



Australian Government

endeavour250
Reflecting on Australia's History

From the shore

Drawing on resources such as *Dark Emu*, students will explore the experiences and lifestyles of the Aboriginal peoples prior to and at the time of the arrival of Cook.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures



HASS



Year Level: 5–6





From the shore

OVERVIEW

In this learning sequence, students investigate two separate, yet intertwined, myths about Aboriginal peoples' ways of living prior to the arrival of Cook in 1770 – that there was no permanent housing and that these peoples led a hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

By examining the journals written by early European explorers, students will use primary sources of evidence to support the assertion that Aboriginal peoples had permanent homes and were not hunters and gatherers, but expert agriculturalists.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this unit students will:

- use details from early European explorers' diaries and sketches to gain insight into Aboriginal peoples' ways of living pre-contact
- investigate evidence of pre-contact permanent Aboriginal houses and villages and evaluate the significance of the perpetuation of the inaccuracies of history
- analyse evidence of Aboriginal agricultural practices before Cook's arrival
- evaluate the myths that Aboriginal peoples lived as nomadic hunters and gatherers.

LEARNING AREAS



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures



HASS

DURATION OF LESSONS



8–10 lessons





Introduction

It is highly recommended that teachers read either *Dark Emu* or *Young Dark Emu* by Bruce Pascoe to provide culturally appropriate background information for this learning sequence. Both, but particularly the latter, also contain images that may be useful to the students' learning.

Due to the nature of the content in this learning sequence, some of the source materials used are more recent than those from Cook's 1770 expedition.

It is important for teachers and students to understand that to gain insight into Aboriginal ways of life in pre-contact Australia, written accounts and sketches of early European explorers are heavily relied upon. Very few direct accounts from Aboriginal people were recorded. This means that Aboriginal lifestyles were recorded by people observing, but not being part of, that way of life, and sometimes after the period of Cook's expeditions.

- What potential limitations does all this raise for learning about Aboriginal ways of life at the time?
- How might a person's preconceived ideas influence these records?
- What barriers to understanding Aboriginal ways of life might the early European explorers have faced (eg language; cultural restrictions on sharing of certain information – particularly around ceremonial practices)?
- Why is there no written account from an Aboriginal perspective?





Australian Curriculum

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITIES



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures



Sustainability

GENERAL CAPABILITIES



Critical and creative thinking



Ethical understanding



Intercultural understanding



HASS – YEAR 5

- Locate and collect relevant information and data from primary sources and secondary sources ([ACHASSI095](#))
- Evaluate evidence to draw conclusions ([ACHASSI101](#))
- The influence of people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, on the environmental characteristics of Australian places ([ACHASSK112](#))



HASS – YEAR 6

- Locate and collect relevant information and data from primary sources and secondary sources ([ACHASSI123](#))





Engage

Inquiry questions:

- What do we know about Aboriginal ways of life prior to, and at the arrival of, Cook?
- Where does this information come from?

Aboriginal peoples did have permanent homes prior to the arrival of Cook

1. Show students the sketch of [Aboriginal encampment at Rockingham Bay, Queensland \(1878\)](#). Access the large view of it from the Available online link. Please note that such works are culturally sensitive, and students should be informed of this.
2. Ask: What can you see? Does anything surprise you in this picture? What might the houses in this sketch be made from?

Discuss any prior knowledge students may have regarding Aboriginal ways of living before British colonisation. Be aware that there may be students with culturally insensitive responses that could offend some students. Explore what information they have been given and where it has come from. This can be a learning opportunity to discuss sources of information (primary and secondary sources) and how students can find legitimate, reliable information on the internet.

3. Again being aware of cultural sensitivities, show students the image of ST Gill's [Aboriginal Australian camp in the northern interior of South Australia ca. 1846](#) accessed from the 'Online versions' link. Then read this description from Charles Sturt's journal:

... [the huts] were made of strong boughs with a thick coating of clay over leaves and grass. They were entirely impervious to wind and rain, and were really comfortable, being evidently erections of a permanent kind to which the inhabitants frequently returned. Where there were villages these huts were built in rows, the front of one hut being at the back of the other, and it appeared to be a singular but universal custom to erect a smaller hut at no great distance from the large ones, but we were unable to detect for what purpose they were made, unless it was to deposit their seeds; as they were too small even for children to inhabit.

