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## Chapter 4

### The Fisheries.

As well as the "regular" exports from Cooktown, such as gold and tin, a diverse number of products contributed significantly to the export economy of the area. It is ironic that in the present era Australian politicians and commercial interests are "discovering" trade with Asia, when their ancestors in North Queensland enjoyed a strong two-way trade with our northern neighbours, and especially with China, from the time the area was settled by Europeans. Much of the imported merchandise gracing the shelves of emporiums throughout Colonial Queensland came from Asia.<sup>374</sup> The trade was reciprocal, and as the northernmost mainland customs port, Cooktown played a significant part. Chinese miners who were lucky at the Palmer exported gold to their homeland. Anecdotal evidence suggests that much of this gold was smuggled out to evade duty, and the local economy would have suffered from the loss of duty, but it is difficult to assess to what extent. However, after minerals, the principal exports from Cooktown were fisheries products like pearl-shell and beche-de-mer.

#### **Pearl shell.**

Most of the pearl shell produced in North Queensland came from the Torres Strait, but the Cooktown area also contributed significantly. Pearl-shell exports from the area were usually shipped through Cooktown, where customs duty could be levied. The significance of the

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<sup>374</sup> For instance an advertisement in 1889 informed Cooktown residents that E.A.C. Olive had forty tons of Japanese curios for auction. Cooktown Courier, 1 December 1889.

industry is illustrated by the report on production in the northern fisheries in 1884. At least 206 vessels, employing 1,500 men worked the fishery in that year, producing 621 tons of pearl-shell, and 206 tons of beche-de-mer.<sup>375</sup> By 1888, pearl-shell exports from the area had dropped to £50,332, significantly below the 1884 return of £94,152.<sup>376</sup> The unregulated harvesting of shell rapidly depleted the beds, and the number of boats working the area dropped accordingly. In 1889, only ninety-three pearling boat licenses were issued at Thursday Island. This was less than in previous years, as some boats had transferred to the Western Australian fishery.<sup>377</sup> The decline in pearl-shell had a detrimental effect on exports through Cooktown.

The Cooktown pearl-shell beds covered an area from just south of Cooktown to a point 200 miles north. Like the Torres Strait, production in this area fell in the late 1880s, but the discovery of a new pearling ground in 1892 brought renewed hope, with predictions of thirteen boats based at Cooktown.<sup>378</sup> The importance of pearl-shell to Cooktown is shown by newspaper reports that forty-two tons of shell was delivered to the port in one shipment.<sup>379</sup> However, the new territory was soon depleted. A fishery that extended from Cairns to New Guinea, and had previously supported 120 boats, was practically finished by 1896. Pearlery made a belated attempt to save the industry by calling for a reduction in the minimum size of shell.<sup>380</sup> However, even when this action was taken, the industry in the Cooktown area

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<sup>375</sup> Q.V.P. 1883, Vol. 1. Pearl Shell And Beche-de-Mer Fisheries in Torres Straits 1884, p. 1839.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid., p. 703.

<sup>377</sup> Report On The Beche-De-Mer And Pearl Shell Fisheries Of Northern Queensland By W. Saville-Kent, Commissioner of Fisheries. Q.V.P. 1890, Vol. 3, p. 704.

<sup>378</sup> Cooktown Courier, 12 April 1892.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 6 June 1893.

never recovered.

### **Beche-de-mer.**

While Thursday Island was the principal Queensland port for pearling, the beche-de-mer industry centred on Cooktown, and for many years contributed significantly to the town's economy. Beche-de-mer is a sea slug harvested from the ocean floor by divers, or in shallow water by waders. It is regarded as a delicacy in Asia, where it is used principally to make soup. At least nine varieties of beche-de-mer were harvested from the Cooktown area, all fetching different prices on the markets of Asia. In 1890 values ranged from £150 per ton for Black Teat Fish ( called by the Chinese Se Ok Sum ), to £20 per ton for the less well regarded Sand Fish.<sup>381</sup> Once harvested, the beche-de-mer required careful processing. The fish was boiled in iron pots for twenty minutes before being split and gutted. After drying in the sun, it was smoked with mangrove wood and bagged for market.<sup>382</sup> Although the process appeared simple, any mistakes could have significant repercussions. In 1881, one consignment that had been boiled in a copper pot poisoned a number of customers in China. As a consequence, Prickly Red, the variety of fish involved, dropped in price from £150 per ton to only £20. Although it had previously been one of the most sought after varieties, it never regained its popularity.<sup>383</sup>

It is probable that beche-de-mer, or trepang, was the first significant export from Australia. While it was one of the first resources to be

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<sup>380</sup> Queensland Parliamentary Debates (Q.P.D.) 1896, p. 1795.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid., p. 728.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., p. 731.

