

'NOT SO SOLITARY'

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT, SOLITARY ISLANDS MARINE PARK

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Abstract

The social and economic values of NSW marine parks are an important component of their management. Various approaches have been undertaken over the years to investigate these values. Surveys to identify human use patterns, community perceptions and attitudes are common approaches to identifying and quantifying the social values. In the Solitary Islands Marine Park the desire to improve our understanding of the importance of the coast and ocean to the local community has led to the implementation of an oral history project entitled 'Not So Solitary'. Oral histories are essentially an articulation of individual and collective memories and observations that portray the attachment of people with place.

'Not So Solitary' commenced in May 2012 and documents a broad range of perspectives and memories of park users prior to, and during, the marine park's establishment and management. Experiences, favourite features and species observed within the park are key topics covered within this project, as well as changes people have observed over time. In essence, the project highlights the strong relationships people form with the Solitary Islands region. Approximately 30 interviews have taken place to date and a further 30 are planned with people who have a long-term and varied attachment to the Solitary Islands region. Stakeholder groups include commercial and recreational fishers, Aboriginal knowledge holders, tourism operators, divers, spearfishers, marine scientists, surfers and community members. Conversations to date have been extremely varied, but all indicate the coast and ocean is central to their way of life. Reported changes in the landscape and abundance of animals observed over time are repeated by many individuals. Some amazing experiences and wildlife encounters have been documented. This collective knowledge will contribute to the future management of the Solitary Islands Marine Park.

Introduction

Oral histories are essentially an articulation of individual and collective memories and observations that portray the attachment of people with place. They are also an important tool to identify patterns of change over time, and rely largely on peoples memories, which are influenced by many factors. The accuracy of memories is influenced by: how long ago the event was (the more recent the better the recall); the emotional connection to the event (negative events are remembered more clearly than positive events); the value of the memory for the individual (more meaningful or personal are remembered more clearly) and uniqueness (the more unusual or unique the event the better it is remembered) (Fernbach and Narin, 2007).

The purpose of an oral history exercise can vary. Some intend to document stories relevant to an event, a connection to place, or an occupation, while others may track a family history or changes in the landscape. When collecting oral histories it is the common meanings of the shared experience that are all sought – and also the meanings unique to the individual. Alessandro Portelli states this succinctly in Yow (2005) ‘The fact that a culture is made up of individuals different from one another is one of the important things that social sciences sometimes forgets, and of which oral history reminds us’.

Oral history is placed at the interface between science and people (Roberts and Sainty, 2000). Memory is trained to remember what is relevant to ourselves, which makes memory more subjective but more detailed (Fernback and Narin, 2000). Often, key events recounted can be matched to historical records such as reports in local newspaper, historical papers, scientific literature or even known weather events, such as a particular cyclone or period of drought. This is particularly useful when trying to verify observed environmental change over time or species shifts. Through collecting oral histories we can recognise previous states and patterns of change (Dovers, 2000). Oral histories can also provide a community or user group perspective, or an individual’s feelings about a particular pattern of change, as well as the management intervention, if any.

In Australia we are ‘girt by sea’ and more than 85% of the nation live within 50 km of the coastline (CSIRO, 2013). Therefore it is no surprise that most people have some association with the coast or ocean, whether they live near it, work or play on it, or visit it on occasions. The management of the coast and ocean is the responsibility of all three levels of government and the broader community. Marine protected areas are acknowledged as a tool to manage the marine environment by spatially constraining and directly managing different activities. In NSW there are six marine parks that encompass one third of NSW waters. Sanctuary zones (areas where no extractive activities are permitted) only account for approximately 6% of the NSW State waters.

In 2011 an independent scientific audit of marine parks was undertaken with findings reported in February 2012. A key recommendation was to reorganise the management of the NSW marine estate to achieve a more holistic approach to management. Several recommendations centred on “incorporating social and economic data into decision making in order to help all parties to better understand the social and economic benefits and costs of marine parks” and “incorporation of social science expertise into planning and management processes”. This gave more certainty to the role of oral histories in the planning and management of the marine environment, as well as elevating the participation and integration of community values and aspirations into management regimes. By collating local knowledge managers gain important information which can inform future management of an area, which increases the transparency of future environmental management decision-making (Robertson and McGee, 2003).

