

# Basic Detail Report

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**Title**

Derrka (bark canoe)

**Date**

c 1984

**Primary Maker**

John Bulun Bulun

**Medium**

Eucalyptus tetradonta (stringy bark) with pandanus fibre

**Dimensions**

Length 410 x width 93 x depth 40 cm

**Name**

Canoe

**History**

This canoe is made from stringy bark (eucalyptus tetradonta) a common eucalypt across northern Australia. It has a tall and relatively straight trunk from which the bark is cut in one cylindrical piece. The bark piece has been soaked with water and steamed over a fire to heat it and make it easier to shape. The ends are sewn together with fibre and sealed with mud, fibres and bark to make them watertight. The bow is carefully shaped to a fine cut back prow and sewn together along the top edge. This shape allows the canoe to part tall grass in the swamp while being poled from a standing position. Throughout the main body of the canoe the sides are almost parallel and each side is supported on the outside with a branch acting like a gunwale timber. This branch is sewn to the bark. Canoes like these were recorded by anthropologist Donald Thomson when he visited the Arafura Swamp in 1937. The craft he observed had about four branches as cross beams holding the sides apart, with fibre ties at each beam. He did not observe any of their craft having branches to support the sides. One important detail he noted was that the craft were made as the geese began to nest. This was also the right time to peel the bark from the trees when it was more pliable and could be formed into the required shape. This type of canoe was developed with its characteristic sharp bow and shallow draft so that it could be poled through flooded grass and pass over snags and obstacles in the shallow water of the flood plain created following the rainy season. When the canoe reached the open water of the river system, they were paddled by hand, seated. Thomson also took part in two expeditions on the swamp and his images became the inspiration for the 2007 Rolf de Heer film 'Ten Canoes' which was based around an expedition to collect magpie geese and their eggs.