

The Rebirth of the Australian Aborigine Culture Brings Renewed Danger to the Dugong

by Ben Cropp

THE ABORIGINE stood poised on the dinghy's bow, the long harpoon ready, balanced in his right hand. The dugong surfaced, a brown fat body not fifty meters away. Now the boatman sculled rapidly, the muffled oar quickly surging the dinghy forward. Still the dugong lazed on the surface.

Up came the harpoon. The hunter's body arched, followed by a powerful dive. For a

moment he seemed suspended in midair, a slow motion effect as the harpoon sunk deep into the great bulk. A moment later the hunter fell off the spear, there was a great splash, a tail disappeared, and some frantic swimming as the aborigine grasped the dinghy just in time before it jerked away in a fast tow.

A dugong was captured, a long struggle yet ahead for the two Bardi tribesmen, a struggle reenacted many times over the last few hundred years on this northwest Australian coast.

I anchored *Beva* in Malumbo Bay, in a sheltered pool between the coral and the swirling currents which boil into King Sound. We ran our dinghy onto the beach at One Arm Point to visit the Bardi tribe. School was out and the children frolicked beside the beach. They were playing dugong hunt games. One boy sunk his teeth into a large piece of styrofoam, his boat, and tore out a groove for the sculling oar. A young hunter aged five or six stood at the bow with an imaginary harpoon while the other boy sculled. The little hunter leaped from the foam boat onto the dugong prey—another native boy—who surfaced spluttering and swinging. The hunt game turned into a brawl, and as I watched this delightful young melee, the foam boat fell into pieces after coming in contact with the hunter's skull.

They say the Bardi tribe used to be a wild lot; it seems to surface in the high-spirited children.

Not many years ago they really looked a wild lot, heavily scarred with cicatrices and their upper front teeth purposely knocked out. Their long pointed beards and long hair pulled back and bound with mud set off ferocious features, which must have scared many an early visitor.

Today, the Bardi are a peaceful and proud community clinging to ancient tribal lores more firmly than any other aborigine tribe along the west coast. They live well in modern homes, their children go to school, but they have no intention of losing the heritage of their old tribal customs and native way of life. The Bardi are hunters, highly skilled hunters and fishermen of the sea. Every day I saw the fruits of the sea distributed among the members of the well-fed community.

It has not always been like this for the Bardi tribe. The first explorers here made little contact with and little impact on them. The Dutch sailed past, huge sails over the horizon, which must have bewildered them. Macassans and Indonesians probably dropped in, fishing people with something in common.

William Dampier, buccaneer and English explorer, careened his ship *Cygnets* in 1688 only five miles south of Cygnets Bay. When

he located water, he tried to induce the aborigines to help fill and load casks. Dampier wrote, "... they stood there like statues, staring at one another, and grinning like so many monkeys. They are naked black people with curly hair and are the most miserable people in the world. Their eyelids are always half closed to keep the flies out of their eyes. They have great bottle noses, full lips, wide mouths and two fore teeth in the upper jaw are wanting in all of them."

Dampier's description would bring a laugh to the proud and prosperous Bardi of today. They should have plundered the pompous buccaneer on the spot.

The next white men who came brought tragedy. These were pearlers, and as roguish in their way as Dampier. Confrontation with the pearling crews brought degradation to the proud tribe. The white men raped the women and hunted down the men to labor on the luggers in forced slavery. When the Bardi retaliated, spears flew, but many died, and the tribe would never be the same.

In 1885 a Captain Richardson was speared in Cygnets Bay, perhaps for very good reason. However, the police moved in and shot several of the aborigines under the usual pretext of "resisting arrest". The Bardi tribe suffered through the punitive expeditions that followed. They were chained, marked as the "guilty ones", and marched off to Derby. Here they suffered the final indignity, of being locked up in the famous Derby prison tree—a great hollowed-out baobab—the very tree that provides food and water to nomadic aborigines in times of drought. The once proud tribe was moved to a settlement in Derby and a slum life of drinking, fighting and boredom.

