

# Eddie Koiki Mabo

## Reader Warning:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander users are respectfully advised the following resource contains images of and information about people who have died.

## Eddie Koiki Mabo (1936 - 1992)

Eddie Koiki Mabo is known for his role in campaigning for Indigenous land rights in Australia. This campaign led to the landmark decision of the High Court of Australia to overturn laws, paving the way for native title claims.



Mabo was born as Eddie Koiko Sambo on 29th June 1936, on the Island of Mer (Murray Island) of the Torres Strait Islands. He was adopted by his uncle, Benny Mabo, and his wife, Maiga, after his mother died in childbirth.

## 'Terra nullis'

When laws were first established during the colonisation of Australia by the British, the land of Australia was classed as 'terra nullis', meaning 'land belonging to no one' in Latin. However, Mabo claimed that the Indigenous Meriam people had continuously inhabited and exclusively possessed the land. His people had also established their community on the land and they had political and social organisation.

Mabo worked across northern Queensland and the Torres Strait Islands before moving to Townsville in 1962 and settling down with his young family. It was here that he was elected president of Yumba Meta, an association that purchased houses with funds from the Commonwealth Government. In this role, Mabo set up Australia's first Indigenous community school.

## Supreme Court to High Court

On 20th May 1982, Mabo and four other Meriam people began the legal process to overturn laws and seek recognition as the traditional owners of the Island of Mer in the Torres Strait.



Justice Martin Moynihan of the Supreme Court was highly critical of Mabo and his people's cause and rejected the case. Rather than seek an appeal, Mabo brought the case to the attention of the High Court of Australia. The case went on for over 10 years. However, just months before the court made the decision to overturn the laws around 'terra nullis' on 3rd June 1992, Mabo fell ill and died. The court determined that the Meriam people were, 'entitled as against the whole world to possession, occupation, use and enjoyment of (most of) the lands of the Murray Islands'.

In 1995, Mabo's grave was desecrated by vandals, so Mabo's family decided to bring his body home to Mer. On the night of his reinterment, the islanders performed a sacred Malo dance in his honour. This honour was traditionally only reserved for kings.



### Did you know?

- Mabo Day is an official holiday in the Torres Shire, celebrated on 3rd June, every year.
- Mabo and five others were awarded the Australian Human Rights Medal in recognition of their "determined battle to gain justice for their people."

### Australian history and Mabo's legacy

The Mabo verdict was a landmark case for Australian law, politics and history. This cleared the way for future land rights cases for Indigenous Australians.



# Eddie Koiki Mabo Questions

1. What was the name given to Mabo when he was first born?

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2. Where was Mabo born?

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3. What is the name of the people from Mer (Murray Island)?

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4. What does 'terra nullis' mean?

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5. Which language does 'terra nullis' come from?

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6. On what date did Mabo first take their case to court?

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7. On what date did the court decide to overturn the 'terra nullis' laws?

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8. How long did the whole court case take?

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9. Why wasn't Mabo able to celebrate the success of the case?

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**His name was Eddie Koiko Sambo.**
2. Where was Mabo born?  
**He was born on the island of Mer, in the Torres Strait Islands.**
3. What is the name of the people from Mer (Murray Island)?  
**The people from Mer are called the Meriam people.**
4. What does 'terra nullis' mean?  
**It means 'land belonging to no one'.**
5. Which language does 'terra nullis' come from?  
**It comes from Latin.**
6. On what date did Mabo first take their case to court?  
**He took the case to court on 20th May 1982.**
7. On what date did the court decide to overturn the 'terra nullis' laws?  
**They overturned the laws on 3rd June 1992.**
8. How long did the whole court case take?  
**The case took over 10 years.**
9. Why wasn't Mabo able to celebrate the success of the case?  
**Sadly, Mabo fell ill and passed away months before the decision was made.**
10. Why do you think this was such an important case in Australian history?  
**This decision paved the way for future native title and land rights cases across Australia for other Indigenous people.**

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**He had to take the case to the High Court because it was rejected by the judge of the Supreme Court of Queensland.**
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8. Mabo sadly died before the case was won. Describe how you would feel if you didn't get to celebrate something you had worked so hard for.  
**Open discussion.**
9. Why do you think this was such a 'landmark' case for Australian history?  
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10. Why do you think the people of Mer gave Mabo such a special burial ceremony?  
**Open discussion.**



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5. On what date did the court decide to overturn the 'terra nullis' laws?  
**They overturned the laws on 3rd June 1992.**
6. Use a dictionary to find the meanings of 'desecrate' and 'reinterment.'  
**Desecrate - to treat a special place or thing with violent disrespect.  
Reinterment - a second burial.**
7. Mabo sadly died before the case was won. Describe how you would feel if you didn't get to celebrate something you had worked so hard for.  
**Open discussion.**
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