

A History of Melville Island, Tiwi Islands

Department of Natural Resources, Environment, The Arts and Sport



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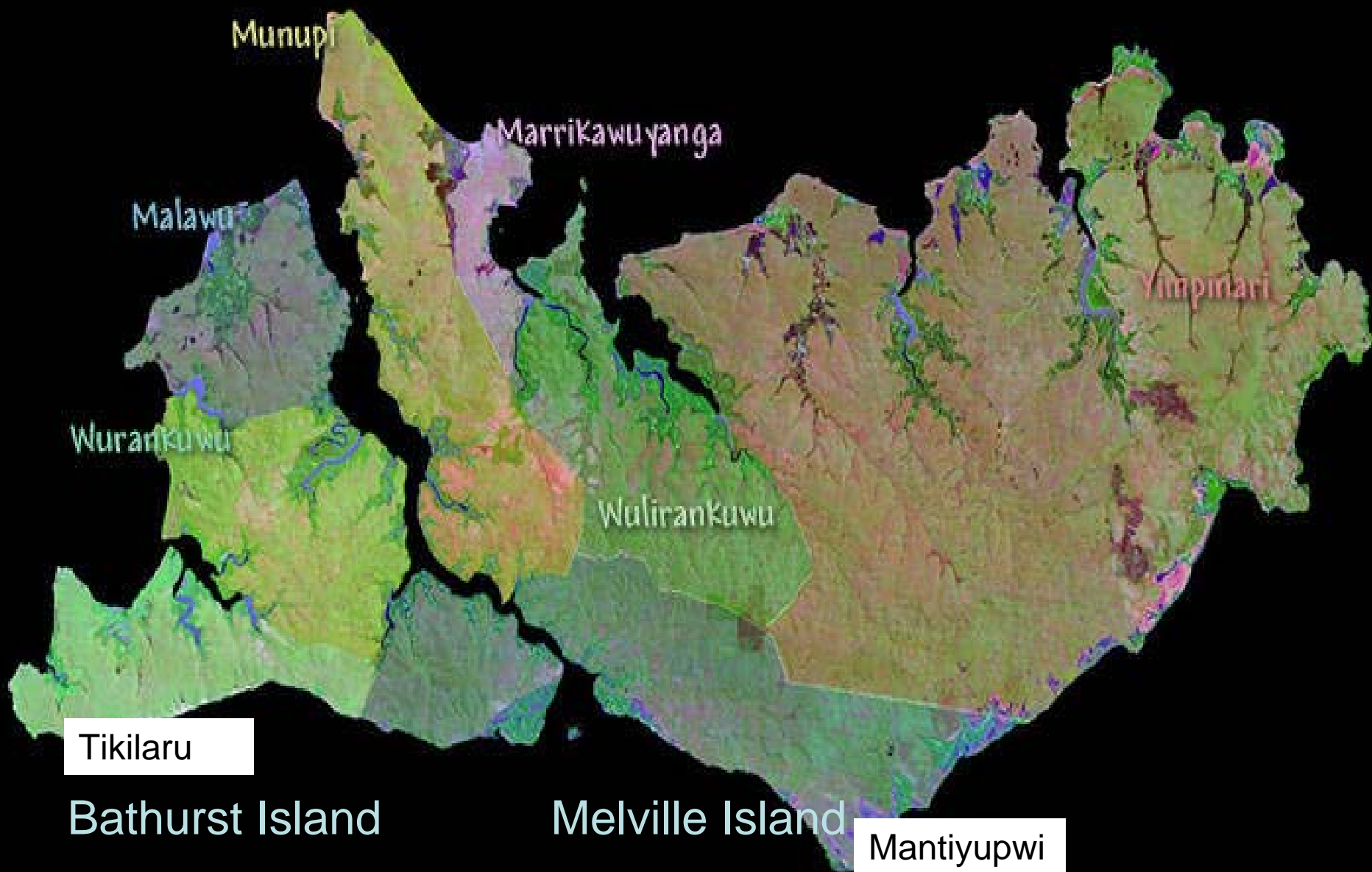
The Tiwi people have been living on Bathurst and Melville Islands for the last 15,000 to 20,000 years (TLC 2001).