The Solitary Islands Marine Park (SIMP) in Northern NSW, Australia is one of the six marine parks in NSW, and the first that was established (Figure 1). The SIMP extends from Muttonbird Island at Coffs Harbour, north approximately 75 kilometres to Plover Island at Sandon. It includes the beaches and headlands to the mean high water mark and estuaries to their tidal limits as well as offshore three nautical miles to the limit of State waters. This oral history project focuses on the SIMP, but it is important to note that the boundaries of the SIMP (and former Marine Reserve) were only introduced in 1991 and that many of the stories recounted by interviewees occurred well-prior to the declaration of any marine reserve or marine park.

Therefore, for the purpose of the project, the study area is referred to as the Solitaires Region. The Solitaires Region encompasses the waters within the SIMP but is not strict in this definition. Stories in the vicinity of the SIMP are also included as they are integral in relaying the history and connection of people to place.

This study area was chosen primarily as it has long been recognised for its biodiversity value and has a long history of management regimes. It was the first marine protected area designated in NSW, in 1991, but was the focus of attention as far back as the 1960's with regard to conservation efforts. In addition, the Solitaires Region has a wide variety of use and has supported several industries over the decades. It has also provided shelter, sustenance and spirituality to traditional owners for thousands of years. Most importantly though, it was chosen as there is no shortage of characters who have long-term associations with the Solitaires Region who are gracious enough to share their personal stories, observations and intimate connection with the area.

This project aims to document the range of experiences, anecdotes and observations of many long-term marine park users. It will record the relationships and connections between people and the Solitaires region and identify interesting or unusual biological, ecological, cultural and social information or trends. It will also combine and synergise individual knowledge into collective knowledge and understanding that can be integrated into future marine park management where relevant. It is intended to share these memories with the broader community through various media throughout the life of the project.

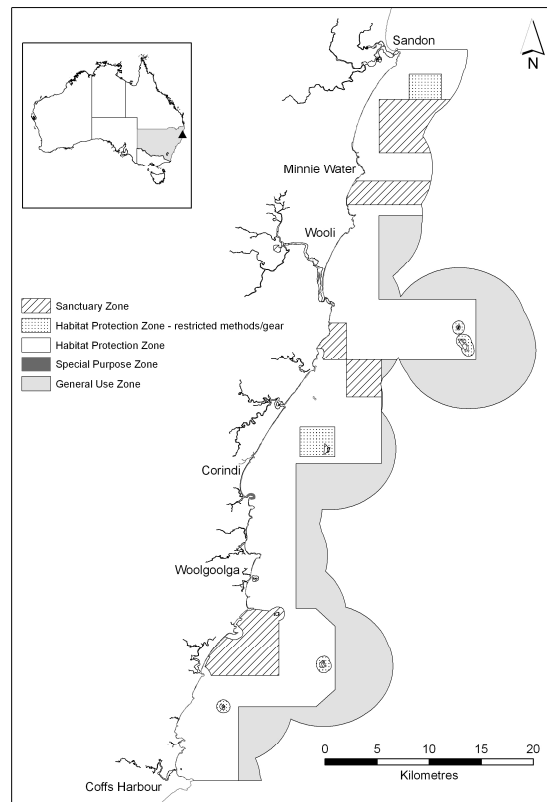


Figure 1. Location of the Solitary Islands Marine Park, NSW, Australia

Methods

Oral history interviews for this project were a semi-structured conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee. Three themes were discussed in all interviews, which included i) experiences and memories, ii) park features and changes observed over time, and iii) how the marine park is managed. The interviewer had a sheet with prompts relevant to these three themes but the conversation was not restricted to specific questions or the three themes. Interviews were recorded using a digital video recorder mounted on a tripod as well as a hand-held voice recorder. All video and audio was downloaded and stored digitally. A transcript was then drafted verbatim using both the video and audio (dependent on the clarity of either).

