# The Impacts of Colonisation

## Dispossession and its consequences, alongside strength, survival and resurgence

**A note before you read.** This read refers to events and policies that may be distressing, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers. Please take care as you read, and stop or take a break whenever you need to. If you would like to yarn with someone, support is available through 13YARN on 13 92 76, Lifeline on 13 11 14, and your local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service.

### Life and custodianship before 1788

Colonisation reshaped the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in profound and lasting ways, and its effects reach into the present. This history sits alongside an equally important truth. The world's oldest living cultures have survived, adapted and continue to thrive.

For more than sixty thousand years, First Nations peoples lived as custodians of this continent and its islands. There were hundreds of distinct nations, more than 250 language groups and some 800 dialects, supported by sophisticated systems of law and Lore, land and water management, trade, governance and knowledge. Understanding this depth of custodianship is the starting point for understanding what colonisation disrupted.

### Dispossession and its interconnected consequences

From 1788, British colonisation proceeded on the false premise of terra nullius, the idea that the land belonged to no one. No treaty was made. As settlement spread, First Nations peoples were dispossessed of their lands and waters, and the consequences were deeply interconnected.

Country is the foundation of identity, law, economy and spirituality, so losing access to land affected all of these at once. Frontier violence and introduced diseases caused devastating loss of life. Protection and assimilation laws removed self-determination and, through child removal, broke families. Bans on languages, ceremony and Lore disrupted the passing of knowledge between generations. Each of these harms reinforced the others, which is why present day disadvantage is best understood as a consequence of history and policy, not of culture or capability.

### Strength, survival and resurgence

Alongside this history is a powerful story of endurance and renewal, visible everywhere today.

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| **Land and law** | The Mabo decision in 1992 overturned terra nullius and led to the recognition of native title. |
| **Culture and language** | Languages are being revived and taught, and cultural knowledge is being passed to new generations. |
| **Self-determination** | A growing sector of community controlled organisations leads its own services. |
| **Economic empowerment** | First Nations businesses and enterprises are among the fastest growing parts of the economy. |

## Why this history explains the present

When we understand how the harms of colonisation were connected and how they reached across generations, present day statistics look different. Gaps in health, education, employment and housing are not evidence of anything lacking in First Nations peoples or cultures. They are the measurable outcome of dispossession and of decades of policy that removed self-determination.

This understanding is exactly why the National Agreement on Closing the Gap exists, and why it centres self-determination and community control. Addressing disadvantage means addressing its causes, and returning decision making to communities.

## Translating understanding into practice

Understanding the impacts of colonisation is not about guilt. It is about acknowledging the past honestly so that we can build respectful relationships, support self-determination, and recognise the resilience and capability that First Nations peoples bring.

In practice, this means centring strength, survival and resurgence in the way we talk about First Nations peoples and communities. Strength-based, culturally safe practice keeps the focus on capability and opportunity, and it is the foundation of genuine partnership.

### Questions to reflect on

- How does understanding sixty thousand years of custodianship change the way you see this history?
- Why is it important to describe disadvantage as a consequence of history rather than culture?
- How could strength-based language change the way your organisation describes its work?

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- ✓ First Nations peoples cared for this continent for more than sixty thousand years before 1788.
- ✓ Colonisation proceeded on the false premise of terra nullius, and its harms were interconnected.
- ✓ Present day disadvantage is a consequence of history and policy, not of culture or capability.
- ✓ Alongside this history is a powerful and visible story of strength, survival and resurgence.

## Reference material

- **AIATSIS, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies**
  aiatsis.gov.au
- **Australians Together, history and education resources**
  australianstogether.org.au
- **Reconciliation Australia**
  reconciliation.org.au
- **National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Priority Reforms**
  closingthegap.gov.au

## 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 right across Australia, or in person by arrangement.

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