

Meet Joey



*'Hi there! I'm Joey—Maiem Taba Merem. In my language, **Meriam Mir**, that means welcome to Mer Island, or Murray Island, as I like to call it. I'd like to share my life and culture with you and introduce you to people and places on our special island.'*



Meet Joey Zaro. He lives with his family on Mer Island—his front yard is the beach! Last year Joey completed his secondary schooling at a boarding school in north Queensland. He chose to return home to the island for a year, before moving to the Australian mainland to find a job.

≈ Joey Zaro.

Name: Joey Zaro

People: Meriam people, Magaram tribe

Born: 7 July 1988, Townsville, Queensland

Primary schools: Ayr State School and Murray Island State School

High school: St Theresa's (Abergowrie) College, Ingham, Queensland

Favourite foods: turtle stew and hamburger with chips

Career aspiration: miner or a truck driver in a mine

Favourite pastimes: fishing, making traditional **artefacts** such as a **dhari** (headdress), cooking smoked fish in banana leaves and roasting bananas

Favourite sports: rugby league, touch football and basketball.



⇒ Aerial view of Mer Island.



⇒ Joey's family home on Mer Island.

Joey says:

*'At school they asked me if I wanted to get a job, but I wanted to come home first and learn cultural stuff off my grandad George Kudub. My grandad, he showed me how to make spear and all my dancing gear and plant garden—banana, **yam, cassava**. He taught me what time to plant it in his yard. I go sit with him and he tell me about how they lived, tell me stories about the past—I'm just real interested. I want to be different, learn about the old ways, because everything's dying out, our culture is dying—I'm trying to keep it going.'*

Joey fishing on Mer Island.



The Mabo Case



Joey's homeland, Mer Island, is famous for a very important reason. On 3 June 1992, many Australians heard the day's headline news. The **High Court of Australia** gave a judgement in favour of a little-known island in the Torres Strait. Mer Island leapt into the national spotlight. On this historic day, now known as **Mabo Day**, a new part of Australia's history was written.

When the High Court of Australia made its decision on the case in 1992, it **ruled** that Australia was not *terra nullius* (land belonging to no-one) at the time of British settlement. The court's ruling stated that the **Indigenous** people were the original occupiers of the land. The court said that the Meriam people's rights to the land continued after British settlement and should be protected by Australian law.

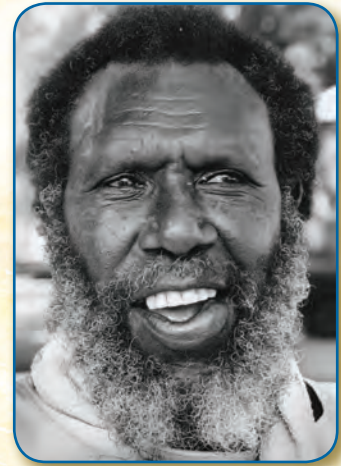
Sample pages



⤴ Torres Strait Islander flag.

The History Behind the Mabo Case

Eddie Koiki Mabo, a Meriam person, was born on Mer Island in 1936. At 21 years old, he moved to the Australian mainland.



⤴ Eddie Koiki Mabo.

Mabo was passionate about making life better for Indigenous Australians and, in 1973, he set up the Black Community School in Townsville, north Queensland. The school aimed to provide education for Indigenous children.

In the same year, Mabo, his wife Bonita and their children set out on a trip to visit his sick father on Mer Island. They reached Thursday Island and wanted to board a boat to Mer Island. At that time, the Queensland authorities had control of Indigenous persons leaving and entering Mer Island. Mabo was refused entry to the island. Sadly, not long afterwards, his father passed away.

In 1974, while talking with a professor at James Cook University, Mabo was shocked to learn that his people did not legally own the lands of Mer Island. In 1981, a Land Rights Conference was held at the university. Meriam people, university lecturers and legal experts talked about legal and **constitutional** issues and how these affect Indigenous Australians. In an emotional speech, Mabo talked about the traditional laws of land ownership of his people. Meriam people agreed they should fight for their legal right to own the lands of Mer Island.

So the following year, Mabo with fellow islanders Sam Passi, Father Dave Passi, Celuia Mapo Salee and James Rice began a legal claim to own Mer Island. Other islanders gave their support. Eventually, their legal battle proved a success. Sadly, Salee, Sam Passi and Mabo did not live to celebrate their amazing victory.

A Timeline of Main Events

- 1879** The Torres Strait region became part of Queensland.
- 1974** Eddie Koiki Mabo learnt that Mer Island was not legally owned by its **Traditional Owners**, the Meriam people.
- 1981** At a Land Rights Conference a decision was made by Meriam people to take a land case to the High Court of Australia.
- 1982** The **plaintiffs** Eddie Koiki Mabo, Sam Passi, Father Dave Passi, Celuia Mapo Salee and James Rice began their legal claim for ownership of the lands on Mer Island.
- 1985** While they were working on the land case, the State Parliament of Queensland passed the Torres Strait Islands Coastal Islands Act. This weakened rights the Meriam people might have had under their traditional law. The plaintiffs challenged the new Act through the High Court.
- 1985** Celuia Mapo Salee died, followed by Sam Passi in 1990.
- 1988** The High Court decided that the Coastal Islands Act was **invalid**.
- 1992** In January, Eddie Koiki Mabo died, aged 56 years.
- 1992** On 3 June, the High Court ruled that Australia was not *terra nullius* when the British arrived in 1788. The court found that the common law of Australia recognises a form of Indigenous Australian's rights to their traditional lands under their traditional laws.

A Big Victory

On 3 June 1992, the High Court ruled that ‘the Meriam people are entitled as against the whole world, to possession, occupation, use and enjoyment of the lands of Mer Island’.

The long legal battle by Meriam people resulted in a big victory—both for them and for all Indigenous Australians. The ruling meant a part of Australia’s history was corrected. The victory brought joy and hope to Indigenous groups, encouraging them to fight for land rights in other parts of Australia.



⤴ Mabo’s wife Bonita (centre) and their daughters Bethel (left) and Maleta celebrating Mer Island’s land rights victory.

The news of the victory reached Mer Island by telephone. The community began to prepare for a big celebration.

Today, Dave Passi remembers how he felt when he heard the news of the court ruling in 1992.

Dave says:

‘Somebody rang here, we heard “You won, you won the case!” I walked down the road towards the church with joy and jubilation, shouting with both hands in the air.’

Dowareb **elder** Dave Passi (left), »
with Joey Zaro.

