

NAMING THE SEA

Offshore Fishing Grounds as Place names on Pitcairn Island and Norfolk Island¹

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Abstract

Pitcairn Island and Norfolk Island place names depict a colourful aspect of the history of the islands. This paper presents and develops an undocumented facet of esoteric and unofficial place-naming on both islands namely locating and naming offshore fishing grounds and argues that this taxon is an important component of the place name landscape as well as the cultural history of the islands. A list of 10 Pitcairn fishing ground names and a list of 10 Norfolk fishing ground names are analysed considering (1) the nature of the place name lexicon, (2) the spatial aspect of locating and talking about the fishing grounds, and (3) the similarities between naming and locating of fishing grounds on Pitcairn and Norfolk. Data elicitation techniques are also described. The results suggest that the names of these offshore locations form a type of sea-based cognitive map especially important in the isolated island situation and argues that the implications of this research and field methods to other island environments should not be underestimated.

Keywords

Norfolk Island, Pitcairn Island, place names, offshore fishing ground names

Introduction

Studying the languages of South Pacific islands where temporal and spatial parameters are vast and varied provides clues to understanding how languages develop, evolve and change over time. The saga of Pitcairn Island and Norfolk Island has attracted the attention of linguists, anthropologists and island scholars for over 150 years due to its unique history of language and cultural contact. Islands present veritable case studies in migration, cultural interaction and environmental change (King and Connell, 1999), the successes and failures of which have been described vis-à-vis Pitcairn and Norfolk by Clarke (1986) and linguistically by Mühlhäusler (2003). As isolated laboratory linguistic case studies, Pitcairn and Norfolk present researchers with the task of observing and describing relationships between language genesis, naming, land use and human and environmental adaptation on some of the remotest islands in the South Seas. In this paper I explore one aspect of naming on these two islands, namely the place name lexicon of Pitcairn and Norfolk, in order to evaluate the extent to which a language and a people are able to describe, adapt to and manage new and foreign environments.

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Place names, as tools humans use to make sense of and deal with their environment, are but one defining characteristic of linguistic adaptation.

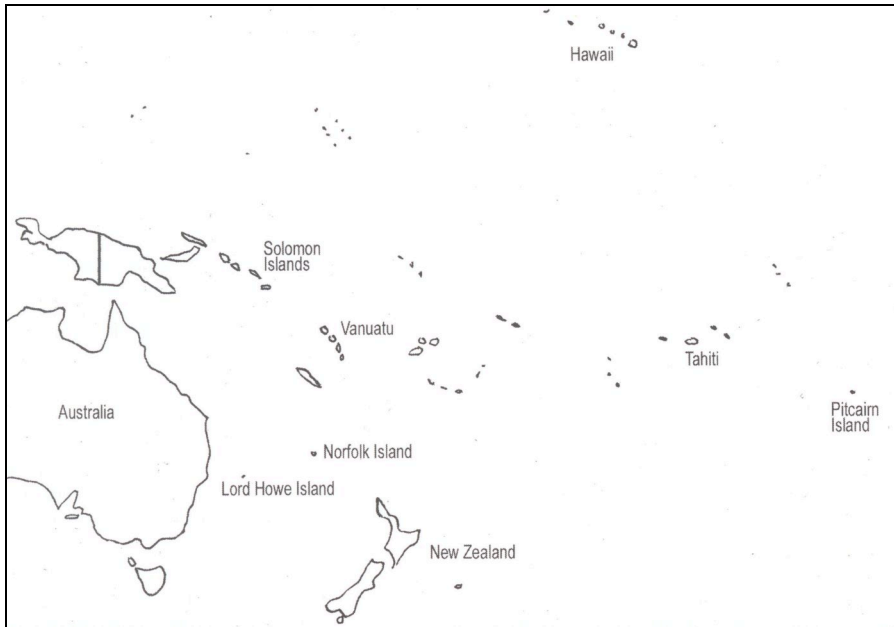


Figure 1 – Map of the southwestern and central Pacific showing the positions of Pitcairn and Norfolk islands (from Hayward, 2006: viii)

