

Livelihood

See we never, apart from a short time at Wallaga, lived on a mission under control of the managers and that's why we just cruised around. All the work that we did was basically either harvesting natural resources or working with the land in some other way. Like bean picking, seafood gathering, mill work.
(BJ Cruse)¹

Living off the resources of the land and, particularly, the sea, remained the mainstay for south coast Kooris throughout the development of the white settlement. Pre-contact methods of fishing and gathering have been handed down for generations through stories and songs, ensuring a continuing connection with the environment. As well the development of industries and agriculture on the south coast has relied on Koori labour. In turn, the experiences of this work has been absorbed into the more traditional lifestyle of fishing, camping and following the seasons.

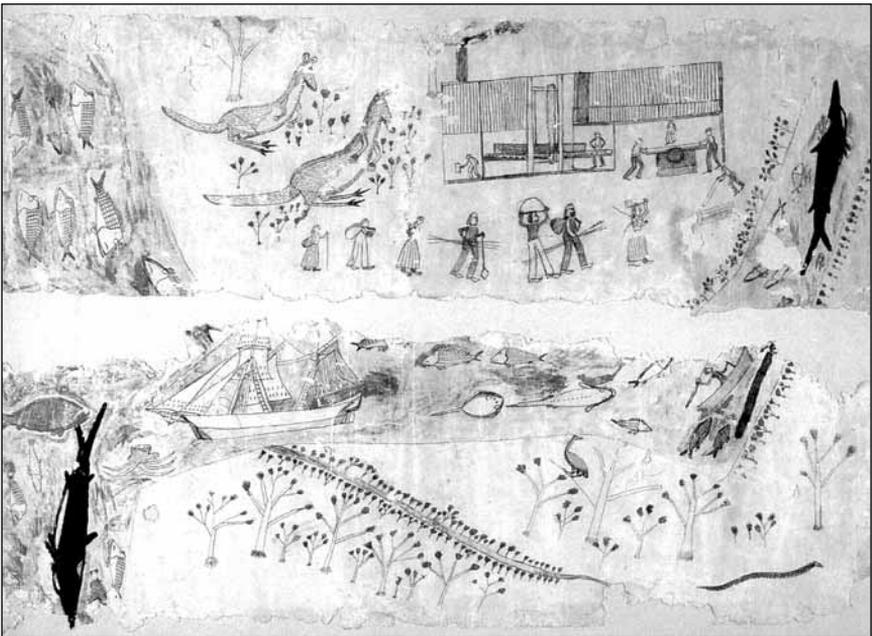
In pre-contact times all activities were associated with songs and some remnants of these were recorded by Janet Mathews in the 1960s. They are now stored in the sound archives at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in Canberra. Percy Davis grew up in the Tuross River area on land preserved by the senior men in the 1870s. He was in his eighties when Janet recorded him singing the song of the westerly wind. The song calls on *Gurrugumar*, the westerly wind, to blow and flatten the seas so the fish can be caught. At about the same time Janet recorded Jimmy Little senior singing a song about gathering oysters, taught to him by his mother from Wallaga Lake.² Fishing and shellfish gathering

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continued to be an important part of the south coast livelihood well into the twentieth century.

Other records of this time have been preserved in the drawings and paintings of Mickey from Ulladulla. He lived in one of the town reserves and made a living from a mixture of hunting-gathering and trading with the white community. Mickey sold brooms from his camp and his drawings and paintings were in wide demand. Mickey drew the fishing, hunting and camp life as well as corroborees and the native fauna and flora. He also drew the sawmills around Ulladulla and Bateman's Bay.³

As the timber industry developed Kooris were employed all along the coast in sawmills and as sleeper cutters. They either camped in the bush or lived in houses made and furnished with mill off-cuts. Some families became known as mill workers, in particular the Stewarts who lived on the town reserve in Bateman's Bay where the main industry was saw milling. The forest and mill work was close to the favourite campsites on the beach where fish and shellfish could be gathered.



Mickey of Ulladulla's drawing of the river, with boat, fish, kangaroos and sawmill, c.1880.

Interest in mutton fish grew with the arrival of large numbers of Chinese coming to Australia for the gold rush. They first landed at Twofold Bay in 1855 and walked to goldfields, thereby escaping the £10 head tax imposed to discourage Chinese miners from entering Victoria.⁴ Mutton fish was considered a delicacy in China and the gold miners were quick to set up fishing and trading businesses to meet the growing demand. The Chinese and Aborigines shared the stigma of racial prejudice and there are many instances of inter-marriage and association between the two groups. In New South Wales, Chinese entrepreneurs set up fishing and fish drying operations in the 1860s just north of Sydney to supply the goldfields. Aboriginal people were employed to collect mutton fish for these traders.⁵ At this time, Chinese entrepreneur Ah Chouney was reported to have owned up to twenty boats, employing mainly European crews. It is said that mutton fish were depleted from the Palm Beach area due to the number of boats and demand caused by the widespread use of the shell for shirt buttons.⁶

The Chinese who stayed on in southern Australia after the gold rushes lived by working as market gardeners and as herbalist doctors. Both occupations were in great demand in rural areas where medical help was very scarce and people who lived in towns relied on the Chinese gardeners for fresh vegetables. Some continued the mutton fish trading businesses set up in the days of the gold rush on the far south coast, which continued to be lucrative. Aboriginal people were able to use their traditional diving skills and their extended family labour in their beach camps to work with the Chinese, right along the south coast.