The two islands are separated by a thin passage of water called the Aspley Strait. Both islands are close to the Australian mainland with the southern tip of Melville Island linked by a series of small islands. The last of the small islands is only thirteen kilometres (8 miles) from Australia (TLC 2001).

Early contact with the Tiwi people was mainly by boat or small water craft.

“Up until 1895 there were raids upon mainland tribes near Darwin by the Tiwi, crossing Clarence Strait in their canoes. The Larrakia tribe returned the raids, and women were stolen from their home country by both sides” (Morris 1961:1).

The Tiwi Islands language map



Mudangkala shaped the land and made the Tiwi Islands.

“... and then Mudangkala, the old blind woman arose from the ground carrying three babies in her arms. As she crawled in the darkness across the featureless landscape, seawater followed and filled the imprints made by her body. Eventually the pools became one and formed a channel. The old woman continued on her journey overland and once again the moulded earth filled with the flow of water. Before she left, Mudangkala covered the islands with plants and filled the land and sea with living creatures. Finally the land was prepared for her children and for generations of children who followed” (TLC 2001:11-12).

Apsley Straight – Picture NT

Macassans and Malays tried to use the Tiwi Islands as a base for trepang hunting but they were “... speared or driven out” (TLC 2001:12). The fighting ability of the Tiwi was well known as passing ships only stopped near the islands when in need of water.



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Dutch explorers in 1636 and 1644 named Melville Island 'Van Diemens Land' (TLC 2001:12).

In 1705 the Dutch searched near both islands for items to trade like pearl shell and trepang, but they were attacked by Tiwi men (TLC 2001:12).

Portuguese boats stopped at the Tiwi Islands hunting for slaves to take to Timor until the early 1800s. The French also visited the Tiwi Islands and named several locations (Morris 1961:1).



Houses, Snake Bay - PictureNT

There were also records of an “... Australian explorer Philip Parker King (who) clashed with the Tiwi in 1818 (Morris 1961:1). He named several locations and some continue today; Bathurst Island, Melville Island and Apsley Strait (TLC 2001:12).



The British established a trading post known as Fort Dundas on Melville Island in 1824. Their aim was to compete with the French and Dutch trading in the area. The fort was unsuccessful and lasted only five years.



Old trench at Fort Dundas - PictureNT

The construction of the fort took over a month and included fitting seven cannons. The British sailors and free settlers were engaged in regular fights with the Tiwi.

The fighting skill and tactics of the Tiwi impressed and deflated the British. Captain Bremer of Fort Dundas “...found that the natives’ activity was astonishing and their speed remarkable.... Their prowess and wonderful precision of the men when using their sticks or Mura-koonga thrilled the Englishmen” (Morris 1964:5).



Melville Island hunters - PictureNT

The Tiwi were not the only problems for the British.

