

The First Australians



Australian Government

Department of Immigration and
Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have inhabited Australia for at least 40 000 to 60 000 years.

They have developed diverse cultures, grounded in a land-based spirituality, and adapted to Australian environments.

Today Indigenous people contribute greatly to our nation across many fields, including the arts, media, sport, politics, academia, business and land management.



Indigenous population figures

The population of the First Australians in 1788, when Europeans first settled in Australia, is unknown. But estimates range from 300 000 indigenous people to more than one million, with 750 000 a commonly accepted figure.

This dropped considerably in the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries due to many factors including the impact of introduced diseases.

By June 2005 the Indigenous population will have increased to around 500 000.

At the last Census in 2001, 458 520 Australians identified themselves as Indigenous, around 2.4 per cent of the total population.

About 30 per cent of the Indigenous population lives in major cities, 43 per cent in regional areas and 27 per cent in remote areas.



Classroom activities

- 1 Learn the meanings of local or national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander place names.
- 2 Study a famous Indigenous Australian.
- 3 Find out about the Indigenous people from your area.
- 4 Invite local Indigenous elders to speak at your school.
- 5 Read a Dreamtime story.

Indigenous languages

In 1788, an estimated 250 distinct Indigenous languages were spoken, and many more dialects.

Nowadays the number of languages in active use has dropped considerably.

About 51 000 Australians speak an Indigenous language. Those with the largest numbers of speakers are the Central Australian languages, Pitjantjatjara, Warlpiri and Arrernte.