

Cobourg Peninsula, Port Essington/Victoria, Garig Gunak Barlu National Park

The **Cobourg Peninsula** is situated at the remote northern tip of Australia, around 570 km (by road) to the north-east of the capital of the Northern Territory, Darwin. It was seen in 1818 by Captain Phillip Parker King of the Royal Navy and named after Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, uncle of Queen Victoria. Parker King also named Port Essington after his “lamented friend, Vice-Admiral Sir William Essington”. Today, the Cobourg Peninsula is part of Garig Gunak Barlu National Park, administered jointly by the traditional Aboriginal owners and the Northern Territory government.

Historically, the northern coast of Australia with Arnhem Land and the Gulf of Carpenteria was a region of prolonged cross-cultural exchange between the Indigenous people of Australia, South-East Asians, and Dutch, French and British Europeans. The earliest recorded visitors to the Gulf country were Makassars, fishermen who sailed from the region of Sulawesi (today's Indonesia) to harvest trepang, also called sea cucumber, a marine invertebrate prized for its culinary value and medicinal properties. These “trepangers” commenced their seasonal travels as early as the 1600s. They arrived with the north-west monsoon each December and sailed back home with the south-east monsoon winds six months later. In 1623, the Dutch captain Willem Joosten van Colster, travelling for the Dutch East India Company, sailed into the Gulf of Carpenteria and named Cape Arnhem (after his ship). Other European explorers of the northern coastline included Abel Tasman in 1644 and Captain Matthew Flinders in 1802. In the early 1800s, Britain had established the colonies of New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia on the Australian continent. In the north, European exploration had only encompassed the mapping of the coast. That the Dutch and French had colonies to the north of Australia and were engaged in trade and exploration in the area was seen as a threat to British colonial and economic interests. In 1824, on a narrow sandy headland called Record Point in the bay of Port Essington, Captain Bremer of the Royal Navy unfurled the British flag and buried a bottle with some dated coins, and by doing so “claimed” 3000 km of coastline. In the following years, the British founded settlements with which they hoped to establish a direct line of communication with Asia, India and

the Pacific. Altogether, there were four attempted settlements in the region. Fort Dundas on Melville Island (1824) and Fort Wellington on Raffles Bay on the eastern side of the Cobourg Peninsula (1827) were abandoned in 1828 and 1829 respectively. The third military settlement was Victoria at the natural harbour of Port Essington (1838). Escape Cliffs near the mouth of the Adelaide river was the fourth unsuccessful settlement, before Darwin was founded in 1869 and later became the capital of the Northern Territory.

The site of the **Victoria** settlement belongs to the traditional lands of the Madjunbalmi clan at Ngardigawunyanggi. *H.M. Military Port of Victoria* was situated on the west side of the inner harbour of Port Essington, about 25 km from the open sea. It was founded as a strategic sea base but lasted only 11 years before it was abandoned in 1849. Lack of trade, the oppressive climate, sickness, loneliness, monotony and depression were given as reasons in contemporary travel literature. The settlement consisted of around 24 houses, “married quarters”, a “government house”, a hospital, a gun battery and other buildings. Some were made of brick, others of wood, but their construction was impaired by the lack of resources and skilled labour. Cyclones frequently hit the settlement, one of which completely demolished it on 25 November 1839. Gardens were laid out that for the most part did not flourish; fruit and vegetables were under attack by green ants, as were wooden buildings and wooden roofs by white ants. Especially in later years the houses of the settlement were described as decayed and rotten, the hospital roof was leaking, etc. Ships passed through once in a while, but often none were seen for months or even years on end. For a while, two naturalists set up residence to collect natural specimens: John Gilbert (in 1840) and John MacGillivray (in 1844). Ludwig Leichhardt and his party, at the end of their “overland expedition to Port Essington”, reached Victoria in December 1845 (John Gilbert had also been a member of this expedition, but died in an Aboriginal attack six months earlier). Malaria and fever were rampant among the small population, diseases that in those days were attributed to an “insalubrious climate”. The sick and convalescent were sent to a camp on the outer harbour to escape the “bad air”. Around 40 people lived in Victoria at a given time, and a quarter of the residents had fallen

ill or died when Port Essington was finally abandoned in 1849. Wild pigs, ponies, buffaloes and red cattle, offspring of the fort abandoned 20 years earlier at Raffles Bay, already roamed about the settlement. When Victoria was given up, its animals were also set free, as were the horses that Leichhardt had left behind. Today their descendants still populate the Peninsula.

There was ample contact with the local population throughout the years of the settlement. An interesting figure in this intercultural context is Angelo **Confalonieri**, a Catholic missionary from Lake Garda in Northern Italy, who had been sent from Rome by Pope Gregory XVI with other missionaries to evangelise Australia. He came to Port Essington in 1846, surviving a shipwreck on the way. He chose to live alone, at a distance from the British settlement on the opposite side of the harbour, and to some extent he even shared the daily life of the local people and their travel around the Peninsula. He learnt the local language(s) – the colonists were amazed with what ease he was able to do so – and produced a bilingual phrasebook with word lists (of which two drafts exist today: one in New Zealand, the other at the Vatican). Confalonieri also produced a map; the names for the “tribes” which he gives are for the most part not Indigenous groupings, but rather Makassarese names for geographical locations. He called the language he translated “Limbakaregio”, which is in fact the Makassarese name for Port Essington, apparently a mix of Garig and Iwaidja, two closely related, neighbouring languages of the Cobourg region. (Garig is no longer spoken today; Iwaidja is highly endangered, spoken by about 150 people.) In his translations Confalonieri tried to grasp some of the complex kin relationships of Aboriginal societies. It appears that Confalonieri was even assigned a skin name himself, what Bruce Birch calls “a useful way of integrating a non-indigenous person into indigenous society”. Confalonieri died of fever in 1848 at age 35.

Garig Gunak Barlu National Park and Cobourg Marine Park cover around 4500 km² and include the entire Peninsula, neighbouring islands and the surrounding waters. The majority of the Cobourg Peninsula is freehold Aboriginal Land, and the park (*Garig* - a local language name, *Gunak* - land, *Barlu* - deep water) lies within the clan estates of the Iwaidja-speaking peoples of Western Arnhem Land, with custodianship being shared between five Aboriginal clan groups, the Agalda, Ngaindjagar, Madjunbalmi, Minaga and Muran. The park consists of a diversity of land and marine areas, including mangroves, rainforest, swamps, lagoons, beaches and dunes, sea grass meadows and other marine habitats. Its rich wildlife includes many rare species, for example the Dugong (sea cow). The park is also home to the largest wild herd of Banteng, Indonesian cattle that are now endangered in their native habitat. In 1974, Australia designated Cobourg Peninsula as the world's first Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention (an intergovernmental environmental treaty established by UNESCO). The Cobourg Peninsula was recognised for its diversity of wetland habitats with threatened marine species and significant seabird colonies and for its value as a refuge and breeding site. The Park is managed jointly by the Traditional Owners and the Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory. It is a conservation reserve used for regulated tourism, commercial and recreational fisheries, hunting and Indigenous use.

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