Doctor Ah Yeck
pictured in Pambula
at the turn of the
last century.

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Ben and Sarah Cruse and their son Ossie describe the process as they remembered from the past:

Ben: While I was at Mogo an old Chinaman [Ah Chin] came up to me looking for someone to drive his truck. And so he got me then to go to a market garden, the other side of Bateman's Bay, place called Kioloa where he had a market garden and he used to get abalone . . . We used to dive for abalone, me and this old Chinaman, for sale. We used to get the abalone and we used to cook it there on the rocks. In a kerosene tin, get four or five kerosene tins, we used to boil them there and dry them on the rocks . . . and they'd go as hard as a board. And he used to take them to Sydney and sell them.

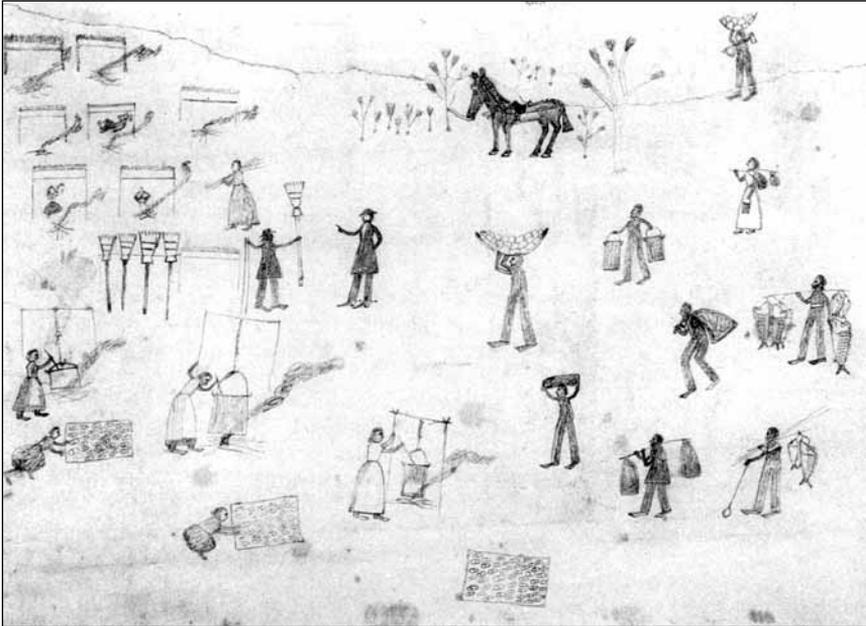
Sarah: I think he used to send them to China.

Ben: He used to send them to China. They used to soak them in water, soak them then they'd come soft.⁷

Mickey of Ulladulla's sketch of camp life shows women boiling up mutton fish and drying it out on sheets in the sun for the Chinese market as described by Ben and Ossie Cruse.

Ossie: In regards to gathering mutton fish for commercial purposes, my dad and my uncles used to do this way back in the early 1900s. They used to gather mutton fish and trade with Chinese people. They used to take the meat out of the shell and while they were doing this it would really be a family gathering, where men would be diving, gathering the mutton fish, bringing it to shore and women and kids would be lighting the fires. And they'd have these big drums to put the mutton fish in. They'd boil it for about three or four minutes and this would take all the impurities off the outside of the mutton fish, and they would come out of the boiling water looking a nice golden brown. Then the mutton fish would be laid out on the rocks in the sun to dry . . . [turning them over every hour so as to season the flesh properly]

Now, the drying process took two to three days, according to how hot the weather was, this was mainly a summer industry because the sun was at its hottest and the rocks used to be hot too.



Mickey of Ulladulla's drawing of scenes of Aboriginal life.

What happened then was that the dry shell fish was placed in the big corn bags that used to take about 5 drums of mutton fish dried out. Now to get 5 drums of mutton fish it would take about 12 or 14 drums because they used to shrink so much when they were dried. And then they would be sewed up and kept in a dry place, then weighed and sold to the Chinese . . . So our people started trading way back then.⁸

Some families made a living entirely from fishing and lived in permanent camps at good fishing spots, such as the Brierlys at the mouth of the Moruya River and the Nyes at Barling's Beach near Tomakin. Others combined this with the seasonal farm work, especially when the intensive production of beans, peas and corn began in the 1930s. Beach camps could be found close to the beanfields, providing fresh food for the off season times. Paul Hudson grew up in the 1950s and describes the seasonal life:

Paul: We used to live at Nerrigundah, and we'd pick beans for three to four months of year and after we'd finished the seasonal

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Cleaning mutton fish on the rocks at Eden, 1995.

work we'd go down to Potato Point by the ocean and camp, we used to camp for about four to six months at a time and all we did was fish and just live off the ocean mainly, gathering mutton fish all the time. That was a sort of everyday thing for food, fishing and that. Just done that for about thirty years, thirty-five years all of our family, plus there was a lot of other families that used to do exactly the same as us. You know there were hundreds of people that used to do the seasonal work and camp and do the same as we did.

Liddy: Do you remember how you used to get them [mutton fish]? Because they used to be plentiful in those days.

Paul: Oh yeah, like they'd be in feeding at low tide, but like today you'd have to wait until low tide to pick them up but they were just lousy years ago, you could just pick them up on the rocks everywhere, they were just plentiful, they were everywhere. We just got them off the rocks and rubbed them on the rocks and got a rock and tenderised them and took them back to the camp with us and put them into the open fire or in the shell and grilled them.⁹