



# BIG BOSS

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A **STUDY GUIDE** BY MARGUERITE O'HARA



AUSTRALIAN TEACHERS OF MEDIA

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**Murrungga Island is situated in the top end of Arnhem Land in a group of islands known as The Crocodile Islands. This is where we find 95-year-old Laurie Baymarrwangga or as she is affectionately known, 'Big Boss', who was named Senior Australian of the Year in 2012.**

*Big Boss* is the story of this 95-year-old Indigenous Elder and her challenge as the remaining leader of the Yan-nhangu speaking people to pass on her traditional knowledge to the next generation.

We learn about Baymarrwangga's life story, from her time as a young girl on Murrungga Island to the time she saw the arrival of missionaries, witnessed the arrival of Japanese and European fishermen, and then experienced war and tumultuous change. The story documents a historical legacy of government neglect, and suppression of bilingual education and how the language and culture of the Yan-nhangu came to be in a precarious position.

The documentary describes Baymarrwangga's single greatest achievement: the Yan-nhangu Dictionary. The Dictionary's main aim is to preserve Yan-nhangu language and local knowledge from the potentially damaging consequences of rapid global change.

Key community people - all related to Big Boss - also feature in the film. Through them, we learn about the unique lifestyle of the Yan-nhangu-speaking people: the traditional method of building a bark canoe, constructing a fish trap and the ritual practices of turtle hunting and the daily collection of turtle eggs.

Baymarrwangga is the keystone, the critical and last holder of a swathe of traditional knowledge vital to Yan-nhangu people, and the last full speaker of their dialect. No other has a comparable knowledge of the islands, seas, and the ways of the Elders.

## **Curriculum Guidelines**

The film will have interest and relevance for middle and senior secondary students of Studies of Society and Environment (HSIE), History, Anthropology, Indigenous Studies, English, Linguistics and Film and Media Studies.

It illustrates the importance of Elders such as Baymarrwangga in keeping alive language and



spiritual and cultural traditions amongst her people that have been lost in other Indigenous communities.

The information and Student Activities in this guide are designed to encourage students to respond to the following key questions which also appear at the end of the guide:

- Is it important that languages and traditions particular to groups of people be preserved, practiced and honoured? If so, why?
- What can white urban Australians learn about the importance of respecting the land and environment from communities such as the people living on Murrungga Island?
- What is the relationship between language and cultural practices?
- How can remote communities preserve their traditional practices, language and beliefs while also being able to work effectively in the dominant culture and society? Is it possible across generations to preserve cultural traditions, practices and languages?

***She knows the stories... she's a very important lady — not only the ceremony side, but about the land itself, and the relationship. She teaches everyone to learn more***

***Rose Laynba-lanyba  
(Baymarrwangga's granddaughter)***



Above: <http://en.travelint.com/advice/maps/arnhem-land-and-gove.aspx>

## MAP OF ARNHEM LAND

Milingimbi is the largest of the Crocodile Islands. On the map it is north of Ramingining (where the film *Ten Canoes* was shot) and east of Maningrida just off the coast. Murrungga Island is about 45 kilometres further out to sea. The combined population of the homelands and Milingimbi community is approximately 1,500. The residents are spread through about 13 clan groups.

All of Arnhem Land was proclaimed as an Aboriginal reserve in 1931. The Yolngu people have been recognised as holding native title rights to parts of East Arnhem Land. This includes rights over the seas which co-exist with the rights of commercial and recreational fishers in one of the Northern Territory's most abundant fishing grounds.

In 2005 in a Native Title judgement, The Yolngu people were recognised as holding Native Title rights to parts of East Arnhem Land, including rights over the sea. These include the rights to hunt, fish, gather and use resources within the area (including the right to hunt and take turtle and dugong) for personal, domestic or non-commercial exchange or communal consumption for the purposes allowed by their traditional laws and customs.

## BACKGROUND

Every nation's history and traditions are important to its inhabitants, even the parts that may not reflect well on the people. Until quite recently

in Australia, our history was only taught starting from the 1770s when white people settled here. However that's not the whole story.

