

## Early Inhabitants

No one really knows precisely when humans came to Australia. Pre-historians now generally agree that they had spread throughout Australia and New Guinea by c.40,000 BP, though they may have done so much earlier. Both the limitations of the radio-carbon dating technique and the inundation of coastal sites with the rising of the sea from about 16,000 BP make precision impossible. Nor is it clear which peoples then came, nor whence.

The Kow Swamp skeletons suggest that there may have been two distinct races inhabiting Australia into recent prehistoric times. What is clear is that by c.23,000 BP, humans had spread into all areas of Australia, from the tropical north through the desert to the moist southwest and southeast corners, along the escarpments of the Great Dividing Range and in the fertile river valleys below them to the coastal and alpine habitats of Tasmania.

## Adaptation to Environment

In time, the cultures of these peoples came to show distinct adaptations to the regions they inhabited. The people on Lake Mungo's shores in western New South Wales developed the earliest cremation ritual yet discovered, dating to about 30,000 BP; western desert peoples adapted genetically to their biosphere; and upland Tasmanians to their cold environment.

Those about Tasmania's seashores, who became isolated from the mainland c.23,000 BP, gave up using canoes, and perhaps eating fish. Maintaining some links with New Guineans until the rising sea created Torres Strait c.8000 BP, the inhabitants of the Queensland rainforest used wooden 'swords', and those of the littoral built outrigger canoes. The people of the western plains of Victoria built stone houses and eel weirs, and harvested grass seeds.

## Early Aboriginal Population



What the Aboriginal population of Australia was prior to the arrival of the Europeans remains a matter of great uncertainty. It is now generally conceded that Radcliffe Brown's old figure of 'over 250,000 and quite possibly, or even probably, over 300,000' is too small by far.

More recently, John Mulvaney and Peter White have suggested c.750,000; but there are others who are willing to contemplate a figure in excess of 1,000,000.

In the absence of reliable records, estimates must be derived from demographic modelling, which involves assumptions about

average size of families, regional food supplies, and the presence or absence of diseases, about which it is easy to make mistakes.

Over millennia, then, the Aboriginal peoples of Australia established viable cultures throughout the continent. It is easy to romanticise the lives of individuals within those cultures. We may doubt that they were as carefree, free of violence, hunger and disease as some would have us believe. Whatever the extent of these drawbacks, however, for Aborigines, the coming of the Europeans constituted an infinitely greater one.

## The Original Australians

Two separate groups of people make up the original Australians. These are the Aborigines and the Torres Strait Islanders.

Prior to 1788, Aborigines occupied all of mainland Australia and most of the inhabitable islands near the coast, including Tasmania.

"Aborigines" was not the name these people used to describe themselves. It was the name given to the first Australians by the Europeans because it means the original inhabitants of the country.

## Aboriginal Names

Aborigines used and still use the names applicable to their own groups. Today's Aborigines are likely to call themselves by the name of the language or territory group to which they belong, for example, Wiradjuri, Pitjantjatjara, Kamilaroi, Gurnai, Aranda.

They may also use a general term like Murri, Koori, Nunga, Nyoongah or Yolngu. Torres Strait Islanders use the name of their island community to describe themselves, for example, Badu, Murray, Yam, Boigu.

The Torres Strait Islands lie in the Torres Strait which is the stretch of water that separates Cape York Peninsula in north Queensland from Papua New Guinea. The people from these islands form the second group of the original Australians.

## Aboriginal Population Before European Invasion

Various estimates have been made of the size of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Australia at the time of European settlement. These estimates range from 300,000 to over 1,000,000.

In the years following colonisation the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population declined dramatically under the impact of new diseases, repressive and often brutal treatment, dispossession, and social and cultural disruption and disintegration.

Available data suggests that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population had declined to around 60,000 by the 1920s.

## Aboriginal Population Today



Today, the Aboriginal population of Australia numbers around 352,970 people, about 2 per cent of the total Australian population.

According to the 1996 Census, New South Wales had the largest population of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders with 101,485, followed by Queensland with 95,518, Western Australia with 50,793, Northern Territory with 46,277, Victoria with 21,474, South Australia with 20,444, Tasmania with 13,873 and the Australian Capital Territory with 2,899.