Separated by more than 6000 kilometres of sea, Pitcairn and Norfolk, 4.6 and 35 square kilometres respectively, are intimately linked to the myth of the mutiny on the Bounty and the subsequent relocation of the entire population of Pitcairn Island to Norfolk Island in 1856. The socio-cultural and linguistic history of the two islands has been dealt with in depth (Ross and Moverley, 1964; Hoare, 1999) and a detailed perusal of this will not concern me here. What is important, however, to an analysis of the place names on Pitcairn and Norfolk and more specifically non-land based place names is understanding the pressures and forces of remoteness and survival so prominent on islands that compel people to name and adapt linguistically to a new milieu. For these two islands, the sea and fishing as an aspect of these populations' livelihoods have always played a major part in the livelihood of their inhabitants and thus what I am concerned with in this paper is the methods these two island populations which are closely linked through linguistic heritage have used to orientate themselves in, make sense of and name the sea around their island. This aspect of place naming which I term *offshore fishing ground names* is inherently linked to the culture and history of fishing on Pitcairn and Norfolk and I argue that offshore fishing ground names constitute an important locational and historical element in the fishing vernacular on the two islands.

The culture of fishing and its relationship to the naming of places especially offshore fishing grounds has been dealt with in a preliminary fashion on Pitcairn (Göthesson, 2000) while it has been given only cursory mention with respect to Norfolk:

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[I]t would be nice if someone remembered what were the circumstances of the naming of Dordies, Futta Futta, Half Century and the fishing ground Dodos (Wisemann 1977: no pagination).

I now turn to describing general principles relevant to place naming on the two islands.

Place names on Pitcairn and Norfolk

Any place name analysis on Pitcairn and Norfolk Island necessarily involves consideration of the settlement history of the islands. For Pitcairn, the situation is relatively simple as compared to Norfolk. It was an uninhabited island that was settled in 1790 and was subsequently named primarily initially by the Bounty mutineers. Some names their counterparts adorn the landscape of Pitcairn but the majority of place names remember and commemorate men and the events associated with these men. These very descriptive and often humorous names (see Ross and Moverley, 1964: 170-188, Kirk 2008) have attracted linguistic interest if not only for the fact that as one Norfolk informant who had been to Pitcairn intimated to me during my Norfolk fieldwork, “every five metres you walk on Pitcairn there is a different place that has been named”. Ross and Moverley list a total of 339 place names while Göthesson (2000) suggests that Evans’ map of 1998 has listed more than 430. Figure 2 below presents a place name map of Pitcairn:

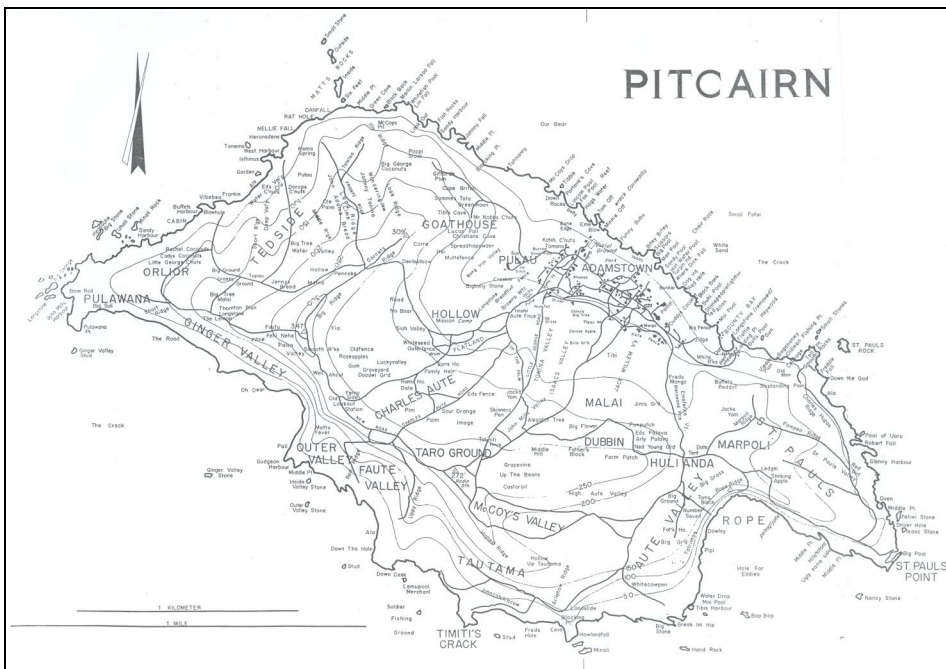


Figure 2 – Pitcairn Island placename map (from Young, 1964)

