

The economics of fishing: sustainable living in colonial New South Wales

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Introduction

James Bell, as part of his analysis of assimilation at La Perouse, presented a historical sketch of Aboriginal society on the south coast of New South Wales,¹ in which he asserted that by the late 1850s, when the full impact of land alienation was being felt, Aboriginal people on the south coast had become fully dependent upon white society.² According to Bell, up until that time, Aboriginal men had found casual work in cedar cutting, grazing and whaling, but by the late 1850s these industries had collapsed. Even though the dairy industry was taking off at this time, it had little need of outside labour. Bell claimed that by the 1860s and 1870s Aborigines had become an 'uprooted people reduced to pauperdom'.³

This article examines evidence of Indigenous fishing in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions of the south coast of New South Wales in the 19th century to explore Bell's claim of dependence. Building on the work of Brian Egloff and Scott Cane, the purpose of my study is to examine Indigenous fishing from the pre-colonial period until the end of the 19th century and ascertain if fishing offered a means for Illawarra and Shoalhaven Aboriginal people to partly maintain economic independence in the face of colonisation. The picture that emerges is more complex than Bell envisaged.

The study area

The study area encompasses the Illawarra and Shoalhaven districts of the south coast of New South Wales, including the cities of Wollongong and Nowra. Today, these regions are home to the Dharawal, Wodi Wodi and Jerinja Aboriginal groups. They are represented by different organisations including land councils and tribal elders' groups. According to Howitt, the areas in traditional times were part of a large inter-tribal group called the Murring, whose range extended from Double Bay in Sydney to the Shoalhaven River and inland to the other side of the escarpment.⁴ The Murring were

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1. La Perouse is found on the northern shores of Botany Bay. From the 19th century, many Aboriginal people moved back and forth between La Perouse and the south coast of New South Wales.
 2. Bell 1959: 84.
 3. Bell 1959: 85.
 4. Howitt 1904.

part of the Dharawal language group, while the language group to the south was the Dhurga. The precise boundary between the Dhurga and the Dharawal is uncertain. Tindale⁵ places the boundary along the Shoalhaven River, while Egloff, Mathews, Morton and Eades⁶ place it further south, adjacent to Jervis Bay. It is likely that both languages were understood in the Shoalhaven and Jervis Bay regions. The Dharawal and Dhurga languages also form part of the Yuin linguistic group that extended southwards from Sydney to the Victorian border.⁷ To avoid confusion, I refer to the Indigenous inhabitants of the study area as the Aboriginal people of the Illawarra and Shoalhaven.

Theory and previous research

Dependence encompasses a variety of economic relationships. Frank, who developed dependency theory in the 1960s, argues that the intersection of capitalist and non-capitalist societies takes place in a process of colonisation. Capitalist forces exploit Indigenous peoples, creating a situation where they become dependent on manufactured goods.⁸ The theory is potentially useful where the colonising peoples make use of Indigenous labour and pay them in goods and rations rather than money. Its drawback is that it tends to underestimate the resistance of non-capitalist economies. It also cannot account for different levels of capitalist intervention and exploitation. Opportunity and response theory provides a better conceptual base for the understanding of resistance to articulation with capitalist economies. The approach is predicated upon the belief that capitalism provides various opportunities to which non-capitalist societies respond in different ways.⁹ As Bird-David has emphasised more recently, 'the articulation of local and world socio-economic systems is *two-sided*' (emphasis in original).¹⁰

Dependence can also refer to a situation where the labour of a non-capitalist society is rarely in demand by the capitalist mainstream. In its extreme form, the lack of work combined with alienation from the land and waters means that members of the non-capitalist society are no longer able to use their labour and skills to maintain subsistence; instead they rely on the distribution of rations from the government or handouts from settlers for survival. This is the sense of dependence that I adopt in this paper to assess the economic status of Aboriginal people in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven. It is also my position – following opportunity and response theory – that Aboriginal people often adapt creatively to colonial pressures by incorporating new technology (such as boats and nets) and articulating with the capitalist economy by selling the products of their own labour (such as fish) for cash, which they then use to purchase goods like flour and tea, etc. Such developments are not necessarily examples of dependence on white society, as Indigenous people are still using their adapted skill and labour in exchange for subsistence.

Research on the far south coast of New South Wales reveals that Aboriginal people remained economically independent in the 19th century. Cameron examined the Aboriginal economy from Batemans Bay to Cape Howe, where he found that Aborigi-

5. Tindale 1940.

6. Egloff 1999; Mathews 1901; Morton 1929; Eades 1976.

7. Egloff 1999: 5.

8. Frank 1969.

9. Epstein and Penny 1973.

10. Bird-David 1992: 21.

nal people 'rapidly came to occupy an important, if undervalued, place in the new local economy both through the exploitation of their traditional skills and by means of their swiftly acquired mastery of new skills' in the fields of agriculture and pastoralism.¹¹ A similar story is told by the research of Wesson who found that '[f]ar south coast Aborigines were employed in seasonal works during the 19th century on whale boats and try works, stripping bark, tussocking, shepherding, droving, tree felling, harvesting and in domestic tasks such as cleaning, cooking and wood chopping'.¹²

