

# Case study

## The Saltwater Story

**Author Benjamin Allmon set out to learn about the Saltwater people, taking him on a journey untravellered for over 100 years**

### What

The Saltwater Project grew from Gold Coast author Ben Allmon's desire to learn more about the Indigenous maritime history of his local area, the Saltwater people - the Bundjalung, Yugambah and Quandamooka peoples – who have rich maritime history that is slowly being lost.

The project brought together Bundjalung canoemaker Kyle Slabb, veteran paddler Mark Matthews, and the local Indigenous communities, to make traditional canoes that were once used to paddle from the heart of the Queensland Gold Coast to Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island).

Departing from the middle of Surfers Paradise on the Australia Day weekend in 2018, the group was accompanied by Maori and Pacific Islanders, Chinese dragonboaters and the local canoeing population for the first leg of the journey.

The paddlers then navigated the traditional trade route arriving after three days in Goompi (Dunwich) on Minjerribah where they were welcomed by the Quandamooka people.

The route of the journey from the Gold Coast to Minjerribah is part of a songline that connects from Byron Bay to Fraser Island, encompassing the sand islands, and known as the Sea Eagle songline



One Mob, Many Hands: early stages of canoemaking. Image Credit: David Kelly

Accompanied by photographer David Kelly and filmmaker Jeff Licence, the journey and project was documented and shared through an exhibition, an illustrated book and documentary.

### When and where

December 2017 to May 2018

The Saltwater Project took place in Northern New South Wales and South East Queensland.

### Key stats

- 1 book – *The Saltwater Story* (177 photos, 158 pages)
- 1 film/DVD (54 minutes)
- 4 dugout canoes (with rope and spears)
- 15 activities
- 37 Queensland artists / arts workers supported

### Arts Queensland investment

\$39,790 through **Queensland Arts Showcase Program (QASP) Arts Ignite**. QASP supports vibrant and accessible arts and cultural experiences.

## Outcomes

- The Saltwater Project provided a practical means for Elders to ensure cultural continuity and documentation of the almost vanished art practice of canoe making in the next generation.

*"One of the most significant things was the impact that the journey had on the broader Aboriginal community, the Elders up there being emotional about seeing stories of what they'd heard in their grandparents' generation. They were really inspired to continue that tradition."* Kyle Slabb

- The Bundjalung and Quandamooka people were able to reconnect via the project, with future collaborations planned for the revival of this crafting technique.
- Documenting the project through a book and documentary fosters a greater understanding of culture and the practice.
- Project organisers noted the growing pride and determination in participants participating in the canoe building and journey as they took on more responsibility.

*"Doing this felt good, for our people. It felt good paddling back to home, going back to the mob. A lot of my Aunties and Uncles and cousins, sisters and that, and my brother, was really proud of me. It felt good when I got there."*

Malachi, 16 (Quandamooka)

- *The Saltwater Story* book was shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's Award for a Work of State Significance at the 2018 Queensland Literary Awards. The award recognises an outstanding work, by an Australian writer, focused on documenting, discussing or highlighting a uniquely Queensland story.



Right boat: Benjamin Allmon and Jarulah Slabb; left boat: Kyle Matthews, Malachi Urquhart and Bijang Slabb. Image Credit: David Kelly

## Feedback

*"This project has inspired me to ngaurai (talk) more about my cultural heritage, without the need to oversimplify or over-explain."* - Paula, survey respondent

*"These young fellas participating in a journey that hasn't been done since their great grandparents time, they've picked that story up again, given that story life. For a lot of our people that's important, because they're not just stories of another generation, not just history, it's actually a living collective memory that's still being lived out ... that gives people a lot of hope, in who we are as a people."* - Kyle Slabb, canoemaker

*"It was a pretty important time for both our mobs, and it's something that connected us both, the canoe, so it was an important trip for both of our people because there's so many things now especially that are looking to pull us apart as mobs, and the canoe is something that connects us, brings us together."* - Jarulah, canoemaker/paddler

## Reflections and learnings

Ben reflected on what worked well in the project:

*[It] comes down to getting little things right - buying tea when meeting Elders, listening and not talking, showing up every day to help, not just with the canoe, but with other tasks required around in the community (fixing a roof, repairing a car, sharing food). Too often my culture goes for the big gestures, the big dollars, the big stuff. There was surprise/shock expressed by many that the Elders agreed to allow me to do this project, which deals with some of the most sacred elements of culture. I was told it was because I got the little things right.*

## Tips for others

*Be flexible - the differences between the two cultures are enormous. Our world of deadlines has little meaning in the mob.*

## What next?

The project has received considerable interest.

Talks are underway with schools to incorporate the book and DVD into the school curriculum.

There has also been discussion regarding making the event an annual occurrence and a celebration of the maritime history of the local areas and First Nation cultures.

## Find out more

Email:

Website: <http://www.benjaminallmon.com/the-saltwater-story/>

Links:

<https://www.facebook.com/saltstorygc/>

<https://vimeo.com/258919504>



The paddlers bringing the canoe on to Quandamooka country in North Stradbroke Island. Image credit: David Kelly