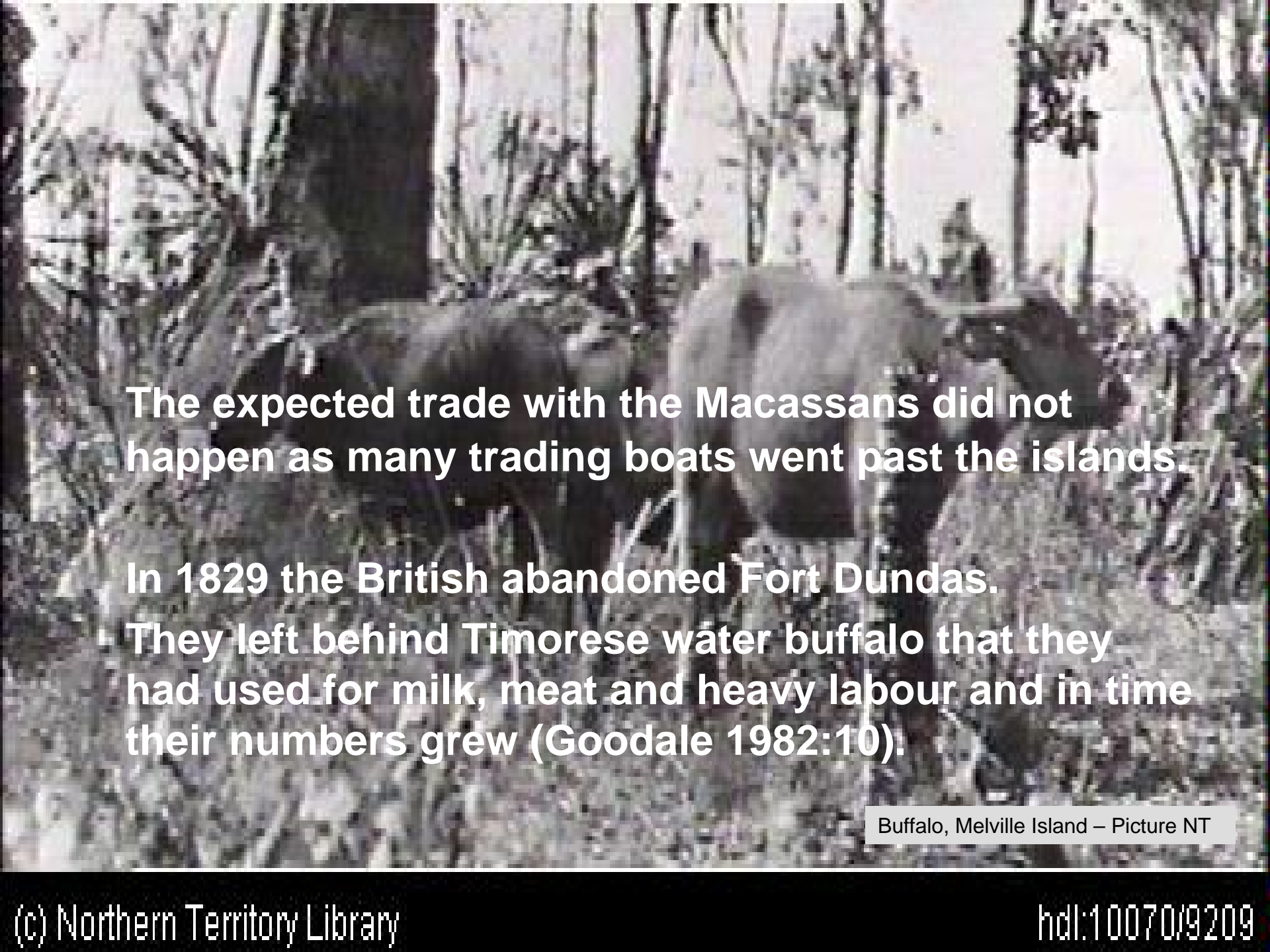
“Sickness, an unhealthy climate, mosquitoes and other annoying insects, a necessary and continual vigilance against Natives intent on mischief, a feeling of isolation, hunger, thwarted attempts by convicts to escape, drunkenness, the capture of several vessels by Asiatic pirates, an earth tremor, soil too poor for extensive agriculture, a lack of anticipated trade, difficult navigation, gales, poor housing, insufficient wages, misconduct on vessels ... “
(Morris 1964:16).



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Canoe, Cobourg Expedition - PictureNT

A black and white photograph of a water buffalo standing in a forest. The buffalo is the central focus, facing slightly to the right. The background is filled with the trunks and branches of trees, creating a dense, textured environment. The lighting is somewhat dim, typical of a forest interior.

The expected trade with the Macassans did not happen as many trading boats went past the islands.

In 1829 the British abandoned Fort Dundas.

They left behind Timorese water buffalo that they had used for milk, meat and heavy labour and in time their numbers grew (Goodale 1982:10).

Buffalo, Melville Island – Picture NT



From 1879 there had been a number of attempts to set up a buffalo shooting camp on Melville Island.

Joe Cooper and his workers, some who were Iwaidja people from the mainland set up a new camp in 1895. They traded axes, knives, tobacco and material. The hunters were involved in many fights with the Tiwi and the camp lasted one year (Frawley 2003:5).

Cooper's anchorage, Melville Island – Picture NT

Joe Cooper returned with his workers in 1905 to attempt another hunting camp and this one was more successful.