Relevant studies of Indigenous fishing have focused on the far south coast of New South Wales. Much of the work of Egloff and Cain was done in the context of preparing a defence in 1992 for seven Aboriginal men charged with breaches of the *NSW Fisheries Act*.¹³ The historical and anthropological evidence compiled for the case shows continuous fishing activity in the 19th and the 20th centuries by numerous families occupying land between Batemans Bay and Eden. The Brierly family of Narooma who fished throughout the 20th century trace their descent to a man who participated in the whaling industry at Eden in the 1840s.¹⁴ Goodall's research suggests Aboriginal groups used reserves declared in the second half of the 19th century as bases for fishing.¹⁵

Egloff's study of fishing at Wreck Bay shows a group of closely related families establishing a community in the late 19th century and continuing to occupy and fish from the area throughout the 20th century. Prominent among the residents were members of the Campbell, Nyberg, Ardler, Bloxsome, Timbery, McLeod and Chapman families. Some came from as far north as Kempsey, but others were originally from the Coolangatta Estate on the Shoalhaven. By the 1950s, up to eight boat crews were operating out of Wreck Bay using nets to haul in their catch, most of which was transported to Sydney for sale.¹⁶ The fishing season lasted from Christmas to Easter. At other times, 'the men went searching for casual work in the timber mills or picking vegetables'.¹⁷

There are no specific studies examining Aboriginal fishing practices in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven districts during the 19th century, although Organ's documentary collections contain numerous references to fishing.¹⁸ Several other historical accounts demonstrate the continuing presence of Aboriginal people in the districts since colonisation. I have previously argued that Aboriginal labourers made important contributions to the local pastoral and agricultural industries in the 19th century, particularly on the Coolangatta Estate, but their remuneration in food, goods and money contributed only a small fraction of their subsistence.¹⁹

11. Cameron 1987: 76.

12. Wesson 2000: 130.

13. Cane 1998; Egloff 2000.

14. Egloff 2000: 204–207.

15. Goodall 1982: 26.

16. Egloff 1990: 25–29.

17. Egloff 1990: 31; the Great Depression of the 1930s severely damaged demand for fish and the Wreck Bay fishermen were denied the dole, as were most Aboriginal people in New South Wales (Goodall 1996: 181–182).

18. Organ 1990, 1993.

19. Bennett 2003, 2005; also see Fox 1978.

Indigenous fishing before 1788

Aboriginal people have lived on the south coast for at least 20,000 years and probably much longer. Their occupation certainly began before the coast settled on its current line at the end of the last ice age about 8000 years ago. Since that time at least, the East Australian Current has flowed along the coast carrying nutrients onto the Australian continental shelf and into the mouth of rivers, producing conditions to support a rich diversity of aquatic life.²⁰

Archaeological research by Attenbrow, Lampert, Poiner and Bowdler shows the importance of aquatic resources to the diet of Aboriginal people in pre-contact times. Fish were particularly abundant in summer but some species were available year-round. The economy, however, was broadly based, and many sites such as Currarong, Burrill Lake and Curracurrang contain the remains of terrestrial mammals as well as fish and shellfish. People stayed on the coast throughout the year, but the population diminished in winter when fewer fish were available. There is also evidence for technological innovation in the last 1000 years with the introduction of the shell fishhook.²¹

Archaeology paints a broad picture of the economy but says little about the social organisation of food-getting. The early observations of Europeans at Sydney Cove provide details of how the Eora structured their daily life of obtaining sustenance. There is consensus that Aboriginal women along the Sydney coast were responsible for catching fish, a major component of the diet, with hook and line.²² The fishhooks were generously curved and made mainly from shell. Fishing line consisted of two strands of bark fibre twisted together although other materials such as animal hair were sometimes used. Women sat in bark canoes and dangled their hook and line overboard. The successful catch was sometimes cooked there and then upon a small fire in the canoe.²³ Men fished with multi-pronged spears called 'fizz gigs' by the British.²⁴ Shafts ranged in length between 3.7m and 6m, and were made from the protruding spiral shoot of the yellow gum tree. Men stood on rock ledges or balanced themselves on bark canoes to launch their darts at the fish below.²⁵ Other aspects of the sexual division of labour are not evident from the records of the officers of the First Fleet. Women were rarely seen and there are no direct observations, as there are from other parts of the country, of them specialising in the gathering of shellfish and plant foods. In fact, only men were observed diving for shellfish. Attenbrow makes a convincing argument that this was due to the conditions of observation: that Aboriginal men, wary of the motives of the mostly male First Fleet members, kept their women away from the colonists.²⁶

AW Howitt related the principles through which south coast Aboriginal people gained rights to country:

20. Bowen 2004: 80.

21. Lampert 1971; Poiner 1976; Attenbrow 1976; Bowdler 1976; Mulvaney & Kamminga 1999: 292.

22. See Attenbrow 2002: 82. For a discussion on the distribution of fishhooks in Australia, see Gerritsen 2001.

23. Attenbrow 2002: 82, 86.

24. A similar division of labour was noted for the Kurnai of coastal Victoria by the Reverend John Bulmer, an informant of Howitt (Howitt 1904: 761).

