

Basic Detail Report



Melville Island Indigenous Dugout Canoe

Vessel number

HV000369

Description

The construction of a log canoe was not possible for the Indigenous Australians, because of a lack of tools, until the type was introduced to them by the Macassan people from the Indonesian islands north west of Australia. They are thought to have begun to come to Australia in search of trepang and other food sources as early as the 1600s. The Macassans maintained a seasonal visiting practice until the 1900s. Their larger sailing vessels carried dugout canoes, and this was a method of construction used for centuries by South East Asian people. They also had the ability to make metal tools which were needed to hollow out and shape the logs. The Macassans traded with the Tiwi communities and are believed to have used these canoes as items of trade in some instances. It is thought they may also have built dugout canoes for the Tiwi in some areas. The Melville Island Indigenous Dugout Canoe is part of the collection of the South Australian Museum, numbered A16462. It is built from a single trunk of an undetermined species of tree. Although the inner hull has been smoothed over there are axe, adze and chisel marks still present near the ends of the hull showing how it was formed. The outer surface of the hull is still in its natural form and has not been treated with fire. The forward section is beamier than the aft section. The stern and stem are shaped to form a raised point. The draft, beam and volume of the canoe indicate the craft was capable of carrying a reasonable number of people and their catch, such as dugong or turtle. It is a solid piece of timber and has sufficient size to make short passages in open water, such as the crossing of the Clarence Strait between Melville and Bathurst Islands and mainland Australia. The South Australian Museum's canoe has a more elementary shape than another canoe in the same collection, A16593 (HV000370), and it is reasonable to assume that it was made by the Indigenous community rather than the Macassans. In 2009 the canoe was in storage at the South Australian Museum. References: This text has been prepared using material from a thesis by Zack King, Flinders University South Australia, and information from the South Australian Museum.

Dimensions

Vessel Dimensions: 3.31 m x 0.52 m (10.86 ft x 1.71 ft)