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AUSTRALIA – ONE LAND: TWO PEOPLES

Nature periodically reminds Australians just how fragile is their hold on the land. The country's Indigenous Peoples have always had a keen awareness of this fact of life but the Europeans have had a greater confidence in their ability to tame it. I think that the Indigenous Peoples are being proved right.



THE LAND

Australia is a great deal larger than it appears on most maps of the world. Most maps use the Mercator projection (named after Gerardus Mercator, 1512-1594, a Flemish cartographer and mathematician) that is an orthomorphic map projection on which parallels and meridians form a rectangular grid, with the scale being exaggerated with increasing distance from the equator. This exaggerates, for example, the size of northern Europe and reduces the size of Africa and Australia. Greenland, which looks so large on most maps, is only about a quarter the size of Australia's landmass. Australia is, in fact, over 80 per cent of the size of the continental United States or about the size of Europe from Spain across to the Urals. A jumbo jet can fly from Sydney to London for about six hours and still be within Australian territory.

Australia used to be part of the super-continent called Gondwanaland. Gondwanaland gradually split up into Antarctica, South America, Africa, Madagascar, Australia, New Zealand and New Guinea. Australia has been physically isolated from the rest of the world's landmasses for over 40 million years. This long period of isolation has given rise to a unique flora and fauna. This has been assisted by Australia's passage north from Antarctica. Earth has chilled considerably over the past 40 million years but as Earth has chilled so Australia has moved towards the Equator so that the temperature has remained much more stable than it might otherwise have done. No other continent has experienced the same degree of geological quiet that Australia has experienced over the past 40 million years.

There are so many species unique to Australia that, along with New Guinea, Australia forms one of the world's greatest zoogeographic realms. For example, there are more species of ants inhabiting the hill called Black Mountain in Canberra than they are in all of Britain. In Australia's arid deserts there are more species of reptiles than exist in one environment anywhere else on Earth. Australia supports at least 25,000 species of plants; Europe - which is taken to include Turkey, the former USSR and the Mediterranean islands - supports only 17,500 species.

Australia is the world's driest and flattest continent. It is an immense land of climatic extremes. For example, it is not unknown for February to register a temperature of 100 degrees F in Western Australia for most of the month and for it to be snowing in Tasmania. This variety would not seem strange in Europe or Africa but it seems odd for one country. Australia is the world's only country to occupy an entire continent.

✓ **INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

The legends and religious beliefs of Australia's Indigenous Peoples have no stories of migration. There is no collective memory of Peoples having roots other than those of Australia.

There is a continuing research on how and when the indigenous people reached Australia. It is assumed that they must have journeyed overland, before the seas rose and created islands out of the land bridge. But the most obvious mystery is that there are presently no people resembling the Indigenous Peoples of Australia (or New Guinea) in the south-east Asian region. Like their languages, Australia's indigenous people seem to be unique.

Indigenous Peoples look back to the Dreaming to explain this mystery. There is no journey to Australia: Australia is the timeless land and they are the timeless people.

Creation beliefs vary considerably from region to region. But they generally describe the journeys of ancestral beings, often giant animals or people, over what began as a featureless domain. Mountains, rivers, waterholes, animal and plant species, and other natural and cultural resources came into being as a result of events that took place during these Dreamtime journeys. Indigenous Peoples believed that the spirits had made living tracks for them to follow, and so they had to treat the tracks with respect. The tracks took the shape of various natural features and formations, such as, mountains, springs and trees.

While all landscape features have their origins in Dreamtime creation stories, there are some places of special significance to Indigenous Peoples: "sacred sites". This is a generic term for different types of places or areas of land and sea. Many sacred sites are places where particularly important events occurred during the Dreamtime. Others are places known as "increase centres" where special ceremonies are conducted to ensure the well-being of particular species. Others are places of great danger, sometimes called "poison grounds" or simply "danger places", where it is believed that inappropriate action (such as the killing of a forbidden species or the entrance of a stranger) will cause severe storms, sickness or even death.

Since sacred sites represent the cultural core of the areas of Indigenous Peoples, knowledge about these places have survived across much of the continent, even in places where other cultural knowledge may have been lost. In contrast, to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic

traditions, Indigenous Peoples have no story of a Garden of Eden from which they have been expelled and then compelled to work in a harsh world. Genesis chapter 3 deals with the fall of humankind and the curse that "by the sweat of your brow" humans would have to work hard and long. Life in Australia was harsh but not necessarily intolerable. They worked only as much as was needed for the day; there was more to life than work. They had a rich spirituality.

The land is the basis of the spirituality. In Christianity, a dead person's spirit goes to heaven; for Indigenous Peoples the spirit goes back to the land, where it came from, so that the spirits of new children can be reborn. The land is the link between the spiritual and the temporal. It is not a commodity to be bought or sold (a principle which is so important for the British legal system). Each group is defined by its link with the land. This means that Australia had no wars of territorial aggrandizement until the British arrived. For Indigenous Peoples to have fought over the land, would have been as meaningless as the Protestants and Catholics fighting over their allocation of heaven. The arrival of the British therefore made Indigenous Peoples spiritual refugees.