25. Attenbrow 2002: 87. According to Louisa Atkinson, fishing spears in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven had three prongs (Organ 1993: 128).

26. Attenbrow 2002: 83.

When a child was born among the Yuin, its father pointed out some hills, lakes, or rivers to the men and women there present as being the bounds of his child's country, being that where his father lived, or where he himself was born and had lived. It was just the same with a girl, who had her mother's country, and also that in which she was born. Besides this the father took the country where his child was born, if away from his own locality, and the mother took that where her daughter was born under similar circumstances.²⁷

As an old informant also told Howitt: 'the place where a man is born is his country, and he always has a right to hunt over it'.²⁸ Presumably, this included the right to fish as well.²⁹

RH Mathews also investigated the social structure of south coast society, his account based on interviews with informants from Jervis Bay, the Shoalhaven River and the Illawarra, who told him an individual was assigned the totem of his or her father at birth. Throughout life, the totem forewarned one of danger, deaths in the family and the activities of one's enemies. Totems, of which there were numerous species – including red bream, shark, eel and wallaby – also regulated the marriage system, which, unlike other parts of the continent, was not based on sections. For example, red bream could marry shark, curlew and stumpy lizard, while magpie could marry pheasant and echidna.³⁰

The archaeology, anthropology and early historical observations suggest the following descriptive model of the coastal economy between Wollongong and Eden. Aboriginal people used marine resources extensively but also exploited flora and fauna found on the coastal plain. Rights to country were determined by a person's place of birth and possibly extended if that person's offspring of the same gender was born in a different area. A division of labour operated whereby the men fished with spears while the women, who seem to have done more of the work, fished with line and hook. It can also be confidently stated that Aboriginal people developed or adopted new technology such as the shell fishhook. The economy followed a seasonal pattern, but only to a limited extent as many resources were available year round. Fish stocks were lower (but not unavailable) in the winter, and so land resources increased in importance. People still lived on the coast in winter, but probably in smaller numbers. Overall, the sea and rivers provided an important component to an independent and thriving Aboriginal economy.

The impact of colonisation

What effect did colonisation have on the ability of south coast people to remain economically independent? In particular, did it impede their capacity to sustain themselves by fishing? Colonial settlement of the south coast began in earnest when Governor Macquarie announced the first land grants in the Illawarra in 1816.³¹ Alexan-

27. Howitt 1904: 83.

28. Howitt 1904: 83.

29. Fishing rights along particular sections of the Hopkins River in western Victoria were 'owned' by specific groups and others could only catch fish with permission (McBryde 1996: 47).

30. Mathews 1896.

der Berry and Edward Wollstonecraft took up their 10,000 acre grant on the Shoalhaven River at Coolangatta Mountain in 1822.³² To establish a viable economic existence most colonisers brought sheep and cattle with them.³³ The precise environmental impact of these domesticated animals is unknown, but their presence in other districts is acknowledged to have fouled water supplies, destroyed yam beds and generally reduced the productivity of the land.³⁴ The colonisers of the south coast supplemented their pastoral activity with timber getting, particularly in the first few decades of occupation. The benefits of timber felling to the colonisers were two-fold: it cleared the land for grazing and crops; and the sale of timber in Sydney provided much needed revenue.³⁵

Aside from whaling, commercial fishing did not develop as an industry until the 20th century. Fishing was a popular leisure activity, with expeditions yielding catches of 50 or more fish in a day.³⁶ These events were, however, infrequent and their impact upon fishing stocks negligible.³⁷ The ocean and rivers, unlike the land, remained largely accessible to Aboriginal people as a source of subsistence, and this is reflected in the numerous historical observations of fishing between 1822 and 1850.³⁸ In October 1823, Judge Baron Field observed a group of Aboriginal people at the Coolangatta Estate spear-fishing by torchlight or dextrously catching them by hand and killing them with a sharp bite to the head. Field also noted that many of the usual Indigenous population were absent at the coast, feasting upon a whale.³⁹ Poison from an unnamed type of bark was sometimes used to stun the fish in a coastal lake: Robert Westmacott, then resident in the Illawarra, depicted such a practice in an etching from the late 1830s or early 1840s.⁴⁰ According to Alexander Stewart, the Aboriginal residents of Tom Thumbs Lagoon, Mullet Creek and Lake Illawarra subsisted mostly on fish.⁴¹ In January 1834, Samuel Elyard observed on the Shoalhaven River 'blacks in their bark canoes,

