

# Dalton Cowley

Murray Island, Torres Strait



Farmer: Dalton Cowley DOB: 5/2/1960

**Who is in your farming family? Where is your farm and what do you farm? What is your farming background?**

I'm talking about our fish traps. Our traps go a long time back to our ancestors. Two of my ancestors, 'Kos' and 'Abob' actually built the fish traps which are the boundary markers of each particular clan or family. Kos and Abob were brothers, Kos was the older brother. This was in the dreamtime, and the brothers built all the fish traps around our islands - Murray Islands group, Darnley Is. and Stephen Is. and from that time until today, we have been catching fish in our fish traps.

Fish traps are made from a built up wall of rocks that fills with sea water and fish when the tide comes in. When the tide goes out, the fish are trapped and easy to catch.

Each island has its' own fish traps right around them, each one belonging to a separate family or clan group. Often each trap has its' own name to identify the family or clan group it belongs to. My family's at Murray Is. is called "Arzerr".

The owners of each fish trap, are responsible for looking after it. An elder of the clan group will say when it is time to do maintenance on the fish trap - to build the rocks up again where they may have fallen down. Everyone will work together. You must participate in looking after the fish trap so that you are entitled to eat fish caught in the trap. If the traps are not looked after, they will not catch fish.

We (especially the men) wait until low tide and go and check the traps for fish, we use torches if it is at night time. If there are sardines (very small fish) caught we use a specially made fish scoop to gather the many small fish. One person uses the scoop while other people thrash the water with sticks to hold the sardines in place. Whatever is caught in the trap, will be shared out evenly amongst the people who have been looking after the trap. Everyone on the island knows which fish trap belongs to which family. That is our culture and our tradition.

## Farming memories:

When I was a little boy, about 3 years old, our fish trap got 125 Yellow Trevally - that was a lot! My Dad and I went around in our dinghy and picked up all the fish. Then, my father and I distributed the fish from one end of the village to the other, each household got a share. That's the thing about our culture, sharing and caring. If you 'share' you end up with more, if you are 'greedy' you will end up with nothing. If another clansman got many, he would do the same. This tradition has been handed down for many many generations. We acknowledge it. It feels good to be able to be generous to the rest of the village. People acknowledge where and who the fish come from. Everyone on the island knows who owns each fish trap. I would never go to another man's fish trap. I remember another time, our fish trap caught a dugong, and everyone in the village got called to come and eat - together, as a family.

We can also catch clam shells and spider shells in our fish traps. Very rarely we might get a turtle. When a fish trap needs repairing, word will be sent out and everyone from that family has to come and help do the work to fix it up.

## Farming Life Experiences:

Family farming presents many challenges which often involve considerable effort to resolve. Although there have been cyclones or storms over the years, our reefs around our islands protect us and our fish traps from damage. When I was in high school, a volcano erupted in New Guinea and we felt the earthquake on Murray Island. I remember all Mum's kitchen utensils fell down. I also remember Mum and Dad raking up leaves and burying them on the beach in front of our family's fish trap. This was done to protect against erosion, the leaves would help hold the sand in place. Also to protect ourselves from the south-westerly winds we build a

bamboo fence. This was another way to look after our land. Today we have additional issues with erosion caused by sea level rise. It's bad now in many of the islands and this is a problem for our fish traps. Also, many families have moved away from their traditional homes to other islands and some of the fish traps are no longer maintained properly.

**Looking Back - What lessons were learnt?**

**What has your farming life taught you?**

Fish traps are a way that we share and care for one another. You have to take care of your fish trap so that you can harvest fish and feed your family. It's still easy to catch lots of fish, just like it was when I was small.

One of my old grandfathers told me this..."If you look after the sea, it will look after you." This is true still today.



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Dalton Cowley Interview



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