Embracing Our Stories
Cairns Indigenous Interpretive Signage Trail
Yirrganydji: Our Country, Our Home

Yirrganydji country includes the coastal plains between Cairns and Port Douglas.

One Yirrganydji creation time story tells of Dumari, an ancestral being, losing his leg in an attack by Ganyarra (Crocodile). Dumari called out to his wife to run as he staggered away and lay down close to the Whitfield Ranges. Meanwhile Dumari’s wife had fled inland and turned into the coastal ranges.

Guyala (White Bellied Sea Eagle)
The Yirrganydji tell stories about Guyala, the majestic white bellied sea eagle as it soars effortlessly on its two metre wings. Some believe that Guyala is linked with the Dumari story as a protector looking over our region and that Guyala is continually searching for his long lost wife, or for fish, turtles and carrion? Both perhaps...

Dumari escapes from Crocodile after it bit off his leg as he crossed Trinity Inlet. (Artists: Patricia Singleton and Sharon Brim).

Guyala flies above the coast. (Artist: Patricia Singleton).

Dugong and calf feeding on seagrass. (Artist: Joanne Brim).

Dugong mother and calf feeding on seagrass. (Artist: Joanne Brim).

Necklaces were made from pieces of trimmed and drilled shell tied together with fibre string. (Artist: Shannon Shaw).

Looking Good
At community gatherings, body art was all important. White ash, moistened and applied to the body was commonly used among rainforest clans. Delicately carved pieces of shell were carefully drilled with a wooden awl and linked with bush twine to make elaborate necklaces. Try drilling a needle size hole in a piece of nautilus shell or twirling the fibres of carefully chosen bark fibres to make string and you will soon realise how much skill was needed.

Necklaces were made from pieces of trimmed and drilled shell tied together with fibre string. (Artist: Shannon Shaw).

Shell amulets from the northeast rainforest region were made from sea shells trimmed and ground to shape. (Collections of the Cairns Museum).

Dugong mother and calf feeding on seagrass. (Artist: Joanne Brim).

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Find on the Cairns Arts & Culture Map: Williams Esplanade Palm Cove Yirrganydji: Our Country, Our Home
Taking the Sting Out of Life

The lowland rainforest and beaches of the northern Barron River flood plains held few secrets from the Yirrganydji. Food, tools and medicines were readily obtained from the diverse plant and animal life. Centuries of knowledge enabled them to live comfortably within their lands.

**Green Ants Ojiliburay**
Green Ants inflict agonising bites on the unwary but were valued by Yirrganydji and neighbouring clans. They can be plucked individually from the trees and eaten tail first! The green body part is nipped off and swallowed, providing a refreshing, citric taste. It is said that if eaten head first, the ant will nip the inside of the mouth. Try that at your own risk. The white pupae were sometimes collected from the nest, squeezed and eaten.

**Quandong (Elaeocarpus grandis) Murrkan**
The thin purple flesh of this large rainforest tree is high in vitamin C. Trees grow to 35 metres but the ripe fruit falls to the forest floor where they are easily gathered. The flesh is eaten raw.

Some clans would string the pitted kernels to make necklaces, while reportedly, Australian soldiers used them as marbles during idle moments training in the Far North during the Second World War.

**Black Walnut (Endiandra palmerstonii) Balay**
Balay were an important part of the diet of many rainforest dwellers primarily because they fruited for nearly eight months of the year. Preparation methods varied. Some people baked the nuts whole before grinding and forming them into cakes. Others crushed the nuts and then baked cakes formed with the moistened, crushed nuts.

**Pipi Chulki**
Chulki were dug from the moist beach sand. Women and children would gather these popular shellfish in soft woven bags. Chulki were eaten raw or lightly baked in the coals. In some areas they were so common that large middens (heaps) of discarded shells developed which now provide important records of pre-colonial feasting sites.

"The environment is our pharmacy, hardware store, and shopping centre. Most importantly, it is our home. It provides us with everything that we need such as food, medicine, tools, and seasons." — Gavin Singleton 2018.