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31. Jervis 1942: 78–9; some of the first Europeans to visit the Illawarra and Shoalhaven were timber cutters after the valuable stands of red cedar that grew near the rivers and creeks. It is unlikely they had a negative impact on Indigenous fishing (see Bennett 2003: Chapter 3; Jervis 1939).
 32. Berry Papers ML 315/53–54; from hereon I refer to their grant as the Coolangatta Estate. Edward Wollstonecraft died in 1832 leaving control of the estate in the hands of Berry (Stephen 1967: 620).
 33. Sheep were kept on the south coast in large numbers until the 1860s when it was realised that the environment was too wet. Scabby disease became prevalent and the flocks were moved to the west and a suitable dry climate. Cattle, and dairy cows in particular, thrived on the green pastures. As Bell noted, dairying became the main primary industry on the south coast after 1870 (Jeans 1972: 252–255, 276).
 34. Reynolds 1982: 156–159.
 35. See Bennett 2003: Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion on the impact of timber getters on south coast Aboriginal communities.
 36. Arthur Elyard of Avondale Farm near Lake Illawarra hauled in 51 small fish from a creek on 6 February 1831, but that was the only occasion he went fishing that year (Elyard Family Papers ML MSS 594).
 37. Bowen 2004.
 38. Cane also makes a strong case for the continued importance of fishing as an economic base (Cane 1998: 72–73).
 39. Organ 1990: 132.
 40. Organ 1993: 219–220.
 41. Organ 1993: 154.

filling them up [with fish] as fast as they could'.⁴² Reverend Matthew Meares of Wollongong told the 1845 Select Committee into the Condition of the Aborigines that an abundance of fish was available to the local Indigenous residents.⁴³ The names of several inhabitants of the Coolangatta Estate also suggest the importance of fishing: Yiambur Fisherman, a young Aboriginal woman of 24, was living at Broughton Creek in 1840 when her name was recorded on a blanket return; Nunnar Fisherman Tom of Gerringong also came forward in May 1840 to collect a blanket. In all, the names of five individuals featuring variations on a fishing theme were recorded in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven blanket returns between 1834 and 1842.⁴⁴ In the 1830s, Obed West observed the use of weirs, or 'mouls' made of sticks and brushes at Mullet Creek near Lake Illawarra to trap fish for large gatherings.⁴⁵ The large numbers of fish caught at weirs allowed large social gatherings, sometimes exceeding 200 people.⁴⁶

An aspect of the south coast observations noted here is that the gender of the fisher people is not specified. An additional observation suggests at least a partial division of the sexes in labouring duties. In January 1840, Reverend Clarke of the Illawarra asked an Aboriginal man named Frying Pan to obtain, if he could, a portion of prawns; Frying Pan drew himself up angrily and replied that catching prawns was women's work and that men fished only with spears.⁴⁷ This is little to go on, but it does suggest that the divisions noted in Sydney also applied on the south coast.

The majority of historical observations of the south coast Aboriginal economy in the first half of the 19th century relate to fishing. There are observations of hunting and gathering: Hamilton Hume, for example, was provided with several kangaroos by Aboriginal hunters when moving cattle to the Shoalhaven River in the early 1820s. John Harper, a Wesleyan missionary, visited Twofold Bay in October 1826 as part of an expedition to identify a suitable place for an Aboriginal school. He noted in his journal that the 'natives' of that place subsisted mostly on fish, but also relied on seals and 'fruit' from verdant forest lining the shore. Harper made similar observations for Jervis Bay and that aside from fishing, kangaroo and possums were hunted using spears and clubs.⁴⁸ Overall, the references above clearly show that fishing was an important contributor to Aboriginal subsistence from colonisation to 1850. European development of land in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven during the first half of the 1800s did not impede Aboriginal fishing activity to any great extent. There were six Indigenous camps on Berry's Estate in the 1830s and 1840s and all were within easy reach of either the ocean or the Shoalhaven River. The camps at Wollongong were spread around Lake Illawarra or along the creeks and rivers that flowed into it.

42. Elyard Family Papers ML MS Q217.

43. NSW Legislative Council 1845: Report from the Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines.

44. For Organ's transcription of the names on the blanket return, see Organ 1990: 432–460; for mine, see Bennett 2003: Appendix 4. The originals form part of the Colonial Secretaries In-Letters and are held by New South Wales State Records.

45. West 1988: 47–51; Lieutenant Robert Johnson found a weir on the Clyde River near Batemans Bay in December 1821 (see Organ 1993: 44).

46. Organ 1993: 232. See also the reminiscences of Louisa Atkinson reprinted in Organ 1993: 128.

47. Organ 1993: 250.

48. Organ 1993: 139–142.

As elsewhere, contact with Europeans allowed Aboriginal people to add foreign technology to the capital of their Indigenous economy.⁴⁹ The most obvious change to their fishing paraphernalia was the introduction of steel fishhooks. James Backhouse, the Quaker missionary, observed in March 1837 in reference to the fishing technology of Aboriginal people on the Shoalhaven River that 'some of their hooks were formed of pieces of shell, but they preferred English ones, of steel'.⁵⁰ Despite the robustness of steel, the traditional form of hook continued well into the second half of the 19th century (see below). Other forms of European fishing technology were also adopted. Billy Mirning and George ('Bangal') McCarty, two employees of the Coolangatta Estate, were given craw pots for catching crayfish in the river in return for their labour in September 1852.⁵¹

