

Eddie Koiki Mabo

Eddie Koiki Mabo was born on 29 June 1936, in the village named Las on the island of Mer in the Torres Strait. Not long after his birth, Eddie's mother passed away. He was then adopted by his uncle and auntie, as this is the custom for Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Having been born in Mer, Eddie's first language was Meriam. From a young age, Eddie grew up learning about his Meriam culture and was taught about the importance of respecting other people's land.



In the year 1959, Eddie moved to Townsville in Queensland, where he worked a variety of different jobs, including a railway fettler, cutting cane and also working on pearling boats. In addition to these, Eddie was also a talented performer and teacher of Meriam song and dance.

While in Queensland, Eddie involved himself in politics and became a notable and important leader for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Queensland. He gave a speech at a land rights conference explaining the traditional land ownership and inheritance system that his community followed on Mer. It was this speech that became a turning point for Eddie when a lawyer, who had been in the audience, recognised the significance of his words and suggested that he take the case to court.

Greg McIntyre, a Perth based solicitor, agreed to represent Eddie in the case that would later be known as the 'Mabo Case'. It began on 20 May 1982. Eddie, along with his fellow Mer Islanders, Reverend David Passi, Celuia Mapo Salee, Sam Passi and James Rice, made their legal claim in the High Court of Australia for ownership of their lands on the island of Mer. Sadly, before this case was decided, Eddie Koiki Mabo passed away in January 1992, almost ten years after beginning his legal journey.

On 3 June 1992, the High Court of Australia decided in favour of Eddie and his team, determining that the lands of Australia were not 'terra nullius' (land belonging to no one). This ruling recognised, for the first time in Australian law, the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to their lands, based on their traditional connection to, and custodianship of, their Country. In the years since this infamous case, Eddie Koiki Mabo has been rightfully acknowledged for his landmark work. Unfortunately, this recognition only came after his death.