Interviews were conducted at a venue of choice which has generally been either in the Solitary Islands Marine Park office at the Coffs Harbour Jetty or at the interviewee's residence. They ranged in length from 40 minutes to 180 minutes. Approximately 60 people are listed for potential interview and feedback was sought after each interview as to who else would be relevant for the project, known as the snowball sampling method (Neuman, 2000). Those listed initially were generally known to long-term marine park staff and had either been involved in marine park activities over the years or were known long-term residents with specific affiliations such as retired commercial fishermen. The list of interviewees was arranged into key stakeholder groups to ensure a broad range of views and recollections were captured. These stakeholder groups were: commercial fishers; recreational fishers; Aboriginal elders; diving operators; charter operators; marine scientists; marine naturalists; surfers; surf life saving members; spearfishers; oyster growers; community representatives and other. Most were living within 100 km of the marine park, however, on occasions, key long term knowledge holders who have moved away from the region were interviewed (e.g. in Sydney and Toowoomba).

Participants were contacted initially by phone and in most cases sent a follow up letter or email to confirm date and time of the interview and information on the project. Following the interview a consent form was signed releasing the use of information and a second form for use and reproduction of photos, if photos were provided. At a later date a thank-you letter was sent, along with a copy the transcript and DVD of the interview. If required, clarification was sought from the interviewee on specific words in the transcript, for example if they were inaudible while being transcribed or the spelling of a person's name.

Interviews commenced in May 2012, with five interviews conducted as a pilot to ascertain if the approach and themes discussed were appropriate. A review of the pilot interviews occurred internally by staff and some minor modifications made, primarily around the introductory statements for the interview as well and a slightly less formal approach adopted. To date 35 interviews have been conducted with individuals and one with a husband and wife.

Although formal analysis has not commenced, it is intended that interviews will be analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively and recurring themes will be extracted from interviews and collated. The intended themes for analysis include:

- Connection to place – stories about a location or feature;
- A deeper connection – what the park means to people;
- Earliest encounters – hard times;
- Competing use – the social and economic value of activities;

- Contrasts – varied feelings in response to a shared experience;
- Wildlife observations – memorable or unusual wildlife encounters;
- Changes over time – shifting baselines and environmental change, and
- Management perspectives – how the park was, and is, currently managed.

Preliminary Findings and Discussion

As interviews are not yet completed, the following discussion is only based on recurring patterns and emerging themes noted during interviews and transcribing by the interviewers. Formal analysis has not yet been undertaken. However, the project has already demonstrated that people value the Solitaries Region in many different ways. When participants were asked to describe what the Solitaries Region means to them the responses were incredibly varied, even within stakeholder groups. For example, of the six commercial fishers interviewed, they each relay a different value: camaraderie and mateship; the challenges associated with commercial fishing; the wildlife encounters; ease of access; importance of the income and lifestyle.

“The part I loved about this place was fishing with the blokes, as I said going to sea with everybody, you’d all congregate at the bay, probably talk there for half an hour before you even go and away you all go together and that’s how it worked, you’d fish together you know you’d probably only be five hundred yards apart sometimes you know, all working in together, it’s beautiful, the comradeship was absolutely beautiful and ah that’s what I miss, I miss it more than anything”_Ron Fuller.

“It’s my livelihood. If the water’s good and looked after I make money. That’s what it means to me, that’s where I’ve gotta make my livelihood from so I mean I try to look after it too, like we don’t dump anything in it. All the bait comes in cardboard boxes and things like that, I bring it all back and put it in the recycle bin and that probably never happened years ago. I think people look after the environment more now, especially when you gotta earn your living from it”_Alan Robinson

“The Solitary’s are special ... the islands offshore and underwater reefs offshore that come up near the top create danger to you, they’re the only things that ever challenged your navigation abilities early in the piece. Every day you got to work as a fisherman is a challenge. It’s a challenge against the environment you work in and it’s a challenge against the particular animal you’re hunting”_Rob Toyer.

Surfers are a prominent user group in the Solitaries Region. The values surfers associate with the region, are primarily related to the natural experience.

