

Lesson 4: Resource Sheet 1

Indigenous management of the environment

It is estimated that Aboriginal people have lived continuously in Australia for over 60,000 years. They developed a close connection to the land that provided them with food and shelter.

The importance of 'Country'

'Country' as used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, refers to family origins and associations with particular parts of Australia. It is central to the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians. It includes not just soil and rocks—it is the whole environment. It is at the centre of all spirituality and, together with the 'spirit of country', is central to the issues important to Indigenous Australians.

Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have managed their land for tens of thousands of years. The land and its natural resources provided for their needs shaped their history and were fundamental to their culture and spiritual beliefs.

"We cultivated our land, but in a way different from the white man. We endeavoured to live with the land; they seemed to live off it. I was taught to preserve, never to destroy."

Tom Dystra, Aboriginal elder

Indigenous ways of life

Traditionally, Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lived a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, each clan having their territory that sustained their way of life. They understood and cared for their different environments and adapted to them.

Aboriginal society was semi-nomadic. That is they moved from place to place. They moved according to the changing seasons and availability of food. Indigenous Australians were skilled in managing the resources on which they depended. Geographic features such as rivers, lakes and mountains defined the boundaries of their territory or traditional lands.

Figure 1: Aboriginal encampment on the shores of Port Jackson (Joseph Lycett, 1817)



Indigenous use of fire

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people made frequent use of fire (see Figure 1) to keep the country more open and easy to travel through; to promote the growth of fresh green grass, which would attract animals; to signal and hunt, and for the more obvious purposes of warmth and cooking.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that the purposeful use of fire extended from the earliest days of Aboriginal settlement. While fires had always occurred in Australia (due to lightning strikes), it is argued by some scientists that after the arrival of Indigenous people the fires became more frequent and intense. The use of fire transformed the Australian landscape because it advantaged those plants best adapted to fire. Today, we use fire to reduce fuel loads, just like Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people did for thousands of years.

Figure 2: Aboriginal people using fire to hunt kangaroos (painting by Joseph Lycett, 1817)



Environmental impacts

The idea that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lived in harmony with nature for tens of thousands of years, without significantly changing the Australian environment, while an attractive one, especially for Indigenous Australians, has been challenged by scientists in recent years.

Loss of megafauna

Some scientists now believe that Indigenous Australians had a far-reaching impact on the environment. It is now thought that Indigenous Australians hunted some of Australia's biggest animal species (the so-called megafauna) into extinction and, in the process, transformed the continent's landscape. Australia's Indigenous peoples are now believed to have been responsible for the extinction of most of the sixty or so species of giant

marsupials that once roamed the continent. There were also large reptiles, including giant goanna-like creatures and large, land-based crocodiles. Having survived for millions of years, these giant marsupials and reptiles became extinct quite suddenly and relatively recently.

The extinction of the megafauna had, for a long time, been explained by climatic change. Scientists now argue that there were no climatic changes significant enough to bring about the animals' extinction. The last Ice Age, for example, occurred after the extinctions.

Hunting is now thought to be the main cause of the loss of the megafauna. The larger animals reproduced slowly, and they were slow-moving and found it difficult to hide from hunters armed with spears.

The extinction of the large plant-eating megafauna increased the amount of vegetation. This, in turn, provided fuel for fire. The increase in the frequency and intensity of fire eventually changed the vegetation of the continent, with the fire-tolerant species thriving.

Figure 3: Examples of Australia's megafauna featured on a 2008 stamp issue.



After bringing about these changes, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people settled into a way of life that established a balance with the environment they had created. This continued for tens of thousands of years until Europeans arrived in 1788.