

## **Beneath the colonial gaze: modelling maritime society and cross-cultural contact on Australia's Southern Ocean frontier—the Archipelago of the Recherche, Western Australia**

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This paper presents the results of my PhD research aimed at developing a model for understanding maritime society, cross-cultural contact and informal colonisation processes that transformed society and environment across Australasia's 'Southern Ocean frontier'—the mainland and offshore islands of Australia and New Zealand where newcomers came into contact with Aboriginal people.

The incorporation of maritime frontiers is essential to any discussion of exploration, frontier studies, cross-culture contact and colonisation processes in Australasia. Immediately following the establishment of the British penal settlement at Port Jackson, New South Wales in 1788, sealers and whalers extended Port Jackson's economic frontier with their explorations of the 'South Seas', including the southern coastlines and offshore islands of Australia and New Zealand.

Connected to established northern hemisphere oil and fur markets in Europe, North America and China, sealing and whaling were key drivers for maritime exploration and settlement along Australasia's Southern Ocean frontier. Sealing and whaling attracted foreign shipping, established commercial relationships with major mercantile houses in London, India and China, and transformed Port Jackson from a penal colony into the major shipping and financial centre of the South Seas. The ability to trade furs directly with China in exchange for money, tea, silk and other commodities reduced the need to export British currency to the China market, and generated colonial wealth to fund mercantile and agro-pastoral ventures.

Unofficial exploration and informal settlement of the Southern Ocean frontier by newcomers in ships led to encounters with Indigenous societies, with seasonal and permanent coastal settlements established on islands and the mainland trading in marine and hinterland resources. Later official colonial settlement benefited from the acquired knowledge of the coast and its resources, and as settler society expanded political, economic and cultural frontiers further into Indigenous territories in the coastal hinterland, traditional life was radically transformed.

The theme of cross-cultural contact applies to the initial contacts made by sealers and whalers with Aboriginal people on the Southern Ocean frontier, the participation of Aboriginal people in those industries and the diverse ethnicities of crews in the sealing and whaling industries. My research follows Lape's (2003: 103) methodological approach to exploring local two-way transfer through culture contact in that it will '...document local developments in the context of large regional scale interactions and influences...[to consider] a focus on the two-way transfer of ideas, influences and technologies in contact situations, an increased concern with the specific mechanisms of information transfer and a related focus on local uses and meanings of foreign ideas and material objects'. This methodological approach avoids the dominant Western paradigm of affirming colonisation processes, and seeks to understand the widest possible diversity of responses to cross-cultural contact, both historically and materially as represented in the archaeological record.

The geographical focus of this research is the Archipelago of the Recherche off Western Australia's southern coast and the adjacent mainland, which contain a variety of archaeological evidence related to 19<sup>th</sup>-century seal and whale harvesting including shipwrecks, historical archaeological sites and Aboriginal sites and artefacts.

Findings derived from historical and archaeological research provide an overview of the history, extent and types of sealing, whaling and cross-cultural contact occurring within the Archipelago during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Fieldwork was undertaken to record a variety of underwater, historical terrestrial and Indigenous archaeological sites. A holistic maritime landscape approach allows for a new understanding of the links between material and symbolic heritage sites in the Archipelago of the Recherche. Pre-existing environmental and cultural boundaries defining the fluid, liminal borderland spaces on the Southern Ocean frontier are described as are their subsequent transformation to more rigidly controlled spaces through colonisation processes. Other key aspects to understanding the maritime frontier landscape include the importance of islands; the establishment of seasonal camps and informal settlements as a precursor to semi-permanent and permanent settlement; voyaging and shipping networks; cross-cultural contact; the blending of Indigenous and newcomer cultures; the operation of hybrid colonial exchange economies; and over-exploitation of resources leading to decline and abandonment.