

# YEAR 7 GEOGRAPHY – COLLECTING, RECORDING, EVALUATING AND REPRESENTING

## Ethical research of geological events with First Nations Peoples

**Warning** – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and students are advised that this curriculum resource may contain images, voices or names of deceased people.

### GLOSSARY

**colonisation:** the act of one country invading and taking over another; the invaded country is called a 'colony'; the invading force are **colonists**. The British began the colonisation of Australia in 1788.

**consent:** permission or agreement to do something.

**Elders:** a leader or senior person in an Indigenous community; a custodian of language and cultural knowledges.

**encoding:** to convert information into another form; for example, changing a worded message into Morse code, or scientific knowledge into song.

**mission:** a place run by Christian organisations from the 1800s up to the late 1980s where many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People were forced to live under strict control.

**oral tradition:** a way of recording information across time without the use of writing; for example, verbally (stories and songs) or physically (dance and art).

**principles:** stated beliefs or rules that guide behaviour and actions.

**reserve:** a place run by the government from the 1800s up to the 1960s where many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples were forced to live in these areas under strict control.

**valid:** well-considered, thorough and grounded in fact and logic.

### Research

Since **colonisation**, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have been studied, researched and questioned. Far too often this has happened in disrespectful and unfair ways – the research does not benefit the people or communities; it benefits the researchers. Research has not been *with* First Nations Peoples; it has been *about* them. Researchers have not listened properly to the people who are being studied (Benveniste & King 2018 p. 52). Recently this has started to change and the importance of ethics in research is being recognised. But what exactly is *ethical* research?

### The difference between morals and ethics

'Morals' are the guiding **principles** of right and wrong a person lives by. These don't often need to be thought about because they're very much part of a person's culture and upbringing. If something's 'immoral', it's known to be wrong. For example, *hurting others* is morally wrong.

'Ethics' take a little more consideration. A person's ethics or a society's ethics are specific rules, actions and behaviours based on the moral principles of right and wrong. If something is ethical it's considered to be morally good or correct; it doesn't harm people or the environment. For example, *not hurting people* is an ethical decision.

### Ethical protocols

A 'protocol' is an accepted and agreed way of doing something in a situation, a group or an organisation. When protocols are ethical, they're based on those important moral principles of right and wrong.

A lot of thought has gone into ethical protocols that can guide the ways research is conducted with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) has created the *Guidelines for ethical research in Australian Indigenous studies* (GERAIS). The fifth GERAIS principle says that Indigenous knowledge must be treated with respect. It mustn't be made to look less important or **valid** than Western knowledge (AIATSIS 2012, p. 7). And there are some interesting examples of what can be learnt when this respect is shown.

### Respect for knowledge and knowledge ownership

One way of looking at it, is that First Nations Peoples own their knowledges. It may seem obvious to say, 'First Nations Peoples own their knowledge'. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could rightly say there is nothing obvious about that statement at all, that this is certainly not the way that Indigenous knowledges have been treated in the past. Historically and to this day, non-Indigenous people have stolen and misused Indigenous knowledges, including technical and scientific knowledges, artistic works, cultural objects and even human remains (Davis 1997).

Today, many guidelines have had to be written to attempt to protect Indigenous knowledges and ensure that any research involving First Nations Peoples must be respectful, confidential and ethical. Participants must give their **consent** and there should be benefits for people and communities who are involved (Orr et al. 2009).

### Unethical history

When the British colonists first arrived in Australia, they were convinced of their own superiority. Because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples weren't white and Western, and because Indigenous ways of living were different from British ways, the colonists thought they had nothing to learn from the local people. This superior mindset led to some highly unethical and inhuman behaviour, such as **colonists** accepting help from First Nations Peoples to find water sources, then building fences and refusing to allow the helpful locals to have access (QCAA 2008). The government-run **reserves** and the church-run **missions** worked hard to separate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples from not only their families, communities, languages, cultures and cultural practices, but importantly from sharing knowledge with their children (Ball 2015, p. 6).

### Oral culture and traditions

Indigenous cultures are oral; knowledges are handed down verbally. They are held in people's memories, embedded in the land, water and stars: the rock formations, the riverbeds and the constellations. And it's quite an amazing feat – imagine trying to repeat the same story again and again, generation after generation, without losing or messing up any part of it. Keeping the knowledges intact is done with great care by **encoding** the information in **oral traditions** of story, song, dance and art. Details are also kept safe across thousands of years by minimising the number of people who are allowed to be the custodian of any particular knowledge. Some knowledges are only for women, some only for men; and knowledge is passed down only when the recipient is ready. Custodians of the most important knowledge are **Elders** (Hamacher 2016). These 'libraries' of oral traditions include knowledges of laws, kinship, botany, animal husbandry, astronomy, mathematics and much more besides. While there are other oral cultures around the world, Aboriginal and Torres Strait cultures have the world's longest held oral traditions (Nguyen-Robertson & Reddiex 2018). Historically, oral traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples haven't been given much respect. Through ignorance and a sense of superiority, the stories have often been considered just that – *made up* stories. Or they are dismissed because they are not written down and are therefore *inferior*. But there's lots to be gained from paying more attention, treating all cultures with respect, treating all cultural knowledges with respect, and recognising their true value. Ethical protocols are changing the way Western researchers think about the knowledges of First Nations Peoples.

Scientists now agree that the knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, that date back to the start of living memory (Heathcote 2018) are key to understanding the geology of this continent.

It's now understood that oral traditions are filled with details of the natural world (Coopes 2015). Many stories have been shared by Indigenous cultures that refer to tsunamis, volcanoes and other geological events. The hope is that more can be understood of the geological events by acknowledging and respecting those stories. The information that the oral traditions include can be used to locate sites of geological events, and it can be merged with Western scientific data to confirm the dates and details offered by both (Coopes 2015).

There are oral records from as long as 4700 years ago describing a meteoroid that crashed to earth in the Northern Territory and the crater it left behind. Some oral traditions date even further back to when Tasmania was separated from the mainland by rising sea levels. These records have been successfully handed down through generations (Nguyen-Robertson & Reddiex 2018).

### What next?

There are many ways you can personally respond to your knowledge of this issue that can add to both your own and others' understanding:

- **Find** out and pay a visit to a local site of geological and cultural significance.
- **Show** your respect for First Nations Peoples' knowledges of and custodianship of the land by using original location names.
- **Share** what you find out in this study with others.

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