

Lesson 1: Teacher Resource Sheet 1

Indigenous Australians

Indigenous Australians are the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia. While the time of arrival of the first Indigenous peoples on the continent and nearby islands is a matter of some debate, the earliest human remains found in Australia have been dated to around 50,000 years before present. These remains were found at Lake Mungo in western NSW. However, recent archaeological evidence from the dating of charcoal and artefacts suggests a date as early as 65,000 before present. That's 2,200 generations!

Over this long time, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia developed a close relationship with the continent's environment. They saw themselves as part of nature, not separate from it. They took from their surroundings only that necessary for their survival. They were skills managers of their environment and they developed a way of life that could be sustained indefinitely.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia have the longest surviving culture on earth. This culture is a national treasure.

Aboriginal people have a rich oral tradition. Cultural knowledge has been passed from generation to generation (often by elders) through the use of stories and songs. Aboriginal Australians also have a rich artistic tradition. It includes works painting on rock, leaves and bark, wood carving, rock carving, sculpting and sand painting. The oldest dated rock art in Australia is a charcoal drawing on a rock fragment found during the excavation of the Narwala Gabarnmang rock shelter in south-western Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. It is 28,000 years old and is one of the oldest known pieces of rock art on Earth.

Figure 2: Aboriginal rock art, Kakadu, Northern territory



Indigenous culture and its link to the natural world

Australia's unique environment, including its landscapes, landforms, plants and animals, hold special spiritual significance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (Indigenous Australians).

Indigenous Australians recognise that features of the landscape such as rivers, mountains and even individual trees have a spiritual meaning. Through these features, Indigenous Australians connect, using song and ritual, to the **Dreamtime** and their ancestral creator beings. **Sacred sites** are places of special spiritual importance to Indigenous Australians.

The **Dreaming** is a key spiritual belief of Australia's Aboriginal people; it describes both the creation (the Dreaming) and the stories that come from this period (Dreaming stories).

Indigenous Australians, like the native or first peoples of other countries, have their own stories about the origins of the world, their people and all living things. These stories can be seen in their paintings and carvings. An example is shown in Figure 1. Stories are told and retold and have been passed down from generation to generation over thousands of years. The stories are also expressed in song and dance. The rich oral and artistic history of Indigenous Australians has created a sense of social continuity and harmony and taught people how to continue the traditions of their ancestors.

Figure 2: An Aboriginal artist at work



Many of the stories passed down from generation to generation involve supernatural beings. This is especially the case in the stories dealing with the creation of the world. They are used to explain the origins of people, plants, animals and even landform features. Supreme beings, in one form or another, appear in ancient myths about creation in most cultures.

Indigenous peoples see themselves as part of nature and many view animals as their equals. Many ancient stories tell of a time when both humans and animals lived together peacefully, without any fear of each other. Indigenous explanations of the creation of the

landscape feature animals in very important roles. In many cases, they are credited with saving the human race. Such beliefs reflect the high regard indigenous peoples have for animals. While they may have hunted them for food and skins, they acknowledged how greatly they relied on them to support their needs.

The Dreaming

*According to Aboriginal belief, the landscape can be explained by the **Dreaming**—especially the time when Tjukurpa, the great Ancestor Spirits, roamed the earth. Before this time, the earth was flat and bleak and empty of any life. When the Ancestor Spirits came up from their dwelling places below the ground, they took the form of humans and animals. They created the features of the landscape, such as rivers, waterholes and mountains. By transforming themselves into these landforms they left evidence of their presence in the landscape. These spirits then created all life on earth—the plants, animals and people.*

The tracks of the Dreaming cover Australia. The whole of the landscape is embedded with evidence of the Dreaming, which remains a powerful spiritual force for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. For them, it still exists today, and the network of tracks and sacred sites link the physical world to the Dreaming. Dreaming stories map out significant landscape features, the location of waterholes, places to camp, and places to gather food and hunt animals.