



NGURRUWARRA/  
DERNERNYIN

STONE FISH TRAPS OF THE WELLESLEY ISLANDS



The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage (CABAH) team recognises that all our activities take place on Indigenous lands and waters. Australia is an exceptional country with a unique cultural heritage and biodiversity that has been under the care of Indigenous Australians for millennia. CABAH is thankful to those communities who partner with us in our research and outreach activities.

We acknowledge the Kaiadilt, Lardil, Yangkaal and Gangalidda Traditional Owners of the lands, seas and skies of the Wellesley Islands region and pay our respects to Elders past and present.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this publication may contain images or names of people who have since passed away.

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# NGURRUWARRA/ DERNDERNYIN

## STONE FISH TRAPS OF THE WELLESLEY ISLANDS

EXHIBITION  
NorthSite Contemporary Arts  
3 February- 28 March, 2024



This artwork is dedicated  
to Kaiadilt elder Dibirdibi  
Elsie Gabori.

# PUBLICATION INFORMATION

## ARTWORK

Ngurrwarra/Derndernyin

Stone Fish Traps Of The Wellesley Islands

Acrylic on canvas. 20 metres x 2 metres.

CABAH Art Series commission in association with Mirndiyan Gununa Aboriginal Corporation, Mornington Island Art (MIArt).

## ARTISTS

Rayarriwartharrbayingat Amy Loogatha (Kaiadilt)

Thunduyingathui Bangaa Dolly Loogatha (Kaiadilt)

Dibirdibi Elsie Gabori (Kaiadilt)

Dibirdibi Agnes Kohler (Kaiadilt)

Dibirdibi Dorothy Gabori (Kaiadilt)

Dibirdibi Amanda Gabori (Kaiadilt)

Juda Juda Rukuthingathi Bereline Loogatha (Kaiadilt)

Gloria Gavenor (Gangalidda/Lardil)

Kuthakin Coralie Thompson (Guthagun/Lardil)

Madar Joelene Roughsey (Lardil)

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# STONE-WALLED INTERTIDAL FISH TRAPS ON THE WELLESLEY ISLANDS REGION

**SEAN ULM, LUCY HUGHES AND ANNA KREIJ**

Stone-walled intertidal fish traps surround the Australian coastline and are the largest structures built by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Some of the largest and most spectacular fish traps are located around the coastlines of the Wellesley Islands and adjacent mainland in the southern Gulf of Carpentaria.

Stone-walled intertidal fish traps are built to trap and control the movements of marine resources across tidal cycles. In the Wellesley Islands region, fish, dugongs, turtles, rays, and sharks are caught in fish traps. In some places, both Lardil (at White Cliff) and Kaiadilt (at Kirk Point) Traditional Owners have identified traps as specifically built for dugong. The sheltered sediments and waters of fish traps also host crabs and other crustaceans, and the walls offer a substrate for shellfish such as oysters.

Ngathald and Kabar  
Bays, Sweers Island.  
Image credit: Anna Kreij.



Fish traps do not operate by indiscriminately killing everything caught by the trap. Rather men and women entered the traps with spears, hand nets and bark containers at mid-to-low tides and selectively harvested what they wanted. Unwanted catch swam out on the next tide. When fish traps were unused for periods of time a gap was made in the walls to ensure animals did not die by accident.

We estimate that there are more than 500 individual fish traps constructed across the region. Some of these form vast complexes of interlocking fish traps covering many square kilometres of the intertidal zone. Multiple pen fish trap complexes are a feature of construction in the southern Gulf and Torres Strait, but are rare further south. The walls of some individual fish traps exceed a kilometre in length. Some fish trap complexes are built at different elevations in the intertidal zone to be operational across differences in tidal range across the year.

We believe that the Wellesley Islands region fish traps are the biggest aquaculture system known in Australia dating to before European invasion. Designing, constructing, and maintaining all the fish traps was a feat of engineering, requiring deep knowledge of construction methods, intertidal sediments, tides, currents, and fish behaviour.

In the Wellesley Islands region, there are so many fish traps that they changed the way that water and sediments move around the islands and what mangroves grow inside and outside the traps.



Kabar Bay, Sweers Island. Image credit: Sean Ulm.

Over the years various projects have been undertaken on fish traps in collaborations between Traditional Owners and researchers. Previous research experimented with different ways of recording fish traps, including using aerial photographs, drones, LiDAR and on Country surveys.

But there are still many questions remaining to be answered.

A fundamental question is working out how old the fish traps are. Histories document that some traps were built by Ancestral Beings (like Crane in the Rock Cod story on Sweers Island told later in this catalogue and the first Lardil people—Maarnbil, Jirnjirn and Diwaldiwal—who brought culture and language to Mornington Island), while others are known to have been built and maintained more recently.





Crab, Kabar Bay, Sweers Island. Image credit: Sean Ulm.

A recent study showed that some fish traps on Sweers Island operate most effectively at modern sea levels, dating them to the past 3500 years. This broadly matches results from archaeological radiocarbon dating of cultural places across the Wellesley Islands showing early occupation by at least 3500 years ago, with evidence for more sustained occupation dating to the past 2000 years, and especially intense occupation in the past 700 years.

However, there are fish traps constructed both lower and higher in the tidal zone that may date to earlier periods.

Traditional Owners are vitally concerned about looking after their Country and maintaining fish traps has been of increasing concern to the community in the face of increased storm surges as well as sea-level rise impacting fish trap walls.

A new wave of research instigated by the Wellesley Islands Rangers working with Traditional Owners and researchers from CABAH aims to answer some of these questions. We want to not only understand more about these fish traps and document the Indigenous knowledges related to them but also understand how to monitor the health of fish traps and protect these extraordinary cultural landscapes into the future.



Nyinyilki, Bentinck Island. Image credit: Daniel Rosendahl.