



Bathurst Island Indigenous Bark Canoe (4202)

Vessel number

HV000529

Date

1911

Description

The Bathurst Island canoe is 4.60m long, and about 700mm wide. It is in very good, intact condition and complete with all its structure. Herbert Basedow, probably known more widely as an explorer, was also briefly the first Chief Protector and Chief Medical Inspector of the Aborigines for the Northern Territory, a position he held for 45 days in 1911 before leaving, claiming the act he was supposed to administer was unworkable. He published a paper in 1913 in the 'Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society of Great Britain and Ireland' after he visited Bathurst Island in 1911, at which time he collected many artefacts. The paper included a detailed description of these craft and their construction. The bark used for the canoe is either a woollybutt (*Eucalyptus miniata*) or stringy bark (*Eucalyptus tetradonta*). It is cut and peeled off the tree in one piece that circles the trunk. The bark sheet is inverted so that the inside of the bark

becomes the outside of the canoe, and the ends are thinned to make them more pliable for forming. The dead and loose material on the outside of the bark is removed by fire, and the heat from the fire also helps make the bark more pliable and helps as the ends are folded together, then cut to the distinct profile. This profile resembles a fish tail, and is much sharper at the bow than at the stern. The ends are sewn together along the top edge and around the fish-tail cuts with a split cane (*Calamus australis*) overstitching the open seam. This is further sealed with wax from a honey bee comb or other natural resins. On the inside clay, fibre and resin is used as well to caulk the seam. Both ends have sides which bend sharply outwards over a short distance, before the remainder of the hull forms a parallel-sided section, supported by sapling branches on the inside edge and three branches athwartships. These branches are secured to the edges of the bark hull with more cane stitching. This combination of bark panel and branch supports forms a quite rigid structure and allowed the craft to be used around Bathurst Island and across the narrow strait to Melville Island. These islands are known as the Tiwi Islands, and the Indigenous communities of the region

used these craft for transport, fishing and hunting both turtle and dugong. The canoe went to Canberra in 1934 with the rest of the Basedow Collection where it was housed at the Australian Institute of Anatomy. The collection then went to the NMA in 1985, and this canoe was registered as 1985.60.4202 along with a similar canoe 1985.60.4201. A third canoe of the same type is understood to have been acquired from Basedow for the South Australia Museum in 1913.

Dimensions

Vessel Dimensions: 4.6 m (15.09 ft)