Fishing also drew Aboriginal people into the European economy of the south coast. As in other pursuits such as guiding settlers across the landscape, tracking lost cattle through the bush and stripping bark from trees, Aboriginal people possessed a comparative advantage in fishing that few among the recent arrivals could match. Most were ignorant of the cycle of the fishing season and unaware of the best fishing spots. Taking advantage of their superior knowledge, Aboriginal fishermen supplied an unknown number of fish to the Coolangatta Estate in January 1837 for which they received three pounds of flour.⁵² Margaret Menzies commented two years later that Aboriginal men and women often brought in fish and crayfish for the residents of Jamberoo for which they received tea and sugar.⁵³ The rations obtained by Aboriginal people from these instances of exchange provided a substitute for the terrestrial sources of subsistence lost from the colonised lands. The evidence also supports Cane's contention that the 'application of Aboriginal fishing traditions to support the European economy seems to have begun shortly after colonisation'.⁵⁴

Aside from fishing, Aboriginal people supported themselves by labouring for the settlers. They began working for Alexander Berry soon after he settled at Coolangatta in 1822. Initially, Aboriginal people employed their bush skills to guide Berry and his employees to valued stands of red cedar and to track lost cattle. In the 1830s, Aboriginal men in particular began to develop skills in agriculture and animal husbandry. Some helped to harvest the wheat crop in summer while others washed sheep in the spring before shearing. But work patterns were variable and the majority of Aboriginal people did not work at all. Berry hoped that the Indigenous residents of Coolangatta would abandon their 'wandering ways' and settle down to a farming life. When this did not happen, he did not force their removal; rather, he approved of their presence as it gave him an inexpensive supply of labour to call on in times of shortage.⁵⁵

49. See Jones 2007: 28 for a recent analysis of the adoption of European technology, including fishhooks, by the Eora of Sydney.

50. Backhouse 1843: 468.

51. Berry Papers ML MSS 315/62-65.

52. See Bennett 2003: Appendix 3 for details of the transaction.

53. Margaret Menzies diary NLA MS 3261; also see Cane 1998: 73.

54. Cane 1998: 72.

55. See Bennett 2003: Chapters 4-6 for a detailed analysis of Aboriginal labour on the Coolangatta Estate in the middle decades of the 19th century.

A labour crisis developed in early 1852 with the onset of the gold rush: within six months over half of Berry's white workforce had left for the gold fields of New South Wales and Victoria. Being no longer able to rely on convicts to fill the void – their distribution had ceased more than ten years before – Berry looked to the Aboriginal community to work on the estate, but they responded with only a meagre increase in their work rate. Overall, in the 1850s when Berry's demand for Aboriginal labour was at its greatest, less than half of the adult population acceded to his request and worked on the estate, and of those who did, most only worked occasionally. It is clear that farm work was a minor contributor to subsistence and that Aboriginal people looked elsewhere for most of their food, including the sea and rivers.⁵⁶

There is little evidence of economic dependence in the first half of the 19th century. The Indigenous population, whether through fishing, hunting, gathering or farm work, were able to support themselves. As Reverend Meares wrote in his reply to the circular sent by the 1845 Select Committee on Aborigines:

Their means of subsistence are fully adequate to their wants; whether derived from their ordinary pursuits of hunting and fishing, or in exchange for such services as they are able and willing to render the settlers.⁵⁷

The Indigenous population depended on the government for blankets. Traditionally, possum skin rugs were worn to keep out the cold, but timber getting, agriculture and pastoralism cleared the land and made it difficult to catch possums; blankets were thus accepted as an inferior substitute. At St Georges Basin (south of Jervis Bay) in 1837, Alexander Harris noted that possum skin rugs, which took from 30 to 60 skins to make, were a 'rare possession in the bush'.⁵⁸ Blankets, by contrast, were relatively easily obtained – 139 were distributed to the Aboriginal people on the Coolangatta Estate in 1838, while two years later 89 were handed out to the residents of the Illawarra.⁵⁹ Distribution, which began in the Shoalhaven in 1827, continued each year until the early 1840s, when Governor Gipps, on an economising drive, decided that blankets would only be given as a reward for special conduct, such as capturing a bushranger. As Reece notes, 'the reduction in issue caused serious suffering and resentment among the Aborigines of the settled districts'.⁶⁰

Fishing after 1850

Throughout the second half of the 19th century traditional practices continued to be modified with the introduction of new technology, particularly boats. Aside from the distribution of blankets and the dedication of an occasional reserve, the New South Wales Government took little interest in the welfare of Aboriginal people between 1850 and 1882. An exception to this pattern was the distribution of boats to coastal communities, beginning around 1868 when one was given to Aborigines at Jervis Bay. For the remainder of the 19th century, boats and fishing gear, including nets, were regularly

56. Bennett 2005.

57. NSW Legislative Council 1845: Report from the Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines.

58. Organ 1990: 219.

59. Organ 1990: 227, 257.

60. Reece 1974: 210; also see Bennett 2003: 77.

supplied to south coast groups and to some on the north coast as well.⁶¹ In 1876, the police submitted a detailed report on the condition of south coast fishing boats, a summary of which is reproduced in the table below.

Table 1: South coast fishing boats, 1876

Place	Name of Aborigine	Purpose	Condition
Wollongong	George Timbery & William Saddler	Fishing	Good
Wollongong	Paddy Bangalong & Mickey Johnson	Fishing	Good
Shoalhaven	Fisherman Johnny	Fishing	Undergoing repair
Ulladulla	Campbell	Fishing	Fair
Ulladulla	Abraham	Fishing	Fair
Nelligen	Abraham Morris	Fishing	Good
Wallaga Lake	Merryman	Fishing	Good (11 oars, 9 feet long)

Source: NSW Police to NSW Colonial Secretary, Box 1/2349, Letter no. 76/8919.