Year	Pearl shell Tons	Pearl shell Value	Trochus Value	Beche-de-mer Value	Boats No.	Workers No.
1890	632				92	
1891	769				126	
1892	931				190	
1893	1 214				210	
1894	1 190				203	
1895	873				204	
1896	1 089				207	
1897	1 223				223	
1898	1 061				307	
1899	1 200				319	
1900	1 060				341	
1901	924	105 403		7 399	359	2 188
1902	961	129 267		9 444	343	2 187
1903	970	165 551		7 270	354	2 308
1904	798	108 130		5 865	378	2 509
1905	543	62 736		10 624	366	1 321
1906	444	47 423		13 938	211	1 314
1907	577	70 495		30 033	211	1 420
1908	424	50 514		21 631	204	1 300
1909	516	70 505		14 504	190	1 362
1910	571	82 652		12 785	192	1 309
1911	457	84 545		16 370	188	1 347
1912	462	92 576		23 385	170	1 357
1913	466	92 000		29 268	180	1 300
1914	303	63 382		24 878	182	1 259
1915	112	18 512		39 918	103	844
1916	6.25	125		30 062	124	1 053
1917	155	21 000	21 800	39 305	126	1 098
1918	250	44 196	37 886	46 593	138	1 085
1919	817	115 756	30 280	34 881	155	1 267
1920	440	66 000	41 698	65 557	160	1 189
1921	188	26 212	7 383	50 152	112	781
1922	952	125 124	10 008	63 630	129	1 040
1923	847	103 640	13 600	33 370	153	1 304
1924	1 245	200 334		23 548	153	1 444
1925	1 150	144 284		12 688	155	1 601
1926	922	121 444		29 383	125	1 380
1927	1 202	167 471		13 908	127	989
1928	1 085	161 502	60 219	16 449	129	1 109
1929	1 429	213 458	38 725	21 199	127	1 166
1930	399	113 399	39 604	13 614	109	1 024
1931	469	76 197	33 168	33 437	91	1 129
1932	416	69 083	40 433	19 265	91	1 141
1933	607	76 582		18 362	93	1 439
1934	818	86 502	48 397	14 100	89	1 678
1935	1 111	123 409	37 899	13 705	98	1 203
1936	1 174	149 427	37 617	5 729	95	1 305
1937	1 131	118 208	29 530	13 332	98	1 085
1938	1 116	104 626	32 823	7 725	89	990
1939	1 211	116 438	36 370	669	85	763
1940	1 186	160 335	19 286	6 890	88	924

Queensland pearl shell, trochus and beche-de-mer production 1890-1940. (Annual reports Queensland Harbours and Marine).

Year	Weight (cwt)	Value Pounds
1925	1 032	3 940
1926	3 749	18 443
1927	4 217	22 666
1928	4 259	20 885
1929	4 846	26 187
1930	4 780	19 477
1931	6 351	27 178
1932	6 530	27 771
1933	5 734	25 852
1934	3 791	17 424
1935	5 228	10 120
1936	2 367	10 836
1937	3 006	14 575
1938	3 747	18 355
1939	653	1 191
1940	1 102	5 437
1941	882	4 720
1942		
1943		
1944	42	205

Australian exports of beche-de-mer 1925-1944. (Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics).

Year	Queensland		New Guinea(Shipped through Queensland)			
	Weight (cwt)	Value Pounds	Weight (cwt)	Value Pounds	Total Weight	Value Pounds
1880	3 199	14 614	775	3 729	3 974	18 343
1881	4 971	23 336	1 264	5 950	6 235	29 286
1882	5 093	25 032	1 249	5 882	6 342	30 914
1883	4 299	21 208	2 542	10 373	6 841	31 581
1884	4 314	18 474	1 380	6 393	5 694	24 867
1885	4 028	19 209	1 156	4 571	5 174	23 780
1886	3 945	15 551	1 188	3 959	5 133	19 510
1887	3 255	12 959	502	1 570	3 757	14 529
1888	4 418	18 379	419	1 669	4 837	20 048
1889	4 190	18 349	1 445	4 391	5 635	22 740

Beche-de-mer exported from Queensland 1880-1889. (Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics).

exploited in Northern Australia by Europeans, Macassan fishers had harvested the sea-slug for a much longer period. Mathew Flinders encountered Macassan fishing vessels harvesting trepang in the Gulf of Carpentaria, and they told him that they traditionally worked the area.<sup>384</sup> The industry was well established in the Great Barrier Reef area before Cooktown was settled. Reports that beche-de-mer was plentiful in the waters off the Queensland coast were officially confirmed in 1826. Major Campbell, on a voyage of exploration, told the Colonial Secretary that the schooner Prince Regent had fished the area around Endeavour Straits and "Cook's River" with good results.<sup>385</sup> The markets of Kupang received shipments of the delicacy from this area as early as 1827, with one shipment of ten tons fetching the highest price.<sup>386</sup> When Cooktown was established as a Customs Port, it became the central point for the export of beche-de-mer in Queensland. Although a significant proportion of the Queensland harvest came from New Guinea and the Torres Strait, it was transported to Cooktown for export.