**Indigenous Australians** are believed to have lived in Australia for more than 60,000 years. At the time of white settlement the population has been estimated to have been between 750,000 to 1 million people. They lived in hundreds of groups, each with their own language. All the land within a traditional area was held by a clan—a cluster of families with special kinship traditions. There were many individual differences depending on the local environment and the region. However, the different 'nations' or people had adapted their way of life to live in harmony with the land and available resources. Skills in hunting and gathering, creating tools and other useful artefacts, social relationships and spiritual links with the land were all shared. Special knowledge of laws, ceremonies, and sacred places was shared and passed on from one generation to the next in a strong oral tradition. White settlement has disrupted many of these traditions and it was only in 1992 that the notion of *terra nullius* (empty land) was legally overturned.

For a timeline of what happened to Aboriginal Australians after white settlement see <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/aboriginal-history-timeline-early-white.html> or watch episodes of *The First Australians* (Rachel Perkins, Darren Dale, 2008). This 7-part landmark documentary series explores what happened when the oldest living culture in the world was overrun by the world's greatest empire.

## PERCEPTIONS 200 YEARS APART

### A. 1770—Captain James Cook (excerpt from his Journals of 1770 after first encountering Indigenous Australians on the east coast of Australia (then called New Holland))

From what I have said of the Natives of New-Holland they may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon Earth, but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans; being wholly unacquainted not only with the superfluous but the necessary Conveniences so much sought after in Europe, they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in a Tranquillity which is not disturb'd by the Inequality of Condition: The Earth and sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for life, they covet not Magnificent Houses, Household-stuff &c., they live in a warm and fine Climate and enjoy a very wholesome Air. . . . In short they seem'd to set no Value upon any thing we gave them, nor would they ever part with any thing of their own for any one article we could offer them; this in my opinion argues that they think themselves provided with all the necessaries of Life and that they have no superfluities. [Journals, p. 174]<sup>1</sup>

(spelling and punctuation is as it appears in the Journals)

- What impression do Cook's recorded observations convey about the Indigenous people he encountered in 1770?
- On what basis did Cook claim possession of Australia for Britain?
- What view of land ownership did Cook have?
- How was this different to what we now understand about Indigenous Australians' connection to land and place?
- How did the Mabo Judgement of June 1992 challenge the idea of *terra nullius*?

### B. 1992—Paul Keating's Redfern speech

In late 1992, to launch the International Year for the World's Indigenous People, the then Prime Minister of Australia, Paul Keating, made a speech on Indigenous issues at Redfern, an inner Sydney suburb with a large Aboriginal population. Amongst other things, Keating said:

*...the starting point might be to recognize that the problem starts with us non-Aboriginal Australians. It begins, I think, with an act of recognition; recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases, the alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice and our failure to imagine these things being done to us. With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic human response and*



Above: xxx xxx xxxxxx xxx xx  
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*enter into their hearts and minds. We failed to ask—how would I feel if this were done to me? As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded all of us.*<sup>2</sup>

It is almost impossible to develop a 'felt understanding' of what has happened to Indigenous people since white settlement but in attempting to imagine what it would be like to be alienated and dispossessed from our own place and family, it is important to try and walk in other people's shoes. Discuss how you would feel if any of these things were done to you.

- The police remove you from your home and family when you are five years old. You do not know why.
- The place where you are sent to live is run by people who do not speak your language.
- You are unable to understand the lessons taught at school.
- You do not know if your mother is alive or dead. She never phones or writes to you.
- The other children in the place where you live do not speak your language.
- You are expected to attend religious services honouring a God you do not believe in or understand.
- The food is unpleasant to you, but you are not allowed to eat any of the foods you are used to.
- You are sent to work for white people who expect you to become 'assimilated' into their way of life.

## WATCHING THE FILM

*Big Boss* is a story about place and people, about valuing and preserving a culture through observing the life of Laurie Baymarrwangga, an Elder of the Malarra clan. Her language is Yan-nhangu, the language of Murrungga and Galwin'ku. Murrungga is an island community in the Outer Crocodile Islands of Arnhem Land, some 45 kilometres from Millingimbi in the Arafura Sea. Transport to and from Millingimbi is by chartered plane or boat.