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The Norfolk place name situation is very different. Although Norfolk was also an uninhabited island, there were two major historical periods with very different agendas and land use that had already contributed greatly to the place name landscape on the Island before the arrival of the Pitcairn population. Beginning with the first settlement from 1788 to 1814, the second settlement (the major penal settlement) between 1825 and 1855 and the subsequent relocation of the Pitcairners to Norfolk in 1856, Norfolk Island has across these three major periods had vast differences in cultural and hence linguistic interaction. The place name map in Figure 3 below depicts this interaction with the place name landscape of Norfolk depicting an eclectic mix of English and Norfolk language (Norf'k) and official and unofficial place names:

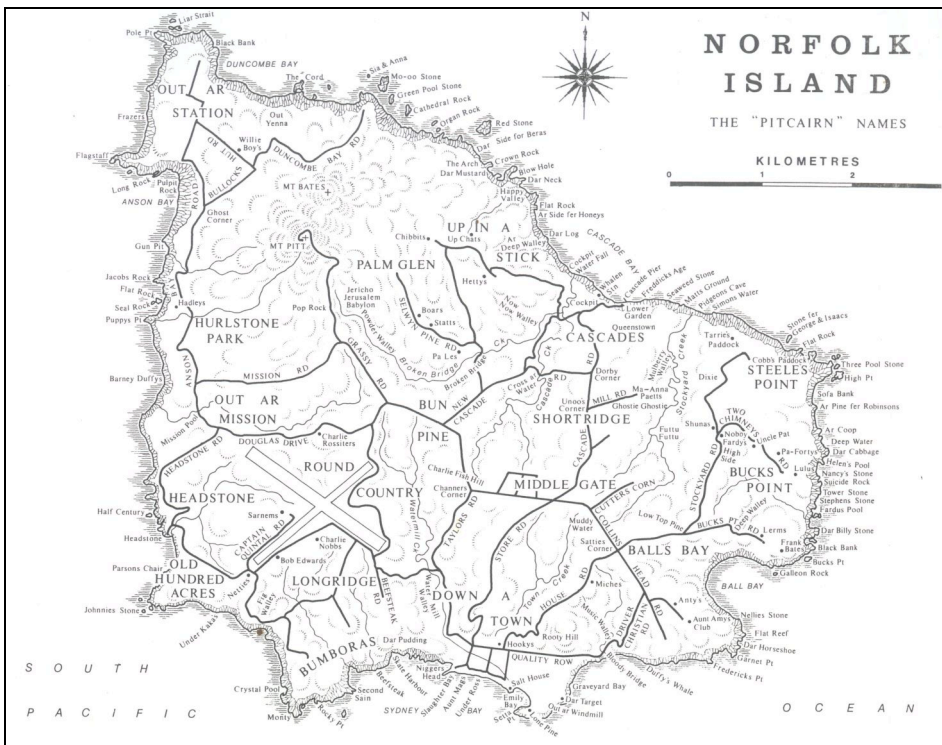


Figure 3 – Norfolk Island placename map (compiled by Brett Martin and others as reproduced in Edgecombe, 1999: 102)

These two maps offer insight into the general principles of land-based place naming or toponymy on Pitcairn and Norfolk, i.e. Pitcairn-Norfolk place names are a mix of local, eponymous, historical, event-based and idiosyncratic descriptors, and provided the foundation for a whole new taxon of esoteric and unofficial naming, that is, offshore fishing ground names. Not surprisingly, I have determined that most if not all of the naming and use of offshore fishing ground names on Norfolk happened after the arrival of the Pitcairners and that since then this part of Norfolk culture has been headed almost entirely by the Pitcairn descendents.

Pitkern-Norf'k and place names

The sister languages of Pitkern, previously 'Pitcairn' or 'Pitcairnese', and Norf'k, formerly 'Norfolk' or 'Norfolkese', have been debated within Creolistics and an adequate description of the status and typology of the languages is still pending. Essentially there exists a diglossic situation on both islands with two varieties of English spoken: standard British and Australian English and Pitkern and Norf'k for Pitcairn and Norfolk respectively. Different speech styles and different degrees of broadness exist in and for both varieties and locations. What is important to note for place name analysis is that both English and Pitkern place names and English and Norf'k place names constitute an integral part of the idiolectal or specific vernaculars of Pitkern and Norf'k and the other varieties of English spoken on both islands. Concerning Japanese place names in the urban and rural setting Sibata writes:

[P]lace names... constitute one of those areas of vocabulary which exhibit the greatest individual variation. Consequently, if one wishes to consider place names as a lexical system... place names must be treated as belonging to the lexicon of an idiolect. (1998: 352)

Place name taxonomy

A taxonomy for classifying Pitcairn and Norfolk place names incorporating offshore fishing ground names as a fundamental component of general land-based place naming is presented below:

Place names

Onshore Offshore

Toponyms Diving site names
Road names Fishing ground names
House names

I now turn to placing Pitcairn and Norfolk fishing culture in the context of the anthropology of fishing in the Pacific.

