AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL PEOPLES · INFORMATION SHEET

Australian Aboriginal Peoples

History, facts and culture: a foundation for respectful engagement

Overview

Aboriginal peoples are one of the two groups of First Nations peoples of Australia, alongside Torres Strait Islander peoples. Theirs is among the oldest living cultures on Earth, continuing on this continent for more than 60,000 years, and by some evidence 65,000 years or more. Aboriginal Australia is not one culture but many: hundreds of distinct nations, each with its own language or dialect, Country, and deep systems of Lore, knowledge and connection.

Understanding this depth and diversity is the starting point for respectful engagement. It reminds us that present day First Nations communities are the inheritors and carers of an unbroken cultural legacy, and that their strengths, knowledge and self-determination sit at the centre of the story.

Purpose

This information sheet gives organisations an accurate, respectful and strength-based foundation for cultural awareness. It supports culturally safe workplaces and services, helps replace outdated or deficit framing with accurate understanding, and contributes to truth-telling and reconciliation. It is general in nature and is designed to be paired with guidance from local Traditional Owners and community.

Objective

After reading this sheet, a reader should be able to:

- Describe the depth, diversity and continuity of Aboriginal cultures in Australia.
- Understand the Dreaming and Lore as a living system of creation, law and knowledge, never as myth or legend.
- Recognise the central importance of Country, kinship and totemic connection to identity.
- Appreciate the richness of Aboriginal art, music, dance and oral knowledge.
- Apply respectful, strength-based language in everyday practice.

Times

Reading time	Around 10 to 12 minutes.
Suggested session	30 to 45 minutes when used to open a cultural awareness discussion, allowing time for the reflection questions.
Best paired with	An Acknowledgement of Country, and where possible a local Traditional Owner or community voice.

Key facts

Deep time	First peoples arrived at least 45,000 to 50,000 years ago, with evidence at Madjedbebe in the Northern Territory pointing to 65,000 years or more.
World first seafaring	Reaching Australia required ocean crossings of more than 200 kilometres, the earliest confirmed seafaring anywhere in the world.
A whole continent	By about 35,000 years ago the entire continent was occupied, including Tasmania and the highlands of New Guinea.
Complex society	Evidence includes ceremonial practice before 40,000 years ago, shell bead ornamentation by 30,000 years ago, and long distance trade before 10,000 years ago.
Land and water care	Alongside hunting and gathering, there is evidence of early agriculture and aquaculture, such as the fish traps of Arnhem Land.
Living diversity	Hundreds of nations, each with distinct language, Country and Lore, form one of the world's most enduring cultural landscapes.

Actual outcomes

In practice, organisations that build on this understanding can expect to see:

- Respectful terminology used consistently, such as First Nations peoples, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and Traditional Owners.
- An Acknowledgement of Country practised as a genuine sign of respect, not a formality.
- Strength-based language embedded in documents, describing capability and opportunity rather than deficit.
- The Dreaming and Lore spoken about as living law and knowledge, with cultural knowledge treated as belonging to community.
- Early and ongoing engagement with local Traditional Owners and community controlled organisations.

Summary

Aboriginal peoples hold one of the longest continuous cultural histories on Earth, marked by world first seafaring, sophisticated care of land and water, and rich systems of Lore, art and knowledge. These are living cultures. Centring their depth, diversity and self-determination is the foundation of culturally safe practice and genuine partnership.

Questions to reflect on

- How does understanding more than 60,000 years of continuous culture change the way you see Australia today?
- Where could your organisation replace deficit language with strength-based language?
- How could you build a genuine relationship with the Traditional Owners of the Country you work on?

Reference material

- **AIATSIS, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies** aiatsis.gov.au
- **National Museum of Australia, First Peoples** nma.gov.au
- **Reconciliation Australia** reconciliation.org.au
- **National Agreement on Closing the Gap** closingthegap.gov.au
- **Encyclopaedia Britannica, Australian Aboriginal peoples** britannica.com

How Emus Talking can help

Emus Talking is a proudly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned business. We help organisations build culturally safe workplaces and strong partnerships, delivered remotely and virtually across Australia, or in person by arrangement.

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