

Australian Aborigines are the [indigenous peoples](#) of [Australia](#). Their ancestors probably arrived in Australia just over 50,000 years ago, although the date remains in dispute.

History British colonisation

In [1770](#), Captain James Cook took possession of the east coast of Australia and named it New South Wales in the name of Great Britain. The Aboriginal population was decimated by British colonisation which began in [1788](#), when news of the land's fertility spread to Europeans causing them to begin settling in the Aborigines' land. A combination of disease, loss of land (and thus food resources) and outright murder reduced the Aboriginal population by an estimated 90% during the [19th century](#) and early [20th century](#). A wave of massacres and resistance followed the frontier. The last massacre was at Coniston in the [Northern Territory](#) in [1928](#). Poisoning of food and water has been recorded on several different occasions.

The number of violent deaths at the hands of whites is still the subject of a vigorous and politically-loaded debate, with some figures—notably Prime Minister [John Howard](#)—rejecting what Howard terms "the black-armband" view of Australian history. Figures of around 10,000 deaths have been advanced by historians such as [Henry Reynolds](#). Historian [Keith Windschuttle](#) claims such numbers are not backed up by documentary evidence, finding evidence existing only for a much smaller number. Reynolds attacks Windschuttle's interpretation of the existing evidence, points out that documented proof that Windschuttle requires is unlikely to be available, and questions Windschuttle's rejection of other forms of evidence such as oral history.

Despite the prominence of the direct violence debate, loss of land was probably more significant as a killer, and there is no doubt that by far the major factor in the decline of Australia's Aboriginal population was disease.

In particular, [chickenpox](#), [smallpox](#), [influenza](#), [venereal diseases](#), and [measles](#) spread in waves throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

Aboriginal people had no understanding of European diseases, and very little of the genetic resistance that Europeans had evolved over the centuries. It is estimated that about 90% of the Aboriginal population decline was the result of disease spreading in advance of the European colonists. As always with infectious diseases, the worst-hit communities were the ones with the greatest population densities where disease could spread more readily. Entire communities in the moderately fertile southern part of the continent simply vanished without trace, often before European settlers arrived or recorded their existence. The large fish-farming economy in south-west Victoria, for example, was entirely unknown to science until the turn of the [21st century](#), when investigations by a team of archaeologists working with and guided by surviving members of a local Aboriginal community began to unearth the foundations of houses and rediscover the irrigation system.

In the arid centre of the continent, where small communities were spread over a vast area, the population decline was less marked, and Aboriginal communities were able to continue in an approximation of their traditional lifestyle for considerably longer—in many cases, until the late 19th century and in a few instances well into the 20th.

Nevertheless, European settlers gradually made their way into the interior, appropriating small but vital parts of the land for their own exclusive use (waterholes and soaks in particular), and introducing sheep, rabbits and cattle, all three of which ate out previously fertile areas and degraded the ability of the land to carry the native animals that were vital to Aboriginal economies.

In general, the first European colonisers were welcomed, or at least not opposed, but there were violent conflicts from time to time frequently culminating in murder. In the [Northern Territory](#), both isolated Europeans (usually travellers) and visiting Japanese fishermen continued to be speared to death on a semi-regular basis until the start of the [Second World War](#) in [1941](#). It is known that some European settlers in the centre and north of the country shot Aboriginal people during this period. It is reasonable to presume that many more Aboriginal people died than Europeans, but such events were seldom recorded and the number of murders is a matter for speculation.

Pre-colonisation

The Aboriginal and [Torres Strait Island](#) people are the indigenous (native) people of Australia. At the time of first contact with the [European colonists](#) in the late [18th century](#), most Aborigines were [hunter-gatherers](#) with a complex oral culture and spiritual values based upon reverence for the land and a belief in the [Dreamtime](#). The Dreamtime is at once the ancient time of creation and the present day reality of dreaming. (Also see [Aboriginal mythology](#)).

The exact timing of the arrival of the Aborigines' ancestors has been a matter of dispute among archaeologists. The most common view is that their ancestors came from [southeast Asia](#) more than 50,000 years ago. This means there have been more than 1250 generations in Australia. The 50,000 BP date is based on a few sites in northern Australia dated using [thermoluminescence](#). A large number of sites have been [radiocarbon dated](#) to around 40,000 BP, leading some researchers to doubt the accuracy of the thermoluminescence technique. Thermoluminescence dating of the Jinmium site in the [Northern Territory](#) suggested a date of 120,000 BP. Although this result received wide press coverage, it has been seriously questioned by most archaeologists.

The Aboriginal people lived through many climatic changes and adapted successfully to the different environments. There is much debate about the degree to which Aboriginal people modified their environment. One controversy revolves around the role of Aborigines in the extinction of the [marsupial megafauna](#). Some argue that natural climate change killed the megafauna. Others claim that, because the megafauna were large and slow, they were easy prey for Aboriginal hunters. A third possibility is that Aboriginal modification of the environment, particularly through the use of [fire](#), indirectly led to their extinction.

It is well known that Aborigines used fire for a variety of purposes; to encourage the growth of edible plants and fodder for prey, to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires, to make travel easier, to eliminate pests, for ceremonial purposes, and just to "clean up country." There is disagreement, however, about the extent to which Aboriginal burning led to large-scale changes in vegetation patterns.

Despite their reputation as stone-age relics, there is evidence of substantial change in Aboriginal culture over time. [Rock painting](#) at several locations in northern Australia has been shown to consist of a sequence of different styles linked to different historical periods. Harry Lourandos has been the leading proponent of the theory that a period of hunter-gatherer intensification occurred between 5000 and 3000 BP. Intensification involved an increase in human manipulation of the environment (for example, the construction of fish traps in [Victoria](#)), population growth, an increase in trade between groups, a more elaborate social structure, and other cultural changes. A shift in [stone tool](#) technology, involving the development of smaller and more intricate points and scrapers, occurred around this time.

There were a great many different Aboriginal groups, each with their own individual culture, belief structure, and [language](#) (approximately 200 different languages at the time of European contact). These cultures overlapped to a greater or lesser extent, and evolved over time. Lifestyles varied a great deal, and the stereotyped image of a proud and naked hunter standing one-legged in the red sand of the central Australian desert cannot be applied across the board. In present-day [Victoria](#), for example, there were two separate communities with an economy based on fish-farming in complex and extensive irrigated pond systems; one on the [Murray River](#) in the state's north, the other in the south-west near [Hamilton](#), which traded with other groups from as far away as the [Melbourne](#) area.

Information found at: http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Australian_Aborigine