Fishing culture in the Pacific - fishing culture on Pitcairn and Norfolk

The anthropology of fishing has received a large amount of research attention, e.g. Acheson (1981), as has the linguistic aspect of the relation between fisher people, the sea and naming (Johannes, 1981). The majority of this research has focussed on the ethnozoology of fish names and categorisation, topographical names given to areas used for fishing, the anthropology of boat names and some of the cosmological and mythological methods used by fisher folk. What has not been emphasised in these research areas is documenting the locational aspect of fishing grounds and analysing how fishers use offshore fishing ground names and locations, how these as a part of the idiolect of fisher folk, how offshore fishing ground names are a part of the unofficial place name inventory of the part it plays in defining manifestations of culture in remote communities which depend on the sea for their livelihood.

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Due to their isolation, history and relationship to the sea, the language and culture of fishing has been an integral aspect of daily life on Pitcairn and Norfolk and has moulded important parameters of social relationships and connections to the specific parts of the natural environment. Before boating and motor technology allowed people to travel long distances from the islands for fishing, the majority of the fishing took place in easily accessible locations close to the islands. The geology of Pitcairn is such that 10 metres offshore the sea depth drops to 20 metres and the farthest fishers usually go offshore is around two to two and a half kilometres, where they are at a depth of more than 300 metres. This differs from Norfolk where fishers in pre-GPS days fished as far out as 40 kilometres. The geology of the Norfolk Ridge, the long submarine ridge running between New Caledonia in the north and New Zealand in the south, and its low lying reefs surrounding Norfolk Island mean that there are several localities reachable by rowboat and small motorised vessels that are a haven for fish and other aquatic life. These areas have been the targets of the Island's fishers since Norfolk was inhabited and particularly after the arrival of the Pitcairners in 1856. My major research question for this paper is: how do anglers on Pitcairn and Norfolk orientate themselves linguistically and spatially when they are out at sea? The following three secondary questions explore the naming and locating of Pitcairn and Norfolk offshore fishing grounds:

1. What are the names used by fisher folk on Pitcairn Island and Norfolk Island to locate fishing grounds?
2. What are the spatial aspects of locating and talking about these fishing grounds?
3. Are there any similarities between the naming and locating of offshore fishing grounds on Pitcairn and Norfolk; if so, where do the similarities lie?

Theory about Naming the Sea

Fishing areas are frequently named according to islands or landmarks nearby, or to present or past facts/situations. Examples are the "Costão da Ilha dos Ovos" (literally 'Slope of Eggs Island') that is next to Ovos island; "Croa dos Cavalos" named because during dry periods the population of Torotama island used to go by horse to Marinheiros island using the route that crossed Croa dos Cavalos; "Lamerão da Figueira (fig tree)" is named after a fig tree settled in a sandbank during a rainstorm. Most of the fishermen, however, do not know the origin of the designations because the fishing areas were named more than a century ago. (Schafer and Reis, 2008: 286)

The fishermen of the Coqueiral [an area in the south of Brazil] share a generalized knowledge of the area of the sea and the aspect of the land which comprise their fishing universe. The possibility of maximizing individual production rests on their ability to locate particular species of fish according to market values in different seasons. Towards this end they have elaborated a complex system of named fishing grounds and landmarks. The location of the fishing grounds by visual triangulation and

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the knowledge of the distribution of fish within then in given seasons are transmitted over generations (Forman, 1967: 417).

Naming parts of the sea and ocean is a pragmatic and utilitarian tool for remembrance and memory: if one catches a lot of fish in one location, and one wishes to remember it, one could determine that location using available instruments; most likely, one would also name it. In the case of Pitcairn and Norfolk Islands, given their relative isolation and the fishers' lack of other technologies for orientation and navigation, topographical and geographical marks such as crevices, inlets, caves, rocks, trees and other landmarks such as jetties, sheds and houses have served as highly useful and accurate points of reference for marking, finding and remembering locations offshore. Cognitive maps precede and predate cartographic ones. A generic yet very effective method used to line up offshore fishing marks is *visual triangulation*, a method for position fixing at sea:

By staying on the craft and looking at the land, they locate a number of landmarks of which any two, which are in transit (same line) are selected as one side of the triangle.... Similarly, two other landmarks in line would be selected to get the other side of the triangle. The two sides of the triangle would meet at a single point, which is the position of the craft, and underneath the water column would be the reef or high-yielding fishing ground, or the net left at the sea-bed they would be searching for. (D'Cruz, 2004: 20).