"As children we would walk along the beach collecting the nuts. We would open them with a sharp rock and enjoy the almond flavoured nuts which we ate raw." — Patricia Singleton 2018.
Good Living, good tucker

The rainforest and the coastal margins are well able to provide food, shelter and medicine, if you are careful. Managing use of the forest resources is critical to long-term survival of the forest ecosystem and people who have lived there for thousands of generations have clearly got it right.

Well thatched dwellings using lawyer vines, palm leaves and grasses provide reasonable protection from drenching monsoon rains. Modern brick homes, fortunately, provide even greater protection for Yirrganydji. Rehatching is no longer an issue.

Toxic Seeds
Black bean from deep within the forest and cycads from the forest margins can sustain the wise, or poison the unknowing. Women teach their children from an early age to carefully process toxic plants. The nuts were crushed or sliced and hung in a basket suspended in a creek for several days after which they could be ground into flour and baked.

The flowers are edible, its timber is used for making spears, musical clap sticks, and fire sticks while the bark is used to make string.

Fishing
Slow moving pools were ideal for using ‘fish stupefiers’. Leaves from certain trees were crushed and thrown into the water. The chemicals that were released in this process temporarily stunned fish, causing them to float to the surface. Those same chemicals, saponins, lathered when rubbed and were used as soap. Saponins are also claimed to assist in reducing cholesterol, but please do not try it. Unprocessed, it might even make you foam at the mouth.

Eels inhabited mountain springs and were usually left untouched. They maintained the flow of water and, as children of the rainbow serpent must be respected.

Find on the Cairns Arts & Culture Map: Smithfield Library  Good Living, good tucker
Modern Yirrganydji, like their ancestors, manage their traditional resources carefully. Working closely with government agencies, the Yirrganydji Sea Country Plan provides a modern day management strategy. Traditional lore is combined with modern needs and scientific principles to help manage important resources such as coral reefs, sea birds, sea grass beds, and crocodile control strategies.

Since establishment in 2015 the Yirrganydji Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger Program has dealt with the removal of marine debris, planting trees, monitoring wildlife, and surveillance activities. Yirrganydji are committed to preserving the outstanding values of the Cairns region for all current and future generations.

Canoes

Coastal dwellers relied on the abundant resources of the Great Barrier Reef. Fishing from single outrigger canoes was a highly skilled task. Spears and spear throwers (milay or woomeras) were used for smaller fish. Traditional harpoons were used for sustainable hunting of dugong and turtles. For added thrills a skilled hunter might leap from the canoe onto the back of a passing turtle but only if it was to provide food for fellow clan members.

"The outrigger canoes were a long way in advance of the southern bark canoe. On examination these proved to be beautifully formed from the trunk of red cedar, scooped out by some sharp instrument and perfectly shaped outside, with good stem and stern lines, both exactly alike and ornamented with a thin, broad, protruding prow at each end."
— Sub-Inspector Robert Johnstone 1903.

Fish Traps

Fences of lawyer vine and bushes, were secured across tidal creeks. Men held the sides while women acted as beaters driving fish into the fish fence. Large fish were speared as they attempted to escape. Sub-Inspector Johnstone noted that the occasional crocodile simply forced its way through. Only the bravest, or foolhardiest, would want to stop it!

"One fish would always be thrown back. You only took something from the wild if you were hungry and even then you shared it with everyone."
— George Skeene 2018.

"When we eat fish we throw the bones in the fire. In that way we share our food with the spirits of our ancestors."
— George Singleton 2017.

The dugout, single outrigger canoe was popular for coastal clans and provided a stable platform for spearing fish or catching turtles.

(Artist : Cairns Historical Society P16619).

Canoe paddles were often fashioned from mangrove trees. Their broadly buttressed roots were ideal blades.
(Artist : Shannon Shaw).

Fish traps along sheltered beach areas used rows of stakes driven into the sand during communal fish drives. For many years remnants of them could be found along the northern beaches.
(Artist : Patricia Singleton).

The sea snake, Urea, must be put back into the water when caught. Failure to do so causes huge storms along the coast.
(Artist : Patricia Singleton).