“At the mouth of the creek, that was my favourite area because hardly anyone used to surf it, but there was always a good left hander there.....like on days, you know you had a beautiful clear day and you had a nice south westerly blowing, four to five, six foot wave and everything was just magic you know. I mean those were the days that I wish I could have over again those, those really beautiful days surfing in the ocean you know”_Uncle Tony Hart.

“Honestly it’s a real pure moment for someone, when they get that wave, and they’re on it, and they’re just visualising what’s going on, on that wave it’s like, it’s meditation. And it just gets better you know, better you get, more critical waves you wanna ride, you wanna learn about equipment and how that makes you feel and the experiences you have with other people. As soon as you look

toward the horizon when you're in the water it's pure, you don't really think about the problem that's on land." _Lee Winkler.

"Surfing's about not just riding a wave, but it's about the whole thing, it's about thinking about going, it's about going, it's about in the water, it's about where you are, it's about appreciating the fact. And there a lot of places you can go surfing here where you're out in the water and you can not see any built environment, still...And we all went surfing because one- it was exciting; two- we didn't know it but we were probably environmentalists in some way right, but we just appreciated the fact that nature was there, waves were there, you know." _Rus Glover.

The Solitaries region means so many things to so many people and this is particularly evident for the Traditional Owners of the region. Not only was the region home, but it was also a meeting place, spiritual place, provider of fresh seafood and its resources utilised for traditional medicines and tools.

"I suppose fifty percent of how we lived and what we had to eat came from the beach, that's how it worked. Without that beach we probably wouldn't have survived because there was nothing else. You see, I came through my childhood when they still had those, what they call a ration coupon and police would bring it out every Sunday, the coupons to get things. So you had to live outside of that, so that's why the beach meant so much to us. I think the most important thing to me was, the beach wasn't there for fun... it was more like learning you right from wrong, in what to take from that beach, how much to take from that beach, when to take it, so that you didn't destroy things. so to me it wasn't about enjoyment it was about learning life skills and how to keep your food balanced, how to collect for your elders at home, back at the camp to bring them stuff back home to eat. And times have changed, I suppose the amount of food that's there today compared to when I was a kid, when we talk about Corindi Beach, the reef down from what we call Pipe Clay Lake ... we used to be able to fish out beside that reef and we'd actually catch snapper off the beach" _Uncle Tony Perkins

There have been several recurring observations reported by story tellers when discussing changes seen over time, such as the change in fish stocks and catches; the rise and fall and rise again of the humpback whale and erosion of the foreshore. Rus Glover sums up the perceptions of change well:

"Some good memories you know, we always said that we had the best of it, and that our fathers had the best of it, I'm sure they said that their fathers had the best of it, our kids say that we had the best of it. But for me, our indigenous friends had the best of it because this would've been a magic place back then."

Shifting baselines in terms of fish stocks was commented upon by several participants, with mullet raised on numerous occasions.

"Some of the best memories were also obviously of fishing, and as everyone says, the fishing was pretty good in those days, and so learning to fish in the river, [Corindi River] and then beach fishing was pretty much what the family, the whole extended family, was into ...I can't remember our bags of fish ever being massive going up the creek, but you know, when you talk to my mother and my grandfather before that, certainly the catches in the estuary were amazing. Mum always used to talk about how literally you could go down when the mullet runs were on and you could have pretty much walked across the back of mullet all the way across." _Bob Edgar

“When I think back...about what was there then and what’s there now, it’s a bit frightening actually when I think about it...you know, at mullet time there was just thousands and thousands of tons, day after day of sea mullet going past...I used to be one of the rowers in the boats, and we sent a hundred, hundred weight, that’s 110 pound, which is probably fifty kilo boxes, wooden boxes we used to put the fish in, nail the lids and take them into town, on the truck, put them on the train, go to Sydney. And after they took all expenses out, this might be a bit hard to comprehend, still a bit hard for me to comprehend, we cleared between a farthing and a hapeney a pound”_Bob Howard