That all the boats were used for fishing is indicative of its continuing importance as a mode of subsistence for south coast Aboriginal people. The owners kept their crafts in fair to good condition and requested repairs and additional equipment from the Aboriginal Protection Board (APB) when needed. Some went to great length to obtain their boats. George Timbery and William Saddler, for example, travelled to Sydney and petitioned the Colonial Secretary in person.⁶² Other communities obtained the support of local white people in their efforts to get a boat: Andrew Mackenzie acted for the Wandandian group in the 1870s while those at Tuross River were represented by R Dansey.⁶³

The use of government boats by Aboriginal people is depicted in the artwork of Mickey of Ulladulla: several show Aboriginal men deep-water line fishing for schnapper off the coast at Ulladulla from government boats. Mickey's water scenes teem with marine life, and convey in a lively manner the importance of aquatic resources to Aboriginal people and the means by which they caught it.⁶⁴

Boats were not used for fishing exclusively. The craft belonging to the community at Bodalla was disabled in 1885 when its crew attempted to rescue some sailors in distress.⁶⁵ Other owners took an entrepreneurial approach to the use of their vessel that is not indicative of dependence. In the late 1880s, for instance, William Saddler employed a local white man to take touring parties out on Lake Illawarra. But when his boat was

^{61.} Over 20 boats were supplied to communities on the south coast in the late 19th century (see Cane 1998: 73). After 1883, distribution was controlled by the Aborigines Protection Board (APB).

^{62.} *Illawarra Mercury*, 23 June 1876.

^{63.} Organ 1993: 138–139.

^{64.} Sayers 1994: 55, 57, Colour Plate 20.

^{65.} Henry Parkes Correspondence ML vol 55 A925, CY Reel 77.

dashed upon rocks in October 1887, through no fault of his own, the APB refused to replace it.⁶⁶ Saddler, displaying the political skills that had gained him the boat in the first place, lobbied long and hard to recover his livelihood. In 1895, he complained to Archibald Campbell, MLA, who asked the APB to provide another boat for Saddler. Again the APB refused and Saddler was informed personally of the decision.⁶⁷ Mrs Lizzie Malone of La Perouse was one of the few Aboriginal women to own a fishing boat, although it seems that she did not fish herself because she suffered from bad knees. In the late 1880s, she let her boat out to other Aboriginal people in return for money or fish. Supplied with rations by the APB in times of hardship, Mrs Malone was also assisted by her daughter who sometimes worked as a domestic servant.⁶⁸ The experience of Mrs Malone shows that dependence was variable and the fortunes of individuals fluctuated. Sometimes rations were required, but at others people were able to support themselves.

Government records also suggest that Aboriginal people regarded themselves as working fishermen. There were two Aboriginal men in Wollongong Gaol in the late 19th century who identified their profession as fishing. Harry Rocking, aged 37, was incarcerated twice in 1883 for minor offences. More information is known about Richard Campbell, who was in gaol in 1896 and who gave Milton as his residence and Moruya as his place of birth. Campbell further identified himself as a 23-year-old fisherman and an adherent of Catholicism who could read and write. He was of slight build but identifiable by scars on his right lower arm, left cheek and forehead.⁶⁹ Perhaps his father or uncle was identified as the Aboriginal boat owner at Ulladulla in 1876 (see Table 1). Campbell's descendants continued to fish at Wreck Bay into the 20th century.⁷⁰

The importance of fishing to Aboriginal men is also suggested by church records. Twice William Lacey gave his occupation as fisherman, including at the baptism of his daughter Elizabeth in 1861 and of his son Lewis in 1865. Both children were born at Nelligen and baptised at Moruya, and William was probably supporting his family by fishing in the Clyde River. Later in the century, Edward Thomas gave fishing as his occupation at the baptism of his son, Edward junior, at Ulladulla in 1893. Some Aboriginal women married into white fishing families. Ellen Lacey, possibly the daughter of William Lacey, married Harold Augusta Nyberg, an able seaman and fisherman, and together they had several children at Ulladulla and Lake Conjola in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Similarly, an Aboriginal woman named Sarah Evans married a white fisherman named John Wilson and they had at least eight children together at Narrawallee Creek, Milton, between 1897 and 1917.⁷¹

As the 19th century proceeded, Aboriginal people increasingly sold fish to local white residents as another means to raise money. Samuel Elyard of Nowra wrote in August 1874 of purchasing 13 fish from local Aboriginal people after returning from a

66. Archibald Campbell to NSW Colonial Secretary, Colonial Secretary In Letters 1/2693, Letter no. 88/3003.

67. APB Minutes 31 January 1895.

68. Colonial Secretary In Letters 1/2687, Letter no. 88/1253.

69. Wollongong Gaol Description Book 5/1513.

70. Egloff 1990: 29.

71. Dunn 2000: 10, 16–17, 23–25.

boating trip on the Shoalhaven River.⁷² The APB annual report for 1890 recorded that the Aboriginal residents of Greenwell Point raised a 'fair' amount of cash by selling fish to local inhabitants. Similar comments were made for the communities further south at Ulladulla, Bega and Eden. The fishermen of La Perouse were so successful that by the late 1890s they complained to the APB of interference from white commercial operators.⁷³ The APB largely came down on the side of the commercial fishermen by saying that Aboriginal people were exempt from licences and therefore should 'take their own turn in due rotation with other fishermen'.⁷⁴

