

Student Information Sheet 8

The Cultural Significance of Sharks and Rays in Aboriginal Australia

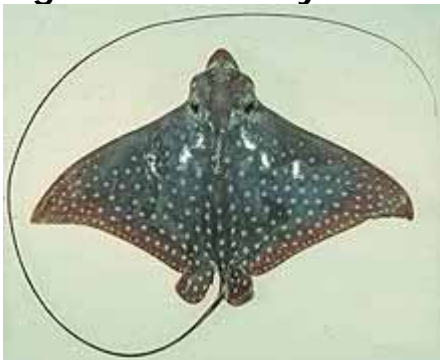
Background

Sharks and rays are important as symbols and resources for Aboriginal peoples throughout coastal Australia. The following information sheet will explain the role these unique fishes play in Aboriginal societies across Australia's Top End.



Speartooth shark (*Glyphis* spp.)
(© CSIRO Marine Research)

Origin of animal symbols



Eagle ray (*Aetobatus narinari*)
(© CSIRO Marine Research)

Animals are a common inspiration for symbols in every society. For Aboriginal societies, whose economies were traditionally based on hunting and gathering wild foods, animal symbols were based on wild animals. Incorporating predators like sharks into religious symbolism might seem unusual in Western societies, but it is not really so strange; we continue to view certain predators as representing positive qualities like strength (the bear) and bravery (the eagle). For many coastal Aboriginal peoples, certain sharks and rays have similar positive associations and symbolic value.

Sharks and rays as resources

Elasmobranchs are highly symbolic in Aboriginal society and they are also valued as a source of food and raw materials. In Aboriginal thought, **supernatural** creator beings created the landscape and bestowed culture on mankind. Various sharks and rays were placed in the world by the ancestors to provide food for their descendants. This link between the ancestors, food species, and mankind is revealed through sacred signs in the landscape. Aboriginal hunters know when sharks and stingrays are "fat" and ready to be **harvested** when certain plants bloom—these are known today as calendar plants. These flowers are signs from the ancestral creators that a food species has been added to the menu for another season.



Shovelnose ray (*Rhinobatos typus*)
(© CSIRO Marine Research)



Sawfish (*Pristis clavata*)
(© CSIRO Marine Research)

Traditionally, indigenous peoples did not share the Western notion of environmental conservation. They believed that food animals were released into the landscape by the ancestors as needed, so long as proper relations were maintained with them through ceremony, art, and song. However, use of animal species was controlled by laws

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established by the ancestors during the creation period. As a result, most food species were only harvested seasonally, like when the calendar plants were in bloom. If hunters harvested animals out of season, they could be punished by the **clan** responsible for maintaining ritual relations with that species. These ancestral laws served to assure a steady supply of sharks and rays every year without causing population collapses.

Sharks and rays were also traditionally used to manufacture a variety of tools, weapons, and implements. On Groote Eylandt, for instance, the toothy snout of small sawfishes was sometimes used as a hair comb. Elasmobranch **vertebrae**, intriguing round spool-shaped discs, were strung as beads to make necklaces. Shark teeth were utilized to make carving implements and rough shark hide was sometimes used like sandpaper. Shark teeth were also set into wooden clubs to make flesh-ripping swords. Large sawfish snouts were also sculpted into war clubs. Spears were sometimes tipped with a bristling bouquet of **venomous** stingray spines. Wounds caused by this fearsome weapon were nearly always fatal.

The shark: *Māna*

For the Yolngu peoples of northeast **Arnhem Land**, certain ancestors that created potent sacred sites are known as "power totems." These ancestors are central to the identity of the clans descended from them, and clansmen draw spiritual and physical strength by accessing their power through sacred designs, songs, and dances. Several Yolngu clans trace their identity to the ancestral whaler shark *Māna* (pronounced: MAR-na). According to the public version of the story, this ancestral being began his journey along the coast of northeast Arnhem Land.



Whaler shark
(© Andrea Marshall)

While sleeping on the beach, *Māna* was speared by an ancestor from another clan who did not want other creator beings near him. Enraged by this stealthy attack, *Māna* charged inland from the sea, exploding into the landscape. The ancestral shark gouged his way inland using his teeth to carve out several river systems. As he journeyed onward, his teeth broke off on the hard riverbanks; these lost teeth became the **pandanus trees** that line rivers today. The leaves of these trees are dagger-shaped with serrated edges, like shark teeth. These trees represent both *Māna's* anger at being speared and the stingray-spine tipped spear that *Māna* carried to avenge his death.

The stingray: *Gawangalmirri*

Another important ancestor which appears in many non-ceremonial contexts today is *Gawangalmirri*, the mangrove whipray (*Himantura granulata*), sacred to the Gumatj clan of the Yolngu. *Gawangalmirri* is a beautiful black stingray with white spots like a starry sky and a striking white tail. While stingrays have no symbolism in Western culture, to the Yolngu these fishes are a metaphor for human society. Like people, stingrays are gentle and social, and they take good care of their children. Like people, stingrays carry spears, but only use them in self defence. According to Yolngu belief, *Gawangalmirri* is a devoted parent, carefully preparing a safe home in which to give birth, called *Yirrnga*. In this home, like human parents, *Gawangalmirri* teaches its children everything they need to know to survive. This behavior is a metaphor for the passing of sacred lore from the elders to the new generation. As a result, *Gawangalmirri* has come to represent cultural survival for the Gumatj clan.

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The ancestral sawfish carves-out the Angurugu River on Groote Eylandt followed by three creator stingrays. An ancestral hunter watches from the riverbank, waiting to spear some rays for a feast.
Culture: Anindilyakwa, Clan: Maminyamanja, Artist: Nekingaba Maminyamanja, Date: c. 1980.
Collection of Matthew McDavitt.

This remarkable stingray holds other symbolism. During ancestral times, *Gawangalmirri* fought with the crocodile ancestor *Baru* after he killed a stingray clansman. Instead of killing the crocodile for this outrage, *Gawangalmirri* avenged the murder by spearing *Baru* in the thigh. This act of restraint became the model for the Yolngu peacemaking ceremony called *makarrata*.

In addition, *Gawangalmirri* is associated with the fertility of the landscape. Mangrove stingrays give birth among the mangrove prop-roots at the beginning of the wet season. As they nuzzle into the seafloor to make their birthing pit, their digging is said to activate sacred ancestral power-wells, triggering the development of wet season clouds. There is seemingly a connection between the clouds of silt stirred-up by nesting stingrays and the development of **thunderheads**. Because the wet season brings renewal of life throughout the tropical north, these stingrays are linked to the **fecundity** of the landscape itself. As is evident from this brief description, this ancestral ray symbolizes many positive attributes including social harmony, good parenting, cultural survival, peacemaking, and the fruitful earth.

Final thoughts

As is clear from these examples, indigenous peoples view elasmobranchs in a balanced way, finding them worthy of respect and admiration. Instead of fearing the predatory prowess of these fascinating fishes, Aboriginal people see in them strength and values which are a model for human behavior. Very few sharks and rays ever pose a threat to mankind, and now our activities threaten the survival of species such as the freshwater sawfish and the grey nurse shark. If we can change our attitudes about these misunderstood animals, perhaps we can save them before it is too late.

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