

Basic Detail Report



Indigenous Dugout Canoe E011616 from Northern Territory

Vessel number

HV000586

Date

1903

Description

The canoe is 4.24m long, 560 mm wide and about 450mm

deep. It is made of *Alstonia verticilosa*- check this name, also known as *Alstonia actinophylla*, a tree common to the Northern Territory and northern Queensland. This tree produces a light timber, which is an advantage for a dugout canoe with its thick sides and bottom construction needed to retain strength. The dugout was built from the trunk of a felled tree. It has been recorded on other dugouts such as the ANMM dugout 00001826 from Borroloola, that the wider, root end of the trunk is traditionally made into the bow. Building a dugout is usually done at the site where the tree has been felled. First the bark is removed, and then it is gradually hollowed and roughly shaped. Care has to be taken throughout to avoid the trunk drying out too quickly and then splitting through. Towards the end of the construction it may be carried to the water's edge where the final shaping was done. Shaping would include fine chipping to work the sides down to the desired uniform thickness which was regularly checked by tapping the inside of the cavity and listening for the consistency of the sound on the exterior of the trunk. An interesting and perhaps modern detail is a neatly drilled hole at one end, possibly used for a rope painter. Also present are marks from the cutting tools used, and many small scars and marks from the outside surface of the tree. Various examples of dugout canoes have been recorded in association with the indigenous communities along the northern coast of Australia from the Torres Strait around to the Kimberley coastline. Dugout canoes were used for fishing and short passages along the coastline. The distinctive shaped ends which feature a stem and stern post carved into the wood are similar to shapes seen on Macassan built dugouts. The dugout is understood to have come from contact with Macassan sailors reaching northern Australia in search of trepang (sea cucumber) and beche-de-mer. The Macassans came on larger sailing craft which carried small dugouts. Initially the Macassans traded the craft with Australian indigenous communities, but they also traded metal tools and shared their knowledge of dugout construction. The *Alstonia* species is widespread in south-east Asia as well as in northern Australia, and it is possible the Macassans helped to identify appropriate and familiar trees to use. This dugout canoe was obtained by the Australian Museum in 1903 through Messrs. Christie and Godfrey, who were collectors of rare conchology samples and based in Port Darwin. Through this work they were in close collaboration with the Australian Museum. Port Darwin is now known as Darwin, and while the dugout may have been built in or close to Port Darwin, it is more likely that this

association is only a connection to Christie and Godfrey, and the dugout could have been built in a community and location along the coast well away from Darwin. The dugout is currently stored at the Australian Museum as part of their extensive collection of Indigenous watercraft.

Dimensions

Vessel Dimensions: 4 m x 0.65 m (13.12 ft x 2.13 ft)