What happened to the Bardi tribe was no different from the degradation of dozens of tribes around Australia. They were first dragged into the white man's service on his personal quest for riches, then lured further by the white man's goods. New habits were formed—notably alcohol and tobacco—and the natives were enveloped by a way of life to which they did not belong. But those "grinning monkeys", as Dampier remarked, are a stubborn and proud race, and the white man's laws, which once suppressed the tribe, today now lean toward their survival and well being.

After a generation in the slums of Derby, two elders, Billy Alchoo and Tommy Djubi, who still remembered the good old days when the tribe lived on Sunday Island off One Arm Point, worked hard to persuade their tribe to return. Billy, now chairman of the Bardi council, and an energetic, active hunter in his seventies, told me of his pilgrimage back to a dignified way of life.

"In Derby, couple a bloke was workin' but most dem just walking around de town, and going into da jail from drinken. Den we all spend all our money on bailing dem all de time. We couldn't do much in Derby so me and Tommy we decide to make our way back to home and we'll have our own life like we been having before. We find here our happy home back again what we been living before. All de people living in Derby, our own people, dey hear dat we is going good and have a good time and catch turtle and dugong, den dey all come back, one by one, little by little cross from Derby. Now we are all here back again, go for der hunting turtle and catching fish, and dey all happy here. And we come back to our own culture, what we forget, and now we get all back again, the way our people been show us—we gotta carry on and keep dat way."

The Bardi tribe made a big decision. Now resettled on One Arm Point, the community seems happy, prosperous, educated in both Western ways and their own—and proud of the hunting and fishing skills that keep their freezers full of meat. The Bardi live the best of both worlds. They have a reasonable standard of living, nice homes and amenities—yet they are true aborigines, they practice and teach the ways of tribal life.

FOR OUR BRIEF one-week stay, Djubi outlined a busy itinerary of turtle and dugong hunting, drugging fish and chasing wild pigs. Before our cameras they proved adept film stars and even understood the problem of continuity. I remember old Djubi calling out to one of his boys, "Hey, you put shirt back on, he filmed you with shirt last time." Many times they told each other where to stand and what to wear when we picked up a following shot.

On our first day we went out drugging fish. It is a way of fishing which can fill a bag within the hour, a change from harpooning, an old lore they like to teach the younger people.

On one of the smaller islands in the Sunday Island group, we clambered ashore over the solid quartz rocks. In the center of the island grew many wispy small bushes, called *Tephrosia rosea*, the predominant vegetation of the sandy areas, growing a meter high.

Our guides, Luke Thomas, Djubi's son, and Peter Coomerang, dug around the bush base and pulled the fat poison root out. In a half hour of digging they had a bagful. Down on the beach they methodically smashed the roots to pulp, mixing them with soft sand to contain the poisonous juices. With this bag of pulp, fibers and sand mixture, we went out on the exposed reef at low tide in search of a pool of fish. We walked another hour, check-

ing pool after pool until they settled on one two meters deep, a few meters wide, and full of fish which scuttled under the coral when we approached. Luke and Peter dove into the pool, went down to the bottom and released the mixture. To be certain there was no safe refuge for the fish to hide, they pushed some of the drug mixture under every ledge and crevice. Now we waited expectantly, camera ready, for the drug to act.

I doubt five minutes had passed before the first small fish hit the surface. It gasped at the air and bounced erratically past Luke who caught it on one of its hops. It was only a small stripey, he tossed it aside. There were bigger fish down there.

More and more of the smaller fish flapped along the surface, and bounced into the shallows, where they lay gasping. I could see much bigger fish rushing back and forth deep down in the pool. It would not be long now.

Another half hour passed, a turmoil of big fish were panicking down there, then suddenly they burst to the surface, bounding along to flap into the shallows. Both the fishermen rushed in and impaled them on spears, or caught by hand dozens of large sturgeon fish and stripeys. Lynn, my wife, and I dropped our camera and sound gear and joined in the chase. Fish bounced along and into our open hands. We captured over two dozen edible fish from this one pool, enough to feed several families that night.

