Making a Canoe

Torres Strait Islander people have been using canoes for at least 6,000 years. People used canoes to travel to other islands for cultural business and to visit family and friends. They also used them to hunt for food such as turtle and dugong. These activities are still important, however today people travel in a dinghy with an outboard motor.

Over many months, the elders worked on building other parts of the canoe, which included an outrigger, mast and paddles. They used traditional materials and modern tools. Through this special community project, elders passed on their knowledge and skills to younger people, who were invited to participate. It was a proud moment for the community when the canoe was completed. Soon after, the canoe was carefully packed into separate parts for its long journey to Canberra for display at the National Museum of Australia.

The canoe arrived safely in Canberra. Sedric Waia and the late Philemon Isua from Saibai Island assembled the canoe in the Gallery of First Australians. A curator and conservator at the Museum worked alongside the men.

In 2000, four elders from Saibai Island began to build a large outrigger canoe just as their ancestors had. First, they obtained a hull from a trader in Papua New Guinea. The wooden hull was towed by a motor boat down the Pahoturi River from Papua New Guinea and across to the island. Once there, quarantine officers inspected the hull for unwanted pests and diseases.

Sedric Waia helps to assemble the canoe at the National Museum of Australia.