

Artist Sally Clarke to return shell collection to Cocos (Keeling) Islands

ABC Pilbara / By Charlie Mills

Posted Sun 19 May 2024 at 12:36pm



Sally Clarke plans to return her shells to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. *(Supplied: Sally Clarke)*

Sally Clarke loved collecting shells when she was growing up, but more than 40 years later she has decided to return her treasures to the place they came from.

The Canberra-born artist moved to the remote Cocos (Keeling) Islands, about 2,000 kilometres off the coast of Western Australia, as a teenager in the 1970s.

Her father had become the archipelago's sole doctor and there she fell in love with the

natural beauty of shells.

"Shell collecting was a big thing," Clarke said.

"So we participated in that and amassed a large shell collection, both collecting and buying shells from the Cocos Malay."



ew specimens from Clarke's vast shell collection. (*Supplied: Sally Clarke*)

Clarke said it felt like she and her dad were on a treasure hunt when they went looking for specimens.

"I shouted to my father, 'bull mouth!'" she said.

"It was like a victory, like you'd found a gold nugget."



Clarke is using the story of returning her shell collection as a way of conveying a symbolic message. (Image supplied: Sally Clarke)

'Crime of the past'

Now in her early 60s and based in Mittagong, New South Wales, Clarke has been weighing up the ethical and environmental impacts of keeping the shells they collected.

"These things were taken and I felt that it would be really wonderful to return them," she said.

"A lot of people view shells monetarily and I didn't want to do that — I didn't want to commodify nature in that way."

Clarke said she had come to understand the importance shells played in marine ecosystems and decided to right what she called a "crime of the past".

"We've extracted them from the environment when they always should have stayed there," she said.



lly wants to return the shells she's held for 40 years back to the sea around the Cocos. (*Supplied lly Clarke*)

Clarke is calling on others to return their collections and consider the impacts they might have when collecting natural resources.

"I think just about every home you walk into there might be a little pile of shells," she said.

"They have a more important role staying where they are.

"Do we really need them on our mantelpieces?"

Clarke is presenting an art exhibition in Canberra that evaluated the ethics of natural collections.

It marks the beginning of the long process of returning the shells to their original home, which she hopes she can achieve by the end of this year.



Clarke says she is looking to return to the islands after more than four decades away. (*Supplied by Lily Clarke*)

'A very free life'

Clarke said she quickly embraced life in the tropics.

"[We went from] from Canberra, which must have been the most regulated city in Australia – if not the world – to this tropical paradise," she said.

"It was a very free life.

"Walking around in thongs and going up the beach and snorkelling and chasing sharks – it was incredible."

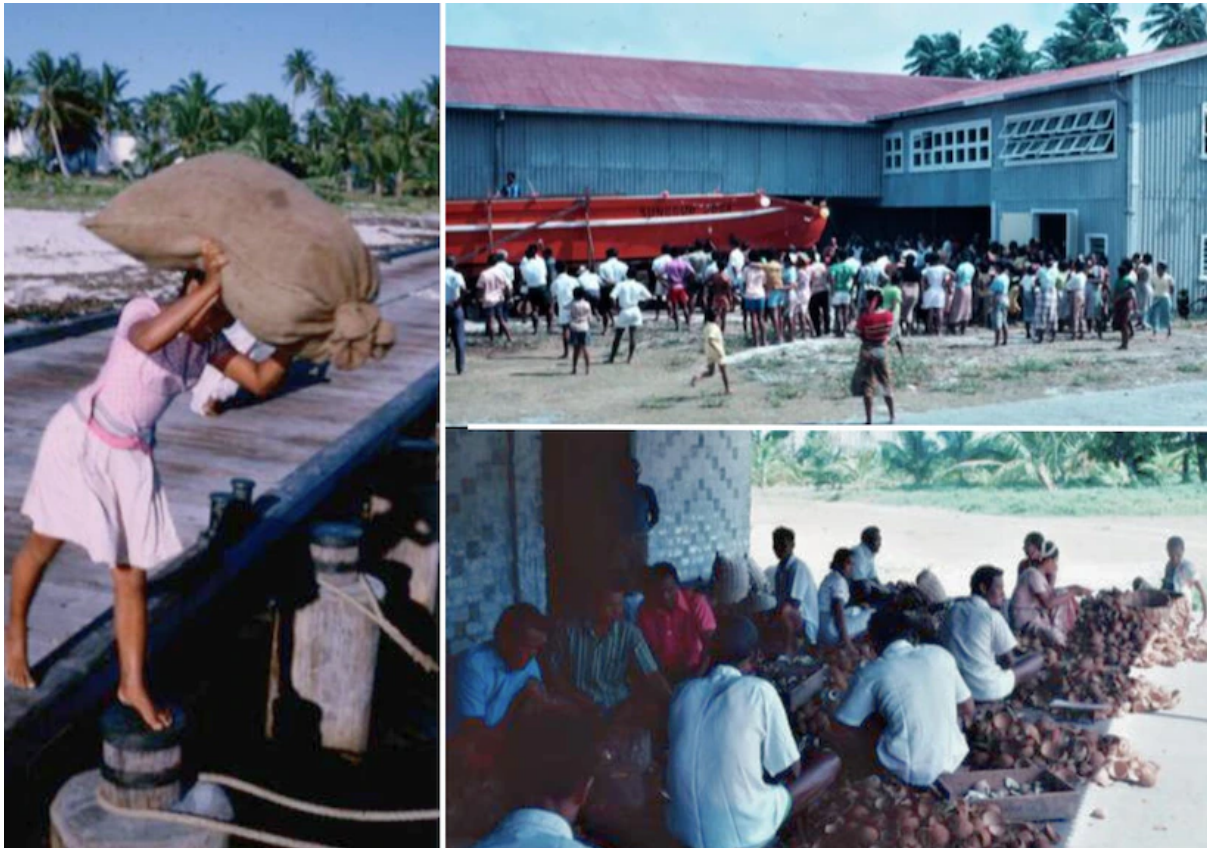


Clarke said the archipelago was the perfect destination for her adventurous dad. (*Supplied: Sally Clarke*)

Clarke said she was glad her father "jumped at the chance" to work on the islands.

"He'd been a medical officer in Borneo during the war, so he was used to an adventurous medical life," she said.

"The Cocos Islands were the answers to his dreams."



lly said even as a young girl, she noticed the inequalities levelled at the Cocos Malay (Supplied: lly Clarke)

'Feudal society'

It has been 40 years since the Cocos Islands' residents voted to fully integrate into Australia, but even today, [the legacy of the Cocos Malay people's struggle remains](#).

Prior to the vote, the islands were effectively controlled by the Clunies-Ross family, which presided over a feudal system that continues to impact land rights and identity.

Clarke said even though she greatly enjoyed life on the islands it was clear that some people experienced life differently.

"It was very apparent that there was this feudal society," she said.

"The fact that the Cocos Malay were paid in plastic money, that they weren't allowed to come over to our island, and they weren't allowed to leave the islands.

"Even at my age, it was very evident — the demarcation between our life and their lives and the lives of the Clunies-Ross was very clear."

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