### Student Activity

As you watch the film, use the Viewing Log below to record your responses. Afterwards use these notes to inform your discussions about what we see in the film.

## VIEWING LOG

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES	CONTRIBUTION TO THE STORY
What do the opening pre-title scenes show us about the place and the people of Murrungga Island?		
How do the people on Murrungga feed themselves without access to store-bought goods?		
What are some of the traditional artefacts, used for hunting and fishing, which are shown in the film? Who has the knowledge to make these things today?		
What are the main activities of the <i>Crocodile Islands Ranger Program</i> ? Why was this program established and what needs does it meet?		
In what ways are the 1930s photographic records of Donald Thomson, anthropologist and photographer, important in telling the history of the Yolngu people?		
When did Christian missionaries first come to the Crocodile Islands and build a church and school at Millingimbi?		
When was a school first opened on Murrungga Island? Who started the school?		
Why does Baymarrwangga think it's important that children be taught the local Yan-nhangu language? How are new technologies being used to record the language?		
How did the arrival of anthropologist Bentley James on Murrungga Island offer a great opportunity to preserve and record the Yan-nhangu language?		
Why did Bentley James decide to work FOR Baymarrwangga as opposed to just working with her?		
How is the co-operative nature of food-gathering illustrated in the turtle-hunt scenes?		
What are some of Baymarrwangga's responsibilities as a traditional elder of the Crocodile Islands that are shown in the film?		
What is significant about initiatives such as the <i>Crocodile Islands Ranger Program</i> and the Yan-nhangu language dictionary project? Who do these programs benefit?		



## The Crocodile Islands Rangers Program

*I started the Ranger Program for both the Yolngu and the Europeans to protect our sea country, the country of the Gamalangga, the Gorryindu and the Malarra. This program will employ all my people and non-indigenous people too.*

— Baymarrwangga

This program was set up by Baymarrwangga and community elders to provide opportunities to pass on traditional knowledge and skills to young people, specifically:

- 'To create practical partnerships to positively engage children with their own country'.
- 'To re-invigorate pre-existing relations to land and sea country'.

See [www.crocodileislandsrangers.com](http://www.crocodileislandsrangers.com) for more detailed information and images about this project.

### Student Activity

#### 1. Laurie Baymarrwangga

*She {Baymarrwangga} is a very demanding person. She teaches young men not to abuse the law and the rule...she teaches everyone to learn more— Michele Garawurra, grand-daughter*

- What are your impressions of Baymarrwangga?
- How do her children and grandchildren shown to share some of her qualities?
- What are these qualities?
- Do you think her legacy will live on through her descendants after her death?
- Aged 95, her next goal is to establish a 1000 km turtle sanctuary in her sea country to save the sea turtles. How many people in her age group still have the energy and skill to be embarking on new projects?
- Baymarrwangga has said that her vision and the wisdom of her years prompt her to resist the creep of assimilation and re-affirm the culture and dignity of indigenous people everywhere?

### Aboriginal languages

**250 Aboriginal languages were spoken in Australia before 1770.**

60 Aboriginal languages are considered 'alive' and in use as a first tongue today.

11% of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people mainly speaking an Aboriginal language at home in 2008, 75% of these can also speak English.

50% of Indigenous people in some remote areas of Australia speak an Aboriginal language at home.

62% of Aboriginal adults identified with a clan, language or tribal group in 2008.

**145 Aboriginal languages are spoken in Australia today. Of these, 110 of them are regarded as 'critically endangered'.**

### BAYMARRWANGGA'S INITIATIVES

#### The Yan-nhangu Dictionary Project

*We will write together all of the words down, and keep the words and all of the knowledge inside them strong for future generations. — Baymarrwangga to Bentley James*

- How many Yan-nhangu words were written down before the dictionary project began its work?

See [www.crocodileislandsrangers.com](http://www.crocodileislandsrangers.com) for more detailed information about this project.

