



Tradition

There is a long and ongoing history of muttonbirding within the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. While there have been some changes, the tradition persists. In the following article we hear from people about their motivations to continue this tradition.



CROSS CURRICULUM PRIORITIES

-  Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures
-  Sustainability

CONTENT AREAS

- T** Technologies
- G** Geography
- H** History
- EB** The Arts

GENERAL CAPABILITIES

-  Intercultural Understanding
-  Personal and Social Capability

KEY CONCEPT

[Tradition is] the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being passed on in this way.

A long-established custom or belief that has been passed on from one generation to another.

Oxford Dictionary

SUPPORTING CONCEPTS

- › identity
- › community
- › family
- › culture
- › celebration

GUIDING QUESTION

What does the tradition of muttonbirding mean to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community?

This printed material is **to be used with Muttonbirding – a Living Cultures multimedia curriculum resource** that can be found at www.theorb.tas.gov.au

The Living Cultures Muttonbirding resource and this supplementary printed material have been designed to foster culturally responsive practice when learning about Tasmanian Aboriginal Histories and Cultures.

Introduction

Mutton birds are part of my blood, it's my culture, and it's my life.

Buck Brown

It Gets Into Your Blood



Young Muttonbirder on Big Dog Island | Image: Dcnstreet Pty Ltd

It gets into your blood. It's funny you know, it just gets there and you just want it to continue because it's something that you've been brought up with.

Aunty Furley, Kam Yan ABC

The birders describe their experiences of going every year to the islands, catching and processing the birds, and of course, eating them. Their descriptions help us to imagine what it is like on the islands and maybe we can appreciate how deeply connected their experiences are to the ongoing development of contemporary culture.

The following quotes are Aboriginal birders' recollections recorded for the publication *Return to the Islands*.

I'm what you call an all-rounder today, I catch mutton birds in the rookery, process them right through the shed, pluck them, help out cleaning out sometimes in the cleaning shed, and then in the factory of a night time when we open them and gut them.

Drummer

At birding time it's great for the island, because obviously the shop's getting used, we're buying lots of fuel, so we're really putting a lot of money into the local community there, which is really good as well.

Emerena Burgess

Jacob, he just takes time off school, yeah, he really loves his birding. Even when he was a little fella, yeah, you couldn't stop him going birding, he was out there flat out, and you'd get some hot days in the rookery where it's a bit snaky, but he don't worry about snakes, he's straight back out there, and he's like "I'll be careful" and that, but he's won 'Muttonbirder of the Year' three times or something, so yeah, he's got the medals and that, he just loves his birding, yeah.

Tim Maynard

It's still our culture. It's just that we've updated and use more modern things I suppose, yeah. Going with the times.

Buck Brown

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › Why do you think birders put up with such physical hardship and discomfort to keep up the practice of muttonbirding?
- › What do you think the birders mean when they say about birding that it 'gets into their blood' and is 'part of their blood'?

New Ways

Jo James talks in the Yolla Video about the changes that took place in the late 1990's to ensure that the latest meat-marketing standards were followed in the commercial muttonbirding industry.

Watch this video in the Living Cultures Muttonbirding and Birding multimedia resource.



Continuation of culture is expressed through the use of new methods.

The 'old birders' would salt their birds and send them for sale around the world in barrels. Today's birders use cool rooms and freezers to prepare their birds for market. Many of today's birders still love the salt birds that remind them of their early days of birding with their families when they worked long tough days.

There are still long days and tough conditions for birders on Big Dog even though they use tractors, small boats and cool rooms that were not available in the old days when families would spend eight weeks on the islands during the season.



The plucking room, Big Dog Island | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd

Ode to Salted Mutton Birds

*Mutton birds! I like 'em. I'll eat them any way.
Skin 'em, 'n braise 'em and serve 'em on a tray,
Stuff 'em, n bake 'em and serve 'em with sauce.
Or put 'em over coals, on a spit of course.
I like 'em grilled, I like 'em fried,
And there's plenty other ways I've tried.
But salted birds, just scar and boil
With carrots, spuds and swedes as well.
It's the best way known to man and beast,
To eat mutton birds and have a feast.*

Jimmy Everett | Cited in Felton 1984: 22

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What technological changes have taken place over the last twenty years in the way muttonbirding is done?
- › How does culture adapt with the advent of new technology?

