

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander place names and meanings

GLOSSARY

Traditional Custodian: an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person who's directly descended from the original inhabitants of a culturally defined area, and who's culturally connected to their Country. More generally, a custodian is a person who has custody of something; the keeper of something, responsible for its safekeeping.

Dreaming stories: a European term used to describe complex First Nations stories that offer an understanding of the land, rules for living (a moral code) and show connections between all people and all things through all times.

midden: a mound, often of shells from mussels and other shellfish, which marks the site of long-term human habitation throughout history.

missions and reserves: places run by Christian organisations or the government where many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were forced to live after colonisation.

sacred sites: landforms that have special meaning or significance, including rocks and trees; billabongs, waterholes and lakes; plains, valleys and hills; and **middens**, clearings and places of burial.



The Wound

Landscapes and landform features are significant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and Indigenous communities have cared for, mapped and managed Australia's complex landscape since long before colonisation.

The arrival of Europeans, which started in 1788, changed Australia's landscapes and landforms dramatically. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were forcibly moved off the land they cared for. Fences, farming, mining and private land ownership made it extremely difficult for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to continue traditional land management practices. Because of this, large numbers of **sacred sites** were destroyed. Today, there are many sacred and significant sites all over Australia that are in danger, and many that **Traditional Custodians** are campaigning to protect.

At the same time, many sites have survived. There are landscapes and landforms around Australia that have been recognised by the government as significant to First Nations Peoples, such as Uluru and Kata Tjuta (the Olgas) in the Northern Territory and the Budj Bim eel traps in Victoria (a complex aquaculture system developed by the Gunditjmarra People). There are also thousands of lesser-known sites across the country.



Our History

Value of land

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, land has always been and continues to be, deeply connected to beliefs, cultures, **Dreaming stories** and daily lives. The stories, songs, dances and art of First Peoples record the scientific details and the historical and cultural significance of Country – the landscapes, and the landforms within them.

An Indigenous understanding of landscapes is very different from a Western understanding. In a Western understanding, the value of land is measured in dollars, based on the resources that can be taken from it. But for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the land is something they belong to and care for. Particular Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people have ties to and are responsible for specific parts of the land and **sacred sites**, (Edwards in Poroch et al, 2009, p.6).

Much of Indigenous history is recorded in sacred sites across Australia. For example, the Gwoin Gwoin rock paintings in the Kimberley are considered to be some of the oldest paintings in the world and hold historical information about animal and plant life, spears, bags and headdresses (Wroth & Veth 2017).

Impact of colonisation

When British colonisers first arrived in Australia what they found was unfamiliar to them. They didn't recognise the ways Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples managed the land. Nor did they understand the connection to land that drove this careful management. However, in the years that followed, evidence of cultural boundaries of First Nations Peoples became clear and the British made their false claim of *terra nullius* – land belonging to no-one – to justify their theft of large areas of land, (Tripcony, 1999). John Batman, one of the first colonists to settle at Port Phillip in Victoria, tried to draw up a treaty with the Wurundjeri People to buy all their land. Sir Richard Bourke, the Governor of New South Wales, quickly stopped the treaty with his Proclamation, which called on that principle of terra nullius and was used from then on to give the colonists legal rights to all land (Museum of Australian Democracy 2020; Migration Heritage Centre 2011).

When fences were built and many First Peoples were forced away from Country on to **missions and reserves**, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities were no longer able to access usual sources of food or tend to the land that was their responsibility. Many were also separated from sacred and significant sites. Families were torn apart. Cultural practices and language were forbidden. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people losing this connection to Country meant losing their identity. Despite this history, today many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people maintain a close connection to Country and are involved in the preservation of significant and sacred sites, environmental management and the renaming of places.

Names and meanings

It's estimated that there were over 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages when the British arrived. Today, there are around 100 Indigenous languages being spoken, and of those only 13 are being learned by children, (AIATSIS, 2019).

During colonisation, many places had traditional language names removed through a process of geographical renaming. Many places in Australia, which were well known to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, were given European names even though they had Indigenous names that had been used since long before colonisation.

In recent times, some places, such as Uluru, have had their Indigenous names officially returned. Some places are now known by multiple names. There are also many places across Australia that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are campaigning to have returned to their traditional names. One example of this is K'gari, which is also known as Fraser Island.

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