## Aboriginal Population Since 1971

Counts and estimates of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations have been attempted at every national census since federation. The figures were not included, however, in the official count of the Australian population until the 1971 Census.

In the 1971 Census, a total of 115,953 persons identified themselves as of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. At subsequent censuses the figures have been:

**1976** - 160,915

**1981** - 159,897

**1986** - 227,645

**1991** - 265,492

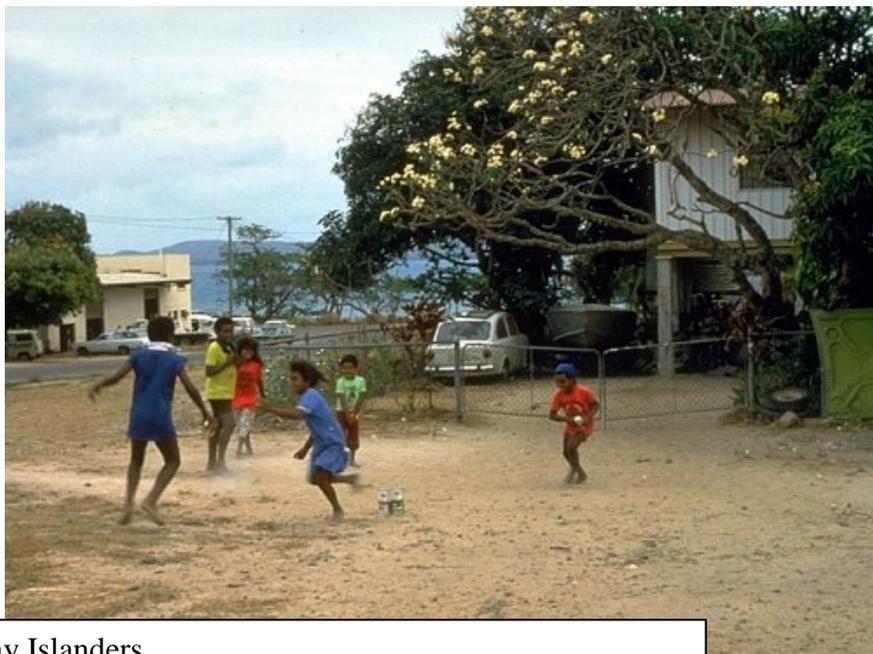
**1996** - 352,763

It is believed that a substantial proportion of the increases reflects a growing willingness of people to identify themselves as Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders. There have also been some changes over the period in the form of the question asked in the Census, and improvements in collection procedures.

It is not possible to estimate the significance of these special factors and thereby to identify underlying trends more accurately. Nor is it possible to utilise data on registrations of births and deaths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to provide some check on inter-censal trends, as not all states and territories identify Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders separately in their records. There is, in any event, some concern about the accuracy of the data that is available.

Despite these limitations, it is clear that over the last two decades the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population has been growing much more rapidly than the overall Australian population.

## Torres Strait Islanders



### 2 Thursday Islanders

There are no records of the size of the population of the Torres Strait Islands prior to the initial contact in 1606 with European ships or later British merchant ships, which began to use the Torres Strait more often in the early nineteenth century.

From the time the Europeans arrived, the population of the Torres Strait began to decline. This was mainly because of the diseases the ships brought with them and the violent battles fought between ships' crews and the Islanders.

Today, there are about 28,744 Torres Strait Islanders, although only 5,000 live on the Torres Strait Islands themselves. The rest reside in Australia, mainly in Queensland.

### 3 Thursday Islanders

## The Changing Landscape

Aboriginal people have been in Australia for more than 50,000 years. Archaeological research has led to the gradual discovery that during this enormously long time there were great changes in the geography of Australia.

Some 30,000 years ago the country was mainly a green and pleasant land in which giant animals roamed, lakes were full, and mountains were snow-covered.

Conversely, 15,000 years ago the land was even more heartbreaking than it is now, with the desert core hugely enlarged, and sand dunes blowing in Victoria and even Tasmania.

Around 10,000 years ago the climate and vegetation patterns reached approximately their present condition. Throughout the Ice Ages sea levels had fluctuated. At their lowest point Australia formed one giant land mass from the bottom of Tasmania through to New Guinea.

A major thrust of archaeological research has been the examination of the kinds of adaptive responses which Aboriginal people made to these changes.