

Changing Perspectives in Australian Archaeology, Part IX

Fishing for Data—The Value of Fine-mesh Screening for Fish-bone Recovery: A Case Study from Peel Island, Moreton Bay, Queensland

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ABSTRACT. The age and extent of the Aboriginal fishery in Moreton Bay have been debated ever since excavations revealed low numbers of fish bones in coastal sites in southeast Queensland. Aboriginal people recall fishing as a major subsistence activity, yet archaeological evidence of low rates of fish bone discard have questioned this memory. In an effort to address these contrasting perceptions, excavation of the Lazaret Midden on Peel Island employed a 1 mm mesh sieve to maximize fish bone recovery. Our results suggest that fish remains are indeed numerous in this site, although the extreme fragmentation of the bone recovered from the fine sieve makes identification of fish taxa largely impossible. We discuss the implications of these findings for reconstructing Aboriginal subsistence patterns in Moreton Bay.

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According to Aboriginal knowledge, people have been living in the region now known as Moreton Bay since the beginning of time (Ross & Coghill, 2000) (Fig. 1). Even at the height of the last glacial, when sea levels were as much as 170 m lower than present levels (Lambeck & Chappell, 2001) and Moreton Bay was an expansive plain, the high dunes that were to become Moreton Island and Stradbroke Island were never far from the sea (Neal & Stock, 1986: 618). Aboriginal knowledge is that occupants of this landscape practised a marine economy, in accordance with traditional Aboriginal law, as provided by the original creator beings (Denis Moreton, senior Gorenpul elder, pers. comm.).

Therefore, Aboriginal people believe that the management and exploitation of marine resources, as part of the overall management of the landscape and seascape, has been a significant component of Aboriginal life forever.

Archaeological evidence supports the Aboriginal version of occupation history at a general level. It demonstrates that Aboriginal people have lived in southeast Queensland for at least 20,000 years (Neal & Stock, 1986). Neal argues, on the basis of the excavation results from Wallen Wallen Creek on the west coast of North Stradbroke Island, that marine exploitation was likely to have been the dominant subsistence activity throughout the site's occupation (Neal

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