Joe Cooper (right) became famous, with some newspapers calling him the 'white rajah'. He hired out his boat for government officials and their tours of the Tiwi Islands. He later became appointed as Sub-Protector of Aborigines. "... (O)ne of his roles was to be responsible for a number of mainland Aborigines who were banished to Melville Island as punishment for crimes..." (Frawley 2003:11).



Joe Cooper – Picture NT

By 1915 there were few buffalo left on the island and the prices for their skins had dropped. Joe Cooper turned his focus toward a new venture, timber. He built three sawmills at Danuru, Tuiu and Ililu to mill the many cypress pines on Melville Island (Goodale 1982:11).



Sawmill, Melville Island – PictureNT



Modern pine forests on Melville Island - Internet



Buffalo hunting later expanded into hunting trepang and crocodiles.

Neville Wigg was a supervisor at the saw mills during the 1960s and in his spare time he hunted crocodiles.

“I’d go out shooting crocodiles at night time...I used to go back down to the beach and skin the crocodiles, with the help of two or three Melville Islanders... Neville travelled as far as “...Goose Creek, Shark Bay, Johnston River ... and Tieyonor Bay right at the northern tip...” to chase more crocodiles. Once a fortnight Neville would take the skins to Darwin by plane and sell them (NTAS 2003).

Crocodiles caught off Melville Island – Picture NT

Boats were the main transport for Tiwi people. They also carried many new people who would call the Tiwi Islands their home.



Tiwi Islands – Picture NT



In 1911
Father Gsell
started the
Bathurst
Island
Mission a
short boat
trip away
from Joe
Cooper's
camp on
Melville
Island
(Goodale
1982:10).

Bishop Gsell – Picture NT



After the Catholic mission was established on Bathurst Island the government turned its focus towards Melville Island and mixed race children.

The government decided to build a settlement at Garden Point in 1937.

The purpose of the settlement was to supply rations such as tea, sugar and flour to local Tiwi to distract them from dealing with passing boats and traders for the same goods.

The settlement would also house mixed race children from the Tiwi Islands and other parts of Australia (Goodale 1982:11-12).

A second settlement was built on Melville Island at Snake Bay in 1942 as a defence post.

World War II provided some employment for a number of Melville Island men who were involved in “...rescuing distressed pilots and watching for stray mines” (Goodale 1982:12).



RAAF
Squadron on
Melville Island
– Picture NT



In 1942 due to World War II children were evacuated from the Melville Island settlements accompanied by nuns or priests. After the end of the war Sister Emmanuel recounts how in April 1945 she assisted children in her care to travel back to Melville Island after they had spent a number of years in South Australia.

“There were four sisters, and it would have been around forty or so children: little boys up to the age of five, and then little girls right up to the edge... We picked up two babies in Alice Springs (six weeks of age) and we had another baby at three months. We were taken by military convoy, which meant we were on the back of trucks. But we pulled into Army places overnight, we weren't travelling all the time, we just travelled in the day” (NTAS 1993).

Army truck convoy – Picture NT

Father Cox drove a number of children in the back of a truck to Darwin and later by boat to Garden Point. One of those children was Marita Ah Chee from Alice Springs.

She tells of seeing the sea for the first time. “When we got to Darwin, I remember this very clearly, because he took us down to the jetty, and put us on the *Margaret Mary*. That’s the lugger...When we went down there ... for the desert children to see all that water, it just frightened us. We didn’t know what was going on. We screamed, we cried, we hang on to Father’s pants... he took us over, because he knew we were scared, so he come in ... we stopped at Bathurst, and then went on to Garden Point” (NTAS 1979).



Margaret Mary – Picture NT

Marita describes her first impressions of Garden Point.