✓ THE CULTURE

Two centuries ago, there were at least 750,000 Indigenous Peoples in Australia (and possibly as many as 1.5 million), who spoke about 250 distinct languages (as different as English, French or German), and who were members of about 600 or 700 tribes.

Indigenous Peoples maintained a high degree of communication across a large continent with comparatively few people. It seems likely that every part of the continent was inhabited, with no part left unexplored by Indigenous Peoples. This was an achievement in itself when it is recalled just how varied is the Australian climate: from blistering heat (some of the hottest temperatures on Earth are recorded in northern and central Australia) to freezing snow (Australia gets has more snow each year than Switzerland). Light items of trade, such as stone axes, crossed the continent. The format of ceremonies also crossed the continent. Careful stewardship of resources meant that large scale gatherings were rare: the land could not sustain them.

The languages across the continent contain some recurring words. There are also similarities in grammar. The languages have been traced back to one language family, where the original language was spoken somewhere on the central north coast (around Darwin) thousands of years ago. As Indigenous Peoples moved out from the central north coast, so the different languages evolved. No relationship has been found between the languages of Indigenous Peoples and those spoken anywhere else in the world.

The variety of languages and the way that people could come into contact with other languages meant that Indigenous Peoples were very good linguists. This was recorded at the time

of British settlement; some of Indigenous Peoples quickly learned English, while very few of the settlers ever got much of a grasp of the local indigenous language for their vicinity.

Knowledge and wisdom were the wealth of Indigenous Peoples. They lived lightly upon the land; they did not build cathedrals, highways or elaborate bridges. They could carry only a few possessions. Their major resource was in their heads. The elders (males and females) were greatly respected because of their experience. They provided guidance to the younger generation. Indigenous Peoples were the world's first environmentalists. They knew the importance of working with nature and understanding it, rather than arrogantly trying to impose an alien system of values on a fragile environment.

✓ **LIVING WITH THE LAND**

Australia's Indigenous Peoples are the world's oldest continuous civilization: at least 40,000 years. They have made a success in living with one of the world's most hostile environments. Nowadays, at a time when Australians are troubled about the continent's environmental problems, there is little information about how Indigenous Peoples were able to do this. There is little to guide the historical ecologists in their research on the remarkable success of the Indigenous Peoples being able to adapt to the continent. Given the environment of the surrounding countries, there is little knowledge that they could have carried into Australia that would have assisted their settlement of the land.

Australian history books contain stories of intrepid white explorers who crossed the barren continent and occasionally perished in the desert because of a lack of water or food. They died in the equivalent of an indigenous fast food outlet. With their intimate knowledge of the characteristics of plants and the habits of animals and sea creatures, Indigenous Peoples knew what was edible and what was not, where and when to find it, how to capture or collect it, and how to prepare it for eating. (One current tourist attraction in central Australia is the "edible desert" tour, where a guide shows tourists how to survive in the desert).

Indigenous society was not static. The traditional white view was that time stood still for Indigenous Peoples. But, as the research continues, so there is a greater understanding of how the indigenous people were able to adapt to the land. For example, probably the world's greatest concentration of ancient art is in Arnhem Land, in northern Australia, where people have been painting for at least 18,000 years. White researchers have become more adept at understanding them. Some of the paintings, dating from over 3,000 years ago, show Indigenous Peoples using boomerangs but current Indigenous Peoples in that area have no tradition of using them. Boomerangs can be best used in open country. About 3000 years ago the vegetation in Arnhem Land became denser and so the spear replaced the boomerang. Thus, as the vegetation changed, so Indigenous Peoples had to respond.

Key factors, then, to surviving in such a difficult environment were flexibility in adapting to environmental challenges and avoiding exceeding the carrying capacity of the land. Indigenous Peoples lived lightly upon the land, mainly as hunter-gatherers and some fishing activities on the coast. They lived in communities rarely exceeding about 500 people. They were often nomadic. This prevented them from over-exploiting a particular piece of land. They did not just wander about but, instead, had a clear route over which they moved in their own tribal areas.

The British settlers could not understand the lifestyle of Indigenous Peoples. The British arrived from a land of neat farms, specific hedgerows, a regular cycle of tilling the land and a cultivation timetable based on seasons. It was a lack of these features that encouraged the British to think that Indigenous Peoples were "lazy" or even that the land was unoccupied ("terra nullus"). In the mindset of the greedy developers, Indigenous Peoples had been squandering their opportunities to make the most of Australia and so they did not deserve it.

The British colonizers and their successors have been in Australia for 0.3 per cent of the time of Indigenous Peoples. The people who have been in Australia for 300 times longer may know something that the newcomers do not: there are severe limits as to what can be done with the land. Australian soil is the world's oldest and most fragile. Soil nutrients are abundant in Europe but they are not in Australia. Australian farmers were successful in the 20th century in adding chemicals to overcome some of the soil's limitations but these are then washed into streams and create blue-green algae problems of toxic water. Additionally, the weather patterns (especially on the eastern half of the continent) can swing from droughts to floods. (One of the most evocative photographs of the drought in the late 1970s was that of a farmer wading through a suddenly flooded river to get into town to lodge his latest drought-relief application form). In Australia's north, Europe's four seasons are meaningless; there are only two seasons: the Wet and the Dry, both of whose onsets lack the regularity of Europe's seasons.

