

# Relationships to country: Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people

Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people have diverse relationships with, connections to and understandings of the Australian environment. Some of these relationships are based on the traditional knowledges and practices that have been passed down from generation to generation, while others have resulted from the various impacts of colonisation.

Relationships to country are complex and interrelated. The term “country” is often used by Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people to describe family origins and associations with particular parts of Australia. For example, a Gamilaraay man from south-west Queensland might say “The Narran lakes area is my country”, or “I am a Simpson from Gamilaraay country”. Descriptions of country, particularly traditional associations, will differ from individual to individual, depending on the associations passed down through the family and community. Uncle Ernie Grant, an elder from the Tully area, explains that the relationships Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people have with the environment involve an understanding of the time, place and cultural relationships found within a particular area, and the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people of that area. These are all relationships to country.

Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people use plants, animals and other natural materials from the Australian environment, showing a distinct relationship to country. These resources meet basic human needs for Indigenous Australians — such as food, shelter, clothing and medicines — but have also been used to create tools, weapons, art, craft and ceremonial objects. Resources from the Australian environment play an important role in religious practices and beliefs, connecting people to country in a variety of ways. The Australian environment is diverse, and therefore the relationships that Indigenous Australians have with these environments also differ across the country. So, too, the relationships to country differ.

Within traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies, each Indigenous language group has a defined area of land or country that each group is connected to, both geographically and spiritually. An estimated 700 language groups across Australia once contributed to a diverse mix of cultures, stories and relationships, all specific to areas of land and the environment. Today, the continuing cultural practices of Indigenous Australians show the diversity of relationships that Indigenous people have with the environment.

Over a hundred thousand years, the environmental practices of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people led to an ecologically sustainable



way of life for many communities. Although the colonisation of Australia has impacted greatly on the relationships that Indigenous people have been able to maintain with the environment, spiritual and cultural connections to country remain strong.

Maintenance of Indigenous cultures and local community practices requires access to the defined areas of land belonging to the Aboriginal language group or Torres Strait Islander language group. When non-Indigenous people colonised land belonging to a particular language group, permission was rarely sought to access this land. The colonisers saw the land as a commodity, to be bought and sold. The resources were often exploited or destroyed in favour of mass reproduction or farming of “known” resources, usually imported from other countries. This misuse and disrespect for Indigenous relationships to the land led to conflict.

Clearing of land for agricultural purposes seriously reduced the food supplies that Indigenous Australians needed for survival. The introduction of hard-hoofed grazing animals, such as sheep, cattle and horses, destroyed grass species that were adapted to soft-footed marsupials. This led to reduced marsupial populations, and many Indigenous groups were no longer able to rely on basic resources from their environments. Other introduced species also had drastic impacts on the environment and the fragile ecosystems found within Australia.

Farmers fenced properties and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were refused access to sources of water which were vital for life, especially in the drier areas. Other water sources were important for supplies of food such as fish, crustaceans, turtles, shellfish, water birds and their eggs, and food plants that grew in swampy or damp conditions. Some water sources which were once available to Indigenous people were used up or fouled by the introduced animals. (*Year 5 Social Studies Sourcebook Replacement Units 1 and 2*, Department of Education, 1995)

Ceremonial practices in many areas were also inhibited, due to a lack of access to these important sites on traditional lands.

Many people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, died fighting over the land, seas and waterways. Shootings, poisoning and introduced diseases had devastating impacts on Indigenous populations within Australia.

The introduction of land, sea and custodial rights legislation in the 1970s, and the heightened recognition of Indigenous relationships to the land, seas and waterways have increased Aboriginal people’s and Torres Strait Islander people’s access to traditional lands. For Indigenous Australians, connections to country are today seen as environmental, spiritual, social, political and language-related. Their complexity and significance is officially recognised within Australia’s legislation and government policy.