

## Source papers

### Who we are

Many visitors to this country are not aware that we have two Indigenous peoples in Australia: Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples and within those groups is significant diversity. Torres Strait Islanders, whose cultural origins are in nearby Melanesia, come from the Torres Strait, which separates the top of Queensland from Papua New Guinea. Of the more than 100 islands in the Strait, thirty-eight are inhabited. Many Torres Strait Islanders have migrated and today live throughout mainland Australia.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have adapted culturally and physically over many millennia to a range of climatic and environmental changes, including those brought about by extensive use of fire to alter the landscape. Although a level of cultural continuity and similarity across Australia is clear, regional differences demonstrate that prior to European arrival the First Peoples were innovative and adaptive to environmental and social situations. This is shown today by the sheer complexity and diversity of cultural systems, religion and distinct languages.

At least 250 languages, many with numerous dialects, were in use on the continent and islands prior to European colonisation. Indigenous Australian cultures are multilingual, speaking the languages of neighbours is a cultural norm; in some areas, like Arnhem Land, many different languages are spoken over a small area, whereas at the other extreme is the Western Desert Language whose many dialects (such as Pitjantjatjara) are spoken across about one sixth of the continent, covering much of the desert regions of Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory.

Welcomes have become strong features of contemporary Australian life and are often held at the beginning of meetings and events and may include song or dance and other local rituals such as smoking ceremonies. Welcomes can only be given by the traditional custodians of that country, or those who are given permission by the Traditional Owners to do so.

### Our past

When asked where we come from, our usual response is: we have always been here. Successive archaeological discoveries reveal the truth of this statement. The oldest known archaeological sites on mainland Australia date to at least 65,000 years ago — much longer than modern humans have been in many parts of Europe and the Americas. In the Torres Strait Islands, archaeologists have discovered sites that date to approximately 8,000 years, however, the settlement of this region likely extends to the earliest habitation of this continent. It is also significant that prior to global sea level rises circa. 11,000–7000 years ago, Australia (including Tasmania) and Papua New Guinea were connected, forming an even larger landmass called Sahul.

Mungo Man was excavated in 1974 and found to be 42,000 years old, making him the oldest modern human remains discovered outside Africa. The kind of cremation and the use of red ochre indicated sophisticated burial customs and the earliest known evidence of modern human spirituality. Following years of campaigning by his descendants, Mungo Man's remains were recently returned home.

Aboriginal rock art, such as elaborate paintings and stone petroglyphs (carvings or inscriptions in rock), may be the first representations of this type of art anywhere in the world. The Echidna Track engraving site located in the Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, NSW, has a long line of footprints which may have once linked this site to others. Sydney has been described as one of the largest open-air art galleries in the world. More than 600 rock engraving sites have been recorded in the area and new discoveries are regularly being added to the list.

A recent archaeological discovery has revealed that Aboriginal peoples have inhabited Australia for at least 65,000 years. Evidence, including stone axes and grindstones, found in the Northern Territory's Madjedbebe rock shelter, was located on the traditional lands of the Mirarr people. It also appears that ground-stone axe technology probably began on the Australian continent earlier than elsewhere. These, along with other technologies, represent a suite of early sophisticated advances by Aboriginal peoples.

### Our shared history

Legal exclusions and discriminatory policies prevented many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women from serving in Australia's military forces. In the First World War there was a rule to recruit servicemen to the Australian Inland Forces who were 'substantially of European origin'. Only in the late twentieth century were all formal barriers to Indigenous Australians entering the defence forces removed. Despite these barriers, many thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were willing to serve for Australia. More than 1,000 Indigenous Australians served in the First World War, and more than 4,000 in the Second World War. At least 300 Indigenous Australians served in the Vietnam War. Yet when many returned to civilian life in Australia they were not treated equally.

The year 1967 saw the culmination of a valiant campaign fought by FCAATSI and others to encourage the Australian people to accept a referendum to change the Constitution. Many people mistakenly believe that the 1967 Referendum gave Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the right to vote, but this was not the case. The change would allow Aboriginal people to be included in the census and would enable the Commonwealth to make laws for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Aboriginal people could vote at the state level before Federation in 1901, Queensland and Western Australia being the only states that expressly forbade Indigenous Australians from voting. It wasn't until 1962, when the electoral act was amended, that Indigenous Australians were given the right to register and vote, but voting was not compulsory. Full voting rights were not granted federally until Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were required to register on the electoral roll in 1984.

In 1965, Charles Perkins, one of the first Aboriginal university graduates, led a group of our people and supporters on a 'Freedom Ride' — a bus tour of outback New South Wales. The action was based on the US Freedom Rides and sought to highlight blatant racism. At that time, Australian Indigenous peoples were barred from using public venues, including swimming pools, in many Australian country communities. The Freedom Riders caused enormous controversy across the nation as Australians were shown the true nature of race relations.