

Aboriginal and western conceptions of land

[History](#)



The Aborigines are historically considered as the indigenous people of the Australian continent because no other history about this race has been discovered except from their dwelling place. According to archaeological excavations, the Australian continent has been inhabited by human beings for at least 50, 000 years and the Aborigines have always claimed that they have lived here since the era of creation.

Although this belief gives room for Aboriginal oral traditions, stories have often occurred about ancestral figures that arrived here by canoe from overseas. For many years, the Australian Aborigines were able to live a hunter and gatherer type of lifestyle largely because such a lifestyle was not only suitable for this dry continent, but also because European -agricultural lifestyle was to fail drastically here.

The pre-historic Aborigine population had food-rich habits such as large inland rivers, lakes and the coasts that enabled large groups of these people to live together for a certain duration; a style of living that remained stable for over 50, 000 years until 1788 when Europeans established settlement in this land and led to a near fatal impact on the Aboriginal way of life.

This began a grueling battle of recognition and claim for ancestral land ownership among the Aborigines as the white settlers set out to acquire all the land that they considered unused or vacant (Jupp 2001, pp. 4-5).

Aboriginal Vs Western conceptions of land

Long before the white settlers arrived in Australia, the Aboriginal people had very well-developed law systems that were underpinned by the people's relationship to the land; a relationship that has been characteristic of

Aboriginal spirituality for a long time. Through 'The Dreaming' or Aboriginal Customary Law, the law was prescribed for the land as well as its inhabitants. According to The Dreaming, the landscape originated from the activities of spirit beings and all the land was therefore a sacred site.

Traditional Aboriginal conceptions of land revolved around communal land occupation and use. Continuity of land ownership did not require any legal documentation and was passed from generation to generation through oral traditions. According to these people, control over land use has always been central to self-determination and this explains the reason why they have always demanded to be given the opportunity to have control over land use as the only means of sustaining their economic, social and community viability (Bourke et al., 1998, pp. 56, 81; Zimmer 2006).

The year 1788 is significant in Aboriginal history though negatively; because it was the beginning of great loss and suffering for these people due to the invasion of their land by British white settlers. For about 2 centuries, Europeans held this prevailing idea that Aborigines were parasitically living off the land without making any investment in it.

This concept was suited to the British legal system theory that unused or unoccupied land was there for the taking. Yet some European settlers had a different view that the Aborigines had for a long time been able to manage the country towards long-term agricultural productivity and suggested that it was the European strategies of land-use that were to blame for diminishing productivity. When the European settlers arrived in Australia, they developed the concept of distributing the Aboriginal population within several states.

This notion of gathering together and moving the Aborigines became a central issue to the colonial as well as state government policies beginning from mid-twentieth century. Governments encouraged missionaries and private citizens to gather up the Aborigines and settle them into organized European-style communities. During the early 20th century, governments also engaged in setting up their own settlements to which they moved the Aborigines (Jupp 2001, pp. 9, 14)

Early European settlers held a general view that they belonged to a culture that was more superior to the Aborigines and their acquisition of the unsettled land would apparently help to create a superior nation. Australia's population was also quite low and to fully utilize the large tracts of agricultural land, the European settlers introduced the grazing of animals such as cattle and sheep on the landscape to substitute economic production for export.

This created competition for land between the Aboriginal people and their indigenous animals and the newly introduced European animals. The piedmont plains, flood plains and foothills especially in Central Australia were most vital as a source of water and residence for the Aborigines. Competition for grazing land drastically reduced the number of animal species on the land and subsequently interfered with the source of proteins for the Aborigines.

European settlement led to dramatic and significant changes in Aboriginal population distribution and location through either forced migrations, or through moves that were instigated and enforced by the government (Jupp 2001, p. 12; Bourke et al., p. 5; Flood 2007, p. 27).