Down on the beach, old Djubi was putting the finishing touches to his new raft. It is not just a raft, but a very special one. Djubi had carefully selected and cut each two-and-a-half meter stake from a light-weight mangrove tree, and nailed six together with wooden dowels of hard wattle wood. It had taken him a week to make this raft, in two sections, each tapered at one end just like his forefathers taught him. Djubi told me all about his raft of ancient design and why it is in two sections, actually two rafts tied together.

"Raft is good thing for hunting you see because I'm da one been using raft long time for hunting turtle and dugong. Outside in deep water when I see 'em floating I jus chasem, chasem. Next minute when turtle wanna breathe I just drop flat on de raff so turtle can't see me, next minute paddle again. When he get close I just get my spear and jump over it and hit 'em. Soon as I grab dat turtle I can just hit 'em on a head and just put 'em on a raff den I went home.

"If I hit big dugong, he very strong, I untie dis rope here an let 'im take one part raff with 'im. He tows this long time. I just paddle behind 'im on other part of raff. When he's

dead I pull him on raff and tow him home. Raff is good thing to hunt turtle and dugong. We teach our young people dis so dey know old ways so maybe someday after we die they know how to make raff."

Djubi is the last of the original Bardi. He is the only one left with the upper front teeth knocked out, and a most obvious bulbous nose. This amiable stooped man was always willing to help us. In his seventies, Djubi is too old to hunt anymore, but he remembers and teaches.

His son, Luke, showed me how he hunts from the raft. He lets the currents sweep him along, quietly paddling to maneuver the raft into position beside a surfacing turtle. Crouched low on the raft, he suddenly straightened up and leaped out, plunging the harpoon into the turtle. This time Luke paddled back with his catch, but normally he would wait for the tide to turn and the currents to sweep him homeward nice and easy.

FOR A LONG TIME I have wanted to film a real-life dugong hunt. Two fishermen, Roy Wiggan and young Douglas Tigon, offered to take me. Douglas would handle the harpoon while Roy sculled the boat, which requires the most skill. He had to sneak the dinghy right on top of the wary dugong in the daytime so that the harpooner could leap and accurately impale the animal. As we made the long trip round to Cape Leveque to get there, Roy described another journey he had made in these waters some years earlier.

"I went over to Cockatoo Island a few years ago with a seventeen-year-old companion to trade my aboriginal goods. On the way home, my little boat hit the powerful tide rips and suddenly it capsized and sunk under us.

"I tried to help the boy how to swim, I gave him the paddle but he just sat on it. I gave him a fuel drum to float on but he couldn't do it right. After dark I lost sight of him.

"The tide took me out a few miles and when it turned I ended up at nearly the same spot where the boat capsized. I camped on the closest island and crossed to Mermaid Island next day. I tried to get back to the island where everlasting spring waters are but the currents couldn't let me. So I drifted from island to island trying to reach Derby over fifty miles away. At Long Island I camped four or five days and when I left that island I knew I would survive.

"My mind was off. To my knowledge it took me nineteen days to reach Derby, but when they put me in hospital they told me it was only seven days since I left Cockatoo

Island. I must have swum nearly eighty miles.

"It took me about three years at least until I was back on myself again. I was so nervous. Every time I was dugong hunting I was really scared of the rips and whirlpools. Now I am back on myself again."

We negotiated the boiling tide surge in the narrow passage between Swan Point and Swan Island, and turned west for Cape Leveque. Roy pointed out a section of turbulent water where he said the wreck of the *Karrakatta* lay. She was a 1,271-ton steamer, and on the night of 26 March 1901, she hit a rock which now bears her name and she sank quickly in only ten meters of water.

We passed a little creek. Roy told me that it was Hunter's Creek, where his grandfather lived with his fourteen wives.