On the whole, Aboriginal people on the south coast did not face significant competition from white fisherman in the second half of the 19th century.⁷⁵ The commercial industry received a boost in the 1860s with the introduction of coastal steamers and the invention of ice-making technology.⁷⁶ Illawarra fishermen in particular made use of these developments and supplied a significant amount of fish to the Sydney market.⁷⁷ The industry, however, failed to expand and in 1899, TA Coghlan, the NSW government statistician, bemoaned the fact the fishing grounds along the entire New South Wales coast had been 'greatly neglected',⁷⁸ despite a trial of deep-sea trawling off the previous year.⁷⁹ Larger scale commercial fishing did not commence until the 1930s with the introduction of truck transportation.⁸⁰ The Nowra District Fishermen's Cooperative was not established until 7 August 1947.⁸¹ Oysters, however, were another matter and the beds on the Shoalhaven River were badly over-exploited by white collectors in the late 19th century to supply the insatiable Sydney market.⁸²

As a consequence of the poorly developed commercial industry, there was an abundance of fish available on the south coast into the late 19th century. Reverend Thomas Sharpe wrote in 1869 that fish were plentiful in Kiama, and his comment is probably true for the entire south coast. He went on to say that 'people are so much taken up with their cows, that fish is only to be had [eaten], now and then. A few fisher-

72. Elyard Family Papers ML MSS 594.

73. APB Minutes 31 March 1898.

74. Some La Perouse fishermen later moved to Wreck Bay to escape competition with their white counterparts (Egloff 1990: 26).

75. Fishing for leisure was a popular activity on the south coast, but it is unlikely that the numbers caught would have threatened the viability of species and the livelihoods of Aboriginal communities (see Comyns 1915: 32, for a description of Jervis Bay as one of the most popular 'piscatorial resorts' in Australia for the leisured catching of schnapper and bream).

76. Bowen 2004.

77. Tenison-Woods 1882: 136. See also Howard 1985: 40–41, who briefly discusses the development of commercial fishing at Ulladulla; and Thackeray (1895: 90) who notes that imported fish were placed in streams about Nowra, possibly to increase fish numbers and encourage commercial exploitation. This practice began as early as 1874 when from 100–300 codfish were placed into the Shoalhaven River near Braidwood (*Australian Town and Country Journal*, 21 February 1874: 289).

78. Coghlan 1899: 200.

79. *Murrurundi and Quirindi Times*, 26 February 1898: 2.

80. Bowen 2004: 80; the value of fishing intensified in the 1940s with increasing exploitation of high-value seafood such as lobsters, prawns and crabs (Tull 1993).

81. Bayley 1975: 225.

82. Coghlan 1899: 202.

men might make a very snug living here, I should imagine, yet this is not tried, and the fish are left to enjoy their home in peace.’⁸³ It seems that only Aboriginal people were heeding of his advice.

Not all Aboriginal fisherman, however, were able to support themselves. George Hunt of Ulladulla depended upon rations from the APB for an unspecified period until he resumed fishing in November 1900. Other Aboriginal people also depended upon APB rations for their survival. In 1882–1883, the APB distributed ‘amongst other things, 15,969 lb of flour and 496 lb of tea to the Aborigines of the Shoalhaven’.⁸⁴ In the 1890s, the old, infirm and children accounted for almost half of the combined Illawarra and Shoalhaven population, which fluctuated between 182 and 201.⁸⁵ Other Aboriginal adults also applied to the APB for rations, but were rejected if considered fit enough to work.⁸⁶ The implication is that in the 1890s, during a significant depression, about half the Aboriginal population of the Illawarra and Shoalhaven were dependent at times on government rations.

Some needy Aboriginal people made direct requests to white residents of the Illawarra and Shoalhaven. For example, Black Polly, the wife of an Illawarra elder, was well known for her solicitation to ‘gib a penny to Poor Polly’. Her death was reported in May 1865.⁸⁷ Other Aboriginal people relied on the generosity of others during hard times. During the winter of 1876, for example, Aboriginal people living at the Minamurra camp near Kiama were caught without food for several days. Local settlers came to their aid.⁸⁸ The situation fits well with the description of the Kiama environment by Reverend Thomas Sharpe, who noted that ‘almost every vestige of tree and scrub’ had been removed from the land.⁸⁹ There may have been limited terrestrial resources in the Kiama district to provide subsistence for the Aboriginal community.