Indigenous Peoples lacked the warrior traditions that confronted the British in other conquests. Indigenous Peoples were quick learners and put up a better fight than the British were willing to admit publicly at the time or that historians were willing to write about. There is apparently no tradition of feuds running on through generations. This lack of a martial tradition (which is so obvious in nearby New Guinea and New Zealand) may also have environmental origins. Indigenous Peoples learned to live together or perish separately. A drought or flood in one tribal area may force them temporarily into the area of another tribe. They had social obligations which linked them across hundreds of miles. If there were a tradition of warfare, then such temporary assistance may not have been forthcoming. Additionally, the land was too fragile to sustain widespread warfare. Some of the traditional military practices of other countries, such as the poisoning of water holes of the enemy, could have been long-term catastrophes.

✓ THE EUROPEANS

Australia was the last of the inhabited continents to be reached by Europeans. As Britain became a more powerful country in the 18th century, so it became more adventurous in the South Seas. In 1768, James Cook was put in charge of a scientific expedition to Tahiti to observe the transit of Venus across the face of the sun. His instructions were that he should also explore the South Pacific to see if there was a continent as yet unclaimed by the Europeans. When he got to the top of what is now Queensland's Cape York peninsular on Possession Island, Cook claimed, in the name of George III, the entire area of the eastern part of the mainland as "New South Wales". Cook sailed away and there was no further British activity in Australia for two decades, until the First Fleet arrived.

In 1788, the British began building a prison system in New South Wales to ease the over-crowding in British prisons. Britain was on the edge of the world's first industrial revolution and the country was in economic and social turmoil, with a large crime rate. Britain was short of prisons. Some convicts had been sent to the US colonies. That option ceased in 1775, with the beginning of the War of Independence. The convicts were now to be sent to Australia.

The arrival of Captain Phillip's First Fleet (of almost 1,500 people, including 736 convicts) in January 26 1788 slices through Australian history like a razor blade. Previous visitors had been and gone. The First Fleet stayed. It provided the foundation for an attempted destruction of the world's oldest civilization.

Indigenous lifestyles were disrupted by being driven off their land, away from their sources of food and away from their basis of their religion: particular areas of land. They had no way of knowing just how long this disruption would last. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the disruption was permanent. But that may not have been so obvious to Indigenous Peoples at the time (indeed, even the settlers at times wondered just how long they would be able to survive in what they saw as such a hostile environment). Indigenous Peoples were forced to depart from their ancient ways of ordering society to cope with this abrupt interruption. Starvation, which had been rare for Indigenous Peoples, now haunted both the early settlers and the nearby Indigenous Peoples: the former could not get European agricultural techniques to work in Australia and the latter were excluded from the lands which they previously traversed to get food.

✓ THE SHORTAGE OF WATER

An example of how Europeans have had problems comes from the use of water. Water is hard wired, so to speak, into agriculture, industry and culture. It is the single most precious element for life on earth. As societies get richer, so they tend to use more water.

There is a great deal of concern about the shortage of freshwater in Australia. European agriculture and lifestyles may not be compatible with Australia's environment. For example, there has been the destruction of trees for land clearing, which has caused problems with salination. Additionally, there has not been enough financial incentive to use water wisely. One implication of Australia's freshwater crisis is that this crisis is far more severe than many other environmental issues that receive more media attention, such as climate change.

Second, countries need to rethink their agricultural practices. Agriculture is the main user of water, especially irrigation. Australians may need to rethink some of those European-style ones. At the very least, it is necessary to look again at some irrigation practices. Meanwhile, closer to home so to speak, there is the issue of European-style gardens. Australia needs to create gardens using more local flora and less water-intensive European flora (not least lawns). Irrigation is not just a matter for farmers – it is an issue for all home-owners with gardens

Third, the conversion of saltwater into freshwater is an energy-intensive process, whether by distillation or filtering through a membrane. There may be scope here for new solar energy industries to be developed to power such conversion. Australians ought to be finding new ways of financing solar energy research. It is bizarre that a country that receives so much sunlight should be so slow to find ways of generating solar energy. For example, Australians for the past decade and a half have been obliged to save for their own personal superannuation ("old age pension") funds. The trustees of such funds are obliged by law to invest the funds to get the highest returns. However the law could be changed to ensure that a very small percentage of the funds be spent on such projects to build up the nation.

Fourth, there may be an error in the pricing policy for water. The issue is not one of whether the water supply should be privatised, but that consumers should be paying a realistic price for it (no matter who supplies it). More expensive water will provide an incentive to be more careful in how it is used. Indigenous Peoples knew intuitively they had to be careful how they used water – Europeans may now have to be forced to be careful.

To conclude, there are more dead civilizations than currently flourishing ones. A key factor in the death of civilizations was the loss of water or food. It remains to be seen whether Australia under European control can avoid the fate of civilizations elsewhere.

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