Sturt, C, *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia*, T and W Boone, London, 1849





4. Read Thomas Mitchell's description from his journal:

There were also permanent huts on both banks, the first of the kind I had seen, large enough certainly to contain a family of 15 persons; and in one there had recently been a fire. They were semicircular and constructed of branches of trees, well thatched with straw, forming altogether a covering of about a foot in thickness, and they were well able to afford a ready and dry shelter in bad weather ... These permanent huts seemed also to indicate a race of more peaceful and settled habits ...

Mitchell, T.L., *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia*, vol 1, T and W Boone, London, 1839

5. Using the Image resource sheet, look at more images of Aboriginal houses and villages. Ask: What might influence the different shape and construction of these houses? What are the similar features/materials? What made Sturt and Mitchell assume that the homes they saw were permanent?

Aboriginal Peoples were not hunters and gatherers

- Inquiry question: What is the definition of a 'hunter and gatherer'?

In this sequence, students will complete the 'Know-Learned-Wonder' table in the Student worksheet.

Before watching the video, ask students to list what they think they know about Aboriginal peoples' use of the land before Cook's arrival (including for food, water, fishing and farming).

Students watch the video *How Aboriginal Australians made Australia*, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ska2fpueDLA>. (Note that many of the Aboriginal words and languages are mispronounced.)

After watching the video, allow students to fill in the What I learnt and What I wonder sections of the student worksheet. Discuss responses.

Make a list of the evidence from the video that disputes the claim that before Cook, Aboriginal Peoples lived as hunters and gatherers.





Explore

Inquiry questions:

How were some Aboriginal peoples' houses created prior to Cook's arrival?

- What features suggest these houses were permanent structures?
- Do hunter and gatherer societies manipulate and manage their environment?

Aboriginal peoples did have permanent homes prior to the arrival of Cook

1. Ask students to close their eyes and picture the image described here by explorer Thomas Mitchell:

[Some huts] ... being large, circular; and made of straight rods meeting at an upright pole in the centre; the outside had first been covered with bark and grass, and the entirety coated over with clay. The fire appeared to have been made nearly in the centre; and a hole at the top had been left as a chimney.

Mitchell, TL, *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia*, vol 2, T and W Boone, London, 1839

2. Next, give students time to sketch their initial thoughts on the houses as described by Mitchell. Invite students to share and explain their sketches.

3. Watch [Bruce Pascoe's video describing Aboriginal housing](#).
4. To further explore the descriptions and sketches of Aboriginal houses prior to Cook, have students create their own hut or village. All they will need is:

- a piece of firm cardboard or shoe box for the base
- string
- clay or playdough.

Allow students to gather additional *natural* materials, including:

- sticks
- bark
- grass
- leaves.





Aboriginal peoples were not hunters and gatherers

In his [journal](#), Cook describes Australia's land in 1770:

I found in many places a deep black Soil which we thought was capable of producing any kind of grain; at present it produced, besides timber, as fine meadow as ever was seen ...

Captain James [Cook's journal entry for 3 May 1770](#), accessed via the National Library of Australia

Further inland, Sturt and Mitchell often describe the soft soil impeding their respective expeditions.

Later, however, an early colonist named Batey (as quoted in Bruce Pascoe's *Young Dark Emu*) noted the change in soil and suggested that, 'the soil [was] becoming hardened with the continuous tramping of sheep, cattle or horses'.

Activity: Please note that special preparation is required

Students explore the effect that hard, compressed soil has on water absorption by following an adaption of a [Soil Science Society of America activity](#). This could be a whole-class activity, or for groups of students.

