

Basic Detail Report



Mapoon Indigenous Skinbark Canoe

Vessel number

HV000444

Date

1935

Description

Writing during the early 1900s, missionary Reverend Hey records in extracts from his diary regarding a visit to Aurukun and Weipa (April 1910) that he saw bark canoes being paddled in the ocean near Pera Head, north of Aurukun: 'Here again a number of natives came alongside in their frail bark canoes which have to be very skilfully handled in the open sea....the natives are all good swimmers & do not mind being swamped occasionally when they step overboard & turn the canoe over & so empty the water. During such a performance all their belongings have to be held by their teeth until their boat is made seaworthy again.'. The Mapoon Indigenous Skinbark Canoe was acquired by the Queensland Museum in 1935 from the noted anthropologist Ursula McConnell who conducted several anthropological field trips in Cape York Peninsula from 1927 to 1934. She visited Mapoon in mid-October 1934, which is probably when she obtained the canoe. It is known locally in western Cape York as a skinbark canoe and is made in one piece from the bark of a Messmate or Stringybark tree (*Eucalyptus tetradonta*). Both ends have a raked profile that rounds into the straight bottom. The canoe is formed by removing the bark in a single sheet from the tree, then heating it to soften it to flatten it out before shaping. Messmate bark can only be removed easily at the end of the wet season when the sap is up the tree trunk, whereas in the middle and late dry season the bark is too tightly adhered to the trunk to remove without cracking it. The end of the sheet is folded in two and placed in a vice made from two Bloodwood or Wattle sticks tied with strips of Coastal Hibiscus bark (*Hibiscus tileaceus*), the profile is cut with a sharp mud shell (*Geloina erosa*) and then carefully sewn together using heat-softened lengths of Water Vine (*Flagellaria indica*). A bone stiletto is used to pierce the holes in the bark. The sewing is an outstanding feature of the even and neat work which would be required to ensure the joint was held closely together to remain strong and watertight throughout. The inner seam on both ends was sealed with sugar bag wax (from wild bees of the *Trigona* spp.) or sometimes with clay. The parallel sides throughout over half of the craft's length are held in position with two straps made of hibiscus bark that are tensioned with two sticks that cross each other in an 'X' pattern. A forked end is pushed under the strap and the other end pushed down against the hull on the opposite diagonal side. This is a clever construction detail which helps stiffen the craft and hold its shape. Viewed from above, the bow and stern begin to fine up with a slight kink to their line at the sides, rather than a gradual curve inwards to the centreline. The craft were used for fishing and crossing rivers in the area around Mapoon, which is on the western side of Cape York, and about 150 km south of the tip. (They were also used farther south at Weipa and Aurukun) At just over three metres long and around 800 mm wide this example has plenty of volume for a paddler and their catch, in a relatively stable hull. It also has a paddle shaped from

a mangrove stem and splayed out at the root end to form a blade. These paddles were cut from either of two species of mangrove that have splayed out, buttressed roots - the Black Mangrove (*Bruguiera gymnorhiza*) and the Yellow Mangrove (*Ceriops tagal*). In 2010 this canoe is in storage in good condition as part of the Queensland Museum collection. Prepared from material supplied by the Queensland Museum and Geoff Wharton.

Dimensions

Vessel Dimensions: 3.29 m × 0.8 m (10.78 ft × 2.62 ft)