This is depicted below in Figure 4 (D'Cruz, 2004: 20):

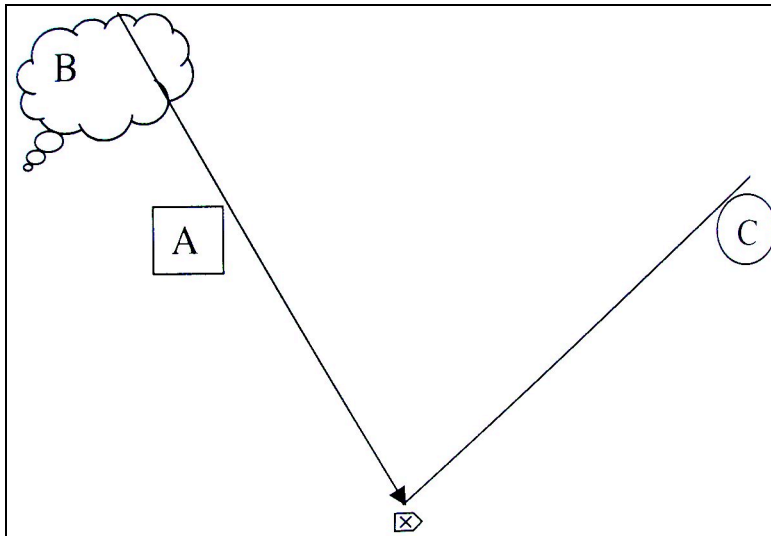


Figure 4 – Triangulation method for locating points at sea

In this figure, 'A', 'B' and 'C' are points on land used to create a triangle system for the location of 'x' which is at sea. This generic system is still used on Norfolk Island today despite the evolution of GPS and other more modern technologies. Although a much smaller island with fewer landmark features, my preliminary research suggests that a method of visual triangulation of offshore fishing grounds exists on Pitcairn:

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The marks are taken from ridges or trees lined up with the coastline or island. These have been passed down through the generations. (Meralda Warren, pc March 2008)

Methods

I present a list of 10 Pitcairn fishing ground names derived from Göthesson (2000) and compare these to a list of 10 offshore fishing ground names obtained through fieldwork on Norfolk in February 2008. As these names and coordinates were almost never written down, acquiring this information had to be done through interviews and relying on the experience and memories of elder fishermen. This data was elicited during four interviews with experienced fishers with intimate knowledge of the places and activities associated with fishing on Norfolk.

Results

During field research on Norfolk Island with fishers who still use or remember these fishing grounds and the visual triangulation system, it became clear that this knowledge was the exclusive realm of the older members of the community who are almost entirely males. Modern tracking systems, sonar, GPS, the removal of trees and other landmarks in locating grounds and the fact that the younger generation on Norfolk do not fish offshore as much as in the past have rendered a lot of the spatial coordinate and place name information obsolete. Many of these areas are shallow reefs and underwater crevices that have been found through experimentation and trial and error over time. It becomes apparent when interviewing older people on Norfolk that there is an awareness of the use of these fishing marks in the past. Yet, many do not know: (1) the names; (2) the history of the names, such as who named them first, and why it was named such; and (3) where they are located. This could be due to several reasons, the most plausible being a lack of usage, loss of memory and/or secrecy:

A fisherman rarely teaches the art of lining up a specific fishing spot, and a boy's apprenticeship consists largely of curiosity and persistence. While a fisherman is always delighted to have a young apprentice help to augment his catch, he avoids taking him to a preferred spot. (Forman, 1967: 422)

Longstone Bank
Nellie
Middle Bank
Nanwi Bank
Pulawana Bank
Ron's Fishing Place
Side for Parkin's
Small Bank
Small Faafaia
Tolea

Table 1: - Names of offshore fishing grounds on Pitcairn Island (alphabetical order).