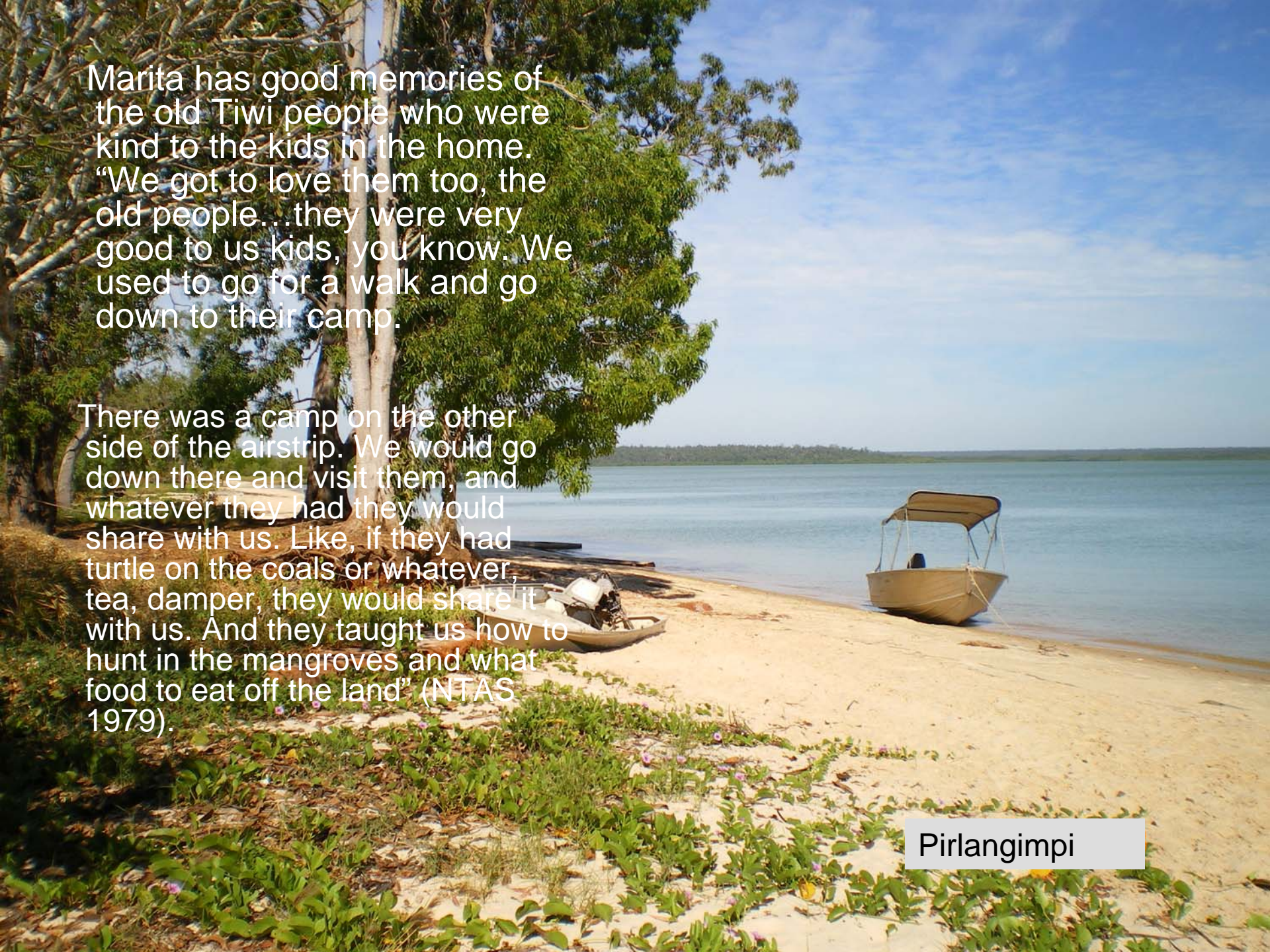
“When we arrived we seen these nuns again, all in white, and lots of children on the jetty, waiting for the boat to arrive, and there was eight of us on this boat. ...I remember, they took us up and they told us to dance. We had to do our dance, our tribal dance, and we done it so proudly”.

The sadness of being away from their mothers was worst at night.

“Well after a while, you know, we got used to the other children and the place, it was so lovely. We used to go camping and hunting... swimming in the sea ... I loved that island...” (NTAS 1979).