"My grandfather Harry Hunter had a pearling fleet at Hunter's Creek. He's got so many grandchildren and sons and daughters everywhere 'cause he had so many wives. He had a dozen or more, I think fourteen my mother told me. Harry Hunter, he came from England about seventy or eighty years ago. He was a boat builder and had a lot of pearling boats. His name is everywhere about here 'cause of all his children."

Douglas yelled up fo'ard. A turtle dived across the bow. Roy gave Douglas the tiller, ripped his shirt off and leaped up on the bow. Douglas roared in pursuit of the escaping turtle. I swung the camera up just in time to catch Roy diving from the bow. He went down deep, then spluttered to the surface, grasping a large and furiously flapping green turtle. It was a beautifully executed capture, done with the bare hands.

The two aborigines hauled the struggling reptile into the small dinghy while I filmed, then turned with a happy grin toward the camera—and threw the turtle back in the water! I was surprised, as turtle is important to the diet of the Bardi tribe. But we were not here to catch turtles.

THE DUGONG is the largest of all the animals hunted by the aborigine. Its flesh is superb, and its capture means a windfall of meat unequalled by other prey. The hunting of dugong with harpoons is also dangerous. There are records of hunters becoming caught in the ropes, knocked unconscious by a blow from the tail, or towed far out to sea and caught in sudden storms. Those few who acquire great skill in dugong hunting reap great rewards—not just in terms of meat, but because success brings great status. To compete with such dangerous elements and capture dugong is the greatest cultural expression an aborigine can make.

A code of ethics deeply ingrained with the

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Top: Children of the Bardi tribe in Western Australia frolic on a makeshift boat in a mock hunt.

Bottom: Adult Bardi collect fish that they have drugged with a native root. [Lynn Cropp]

social beliefs and attitudes surrounds the hunting of dugong. The hunter will not go out while in mourning after the death of a relative. A serious argument would postpone a hunt. Only the initiated man can hunt dugong. Others must not even touch his equipment.

Such beliefs have socially limited the number of hunters in each community, and continue to prevent indiscriminate hunting by the aborigines.

Dugong are now a protected species, but such laws do not apply to the aborigines. The arrival of Europeans instigated the commercial exploitation of dugong for oil. Vast herds were quickly reduced until the dugong became endangered. Today, indirect factors such as the destruction of habitat and accidental netting by shark and barramundi fishermen are still reducing their population.

History records their huge numbers. G. M. Allen in his book, *Sirenia*, quoted that in July 1893, a herd in Moreton Bay off Brisbane extended over three miles by 300 yards. Such a herd would number many thousands. Today, that same herd still exists. I have seen them there—but only a dozen or so.

In a few remote places the dugong are again thriving. One of the heaviest concentrations seems to be along Cape York Peninsula in Queensland. George Heinsohn of James Cook University, Townsville, recorded in a recent aerial survey a herd of some 700 dugong off the mouth of the Starkey River some seventy kilometers north of Cooktown.

Shark Bay in Western Australia abounds in dugong and offers an unrivaled opportunity for dugong study in clear waters. (See *Oceans*, Volume 12, Number 3.) Canadian scientist Paul Anderson recorded 363 individuals by aerial surveys in 1978, but it is believed this widespread herd may number upward of a thousand.

During an eighteen-month expedition around Australia, I saw only two other areas where dugong abound—the first in Doubtful Bay, where ten-meter tides pour through Foam Pass and The Funnel. This area is so remote and rarely visited that my “modern” Admiralty chart was actually made from a survey early last century and was totally inaccurate. The other area was along the western front of King Sound off Cape Leveque, the traditional hunting grounds of the Bardi people.

One may question the aboriginal use of modern European tools such as dinghies and outboard motors—and how these must affect their cultural conservation of the dugong population. Modern methods have not

as yet brought about a dramatic increase in the capture of dugong. The outboard has primarily allowed the hunter to travel more quickly to and from the hunting ground if it is a long way from home—and outboards are frequently out of order. According to Dr. Anderson, the evidence suggests that, for a dugong population to endure, there should be an annual 95 percent survival rate. This means that if the Bardi capture two animals a week, or a hundred a year, there would need to be 2,000 dugong in the area. As yet, the Bardi's hunting ground has not been surveyed.