See 'Aboriginal languages' table left (Read more at <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/language/#ixzz1t6VXP4LS>)

### *Baymarrwangga's biography*

...Laurie Baymarrwangga has seen the arrival of missionaries, exploitation by Japanese and European fishermen, war and tumultuous change. Undaunted, she has almost single-handedly nurtured the inter-generational transmission of local ecological knowledge through a lifelong commitment to caring for kin, culture and country. In the 1960s Laurie established a housing project on her homelands that has benefitted generations of kin. Speaking no English, with no access to funding, resources or expertise she initiated the Yan-nhangu dictionary project. Her cultural maintenance projects include the Crocodile Islands Rangers, a junior rangers group and an online Yan-nhangu dictionary for school children. In 2010, after a struggle stretching back to 1945, Laurie finally received back payments for rents owed to her as the land and sea owner of her father's estate. She donated it all, around \$400,000, to improve education and employment opportunities on the island and to establish a 1,000 square kilometre turtle sanctuary on her marine estate. In the face of many obstacles, this great, great grandmother has shown extraordinary leadership and courage in caring for the cultural and biological integrity of her beloved Crocodile Islands.

- What might non-indigenous Australians learn from the environmental practices and spiritual beliefs of many Indigenous Australians?

Above is the citation from Baymarrwangga's biography on *The Australian of the Year* website

## **2. The Crocodile Islands**

*We are thinking about the future for all the Indigenous people of Australia; we are speaking our language for them; we are dancing for them so that they can remember who they are and remember their important Indigenous heritage.* — Michelle Garawurra, grand-daughter.

- In what ways does what we see of Murrungga suggest that it retains many aspects of what many people would describe as an idyllic and unspoilt paradise?
- What restrictions apply to outsiders who may want to visit place such as Murrungga Island?
- What do you think is the main reason for a permit system applying to communities such as Murrungga?
- Is alcohol permitted in East Arnhem Land communities such as Mililingimbi and Murrungga?
- Why are the inhabitants allowed to hunt sea turtles which are a protected marine animal?
- What do we see the people doing when they

## **Linguistic researcher, Chiara Bussini, reveals why Murrungga in the Crocodile Islands off the NT coast is so special and at risk of disappearing forever.**

Have you ever envisaged what the remote islands off the Northern Territory coast are like? Lost in an isolated archipelago in the Arafura Sea. Well, in truth, they're much like they were thousands of years ago, largely cut off from the concrete and commercialisation that has occurred on the mainland.

Welcome to Murrungga Island, one of the magnificent Crocodile Islands in East Arnhem Land, located about 600km east of Darwin.

As one of many tiny green islands that make up the archipelago, Murrungga is surrounded by crystalline water and from the air, can be likened to an emerald in a sapphire sea. To see this incredible view visitors can board a small charter plane from the mainland, which flies to a small sandy airstrip located in the heart of this tropical paradise.

Murrungga is a place with hundreds of names: every beach, cove and water hole is a link in an ancestral network of relationships and song lines. It is a place where time for the most part is reckoned without reference to either clock or calendar.

The only sounds there are of the sea breeze, of nature and storytelling, which is key to the local culture that is focused not on the stock market but relationships and spiritual connections - a constant struggle in a world of progress.

Nowadays, local families continue to preserve their rituals and homeland by acting as custodians of the future for young Yolngu Aboriginal people. The currency there is not money but knowledge and people are passing it on through practical projects aimed at employment, education and research on their estates.

But for those who are only there for the short-term, a day on the island can be spent indulging in the natural sights and delights such as cooking fresh oysters on charcoals, sampling fresh fish, stunning beach walks and chats around the campfire under the shiny Milky Way. But that's what makes this far-away island so special; it is one of the last frontiers of the simple world, almost a fossil, an archaeological survivor of the fight against time, pollution, assimilation and loss of identity and values. A key to a world almost gone, but still alive through the efforts of its elders practising traditions and passing them on to the younger generations. A little corner of paradise on earth.

<http://www.australiantraveller.com/at-wire/murrungga-island-the-last-frontier>

collect turtle eggs?

Chiara Bussini, a linguistic researcher who appears in the film in the segments when Baymarrwangga travels to Mililingimbi for the circumcision ceremonies, explains what makes Murrungga so special (Above right).