For many years beche-de-mer provided the highest export earnings for the port after gold. Exports reached a peak during the years 1881 to 1883, with over 300 tons passing through the port each year. Annual production fluctuated until 1890, but remained over 200 tons, except for 1887, when poor results were experienced in all fisheries. The total of beche-de-mer exported through Cooktown for the years 1880 to 1889 was 2,681 tons, at a value of £235,598.<sup>387</sup> Production fluctuated over

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<sup>384</sup> Alan McInnes, 1984. "Our First Industry, Beche-De-Mer", in A.D. Broughton and S.E. Stephens (eds.) Establishment Trinity Bay: a collection of historical episodes Book One, The Historical Society Of Cairns, North Queensland, p. 7.

<sup>385</sup> Historical Records Of Australia, 1923, Series 3, Vol. 6, Library Committee Of The Commonwealth Parliament, p. 689.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid.

<sup>387</sup> W. Saville-Kent, Report On The Beche-de-Mer And Pearl Fisheries, p. 730.

the next twenty years, although the overall trend showed a steady decline. The extent of the decline was illustrated by evidence that in 1908 only twelve tons of beche-de-mer were exported through Cooktown, with a value of £1,128.<sup>388</sup>

### **The move to exclude Asians.**

Claims that the industry had been taken over by the Japanese, and that prices paid in Cooktown were being manipulated, led to a Royal Commission into the fishery in 1908. Many European witnesses told the Commission that the depressed state of the industry was a result of its dominance by Asians, who manipulated the market. First, the Japanese were accused of dominating the trepang fishing. The Mercantile Manager of Burns Philp and Co. at Cooktown, William Flamstead, told the Commission that the Japanese had started fishing north of Cooktown in 1905, and by 1908 they were harvesting beche-de-mer well south of the town. While few boats owned by Europeans were still working, it was rumoured that over fifty Japanese vessels operated in the area.<sup>389</sup> Most of the people who appeared before the Commission called for the Japanese to be removed from the fishery, or at least restricted in their operations.<sup>390</sup>

The depressed prices paid in Cooktown and Thursday Island were also attributed to the Asians, with Chinese merchants accused of manipulating prices in Queensland. Local European merchants

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<sup>388</sup> Evidence Taken Before The Pearl Shell And Beche-De-Mer Royal Commission - Report Of The Royal Commission 1908. Q.P.P. 1908, Vol.2, p. 752.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid., p. 714.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid., p. 500.



believed that much higher prices were being paid in Hong Kong.<sup>391</sup> No evidence was tendered to support the allegations of price fixing, but the Commission was told that first-class beche-de-mer was presently fetching only £98 per ton. This compared poorly with £130 for the same quality fish only four years previously, and an industry peak of £250 per ton.<sup>392</sup>

Asian use of indigenous labour also came under attack. The majority of Cooktown residents and commercial interests had shown a marked antipathy to the Aboriginal inhabitants of the area since European occupation.<sup>393</sup> However, at the hearings of the Royal Commission in 1908, they appeared greatly concerned for the welfare of the Aboriginal crew of Asian boats. They complained that Japanese boats appeared to have an advantage in hiring the Aboriginal labour traditionally used to harvest and process beche-de-mer. It was rumoured that Japanese masters were more successful because they bribed the Aboriginals with opium and rum.<sup>394</sup> No evidence was tendered to support the allegations.

Not all non-Asian boat owners had problems recruiting Aboriginal labour. Jose Denis Antonio, a beche-de-mer fisher who came originally

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<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 711. Ernest Evanson, a ship owner and agent of Cooktown made these claims to the Commission.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 709. This information was given by William Humphries, a Commission Agent, Shipping Merchant and Beche-de-Mer seller.

<sup>393</sup> For instance, from as early as 1889, Cooktown residents insisted that no Aboriginal could remain within the town limits after dark. *Cooktown Courier*, 29 January 1889. The racist attitude remained, with one Councillor boasting in 1948 that no dark children were allowed to attend school in Cooktown. O. Crawley, North Queensland Aboriginal Welfare Society, Edmonton, to The Chairman, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 2 April, 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>394</sup> Pearl Shell And Beche-De-Mer Royal Commission, p. 714. Six Cooktown beche-de-mer fishers complained that the Japanese were taking Aboriginals from the wrong area and supplying them grog. Ernest C. Evanson, H. Evanson, William McLeod,

from the Cape de Verde Islands, claimed that he was always able to find an Aboriginal crew. Antonio said that the natives were good workers and gave no problems if they were well supplied with good food. However, he agreed with the Europeans that the Japanese should be excluded from the fishery.<sup>395</sup> It is probable that Antonio and the Japanese boat owners were able to recruit Aboriginal crew because they treated them better than the European boat owners.