Materials

- 4 large disposable foil trays (approx. 30 cm x 20 cm) – two to hold soil, two to capture runoff
- quantity of soil (enough to fill 2.5 foil trays loosely)
- small (eg 1-litre) watering can, filled with water

For the extension activity (if required)

- a packet of grass seeds

Instructions

Fill two foil trays to the rim with soil.

- In one tray, leave the soil quite loose.
- In the other tray, push the soil down firmly to compact it (the 'continuous tramping' of livestock). Continue to top up and compact the soil until it is filled to the rim.

Arrange the filled trays on books or wood so that one end is higher than the other (on a slope of around 30°). Place an empty foil tray at the downslope end of each filled tray to collect any runoff.

Replicate rain by using the watering can to water the surface of each container of soil. Try to ensure that water lands only on the soil and is not concentrated in any single area. Students record their observations.

Extension activity

Extend the activity over a longer period by adding grass seeds to the different soils to measure how rates of plant growth are affected by soil compaction. What might be the short-term and long-term effects of soil that is not absorbing sufficient water?

Discuss

Are Cook, Sturt and Mitchell's observations evidence that the soil was managed by Aboriginal peoples? Is there enough evidence yet? What else might we need to know?





Explain

Inquiry question:

- **How did the environment influence the housing designs of Aboriginal peoples prior to British colonisation?**

Aboriginal peoples did have permanent homes before Cook's arrival

In Thomas Mitchell's words, 'I began to learn that such huts with a good fire before them made very comfortable quarters in bad weather'.

When speaking of the huts, Charles Sturt describes them as being:

... from eight to ten feet in diameter, and about four and a half feet high, the opening into them not being larger than to allow a man to creep in. These huts also faced the north-west, and each had a smaller one attached to it ... these huts they must be a great comfort to them, for in winter they must be particularly warm, and in summer cooler than the outer air ... From the fact of these huts facing the north-west I conclude that their more inclement weather is from the opposite point of the compass.

Sturt, C, *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia*, T and W Boone, London, 1849

- What are the different weather conditions that need to be considered when constructing a house?
- Why were all of the huts described by Sturt, facing the same direction? (Consider winds, sun direction)

Students revisit the model of the hut or village they created and discuss any modifications or enhancements they might need to make to their design to make it suitable for your local weather conditions.

Look at the consistent materials used by Aboriginal peoples to create their houses in the pre-Cook era: clay, grass/straw, bark. Students adapt the experiment described in this [Teach Engineering activity](#) to find which is the best natural insulating material of some common materials.

- What would Aboriginal peoples need to know and understand about the climate and the environment to design these shelters and houses?
- How would the local environment influence which building materials they chose? (If possible, relate this to your local environment.)
- Why might you find different houses and shelters in different parts of Australia?

Aboriginal Peoples were not hunters and gatherers

Aboriginal peoples had extensive agricultural knowledge. Watch Bruce Pascoe's TEDx talk, [A real history of Aboriginal Australians, the first agriculturalists](#). It is over 12 minutes in length, and could be watched in steps.

As students watch this talk, encourage them to create a plus, minus, interesting (PMI) chart to record new knowledge/things they didn't understand/connections to other knowledge. Discuss students' conclusions.

Thinking back to the previous section on soil quality, what is the new evidence that supports the view that Aboriginal peoples were not hunters and gatherers, but that they had manipulated and managed the land?





Elaborate

Inquiry question:

- **Were Cook's conclusions about the value of Aboriginal peoples' homes reasonable?**

Aboriginal peoples did have permanent homes before Cook's arrival

Students examine the [interactive maps of Cook's exploration of Australia in 1770](#) accessed via the National Library of Australia

- How much of Australia did Cook actually explore?
- Do you think Cook would have a good understanding of Australia's different landscapes from his exploration? What didn't Cook see?

Compare Cook's exploration map to those of Charles Sturt (expeditions 1828; 1829–3 accessed [via Wikipedia](#)) and Thomas Mitchell (expeditions in [1831–2](#); [1835](#); [1836](#); [1845](#)).