A Major Food Source

When I was small all I could remember living off was kangaroo, mutton birds and fish.

Aunty Bea, Kam Yan ABC

Many Aboriginal people who lived on the islands remember the times when mutton birds were a major food source for most of the year.

As Drummer describes, there are many ways to cook and prepare mutton birds, the following recipe is just one.

I love 'em, I could probably eat them every day, because they've just got something, something about them.

Drummer

TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL RECIPES

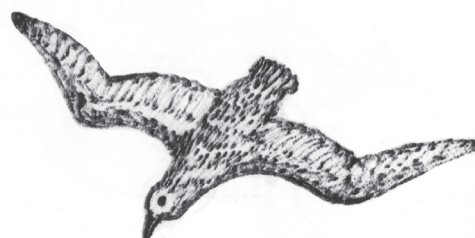
BRAISED MUTTON BIRDS

Gloria Templar

INGREDIENTS: 4 Skinned Mutton Birds
2 Onions
Plain Flour
Salt and Pepper
2 Carrots

METHOD:

- (1) Cut birds in half and place in a casserole.
- (2) Slice onions and carrots over the birds.
- (3) Sprinkle salt and pepper, also some worcestershire sauce.
- (4) Add 2 cups of water.
- (5) Cook in a moderate oven for 1 hour and thicken with plain flour.
- (6) Serve with vegetables or cooked rice.



Recipe for Braised Mutton Birds | Cited in Felton 1984: 6

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › How do stories help to grow culture and identity?
- › What is the emotional attachment that Aboriginal people have to this food source?

The Season

Nathan Maynard's first play, *The Season*, is about the annual mutton bird harvesting that takes place on remote Big Dog Island, in Tasmania's Bass Strait.

The Season is a show about a family of muttonbirders on Big Dog Island. It's about culture and connection to country, but it's also a universal story about the complexities of family and community.

Everybody feels that need to belong somewhere. As human beings, we all have that need to belong to some group or some place, especially for black fellas. That connection and feeling of belonging is really important to our people and the places we hold in our heart.

Our people have been muttonbirding since the beginning of time. The fellas that didn't have mutton birds on their country would do a deal with the muttonbirders so they could access the birds. But all cultures evolve, and today, we still do it, but as part of the evolution, it's become a more commercial enterprise. We used to trade with other mobs for goods, now we trade the birds with white people for money.

It's in my blood. It's a part of my DNA. I have a connection with my community when I'm there, a connection with my country, a connection with the birds.

These days I take my young son with me and that makes it even more special – that passing down of knowledge, passing down of culture.

Going back to the fifties and sixties, a lot of our fellas lived on the islands, before the Tasmanian assimilation policy took effect. A lot of the families would go to the islands for a couple of months and take their kids, babies in cots, dogs, cats – the whole lot would go. That part of it has been slowly lost, because everyone has commitments at home (jobs, kids, school). Back in those days, they used to close the Cape Barren school down for muttonbirding.

Nathan Maynard, The AU Review



Sydney Festival 2017 program for *The Season*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What are some of the reasons why people continue to value the practice of muttonbirding?
- › How will cultural tradition be passed on to future generations?

www.theorb.tas.gov.au/living-cultures/muttonbirding/teacher-drawer

REFERENCES

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2017. *The Season* (a play by Nathan Maynard). Sydney: Sydney Festival

Felton, H. (1984). *Return to the Islands: the story of Aborigines and the tradition of muttonbirding*. Hobart: Education Department

Tasmanian Aboriginal traditional and contemporary recipe book: Tasmanian Aboriginal Education Association

Yolla [videorecording]: the Moonbird project co-ordinated by Jo James for Riawunna



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