ABOUT TWO MILES short of Cape Leveque, Roy stopped the outboard, took it off the transom, and fitted a sculling oar. He wrapped a bag around the oar to muffle the sound. “This is dugong country. Now we go real quietly, do not even cough.” Even the faint lapping of the fuel in the half empty tank was given a worried look.

We let the dinghy drift with the current along the edge of the dugong feeding grounds about a mile offshore. Two brown heads popped up a hundred meters farther out, and two heavy bodies and fluked tails followed as the dugong went back down to the seagrass on the bottom.

There was excitement but no hurry. Roy sculled the dinghy closer in and told me he wanted the dugong to get used to his boat. We would take it easy, follow and bide our time for the attack.

Earlier, my friend Wally Gibbins had sat for two hours timing dugong when we met them in the gulf. Every dive they made timed out at seven minutes. I told Roy this and kept tab with my watch. Amazingly, within a few seconds of seven minutes, these dugong of the west coast popped up for a breath.

An hour passed as we relaxed in the boat, yet muscles tensed every time we heard a faint snort. There were more than a dozen dugong around, but Roy concentrated on the first pair we saw and quietly followed.

“We go in next time.” The seven minutes ticked by slowly. Douglas stood on the bow, deftly balancing the long harpoon. A long rope snaked back from the detachable head. He checked that there were no coils close by his feet.

We knew by now exactly where they would surface again. I was surprised Roy held the dinghy so far back, a good fifty meters from where they should surface, but he had his reasons, I would shortly witness.

Wally's calculations were a little off this time. We waited with bated breath for just over another minute past the seven before the two heads popped up. Immediately Roy sculled the dinghy forward, silently but

swiftly with an urgent determination showing on his strained face.

The two dugong were still lolling on the surface. We came in fast but they still seemed to be a good thirty to forty meters ahead. One dugong went down, the other stayed a moment longer. Now the dinghy was right above him, he was barely a meter underneath.

Douglas leaped at that moment. The harpoon went in deep. I remember seeing Douglas momentarily suspended in midair still grasping the harpoon, then he fell off the spear into the water. There was a great splash. Douglas popped to the surface, and Roy's outstretched hand pulled him into the dinghy just in time. There was a sudden jerk as the slack took up, and I realized the dinghy was moving rapidly through the water. The great animal surfaced ahead as both Roy and Douglas strained on the rope, heaving to bring him in close.

We were moving faster than the outboard had propelled us. It was only a frail three-and-a-half meter dinghy. I knew how the old whalers felt when they hung on to a sounding leviathan.

Now they had the dugong close, not tiring and still powerfully thrusting forward. Without hesitating Roy dived over with a heavy rope and half hitched a loop around the dugong's tail. He finished this so quickly I hardly knew what he was doing. “We've got him now!” and a beaming Roy clambered back in the boat. A very short tail rope tethered him to the dinghy. That did not mean it was all over. Now 400 kilos of power threshed and smashed beside us.

The end was close though for the unfortunate animal. Both aborigines now held the tail, twisting it so the dugong could not raise his head and breathe. A final expulsion of air signified a drowned dugong. Now it was easy to tie him alongside and slowly head for home.

The sun balanced on the horizon when they beached the dinghy at One Arm Point. Willing hands hauled the carcass up on the rocks, knives flashed and grinning children gathered round. For all the Bardi community that night it was “good tucker”. We sat with them and tried the roasted catch. I have to admit it tasted good.

For the Bardi tribe, this is their way of life, the old way, but the best. As Billy said, “The olden time you see we are coming back to now. The way our old people been show us—we gotta carry on and keep dat way!”

Ben Cropp is a photographer and writer who has authored a number of books about the sea and who travels the coasts of Australia, filming a series of underwater programs for television.