“I was watching for mullet over on the Gallows, you know the surf over at the Gallows ?[North Boambee Beach]. We used to sit up on top of there. I’m looking down the beach and I’m seeing things flashing in the surf and just too far to see what it was, so I jumped in me truck and I said to dad “I’ll go down and see what that is down there flashing”. When I went down from the surf, way out behind the break, it was distance of oh maybe two, three hundred yards; it was just a mass of tailor. And I drove from Coffs Headland right to the mouth of Boambee Creek, all that beach just on three and a half mile of it, it was like that. They were from knee deep water right out to, way out behind the main break and they were as thick as the hair on a cat’s back you know. And they kept going beyond the headland..... Well, after that I’ve never seen patches of tailor since.”_Keith Anderson

A particularly interesting observation with regard to marine species is the changes in whale numbers over the decades. In the 1950’s, there are reports of many whales in the Solitaries region. However, when whaling increased in intensity after the war and methods became more effective there was a noticeable decline in whale numbers. This observation shared by the story tellers. From 1952 until 1962 a whaling station operated at Tangalooma on Morton Island in Queensland which harvested and processed 6277 humpback whales during that period (Wikipedia, 2013). Whaling stations were also operational in Byron Bay and Eden. Whaling ceased in 1963 and humpback whales were protected in 1965. As we know, in more recent years, after the cessation of whaling there has been a marked increase in the number of humpback whales transiting the Solitaries region each year. This is a good example of memories supporting science.

“You know back in the 1950s I used to walk up on top of Corindi Headland or any headland and the number of whales, they were nearly running into one another going up the ocean. They were just, like you didn’t have to go anywhere, like today you’ve got to pay to go out on a boat to find them. Back in the fifties you only had to stand on the headland they were everywhere...Yeah that was just one of the things that struck me today, I know the whale numbers are increasing but when I think back to the fifties, it was unbelievable watching it.”_Uncle Tony Perkins

“And the whales that came past, they’re coming back these days like they used to in the old days. There’s heaps of whales out here now, but we had a banana plantation at west Korora and in the migrating season you could stand there and we could watch them out at sea spouting you know, they’d be cruising along and they’d spout and occasionally you’d see one jump and that sort of thing... There was a whaling station at Byron Bay and they killed a lot of whales up there well that thinned em out of course.... That was in, yeah it was around about fifty five [1955], fifty six [1956], the whaling station was still going. I used to go to Coolangatta for holidays and they used to run a bus down to the whaling station so that you could go and watch them, the tourists would go

down and watch them haul the whales in and flensing them and that sort of thing.....But ah, there's no doubt they've come back with a vengeance, there's heaps of them now, it's good to see" _Bill Palmer

Coastal erosion was a common theme in the memories shared. Story tellers speak of the ebb and flow of the sandy foreshore but believe that in recent years the erosion has been particularly bad. The gradual sedimentation of the creeks and the harbour was also commonly mentioned.

"So that's how much has gone, in the time that I've been here [1952]. And the last couple of years has been the worst. Since they put the rocks at the bottom of the road at the bay... but now the water's chewing in up here....In 1992 we started Dunecare here, and I was the coordinator of my area, of course. We planted pandanas down there, they're laying over now.....I'd say we've lost about twenty metres or something like that". _Barbar Knox

"We had a ski jump in Woolgoolga Lake, right and this is in 1965. It was deep enough to ski and have a ski jump, and you can not do that now....you start to realise just how many changes there have been in that local area just from change in the infrastructure in the area, particularly the change in the highway which cut our catchment, has cut our catchment several times and is doing the same thing again. You can't have changes like that and not expect to have changes in the physical make up of these estuaries. They've probably just sped up what happens over time so, huge changes." _Rus Glover

Another topic of note in the project so far is that everyone has a shark story. Not all bad encounters, but an encounter never the less.

