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Navy Marks 17th Blue Mud Bay Sea Rights Anniversary

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On July 30, 2025, Royal Australian Navy (RAN) sailors and officers gathered in Bäniyala, a Yolŋu community on the shores of Blue Mud Bay in the Northern Territory, to commemorate the 17th anniversary of the 2008 High Court decision affirming Indigenous sea rights. The visit formed part of a week-long engagement that included cultural immersion activities with local residents.

The Blue Mud Bay decision confirmed that traditional owners, including the Yolŋu people of Bäniyala, hold exclusive access to tidal waters overlying Aboriginal land, as provided for under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976. This ruling applies to an estimated 85 percent of the Northern Territory's coastline and requires permission from the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Land Trust for activities such as fishing.

Deputy Chief of Navy Rear Admiral Matthew Buckley led the Navy delegation. He stated that the engagement reflected a shared connection to Australia's maritime heritage. The commemoration took place at the Yingapuyŋapu sand sculpture memorial, where Yolŋu leaders and Navy representatives placed spears as a symbolic gesture of unity.

Community leader Djambawa Marawili AM, who was instrumental in the Blue Mud Bay legal proceedings, described the event as a demonstration of the shared relationship between the Yolŋu people and the Navy.

The visit included guided tours by Yirralka Rangers, who showcased Yolŋu cultural heritage, including songlines and traditional navigation practices. The activities highlighted the community's longstanding maritime traditions and knowledge systems.

The Northern Land Council continues to work with traditional owners, government, and industry under the Blue Mud Bay Action Plan established in 2020. This plan seeks to manage fishing access in a way that upholds Indigenous rights while allowing for regulated commercial and recreational activity.

The RAN has maintained an ongoing relationship with Bäniyala and other communities in the region, aligning defence operations with respect for Indigenous cultural and maritime heritage. The 2025 commemoration served as both a recognition of a significant legal milestone and an opportunity to strengthen partnerships between the Navy and traditional owners in the Northern Territory.