Dependence on blankets also continued after 1850: 50 Aboriginal people received blankets at the Wollongong Court House on 16 April 1860;⁹⁰ 115 blankets were distributed in the Shoalhaven in April 1865.⁹¹ When blankets failed to arrive, some Aboriginal people expressed ‘great indignation’ and resorted to stealing wood to keep themselves warm. When such an event occurred in June 1879, the owner of the wood promised to claim a blanket as compensation, though this tense situation eased when blankets arrived the following week and were distributed with ‘tea and some eatables’.⁹²

83. Thomas Sharpe Papers ML A1502: 189–90; Cameron notes that 19th century Aboriginal people on the far south coast had largely unhindered access to the resources of the sea and river (Cameron 1987: 13).

84. Egloff 1990: 20.

85. See APB Annual Reports, 1890–1900.

86. According to the APB, about 20 Aboriginal men were employed on the Coolangatta Estate in 1890 (APB Annual Report 1890). After 1850, much of the estate was divided up between tenant farmers and their small-scale enterprises demanded few additional labourers (Bennett 2003).

87. *Illawarra Mercury*, 5 May 1865.

88. Thomas and Higham 1982: 10–11.

89. Thomas Sharpe Papers ML A1502: 189–190.

90. *Illawarra Mercury*, 17 April 1860.

91. *Illawarra Mercury*, 11 April 1865.

92. *Shoalhaven Telegraph*, 5 June 1879: 3 and 12 June 1879: 2.

The introduction of boats and nets diminished the importance of some traditional fishing technology. In October 1879, a reporter for the *Shoalhaven Telegraph* could find only one Aboriginal woman who could manufacture shell hooks and fibrous lines in the old style. Her implements were collected by Henry Moss and taken to Sydney for the Garden Palace Exhibition.⁹³ Of Mickey of Ulladulla's numerous paintings of fish and fishing, only one depicts an Aboriginal man spear-fishing from a canoe.⁹⁴ Overall, there is no clear evidence after 1850 of the continued operation of the traditional gender division of labour. Observers rarely specified the sex of the person doing the fishing. Some traditional knowledge, however, was retained, particularly the important skill of spotting schools of fish from the land which continued to be used into the 20th century.⁹⁵

The resilience of traditional culture and the self-supporting capabilities of Aboriginal people were evident during the initiation, or Bunan, ceremony held at Broughton Creek on the Coolangatta Estate in the late 1880s.⁹⁶ RH Mathews did not witness the ceremony, but one of his informants was Dick Buttong, whose name first appeared in the blanket returns for the Coolangatta estate in the late 1830s. Mathews related that men and initiates hunted during the day to provide food for those participating in the ceremony. Although not stated explicitly, it is likely that initiates were instructed in fishing techniques. It was at this time that Mathews collected information about totems indicating that elements of the traditional marriage structure and patterns of land ownership were still in operation.

Conclusion

As the 19th century drew to a close, a view persisted in the Shoalhaven and Illawarra that Aboriginal people were 'weighted' by a 'lazy feeling' and much could be done to encourage them to take up employment in 'gardening and poultry raising'. The correspondent for the *Nowra Colonist* who wrote these words also commented that 'there is too much lying-about, skulking, and sleeping, when various works might be done by them with benefit to their physical and mental being'.⁹⁷ The author was clearly unaware of the efforts made by Aboriginal people, particularly in fishing, to support themselves. Soon after these words were published, the Aboriginal residents of the Coolangatta Estate were moved to reserves at Roseby Park and later, Wreck Bay, ending many millennia of continuous occupation.⁹⁸

The previous century had wrought drastic changes to their way of life and the balance of power was firmly with the colonisers, but the detailed research presented here indicates a more complex picture than Bell's gloss of dependence and pauperism.⁹⁹

93. *Shoalhaven Telegraph*, 30 October 1879.

94. Sayers 1994: 55, Colour Plate 16.

95. See Egloff 1990 and Cruse et al 2005.

96. Mathews 1896.

97. *Nowra Colonist*, 11 October 1899: 2.

98. See Bennett 2003: 220–223. Alexander Berry died in 1873, leaving the Coolangatta Estate to his brother, David. After David's death in 1889, ownership of the Estate passed to Alexander and David's second cousin, Sir John Hay. He was assisted by his brother, Alexander Hay, who played an important role in the removal of the Aboriginal people from the Estate.

99. It is likely that there were other important changes to Indigenous society which were beyond the scope of this paper to investigate. Genealogical research, for example, may elicit alterations to the social structure and marriage patterns.

Hunting and gathering declined significantly in importance as land was taken up for timber getting, agriculture and dairying. Some Aboriginal men and women earned money and rations by working on properties such as the Coolangatta Estate, but they were in the minority. The seas and rivers were not alienated from their Aboriginal owners and fishing remained an important source of subsistence throughout the 19th century. New technology was readily adopted and participation in the commercial market increased as the century proceeded. Boats and nets were particularly important and most were kept in good condition. Some people lobbied prominent members of the white community such as politicians to provide additional boats and nets so fishing could continue. Others displayed an entrepreneurial spirit by renting out their craft. The community on the Coolangatta Estate was sufficiently resilient and independent to hold an initiation ceremony in the late 1880s. There was a growing trend of dependence on government rations throughout the second half of the 19th century and blankets had replaced possum skin rugs, but this reliance was variable and the fortunes of individuals fluctuated. What is clear is that people continued to use their immense knowledge, skills and experience to catch and collect the bounty of the seas and streams.

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