



# COAST OF DREAMS AND PLENTY

Aboriginal connection with the  
sea in and around Whyalla

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The Spencer Gulf and Lake Torrens basin were formed during the late Cretaceous faulting 90 – 60 million years ago. During the Pleistocene era (2.5million years – 10,000 years ago), as part of at least 1,000km long rift valley, Spencer Gulf was flooded and drowned at least twenty times due to the incoming and retreating ice ages. The archaeological evidence suggests that Aboriginal people watched the last actual event of the gulf flooding from their established camps at Point Lowly 10,000-6,000 years ago. They also started fishing there. So, who eats who and how? People versus marine environment. Round one.



Aboriginal fishing techniques and one very specific ritual:

## FISH TRAPS



### STONE TRAPS

**Where:**

Between Fitzgerald Bay and Point Lowly.

**When:**

Mainly Summer but suitable all year round.

Stone traps include simple straight to open V shaped barriers across the tidal channels, often with a gap in the wall and box and wing traps on the upper edge of tidal area. Most of the tidal traps would work best when the tide was at the greatest amplitude and would not function properly on small tides and 'dodge' tides ('dodge' tide or no tide at all is specific only to Spencer Gulf, Gulf St Vincent and Torres Strait in Australia). Stone fish traps were usually made from local stone. Calcarenite was commonly used. Large to small often tabular or rectangular rocks were placed on top of each other. The fish traps on Eyre Peninsula appear to be more common to those of South West Western Australia and the Northern Australian coastline in terms of their construction and environmental setting than those of South East Australia.



### NATURAL BAYS

**Where:**

Suitable coves and bays between Douglas Point and Mount Young.

**When:**

Mainly Summer.

Shoals of fish were surrounded by several men, each being provided with a branch of a tree and slowly driven towards the shore where they were secured by placing the branches around them and throwing them on the sand.



## WOODEN TRAPS

**Where:**

South off Seaview Estate, Marevista Crescent, Whyalla.

**When:**

Suitable all year round.

Wooden fish traps were constructed in the tidal channels of the mangrove samphire swamp on the southern side of Whyalla. It was built in a narrow two (2) metres wide channel running through the samphire behind the Seaview Estate. Wooden fish traps were mostly composed of upright stakes driven into calcareous mud with smaller branches interwoven around the stakes. The Whyalla traps were made from branches laid across the channel.



## SPEARING

**Where:**

Black Point, mangrove swamp south of Whyalla and any suitable bay between Douglas Point and Mount Young.

**When:**

Mainly Summer but suitable all year round.

No fishhooks, baits, nets or any kind of vessels were used by Barngarla people. Fish spear was about 1.5m long and was called 'winna'. It mainly had a simple point, other options included use of a single kangaroo toenail barb. Apart from spearing large fish from the rocks, the spear was also used while wading in knee-deep water. Spearing off rocks included mainly snapper, any medium to large fish (kingfish, flounder, salmon, small sharks) and possibly stingrays.



## SINGING TO THE SHARKS RITUAL

**Where:**

Point Lowly.

**When:**

Summer.

All three tribal groups – Barngarla, Andyanmanthanha and Kokatha agreed that Point Lowly was a place where people used to sing to the sharks. At Weeroona Bay, the men gathered at the rocks while the women danced on the beach. The men sang to the sharks. The sharks gathered schools of fish and drove them towards the beach. The men then entered the water and collected fish. The last person in Whyalla who was able to sing to the sharks passed away in the late 1960s.

**Explainer:**

In general terms, fish are not drifters, they swim with a reason. They have a well-developed

hearing system. When fish larvae hatch, they drift to surface, feed on plankton and start swimming as well. The fish then look for a reef to live on. The reef itself produces a complex of various sounds – fish feeding, crabs fighting, sand and rock moving etc. Young fish listen to and follow these sounds. Singing to the sharks from the shore virtually creates a reef 'symphony', attracting little fish followed by predators and eventually large predators like sharks and dolphins. As sharks (and dolphins) are easy to observe close to the surface, they may look like the ones who gather a shoal of fish and drive it towards the shore.

This tradition in Australia is unique to Point Lowly, possibly to Point Gibbon and North Shields – all Barngarla people territory. Other places where this ritual is still practiced in slightly different form are Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Solomon Islands.

# FISH TRAPS CONT..



## COLLECTING

### Where:

Anywhere on the coast between Douglas Point and Mount Young.

### When:

Mainly Summer but suitable all year round.

Crabs and razor fish were collected on mud flats at low tide. Cowled 's landing was especially good place for getting large blue swimmer crabs. The Aboriginal people would not eat oysters and some kinds of shellfish along the east coast of Eyre Peninsula.



## CUTTLEFISH

### Where:

Point Lowly, Stony Point and Black Point.

### When:

Winter.

There is a pattern of a cuttlefish 'highway' starting near Cowell and Wallaroo taking a straight run towards Point Lowly. The major hotspots for cuttlefish breeding are located at and around Black Point and Stony Point sub tidal reefs. The cuttlefish feed on molluscs, crabs, small fish and shrimp. Breeding takes place around May to August every year. Hundreds of thousands aggregate on rocky reefs around Point Lowly. This is the only known mass mating of *Sepia apama* (Australian giant cuttlefish) in the world.

IT IS NOT KNOWN IF BARNGARLA PEOPLE AND OTHER VISITING INDIGENOUS GROUPS HUNTED FOR CUTTLEFISH AT POINT LOWLY.

