

## **Your Shortcut to... Eddie Mabo and Native Title**

It started more than 60,000 years ago, when the first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples walked this land. It was taken away during colonisation when Captain Cook claimed that the land belonged to no one. Then, along came Eddie Mabo — and everything changed. This is your Squiz Kids Shortcut to Eddie Koiki Mabo and Native Title — the podcast where we dive into the who, what, when, where, why and how of the big news stories. I'm Christie Kijurina.

And I'm Bryce Corbett.

Hey Bryce, if you found out that the land your family had lived on for generations didn't legally belong to you — what would you do?

I'd be shocked. Confused. Angry. And maybe, just maybe, I'd do what Eddie Mabo did — and take that fight all the way to the High Court of Australia.

It's Reconciliation Week — and it always ends on June 3, the anniversary of what is known as the Mabo decision.

So today, we're exploring who Eddie Mabo was, what made his case so groundbreaking, and why it still matters today. So, grab your judge's wig and your gavel, and let's get started.

Listen carefully. There's a S'Quiz at the end.

WHO

So, Bryce, Eddie Koiki Mabo was a Torres Strait Islander man, born in 1936 on Mer Island — also known as Murray Island. It's part of the Torres Strait Islands, between the tip of Queensland and Papua New Guinea. It's a small, tropical island with a strong sense of community and deep traditions.

And he didn't grow up with his parents, right?

No. Sadly, his mother died shortly after he was born, and he was adopted by his uncle and aunt, in keeping with Islander tradition. From a young age, he was taught traditional law and stories — especially by his grandfather — learning who owned what land, and why land was central to identity and culture.

So land ownership was personal and passed down through families, even though that wasn't recognised by Australian law?

Exactly. Eddie moved to mainland Australia as a young man, working in Queensland and eventually settling in Townsville. He became a gardener at James Cook University, but

he was also passionate about education and politics. And that's where something happened that changed everything.

I know this bit! One day at lunch, Eddie was talking about his land at home to some academics in the history department. They mentioned to Eddie that under Australian law, he didn't actually own the land he thought belonged to his family on Mer. He was stunned.

He must have been shocked. It's kind of unbelievable!

Isn't it. So, Christie, what did Eddie Mabo do?

WHAT

Well, Eddie started asking questions. Big questions. About fairness, truth, and how a country could ignore the land rights of its First Peoples. He was already active in Indigenous rights, including campaigning in the 1967 referendum.

The one where Australians voted to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the census?

That's the one. Then, in 1981, Eddie gave a speech at a Land Rights Conference at the university, all about land inheritance on Mer Island. A lawyer in the audience heard him and thought, "He has a case." And so, in 1982, Eddie and four other Meriam people launched a case in the High Court of Australia.

Ahha! The famous Mabo case. The Meriam People were trying to prove that their families had owned and passed down land on Mer Island long before the British arrived. And that the idea of terra nullius — which means "land belonging to no one" — was wrong.

That's right in 1770, Captain Cook had claimed the east coast of Australia for Britain - using an ancient Latin term 'terra nullius', meaning the land belonged to no one and therefore the new arrivals could just claim it as their own.

But Captain Cook saw Aboriginal people here when his ship landed at Botany Bay! He knew the land wasn't empty!

Exactly. But the British called Indigenous people uncivilised, so they could just claim the land for the Crown. It was convenient — but false. Eddie's case aimed to change that.

And the case took ten years?

Yes. It went through all sorts of delays, arguments, and setbacks. Eddie never gave up. But sadly, he died in January 1992 — just months before the court's decision.

So, what actually happened on June the 3rd of 1992 and why is it still so important today?

## WHY

On June 3, 1992, the High Court ruled in favour of Eddie Mabo and the Meriam people. They said terra nullius was wrong. That Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples had rights to land before, during, and after colonisation.

It was a massive shift. And one of the judges even called terra nullius "the darkest aspect of our nation's history."

The ruling led to something called the Native Title Act in 1993 — a law that allows Traditional Owners to have their land rights officially recognised. It was a win for truth and justice.

But not everyone was happy, were they?

No. Some mining companies and farmers were worried about losing land or access. There were debates, and more court cases to figure out things like how land could be shared, fishing rights, and the protection of sacred and culturally important spaces. That work is still happening today.

And what about Eddie's family?

His wife Bonita continued to share his story. Their ten children have carried on his legacy. You might have even heard of his great nephew Olympian and NBA star Patty Mills.

And every year on Mabo Day, June 3, we remember the man who stood up, spoke out, and changed Australia for the better.

## THE S'QUIZ

"This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening..."

1. What is the name of the island that Eddie Mabo came from? [Mer Island]"
- 2 What ancient Latin term did Captain Cook use to falsely describe Australia as uninhabited? [terra nullius - land belonging to no one]
- 3 On which date do we remember Eddie Mabo and his legacy? [ June 3]

That's all we have time for today. Thanks for joining us as we explored the who, what, how, where, when, and why of Eddie Koiki Mabo and Native Title.

Now get out there, and have a most excellent day!

Over and out.