"Another day we, cause with the tigers [tiger sharks] you gotta cut em open and pull the liver out because they float indefinite....Anyhow so we, we ripped it open like that and I said "Shit! There's a head!" and he was "What is it?" I said "What do you reckon, do we cut it and check it or not?" So I just cut it, it was a coconut. I thought 'Oh we got a bloody head here!' A bloody coconut, thank Christ for that you know." _Darcey Wright

"There was a trawler that had been up off north of North Solitary and they'd somehow managed to get their trawl tangled up.... they needed a diver to go out and have a look.... So I went down the trawl line and I probably only went down about ten metres and then I saw the boards... so I went down a little bit deeper and I could see the trawl, and behind the trawl was this nice tiger shark. Big broad head, and I thought 'Hmm okay this could be interesting'....and I'm working under the back of the boat, and I'm buffered up against the hull and into the rudder...anyway, I look down and me mate's started to come up the line. I don't know whether he sort of just came up to have a look or what he was doing, and anyway he got to within about ten metres and I thought 'Nope bugger this, I'm out of here'. So I went back up and I said "You got a tiger shark floating around down here"... "I'm getting out" and the captain wasn't happy actually he said ah "It's probably a bloody dolphin" (chuckles) I said "That's alright mate, I'll lend you my mask and you can go over the back and do it if you want" and of course he didn't do that" _Ian Shaw

And finally, there are some very important memories shared by people who were integral in getting the park established which reminds us of the values of the Solitaries Region and offers some background as to why it was the first marine protected area gazetted in NSW, back in 1991. There are also many other thoughts and memories shared with regard to management that will shape the future of the marine estate in this time of change.

"In the early days scuba diving... there was the realisation that I was seeing something really special, especially when we went to North Solitary Island.... and what motivated me to try to do something about saving it was that there was to be the world spear fishing championships. I think it was in about seventy two [1972], three or four. ...I agitated really hard in the community and at political levels just trying stop that and I succeeded in stopping the spear fishing championships. And I thought that having done that, I should do the next best thing, go on from there, and that is to try and have some sort of preservation of the marine environment established. So the movies that I made, I used as a tool for trying to persuade, move public opinion. ...and I worked really, really hard for probably, maybe ten years, eight to ten years to try and have a marine park established. Part of that initiative was to get the first visit of the New South Wales State Fisheries team up here and that was when Dr David Pollard and Johan, now Dr Bell and others came up and they spent about a week here"._Harvey Lee

Case Study – Artwork, Poetry and Song Component

A very exciting component of the project is the interpretation of these stories through a combination of visual art, poetry and song. A pilot study of five individual story-tellers was undertaken in early 2013 using a mix of mono-colour prints (Bronwyn Rodden), poetry (John Bennett) and song (Hamish Malcolm, Art Schultz). This was successfully presented at the 2013 Bellingen Readers and Writers Festival, with about 60 people attending, including the five story-tellers. The second phase of the art, poetry and song component of the project involved extending the five story-tellers to ten to increase representation to people involved in various stakeholder groups (commercial fishers, recreational fishers, Gumbaynggirr Elders, naturalists, scientists, surfers, tourism operators and resource managers). This was presented at the Coffs Harbour Regional Gallery on 31 August 2013, with ten artworks displayed and artworks discussed by the artists, 20 poems narrated, two recorded songs with associated video clips of historical photographs and other images shown on DVD, and eight live songs performed. The event was very successful at sharing stories and the planning for a third phase is underway. It is an innovative way to share stories more broadly with the public and the artwork and poems will hopefully be showcased long-term in an appropriate cultural centre, museum or other venue.

Conclusion

Oral histories are, without question, an effective way of collating the values attributed to place as well as future aspirations for that place. The Solitary's Region has been, and continues to be, more than just a body of water on the mid North Coast of NSW. For many people it was difficult to articulate what the park meant to them. It is a provider of fresh seafood, a place for recreation, a place to be challenged, a place to find peace and a place that brings people together.

Similarly, this project has documented many stories and revealed many interesting observations over the years with regard to the natural environment, and importantly it has brought people together. Interviewees fondly recollect the good times, speak about old friends with such warmth and kindness, and through the project, some good friends have reconnected.

Although the findings to date are only preliminary, given interviews are not yet completed and a full analysis has not been undertaken, this study has already provided a wealth of information and knowledge on species, trends, and values that has already informed management of the Solitary Islands Marine Park. This knowledge will build with time.

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