Melville Island jetty 1912 – Picture NT



Marita has good memories of the old Tiwi people who were kind to the kids in the home. “We got to love them too, the old people...they were very good to us kids, you know. We used to go for a walk and go down to their camp.

There was a camp on the other side of the airstrip. We would go down there and visit them, and whatever they had they would share with us. Like, if they had turtle on the coals or whatever, tea, damper, they would share it with us. And they taught us how to hunt in the mangroves and what food to eat off the land” (NTAS 1979).

Pirlangimpi

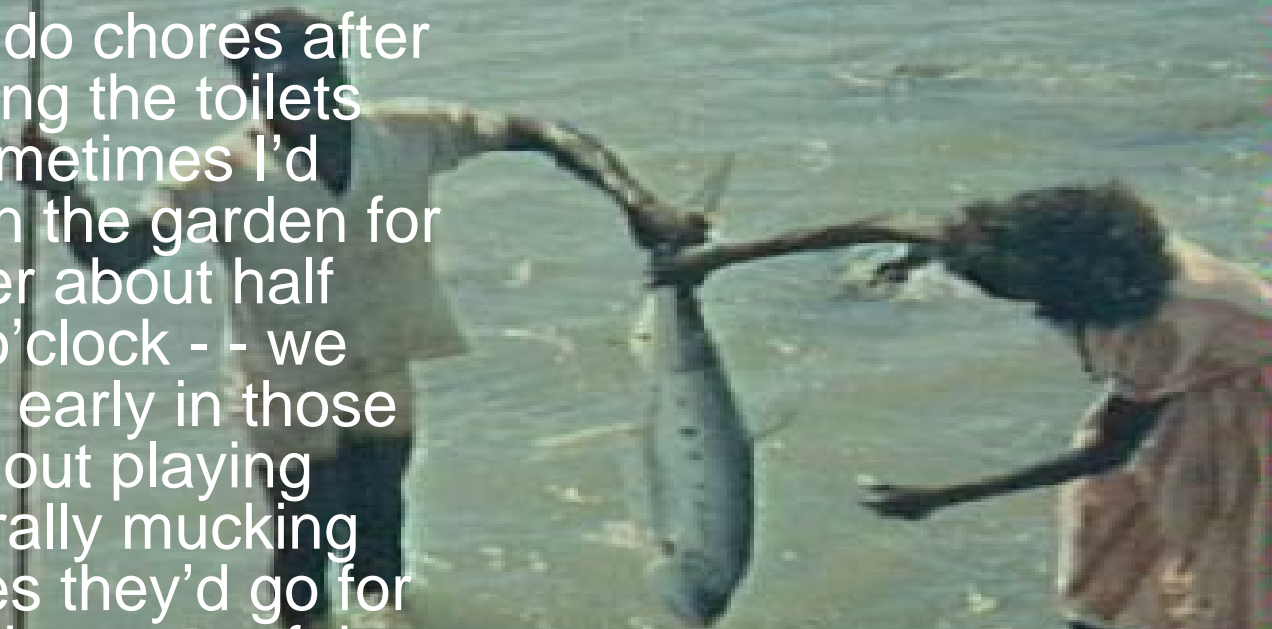


Sister Emmanuel talks of "... lots of lovely outings on (the *Quail*) because it would take about seventy people, so we could pack all the children onto the boat, go over to Bathurst Island, go to Boolawoolga, where they still go now for their holidays. And the boys used to use it for their croc shooting, to get a bit of money with croc skins" (NTAS 1993).

