

Time, space and ambiguity across the Coral Sea

Connection across the Coral Sea, produced in partnership with ARC Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage (CABAH) and Queensland Museum Network's Project DIG, Queensland Museum, admission free.

Connection across the Coral Sea occupies a modest gallery space just inside the entrance to the Queensland Museum. It seeks to explore the rich cultures and trading relationships of ancient First Nations communities of Papua New Guinea, Torres Strait and the northeast coast of Queensland. Set against black walls and ceilings, the display-cases, maps and text take their colour palette from the blues, greens and yellows of a beachscape. Oceans and waterways are at the heart of these stories, their cultural and economic importance ever present. Yet the movement, entanglement and connection enacted and experienced by these seafaring cultures is sometimes lost amid ambiguous temporalities and static displays.

The story the exhibition seeks to tell is one 'unbounded by western borders,' and from the outset, the deep history and cultural knowledge of First Nations communities is prioritised. Visitors enter the exhibition under a ceiling-light installation of the Tagai constellation, a warrior, leader and fisherman prominent in the creation stories of Torres Strait Islander people. Tagai stretches across the southern sky: his left hand is the Southern Cross, his right hand, the constellation Corvus. His stewardship over the entrance helps locate the visitor in place, which is further contextualised by a floor-to-ceiling map of the region. Dubbed the Coral Sea Interaction Sphere by researchers, the region is made up of more than 100 canoe-based cultural groups whose ancient relationships have been revealed through archaeology.

The main exhibition space is occupied by several enormous wooden canoes, a decorative outrigger, and a collection of paddles, *Pul* [paddle, Tok Pisin language] and *Dogai* [canoe prow, Kala Lagaw Ya language]. Panels explain that to those who craft and use them, canoes are animate, alive beings, imbued with spiritual meaning and connections. That life is hard to feel when these animate beings lay still and starkly lit in the quiet hall. On the longest wall, a 10-metre digital projection of a Torres Strait Islander outrigger canoe, bobbing steadily on a phantom sea, adds much needed movement to the display. To its left, a large black and white photo of a Mabuyag Island canoe (Alfred C. Haddon, 1888) placed behind a *Bunul* [canoe, Gunggay dialect, Yidiny language] shows the true scale of outriggers and their crews. Yet the exhibition still feels devoid of the humans who shaped living vessels and used thousands of years of knowledge to navigate kilometres of open sea. There's a quote on the opposite wall from Kenneth McLean, Dingaal Traditional Owner and Chairperson of the Walmbaar Aboriginal Corporation, who speaks of his desire to share the 'stories of our ancient past' with museum visitors. But to view the main display, you must turn your back on McLean. People pass quickly through the space.

The exhibition is strongest in its final section, a small interactive setup that incorporates video footage, digital technologies and, for the first time, the voices of project collaborators and curators. Here, 'modern and ancient sciences meet,' and the visitor finally *feels* the embodied deep history of the Coral Sea stories. On one wall is a detailed map of Jiigurru (Lizard Island); part of Dingaal, Ngurrumungu and Thanhil Country on the Great Barrier Reef, 250km north of Gimuy (Cairns). Radiocarbon dates sit alongside discussions of the enduring ceremonial significance of

Jiigurru for Traditional Owners. On another wall, visitors can step into a life-size reconstruction of the island's excavation site, a short square trench with the blue sky and white clouds cleverly reproduced on its ceiling. The reconstruction is accompanied by a flawless interactive database, allowing users to scroll up and down the length of the trench, click on embedded fossils and shells, and access an array of high-res images and descriptions. Such technology is undoubtedly a hook for museum visitors—users can literally scroll through 6,500 years of Jiigurru history with the flick of a finger. But the boundless feel is balanced by the panel's reflections on the finite and destructive nature of archaeological excavation.

The last wall plays three short films on a loop, detailing the CABAH-led excavation, the goals of its team, and the collaboration of Traditional Owners and curators on the *Connection* exhibition. Curators speak of their ambition to recentre the Museum's cultural collections—one that is successfully realised—and hearing the voices and songs of First Nations collaborators are an essential and effective way of expressing the importance of the exhibition's stories. Lead archaeologist Professor Ian McNiven, Chief Investigator at CABAH, demonstrates detailed survey techniques and explains how a small 'Lapita' ceramic shard helped researchers trace the expansive movement of peoples across the Interaction Sphere. Still images, video footage and the sounds of Jiigurru Ocean and Country are a powerful contrast to the silence of previous displays.

Overall, *Connection across the Coral Sea* communicates complex and multi-layered histories in a limited space. It's difficult to communicate the embodied, ongoing nature of Indigenous knowledges and lifeways in an exhibition format, and it's equally difficult to know how the spatial connections of such diverse cultural groups could have been better communicated. The interactivity and movement achieved by the final section can't necessarily be carried over for each artefact in the opening section; nor should First Nations people be expected to narrate and conceptualise every aspect of a museum's cultural collection for a varied audience. First Nations deep histories, cultural connections and the research of Western scientific traditions are on full display in this exhibition, and the visitor's experience and understanding of those intertwined knowledges remains imperfect. But this itself reflects the inherent challenge of deep history work. Did I find the final section the most engaging because it spoke in a language I understood; that of stratigraphy and years measured in radiocarbon? Or because it allowed me to hear directly from First Nations collaborators; to gain even a limited understanding of connection to Country that I could use to reconsider the material culture in earlier sections? I suspect—and I hope—that it is both.