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1.	10 O'Clock Bank
2.	Ar Side fer Dodos
3.	Down to the East
4.	Gooty's
5.	Horse & Cart
6.	Ar Pine fer Robinson's
7.	Shallow Water
8.	Shark Bank
9.	The Thumb
10.	Up the Northwest

Table 2 – Names of offshore fishing grounds on Norfolk Island (alphabetical order)

It appears the methods for naming fishing grounds on Pitcairn – that is, people who located them first, an event associated with discovering the area or some element of the natural landscape including especially the fish found in that area - is very similar to that found on Norfolk. Göthesson (2000: 36-37) provides accurate locations, uses and possible etymologies for these fishing grounds and banks:

Middle Bank: an offshore bank situated due south of Small Bank, about 800m to the south of the beach at Down Rope. Probably used for fishing.

Nanwi Bank: an offshore fishing bank situated near Nancy Stone due south of St. Paul's Point (the easternmost point of the island). NANWI or NANWE is the local name for the brown club (*Kyphosus bigibbus*), the most popular fish caught by the islanders. It is an interesting place-name of English and Tahitian components.

Ron's Fishing Place: situated about 800 m south-west off Gudgeon on the south-west coast, this fishing-place is probably named after Ronnie ("Ron") Christian (b. 1969).

'Pulawana Bank' in the southwest of the sea surrounding Pitcairn and 'Small Faafaia' 550 metres to the north of the centre of the island describe the type of fish caught in these areas. 'Small Bank' and 'Longstone Bank' both portray the physical features of the landscape where they are located. 'Nellie', located in the north, was named after a dog that was washed from the rocks in this area while 'Side for Parkin's' remembers former Pitcairn Magistrate Charles R. Parkin Christian. The more obscure 'Tolea' is thought to originate from the Tahitian name *Torea* for the bird *Actitis incanus* (Göthesson, 2000: 39, Ross & Moverley, 1964: 186). All these names are intimately connected with the activity and culture of fishing and naming; they illustrate a pragmatic and utilitarian aspect of place naming; in order to remember and locate a thing or an area you name it.

I now incorporate more precise spatial coordinate data with the following Norfolk data. 'Shallow Water' describes the depth of the water near the fishing ground and 'The Thumb' alludes to the method used to line up this location: that is, one puts one's thumb between Red Stone and Phillip Island, two locations on Norfolk, and when the thumb fits in the gap and one is out a certain distance from shore then one knows that one is in the right place. These names are well known among fishers as these

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responses, as well as others, were elicited reliably across several interviews and across informants. 'Gooty's' is the name of a fishing ground just off Phillip Island the history of which is unknown. 'Ar Pine fer Robinson's' ('Robinson's Pine') reminds us of the Norfolk land-based place name 'Ar Pine fer Robinson's' on the eastern coast of the island attributed to a pine that is situated on Robinson's property. 'Ar Side fer Dodos' is an opaque name whose origin is not known to even the most avid and experienced fishers. It is located in one of the most important fishing areas, some 10-15 kilometres north of Norfolk; it used to be the mainstay of Norfolk fishing containing the 'No Trouble' reef, so named because one would have no trouble catching fish there.

I now present a roughly depicted example by a Norfolk fisher of the location of the fishing ground 'Shallow Water', giving triangulation and spatial information in Figure 5 below:

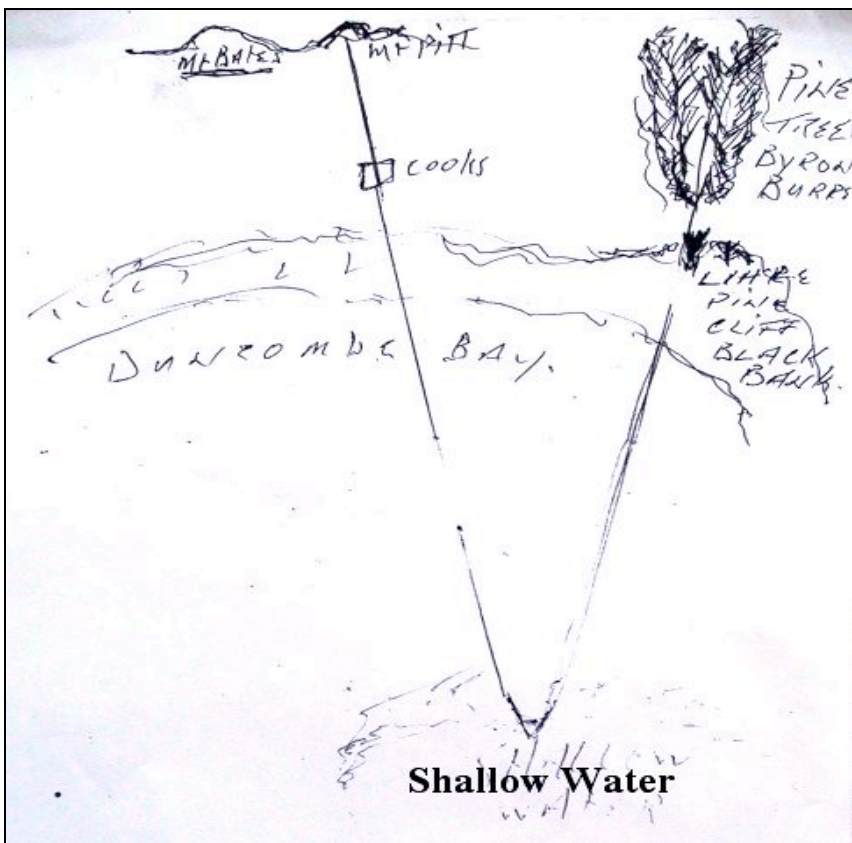


Figure 5 - Spatial Depiction of 'Shallow Water', an offshore fishing ground on Norfolk Island (source: local Norfolk fisherman)

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The spatial coordinates for 'Shallow Water' involve lining up Captain Cook Memorial with Mount Pitt, forming one side of a triangle, and the pine on Black Bank on the western side of Duncombe Bay lined up with the pine tree in an old islander's property on the west coast around Anson Bay when one is some 15 km (9 miles) out at sea north of Norfolk. Two further examples from interviews conducted on Norfolk Island in February 2008 with informants are provided below:

Horse & Cart – The reason they call it Horse & Cart is because there is a passage between Philip Island and Bucks Point and three points out at an old islander's place (near Captain Cook's) which when you line them up and when you're up here, in the area we call Dodos, there is just about enough space to drive a horse and cart through it. It's nine miles out from Norfolk, from the Steeles Point side. The old people used to call that area Dodos. Horse & Cart is a new name created by the younger generation. I don't know who Dodos was but he must have been one of the old fishermen.

10 O'Clock Bank – west end of Philip, half a mile out from the west end, close in, you can see people on the island from that mark, that's how close it is. It was called 10 O'Clock because they reckoned you used to wait there until 10 o'clock until the fish started biting.

These seemingly primitive means for locating prime fishing sites have not only been effective for the Norfolk fishers to remember and locate these areas important for their livelihood. They have also helped to establish an absolute spatial orientation system where the main reference point is Kingston:

Consider the grammar of location: both Pitcairn and Norfolk Island are characterised by difficult steep terrain and this experience has become fossilised in spatial orientation grammar. Norf'k, unlike English, has an absolute orientation system, with the main reference point taun (Kingston) and two coordinates: one vertical, daun-ap as in daun ar taun ('in, to Kingston'), or ap Ban Pain ('to Burnt Pine'), ap in a stik ('into the woods in the mountainous north west') and a horizontal one, where greater distances from Kingston are signalled by aut: aut ar mission ('to/in the former Melanesian Mission grounds'), aut Duncombe ('in, to Duncombe Bay'), and so on. (Mühlhäusler, 2006: 105).

The two fishing ground names indicating the development of this spatial orientation system are 'Up the Northwest' and 'Down to the East' as illustrated in Figure 6.

The use of spatial prepositions on the vertical axis in these offshore fishing ground names, ie *up* and *down* from the main reference point of Kingston, agree with the suggestion of an absolute spatial orientation system.