## THE FILMMAKERS

**Director Paul Sinclair** explains how he came to direct this film.

*In mid 2010, I was contacted by Bentley James, an Anthropologist working alongside the Yan-ngahnu speaking Yolngu people, and asked to shoot a short documentary that would promote their local Crocodile Islands Ranger Program. The location would be Murrunga Island, situated in the Arnhem Land region, and in return he promised an experience I would never forget...he was right!*

*Murrunga Island is unlike any place I have ever been. There are no shops on the island, so the vast majority of food comes from the ocean – fish, turtles, turtle eggs, sting ray, shark, oysters and much more. The youngsters find entertainment from more natural resources and one of my more memorable experiences was seeing a young girl, aged around 3, playing with upward of 20 live baby turtles.*

*Although a number of relatively simple homes have been constructed (simple in the sense that there are three bedrooms – no kitchen, toilet & lounge room), people mostly spend their time outdoors around one of the several fires that burn both daily and nightly.*

*To me, I felt I had found one of the more unique areas of Australia—an island where people were still living a lifestyle by the sea resembling that of pre European Australia.*

*Unfortunately, even this remotest island area is beginning to feel the pressures of the western world. Kids are learning less about their language and more about English. People are moving away from the island and living in more urban areas; scholarships are being offered to school students enticing them to attend private schools in cities such as Cairns and Rockhampton {see footnotes below}*

*But this is where we find the 95-year-old Baymarwangga, or, as she is affectionately known,*

{NT gov stipulates the first four hours of school be taught in English only.

Govt denial of support for outstations is forcing people to move to centralised (overcrowded) communities creating ghettos with a thirty five year back log on housing, health, education and delivery infrastructure (shires) having melted down.

Assimilation strategies used effectively overseas and here in the 1930-60s to take children from their parent culture and undermine the intergenerational transmission of its core values}

## KEY CREW OF BIG BOSS

**WRITER/DIRECTOR:**  
Paul Sinclair

**PRODUCER:**  
Tom Zubrycki

**CO-PRODUCER:**  
Jade Rose

**EDITOR:**  
Ray Thomas

**CINEMATOGRAPHY:**  
Matt Dwyer, Paul Sinclair and Warwick Angus

**MUSIC COMPOSITION:**  
David Chapman

**TRANSLATION AND CONSULTANCY:**  
Bentley James



*Big Boss.*

*Baymarrwangga is the keystone, the critical and last holder of a swathe of traditional knowledge vital to Yan-nhangu people, and the last full speaker of their dialect. No other has a comparable knowledge of the islands, seas, and the ways of the elders.*

*Shot as a 26 minute documentary, 'Big Boss' documents the life story of Baymarrwangga,, from her time as a young girl on the island, the coming of the mission in 1922, photographed by Donald Thomson in 1937, to her current predicament; passing on her knowledge before it's too late.*

*The documentary also features a number of other key people dwelling on the island. Through them, we learn about the unique lifestyle of the Yan-nhangu people; their daily collection of turtle eggs; ecological knowledge; the ritual practices of turtle hunting.*

**Tom Zubrycki** the producer of *Big Boss* is one of Australia's finest documentary makers. Read the information about him below.

'A passion for social justice has always been my main motivation,' says Tom Zubrycki. Over his four-decade career, Zubrycki has tackled contentious

social and political issues in more than a dozen documentaries. 'But I'm also inspired to tell stories about ordinary Australians - stories that have been traditionally ignored by the mainstream media, and that need to be told.'

Credited with thirteen films as a writer/director and six as a producer, Zubrycki has examined some loaded themes: the plight of refugees and the working class, the power of trade unions in industrial relations disputes, and hate crimes driven by racism.

As the son of Polish migrants, Zubrycki acknowledges that his work has been influenced by an innate empathy with outsiders. He is interested in the impact of the 'big picture' on the individual, and a highly personalised and emotive approach is what sets him apart as a documentary-maker. His unique style borrows the dramatic storytelling techniques from the conventions of fiction.

'For me documentary, like any work of art, needs to reach something universal and speak about the human condition ... and it has to start from the inside. It's only when you engage at a really a deep level with your subjects and with the story that you get those key revelatory moments. In the end the film says as much about yourself as it does about them - it bears your imprint. I believe subjectivity is intrinsic to good documentary. There's no reason why doco can't be as personal as fiction filmmaking.'