European merchants also claimed that at the end of each trip the Japanese owners took Aboriginal crew members to Chinese emporiums to spend their meagre wages. Any pretence that the Europeans were concerned for the welfare of the Aboriginal crew was dispelled when the Commission was told that the money earned by Aboriginals should be spent only in "White" establishments.<sup>396</sup> The Commission discounted the allegations that the Aboriginals were forced to buy from the Chinese merchants, or that these merchants took advantage of the Aboriginals. In fact, it was found that the Aboriginals were discerning buyers, and preferred to deal with the Chinese merchants, who were more honest in their dealings with the Aboriginals than their European counterparts. The Protector of Aboriginals also discounted the complaints. He said the Japanese treated Aboriginals well, and that the accusations were motivated by personal animosity.<sup>397</sup>

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David Thomson Snr, J. McLean, D. Thomson Jr, Charles Doyle, Cooktown to The Home Secretary, Brisbane, 21 March 1912, HOM/J85 (177/12), Q.S.A.

<sup>395</sup> Pearl Shell And Beche-De-Mer Royal Commission, p. 715.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 713. William Flamstead, Mercantile Manager of Burns Philp and Co. made these claims.

<sup>397</sup> E.J. Sweetman, Inspector and Protector of Aboriginals, Queensland Police, Townsville, to The Chief Protector of Aboriginals, Brisbane, 22 April 1912, HOM/J85 (177/12), Q.S.A.

Although the fishery never regained its previous vigour, Cooktown continued to produce and export beche-de-mer for many years. However, the number of boats licensed to work from the port steadily fell. Only nine vessels remained in 1907, and even those weren't viable. By 1908, the number of registered boats had fallen to four, three of which were owned by one operator.<sup>398</sup>

### **Trochus shell.**

Although the revenue from pearl-shell and beche-de-mer declined, the loss was partially compensated for by the harvest of trochus. Trochus is a conical shell prevalent in tropical waters, and was common in the Cooktown area. The shell is particularly suitable for the manufacture of buttons. The Evanson Brothers from Cooktown were the first to harvest trochus shell in Queensland. Local export figures are not available, but in 1926 £40,000 worth was sent from Thursday Island to Japan.<sup>399</sup> For many years Cooktown continued to be a base for the export of trochus.

After the trochus was harvested, the luggers brought it to Cooktown for processing. Before being offered for sale, the shell was cleaned of all animal matter, a process that included cooking the shell in big pots on the luggers. After cleaning, the shell was then stacked on No. 1 wharf, which was known locally as the Lugger Wharf, where it was bagged for export. The cooking and cleaning process was messy, and the trochus industry was often criticised for the stench pervading the wharf area.<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> Pearl Shell And Beche-De-Mer Royal Commission, p. 716.

<sup>399</sup> *Smith's Weekly*, 7 August 1926.

<sup>400</sup> Jim MacDowall, interviewed by Peter Ryle at Cairns, 18 November 1998.

It is notable that a button factory was established in Cairns after World War Two. The factory shared accommodation with the fruit cannery, and employed fifteen people. It was the North's only attempt to develop a secondary industry from shell, but was unable to overcome the competition from plastic buttons.<sup>401</sup> No such attempt to capitalise on the raw resources was made in Cooktown.

### **Post war development.**

For some years after the Second World War, Cooktown was the import centre for various shells from New Guinea and the islands of the Coral Sea. Coral Sea Industries, a local firm, imported shell and forwarded it to European and Asian buyers. Some shell was also used in the manufacture of jewellery in Cooktown. Most of the jewellery was exported to southern markets, with some being sold locally.<sup>402</sup> Although this trade provided employment for a few people, it was never capable of influencing the town's economy significantly.

In the 1970s Cooktown again received a small boost from marine products when prawn trawler operators used the town as a base. For a few years up to twenty-five boats operated out of the port, and sent their catch to Cairns by road transport for processing. The industry was seasonal, but provided a boost to local business, especially the hotels and fuel distributors, and the carriers who delivered the prawns to Cairns.

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<sup>401</sup> Regina Ganter, 1994. The Pearl-Shellers of Torres Strait: Resource Use, Development and Decline 1860s-1960s, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, pp. 196-220.

<sup>402</sup> Jack Fearnley, interviewed by Peter Ryle at Cairns, 6 May 1999.

Beche-de-mer, pearl shell, and other marine products provided an alternative source of export earnings to help Cooktown's economy. The town profited from the wages paid to crew, and from the stores purchased from local businesses. Marine products also contributed significantly to wharfage fees at a time when the town's economy was in need of a boost. However, the trade was insufficient to halt the town's decline, as marine products never developed the staple potential of gold.