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Find on the Cairns Arts & Culture Map: O’shae Esplanade Machans Beach  Yirrganydji Sea Country
The Yidinji had the best of both worlds. Their traditional lands extend from the lush coastal plains of the Trinity Inlet into the ranges of the southern Atherton Tablelands. In the dry season, the coast afforded respite from the chilly highlands while the wet season’s humidity and heat were more easily tolerated on the Tablelands.

Nyabor
The wet season, was best spent in the upland forests around Lakes Eacham and Barrine. The ranges reduced the effects of cyclones. Fruit eating flying foxes and white tailed rats provided abundant, succulent meat. Skilled hunters could spear unwary tree kangaroos and possums perched on the branches above.

Yiwi
Around May, the weather cooled. Wattle trees started flowering, indicating it was time to head back to the coast.

Nambar
From August to October the creeks ran low and fish crowded the deeper pools. Trapping bream and eels was much easier at such times as there were more fish and less water.

Tjukalawar
As the wet season approached, in November and December, Goannas and snakes were plentiful and great eating. When the gunyal (cicadas) shrill evening chorus indicated the start of the storm season, it was time to head for the cooler hills where the White Apple, Cycads, Black Pine, Yellow Walnut and Scrub Turkey eggs were in season.

“People generally ate anything, but movement was dictated by where the staple foods were. There used to be a lot of cassowaries around but since the late 1940s the scrub (rainforest) has deteriorated.”
~ Nungabana, George Davis 1999

After European colonisation, local clans often performed ceremonial dances at major celebrations such as the 1926 celebrations on the Cairns Esplanade.

In the upper reaches of the coastal rivers, communal fishing was commonly practised. Clan members waded up the river, driving the fish into nets and traps.

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~ Nungabana, George Davis 1999

Find on the Cairns Arts & Culture Map: Ravizza Park, Edmonton  Seasons for All
The reef and the rainforest yielded abundant food and raw materials for Aboriginal clans of northeast Queensland. Because of this, clans were able to sustain themselves in relatively small areas, unlike their cousins in the drier regions to the west. Their homes were more durable and used for lengthy periods. A deep knowledge of their environment ensured they could hunt, live, celebrate and mourn with their kin close at hand.

Meeting Ground
Ceremonial grounds were scattered throughout traditional lands. There, clans met to hold ceremonies and solve disputes. One such place in the Goldsborough Valley, ‘White Apple’ was favoured for ceremonies. The drumming of dancing feet echoed eerily through this forest clearing and the ground vibrated to each footfall as if the spirit beings dwelt in a cavern below.

Nungabana (George Davis, 1922-2002) spent his early years with his grandfather acquiring a deep knowledge of his grandfather’s estate (see map left). As a result, he placed great importance on passing on traditional knowledge to his family and the wider community. Nungabana was a skilled artisan of traditional tools and weapons.

Nungabana skillfully adds a lawyer cane handle to a stone axe. The cane is split, bent around the axe head and bound into position with thin strips of cane before being coated with a protective layer of resin or beeswax.

(Source: Davis Family Collection)

Shields
The buttress roots of large rainforest trees provided the raw materials for distinctive shields. Roughly oval shapes often nearly a metre long were cut from the buttresses and trimmed to shape. They were then immersed in water, dried and then once again plunged back into water before being tied above the water for a couple of weeks to slowly cure to prevent splitting. After ‘sanding’ using pieces of abrasive rock, they were decorated with totemic patterns. Shields provided protection from blows from hardwood sword clubs and spears.

Sword Clubs
Sword clubs were made from young hardwood trees about 150mm diameter and 2.5 metres long. The timber was split and carved into shape. The grip at one end was grasped by one hand (a shield was usually held in the other hand). It took warriors with strong arms to swing such seemingly cumbersome weapons.

Stone Axes
Edge ground axes were widely used in traditional Yidinji society but were soon replaced by the sharper steel axes of Europeans although, in the hands of skilled workers, stone axes could be used to trim branches and even hew shield timbers from massive buttress roots. All that was needed was time and perseverance and well ground stone axe.

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(Source: Davis Family Collection)
**Beginnings & Games**

When the world was young, Scrub Hen went in search of a nest site. In those early times she flew long distances. Nowadays her descendants prefer to run through the undergrowth and fly only short distances.