### Student Activity

- Why do you think the subject matter of this documentary would have interested filmmakers such as Paul Sinclair and Tom Zubrycki?
- Do you think watching this documentary will encourage people to think more about the importance of preserving Indigenous culture and languages such as Yan-nhangu?
- What did you learn from watching this film?
- Devise three questions for any of the filmmakers about their experiences making this film in the Crocodile Islands.
- Why is documentary film such a powerful and appropriate way to record and present the story of Baymarrwangga?
- How does this program show the many positive ways new electronic technologies are used to document and present these stories to people who might otherwise never know about life in places such as Murrungga?
- What other creative ways of representing the life of Baymarrwangga and her country, both the land and the sea, might be used to express responses to this unique place and its people?

Bentley James, the Anthropologist who has worked for more than 10 years on Murrungga, recording the language with Baymarrwangga, says in a footnote to his outline about the Yan-nhangu dictionary:

A recurring theme in Indigenous affairs draws tensions between the maintenance of Indigenous culture and the achievement of socioeconomic 'equity': essentially self-determination versus 'assimilation'. Implicit in this tension is the view that attachment to traditional culture inhibits 'mainstream' economic goals. In 2008 Associate Professor Dockery reported to a NSW Government Inquiry into Indigenous culture that Indigenous culture should be viewed as part of the solution to Indigenous disadvantage in Australia and not as part of the problem.

Considering what you have seen in the film and what Baymarrwangga and the filmmakers say, re-visit the four questions posed at the start of this guide. Share your responses in a group discussion.

### Student Activity

#### Responding to questions posed in the introduction to this guide

- Is it important that languages and traditions particular to groups of people be preserved, practiced and honoured? If so, why?
- What can white urban Australians learn about the importance of respecting the land and environment from communities such as the people living

on Murrungga Island?

- What is the relationship between language and cultural practices?
- How can remote communities preserve their traditional practices, language and beliefs while also being able to work effectively in the dominant culture and society? Is it possible across generations to preserve cultural traditions, practices and languages?

### Resources, Websites and References

Crocodile Islands Rangers and Yan-nhangu Dictionary website  
<http://crocodileislandsrangers.com>  
[http://www.nailsma.org.au/sitemap/crocodile\\_island\\_rangers.html](http://www.nailsma.org.au/sitemap/crocodile_island_rangers.html)

Anthropologist and Linguist Bentley James writing about the Crocodile Islands

Ranger project  
*Thomson of Arnhem Land*, John Moore, 2000  
 A 55-minute documentary about the work of anthropologist and photographer Donald Thomson, some of whose photos appear in this film. The Museum of Victoria in Melbourne has a large collection of Thomson's photographs from Eastern Arnhem Land.  
<http://anggarroon.wordpress.com/2012/01/25/1094/>

<http://www.ru.org/society/wretched-or-contented-the-politics-of-past-lives.html>

An article about Baymarrwangga's life and awards

An essay offering a range of evidence that suggests earlier societies lived in harmony with their environment

<http://www.ru.org/society/wretched-or-contented-the-politics-of-past-lives.html>

An account by Lindy Allen, curator of the Northern Australian collections at Museum Victoria, of her meetings with Baymarrwangga.

<http://museumvictoria.com.au/about/mv-blog/?tag=donald%20thomson>

A glossary of Aboriginal terms from the NSW syllabus for Aboriginal Studies

[http://hsc.csu.edu.au/ab\\_studies/glossary/2236/glossary2.htm](http://hsc.csu.edu.au/ab_studies/glossary/2236/glossary2.htm)

Marguerite O'Hara  
 25/4/2012

(Endnotes)

- 1 [http://libweb5.princeton.edu/visual\\_materials/maps/websites/pacific/cook1/cook1.html](http://libweb5.princeton.edu/visual_materials/maps/websites/pacific/cook1/cook1.html)
- 2 Keating, Paul, Redfern speech, 1992. <http://apology.west.net.au/redfern.html>



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