

EDDIE MABO

1936 - 1992



Edward Koiki Mabo was born on the 29 June 1936 on Mer (Murray) Island in the Torres Strait. His mother died shortly after his birth and, in accordance with traditional custom, he was adopted by his uncle Benny and aunt Maiga. He moved to mainland Australia in 1957 and in 1959 married Bonita Nehow. Together they raised ten children.

Between 1957 and 1967 Mabo worked in various general labouring jobs, and from 1967 to 1975 he was employed as a gardener at James Cook University. His political involvement began in 1962 when he became secretary of the Aboriginal Advancement League.

In 1967 Mabo initiated and participated in the seminar *We the Australians – What is to Follow the Referendum?* which brought together over 300 Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants in an open forum in Townsville to discuss Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues.

In 1973 Mabo and his friend, Burnum Burnum, established the Black Community School in Townsville. Mabo was the Director of the school until its closure in 1985.

Between 1970 and 1988 Mabo held a number of positions, including President of the Council for the Rights of Indigenous People, President of the Yumba Meta Housing Association, Director of the Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Housing Cooperative and Vice-Chairman of Magani Malu Kes. He was also involved in a number of national advisory bodies, including the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Education Advisory Committee, and at various times he was employed by organisations who worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Mabo Decision

In 1981 a Land Rights Conference was held at James Cook University at which Eddie Mabo spoke on land ownership/inheritance on Murray Island. A group of Murray Islanders, with Mabo as the leading litigant, decided to take their claim for Native Title to the High Court of Australia.

The claim challenged the legal principle of Terra Nullius, under which the British treated Australia as a colony of settlement, a land that belonged to no one, and not as a colony of conquest. Therefore, under British Law, all land in Australia had become Crown Land. The case of Mabo and others v. the State of Queensland commenced in the Queensland Supreme Court in May 1982. Over the ensuing eight years, the case sought to determine whether Native Title had existed in Australian law after British colonisation and whether it continued to exist in the present.

The Queensland Supreme Court delivered a judgement on 16 November 1990 and concluded that:

- a form of Native Title had existed prior to European colonisation,
- Native Title was believed by the Islanders to still exist and
- that it was for the High Court of Australia to decide whether Native Title had persisted in Australian Law after British colonisation.

In May 1991 the case was heard in the High Court.

On June 3 1992, the High Court ruled in favour of Mabo and others. This decision overruled the legal doctrine of terra nullius, declaring that:

- Native Title had existed before European colonisation;
- Native Title still existed; and
- that it was up to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to determine who owned land.



Eddie Mabo did not hear the High Court ruling. He died of cancer on 21 January 1992, and was buried in Townsville on 1 February 1992. On 18 September 1995 he was reburied at his village, Las, on Murray Island. His gravestone was unveiled on 3 June 1995: June 3 is now known nationally as 'Mabo Day'.

Mabo was posthumously awarded a Human Rights Award by the Human Rights Commission and an Australian Achiever Medallion by the National Australia Day Council.

Eddie Koiki Mabo is widely regarded as one of Australia's most influential historical figures.

The Sculpture

Commissioned by Townsville City Council to commemorate Edward Koiki Mabo and the Mabo Decision, this sculpture is part of Townsville City Council's Pioneers Walk. It was designed and created by artist Matthew Harding with the assistance of Gail Mabo. The features of this sculpture include:

- A pebble mosaic - symbolic of the ancestral Octopus that brought the laws of tradition (Mabo) to the people of Torres Strait Islands.
- A Warup drum - an enlarged metal replica of a Warup drum carved by Eddie Mabo. This drum represents the strength and continuum of Eddie's voice - resonating the connection between the past, present and future.
- A large natural granite boulder - positioned at the centre of the mosaic pattern. Carved into this boulder is a large fingerprint design, symbolising the physical, spiritual and cultural connection between indigenous people and land.