First Scrub Hen flew from the Russell River to the Franklin Islands and then to Fitzroy Island. Seeing no nesting sites she headed back to Reed Creek where she saw Murabuy (Green Hill). It was small but looked good until, away in the distance, she saw Jarrugan (Walsh’s Pyramid). “That’s an excellent nest site,” she said to herself and it was there she laid a clutch of eggs. Several rolled out of this beautiful nest and became small hills to the south of the Pyramid.

**What’s in a name?**

These days we call Jarrugan (Scrub-hen nest) by its Migaloo (European) name, Walsh’s Pyramid. It was named by explorer George Dalrymple after William Henry Walsh (1823-1888), a Minister of Works back in the days of Colonial Queensland, who probably never visited this unusually shaped mountain. Walsh was, however, a strong critic of the Queensland Native Police.

**Cats Cradle**

Loops of ‘bush string’ were twisted and woven into shapes representing many aspects of life and the environment. They were both a training aid and an amusement.

**Eggs for breakfast?**

Omelettes, fried eggs and even boiled eggs were unknown. Baked eggs were favoured food. You just have to ensure that they don’t explode. A small hole was drilled into the shell and the egg was then baked on the edge of the fire.

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**Scrub Hen**

Europeans know Jarrugan as a scrub-hen or orange-footed scrubfowl. Scientists simply call it Megapodius reinwardt. Although it is about the size of a chicken, it lays its large eggs (about 90mm long) in mounds where they self-incubate. Several pairs may share a single mound, which can be around three metres high and twice as wide. The chicks are able to look after themselves as soon as they hatch and dig themselves out of the warmth of the mound. Scrub-hens are one of the three Australian mound-building birds, two of which can be found in north Queensland: the Scrub-hen and the larger Bush Turkey with its red and yellow neck. The Mallee fowl is found in dryer regions of southeast Australia.

Scrub-hen eggs were popular food. One egg, often tucked up to two metres deep in those large mounds, could feed a small family.
Paradise in the Rain

Babinda is one of Australia’s wettest regions, which is reflected in the Yidinji name Bunabinda, meaning ‘water over the shoulder’. It refers to the waterfalls cascading from the nearby rainforest-clad mountains. The district’s rich, natural resources meant the Yidinji clans could live in relative comfort. Their food and building materials, sustained by abundant water, grew all around them. This is paradise… as long as you work with nature.

Housing

During the wet season our forebears would build domed huts, thickly thatched with grass to ensure they were waterproof. During winter, paper bark stripped from the Melaleuca trees was added to ensure a warm home for the forest dwelling families.


Ceremonies

Neighbouring clans would meet for ceremonies and trading. Walking tracks wound across and through the ranges linking with neighbours like the Mallanbarra Yidinji. Gatherings provided a chance for marriage, trading and settling disputes and, of course, having a good time catching up with friends.

Babinda Boulders

In the creation time, Oolana, a beautiful young woman, was caught by her Yidinji countrymen for running away with her lover, Dyga, in violation of tribal law. Oolana struggled as Dyga was led away. She leapt into the nearby creek. As she hit the water the ground trembled and huge boulders covered her. Oolana lies there now as one with the boulders. Her spirit still wanders; the river seeking her lost lover. Many young men have since drowned at the boulders. Did Oolana lure them to their deaths as she continues her search for Dyga?

The Boulders are spectacular and well worth visiting but please do not swim there.

Living Off the Land

The diverse rainforest resources feature in the art of Yidinji Elder Paul Bong (Bindur-Bullin). Fishing in the rivers and pools provided eels, fish and turtle. Scrub fowl, Djarragun, and other birds and animals, were speared and trapped by Yidinji.

Freshwater turtles come with their own baking dish. They cook in their own juices when turned upside down and baked on the coals. Scrub hens and fish wrapped in wild ginger leaves and tied with bush string were also baked on hot coals. Eels, Jabban, were good too. They were twisted around a stick suspended on forked sticks standing over the fire.

— Annie Wonga 2019.

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Find on the Cairns Arts & Culture Map: Babinda Information Centre  Paradise in the Rain
Cairns Regional Council would like to thank the following people for their participation:

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Find all Embracing Our Stories Signs on the Cairns Arts & Culture Map