



Aboriginal Perspective on Water - Teacher's Notes

Although Antarctica is the driest continent on Earth, Australia is the driest inhabited continent. About 40-50,000 years ago, towards the end of the last Ice Age, world sea level was lower because rain water which would have normally run down to the sea was still trapped in great glaciers and ice caps. This allowed people to walk over land now covered by sea.

The first waves of ancestral Aboriginal people arrived from the north about 40,000 - 50,000 years ago. They were able to walk, sail and island hop on rafts southwards to the north coast of Australia. Radiocarbon dating and cultural relicts suggest there were at least two waves of Aboriginal settlement. Genetic evidence suggests that the dingo arrived with a late settlement wave about 18,000 years ago. The longest consistent culture on Earth is of the Australian aborigine. (In comparison, Ancient Egyptian civilization only started 3,100 years ago).

Once they had arrived on the north coast they travelled southward across the continent mostly following the coast where there was best access to fresh water and food. People also followed the great rivers inland.

Men mostly hunted large game and women hunted small game and gathered fruits and seeds. When their descendants reached the south coast they were even able to walk across to Tasmania. Then the climate warmed, the ice melted, the sea level rose and Bass Strait became sea again isolating Tasmania.

Because food sources were poor they followed seasonal fruits and game, movement living a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Their "walkabout" lifestyle was essential so that they did not exhaust any resource, be it food or water. They also travelled in small groups because resources were limited. Children were raised to believe that they had to look after "country" . They belonged to the land and were responsible for its maintenance. They were custodians of Air, Water, Living Things and Land.





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Aboriginal People and Water

Fresh water could be found in rivers, billabongs (ponds remaining in drying rivers), soaks (where rain runs off from a rock to be ponded on clay pans in the soil) and in small hand extended reservoirs in rock called "gnamma" holes after the gnamma or snake which was believed to have gnawed them out. Noongar people called the water snake "Waugal". They advised that you should only drink water if it is clear and not when it is murky because the "snake" was still swimming around in it. This gnamma hole near Sandstone has lost its capping rock and has filled in with soil. It still fills with water after rain.

By mostly travelling and hunting in the morning and evening they reduced water lost by sweating. In extreme heat they would dig a hole in damp sand and bury themselves up to the neck to keep cooler. In the central deserts, small groves of desert oaks found within the sand dunes sometimes display little holes drilled into their bark. People would insert grass "straws" into these holes and suck out tree sap for water. The holes would be sealed with mud after use.



The "song lines" by which Aboriginal people remember how to safely navigate their way around their territories often described pathways from water source to water source. The high frequency of water signs in paintings and carvings indicate the importance of water in Aboriginal culture.





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A Sign for Water - Discussion

People used stories as maps of where and when to find water. They left petroglyphs (rock markings) to indicate that water was nearby and children had to memorise songs which "mapped" routes to water sources in their land.

One of the most common signs for water in petroglyphs (rock pictures) and in paintings is concentric circles as shown in this photograph.

It comes from rocks near a waterhole close to Newman but similar signs can be found on rocks and in paintings across Australia



Why do you think Aboriginal people used concentric circles to represent water? If you drop a stone into water, concentric waves are created.

Why didn't they just write a sign saying "WATER" on the stone?

1. Aboriginal people did not have a written language, indeed there were many different language groups sharing hunting ranges but being there at different times. The signs had to be understood by many groups. You may wish to refer to:
<http://www.abc.net.au/indigenous/map/>
2. Although some groups used ochre and made paintings, these had to be under overhanging rock or in caves as they wash off in rain and their colour is lost. The rock carving told anyone speaking any dialect that water was near.



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3. The petroglyphs were made by scratching through the redder weathered rock on the surface to make lighter lines from the rock below. Carving into rock is very difficult and time consuming. Their creation and maintenance over thousands of years is an indication of their importance.

Petroglyph Design - Student Activity

Unlike writing with pencil and paper, petroglyphs cannot be rubbed out and changed if mistakes are made. Students are asked to design their own icon for water and model it in flour.

Materials

- Petri dishes, saucers or other flat dishes
- Flour or sand
- Spoon
- Pencil
- Newspaper
- Coloured pencils or pens

Method

1. Cover the desk with a piece of newspaper.
2. Place a thin layer of sand or flour on the bottom of the dish and smooth it flat with the back of the spoon.
3. Cut your design into the flour or sand with a pencil or spoon handle.
4. Adjust to improve.
5. Copy the design onto this worksheet.





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Draw your sign for water below and explain why you chose it.

WATER
Why I chose it _____ _____

Way to Water - Extension



Students may wish to create a dot painting indicating the route from their desk to the nearest drinking fountain. Icons for footsteps and landmarks would have to be selected.

Materials

- Paper
- PVA paint in jam jar lids
- Blunt brushes or the ends of pencils. Plastic drinking straws make excellent dots if recharged frequently.