- What different landscapes did Sturt and Mitchell see compared to Cook?
- What didn't Sturt and Mitchell see?

When Cook travelled up the east coast of Australia in 1770, he describes some of the Aboriginal houses as 'mean small hovels not much bigger than an oven, made of pieces of sticks, bark, grass and c... [and other shelters] where there has been only some branches, or pieces of bark rising a foot from the ground on the windward side.'¹ This description is very different from those given by the early overland European explorers.

- Why does Cook's description of Aboriginal houses differ so much from Mitchell's and Sturt's?

Mitchell acknowledges that the Aboriginal Peoples he observed created 'temporary huts made of boughs, bark, or grass'² when travelling or hunting, but also repeatedly mentions the 'permanent huts' he sees in other places.

- How might Mitchell's observations help to explain Cook's observations?

Students participate in a [yarning circle](#) activity. Possible focus questions include:

- What do you now know about Aboriginal housing before colonisation?
- What misconceptions do you think the early colonists had about Aboriginal Peoples' ways of living?

- Where might these misconceptions have come from?
- How might you explain the difference in housing observed by Cook and Mitchell?
- What evidence can you provide to support the fact that Aboriginal Peoples had permanent housing before (and for a period after) the arrival of Cook?

Aboriginal Peoples were not hunters and gatherers

Inquiry question

- In addition to grain harvesting, what other farming techniques did Aboriginal Peoples practise?

Students learn about the Gunditjmara Aboriginal eel traps by watching [this video](#).

If possible, find out what eel or fish traps were/are used by Aboriginal Peoples in your local area.

- How do these eel and fish traps also help to prove that Aboriginal Peoples lived in a permanent location?
- How does hearing about Aboriginal agriculture impact your understanding of Aboriginal ways of living before the arrival of Cook?

1 [Cook's Endeavour Journal](#)

2 Mitchell, T.L. *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia*, vol 2, T and W Boone, London, 1839.





Evaluate

Aboriginal Peoples were not nomadic hunters and gatherers prior to the arrival of Cook

Invite students to reflect on their views of Aboriginal ways of life prior to the arrival of Cook that were discussed at the beginning of this unit.

- What have you discovered?
- How has your own understanding of Aboriginal ways of life deepened or changed?

Ask students to prepare a news interview or documentary style report (this may be recorded).

The students prepare responses to stimuli such as:

- In the beginning I thought ...
Now I know that ...
- What evidence is there to support your knowledge of Aboriginal ways of life before Cook arrived?
- How would you respond to someone who told you that Aboriginal Peoples were nomadic or hunters and gatherers?

Students may wish to include their model of the village or house that they created in the Explore section of this learning sequence.



Were Aboriginal Peoples hunters and gatherers before Cook arrived?

▼ What I think I know ...

▼ What I learnt ...

▼ What I wonder ...



Image resources

- [Nouvelle Hollande: Terre d'Endracht Cabanes des Naturels de la Presque île Peron](#). C.1807. Accessed 23 February 2020,
- John Landseer. 1798. [A deserted Indian village in King George III Sound, New Holland](#). Accessed 23 February 2020,
- Artist unknown. 1878. [Aboriginal Encampment at Rockingham Bay, Queensland](#). Accessed 23 February 2020,
- Angas, G. (1859). [Native Mia](#). Album of prints from the South Australian Great Northern Exploring Expedition under the command of John McDouall Stuart. Accessed 23 February 2020,
- Gill, Samuel Thomas & Sturt, Charles. 1846, [Aboriginal Australian camp in the northern interior of South Australia, ca. 1846](#). Accessed 23 February 2020,
- Sturt, Charles. 1846, [Strzelecki's Creek](#), from 'Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia' ca. 1846. Accessed 24 February 2020,
- Artist unknown. 1840. [Village on the Coorong deserted by the Milmenina community after the murder of the crew of the Maria, 'Burnt by me'](#). Accessed 23 February 2020,





Australian Government

Department of Education, Skills and Employment

**Department of Infrastructure, Transport,
Regional Development and Communications**

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AUTHOR

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