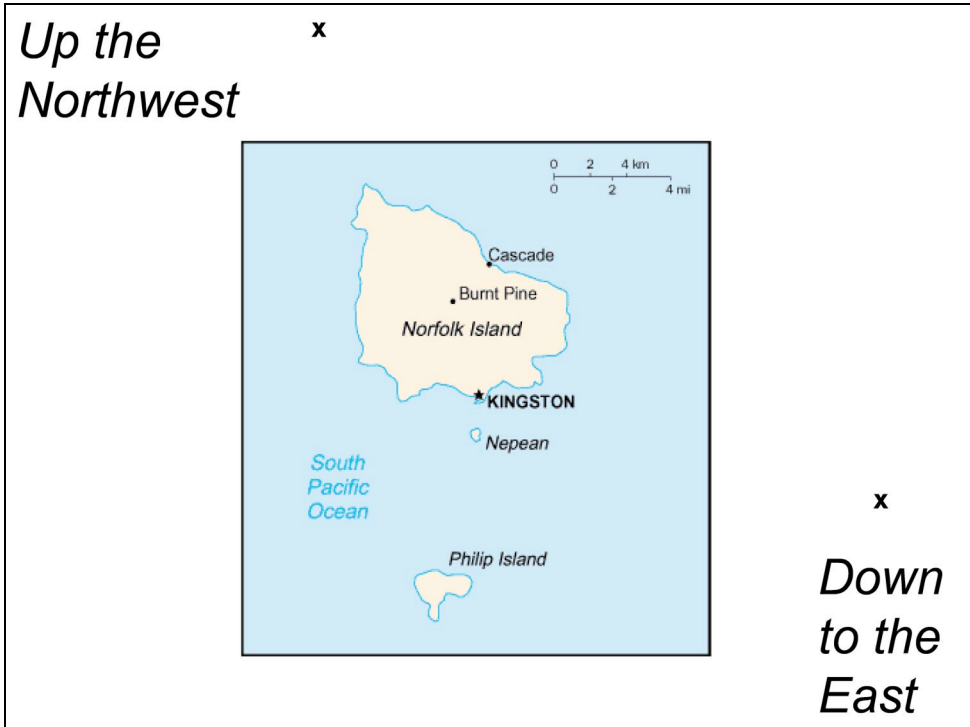


Figure 6 - Spatial Location of 'Up the Northwest' and 'Down to the East' re Norfolk Island

Discussion and Conclusion

Returning to my questions and their broader implications for place name research on small islands, I begin by concluding that the names used by fishers on Norfolk and Pitcairn to locate fishing grounds are descriptive, utilitarian (what is useful is inevitably named), and historical in that they remember and recall events and people. These names form a type of sea-based cognitive map for fishers to orient themselves in an environment where in the past there were no other points of reference or tools for locating areas offshore.

My third question asked whether there are any similarities in naming and locating fishing ground names across Pitcairn Island and Norfolk Island. These two sets of names do express several similarities – they describe landmarks and geographical aspects; they commemorate people; they depict the fauna and particularly the ichthyology of the area; and they often convey an entertaining and humorous feature of the nature of place naming. It is this final element of place naming that has been largely overlooked in general place name research and is definitely an important element of place naming in the language contact situation. This is especially the case in small island environments

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where close-knit relationships of dependency based on linguistic identity to linguistic minorities are more pronounced and where unofficial place names constitute a vital element in the folk lexicon of the people. It is often the isolation of the island setting and the strong human character that habitually develops in such locations that highlights the humour of unofficial naming of a place. People name things because it is fun.

In this sense, this pre-GPS technology gives us an insight into one aspect of what evolved into a developed and intricate web of locational and historical interplay between language, culture and environment on Norfolk in the form of a laboratory case study in place naming and from which various maps have emerged. Comparing these maps and phenomena with earlier and concurrent naming happenings on Pitcairn, though not undertaken in detail here, could help to further unravel the mystery of the continuing evolution of the Pitkern language and its sister language Norf'k on these remote yet intimately linked islands.

It appears that the spatial aspect of fishing ground names on Norfolk based on preliminary analysis follows the absolute spatial orientation system in Norf'k suggested by Mühlhäusler (2006). This system has developed on Norfolk Island since the arrival of the Pitcairners in 1856. A similar system suggesting an absolute spatial orientation system using locative prepositions seems to have developed on Pitcairn Island and is represented at least in land-based Pitcairn place names since the arrival of the Bounty mutineers in 1789. The locatives *out*, *down*, *over* and *up* describe two axes: (1) away from the main township of Adamstown, 'Out-the-small' and 'Over side spread ar powder' (Over at the place where they spread out the gunpowder), and (2) from the coast upwards: that is, generally away from Adamstown, such as 'Up in the Ti', 'Up the Tank' and 'Down the Fautu Valley' (Ross and Moverley, 1964). These initial yet well-founded suggestions form the basis for further research into the respective spatial orientation systems that have developed on these two remote islands and hint at the evolution of an absolute system in both cases. This associated with a greater understanding of the history of place names and offshore toponymy of both islands will lead to a much better appreciation of the linguistic history of Pitcairn Island and Norfolk Island.

Endnotes:

¹ I would like to dedicate this paper to the late Mr. Beverley McCoy.

² I am yet to document a fishing ground that was named due to its lack of fish and/or dangerous fishing conditions

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