dr. Lauer's) evidence, it would be an offence to continue mining."*

Scar Trees: Apart from the middens and stone artefacts, the most obvious archaeological relics are the scar trees. These are the most vulnerable artefacts on K'Gari. Traditional Aboriginal occupation of K'Gari ceased with the missions at the end of the 19th Century and the forced removal at the beginning of the 20th Century. Many trees have been lost since through negligence and the lack of curation and proper protection. The few that remain are now very vulnerable as the bare wood is now tinder dry and can too easily catch fire without better protection. In the forty years since, all of the known gnyah trees are large blackbutts and these are mainly in fire prone areas.

FIDO believes that it is URGENT to locate and protect all K'Gari's remaining scar trees from weather and fire.



In the late 1970s the walking track to Wabby Lakes passed beside this gnyah tree. Over the next two decades this artefact disintegrated and disappeared without any recognition or acknowledgement.



Before the 20th Century this Angophora near Lake Boomanjin was cut open to access the honey in this native bee hive. Throughout the 1980s this artefact remained a living tree but during the 1990s it started to die. It fell over in about 2005 and was allowed to rot on the ground again without recognition or acknowledgement. Another irreplaceable Aboriginal artefact was lost.

Gunyah Trees

Gunyah Trees have large slabs of bark taken from them usually in the shape of a church window. The Takky Wooroo metre long slabs were then supported on curved saplings to form the roof of a sleeping shelter and strips of bark about 40 cms wide formed the walls as depicted in this illustration below by Lauer. A fire at the entrance reflected the heat down from the roof. The big slabs were usually taken from large blackbutts but it is now at least 120 years since any new scar trees were created and those in existence are old and particularly vulnerable to fire without bark to protect the exposed wood.

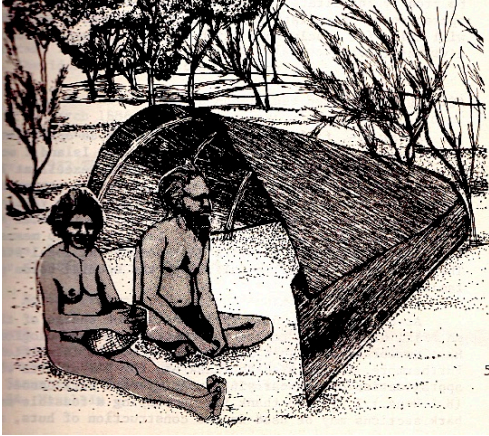


Illustration from Occasional Paper No 8 - Lauer.



The bark taken from this tree beside the Happy Valley Moon Point Road formed the roof of semi-conical sleeping shelters for a family. In the 20 years between the photo above and the one below the exposed wood has separated from the tree making it more vulnerable.



This Gunyah tree in the rainforest near Lake Allom is less exposed to fire risk but it is very close to a busy road and that has serious impacts.



Canoe Trees: This canoe tree stands very close to the road less than 500 metres from Happy Valley. The canoes were not much larger than surf-boards and the paddlers stood up and paddled with a very long stick. Whereas most gunyah scar trees on K'Gari are blackbutts (*E pilularis*), canoe trees are almost exclusively Blue Gums (*Euc tereticornis*) to reduce water friction with the outer bark.

In August 2015 the gunyah tree (photo on left) and the canoe tree (photo above) were at risk of being burnt without FIDO's timely intervention to alert authorities to their presence and significance.

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