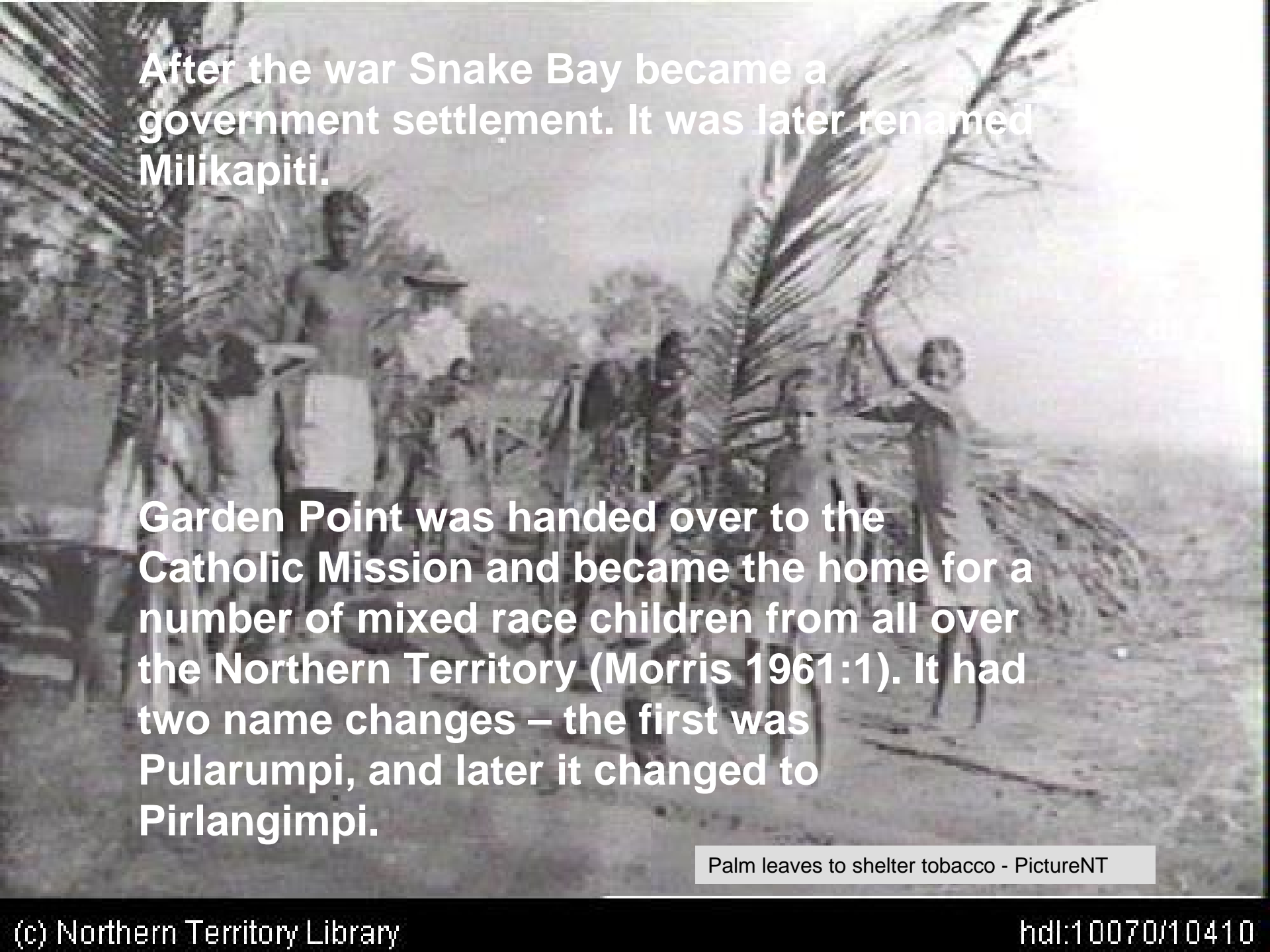
Footballers sailing to a match – Picture NT

Brother Bennett talks about the boys' daily life on Melville Island.

The boys had to do chores after school "... cleaning the toilets and showers; sometimes I'd give them work in the garden for awhile. Then after about half past three, four o'clock - - we used to have tea early in those days...they'd be out playing football, or generally mucking about. Sometimes they'd go for a walk in the bush; some of the boys would go crabbing and fishing and all this kind of thing – they had to be home by dark" (NTAS 1993).



Fishing at Melville Island – Picture NT



After the war Snake Bay became a government settlement. It was later renamed Milikapiti.

Garden Point was handed over to the Catholic Mission and became the home for a number of mixed race children from all over the Northern Territory (Morris 1961:1). It had two name changes – the first was Pularumpi, and later it changed to Pirlangimpi.

Palm leaves to shelter tobacco - PictureNT



Tiwi Flag

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