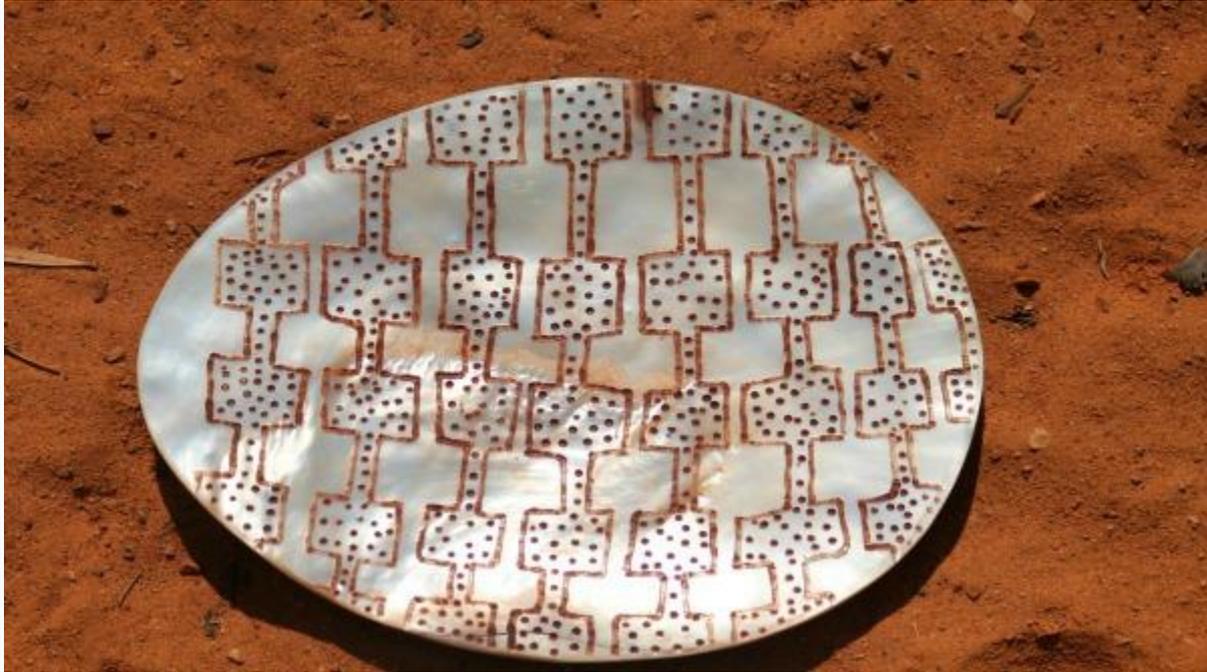


Australia's northern coast littered with pearling heritage

Written by Kandy Curran for ScienceNetwork WA on Friday, 09 September 2016



Pearl shell Kandy Curran

Australia's northern coast is littered with pearling heritage that goes back thousands of years and this heritage should be documented, preserved and respected.

Sarah Yu, a renowned anthropologist who has lived in Broome for forty years, regaled a spellbound audience of over 100 people with her presentation *Lustre: A pearling story, Aboriginal perspectives in a scientific world*.

Sarah's fascinating presentation was held in the old pearling town of Broome where commercial pearl shelling emerged in the late 18th century, as an integral part of the Science on Broome Coast series run by the Roebuck Bay Working Group and Yawuru Land and Sea Unit.

Sarah curated the popular Lustre exhibition at the WA Maritime in June 2015 along with two trainee curators, whose ancestors include Yawuru people as well as Asian and Europeans drawn to Broome by the pearl shelling industry. Her focus, was not only the Indigenous story over the 100 years of pearling, but also the 20,000 year old trade evident in the find of scientifically dated pearl shell discovered in caves on the West Kimberley coast.

The Broome coast boasts some of the most extensive pearl shell beds in the world. The region produces several species, including the impressive *Pinctada maxima* most commonly used for shell carving in this region and growing the largest pearls in the world through modern aquaculture practices. *Pinctada albina* is a traditional food source and the shell used for making smaller artefacts like binji binji or shell blades.

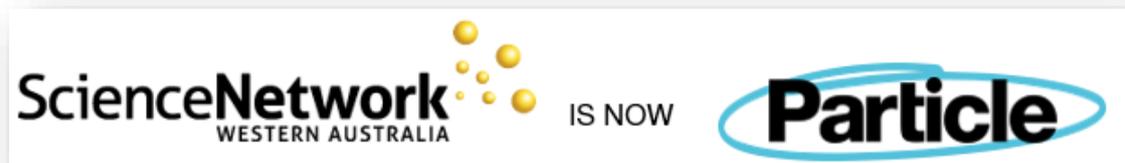
"Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders were the first pearlers to appreciate the lustre of Mother of Pearl, which they imbued with power, and regarded as an emblem of life and manhood. Diving

for shell however, is one of the most dangerous jobs, regardless of the technology that evolved, as the pearlers, depleting the shallower Mother of Pearl beds, had to work in deeper waters. However, despite the primitive conditions, life on the luggers was a platform for close bonds between men of all colours and backgrounds." Sarah Yu said.

On spring tides, luggers would return to town for shelter and provisioning, sharing their hard work stories and hospitality and uplifting the atmosphere of town life, despite the restrictive racial regulations.

This popular science series is sponsored by Inspiring Australia, The University of Notre Dame, Western Australian Marine Science Institution, Department of Parks and Wildlife and Rangelands NRM through the Federal Government Landcare Program.

The next presentation in the series is coming up on September 21 '*How are estuarine crocodiles doing*' - See the 2016 Science on Broome Coast program for details.



ScienceNetwork WA has closed its doors to make way for Particle, Scitech's new science news and story source. Check out the latest stories at particle.scitech.org.au.