

Australia and its Aboriginal People

Australia ranks as one of the best places to live in the world by all **indices** of natural beauty, national income, human development, and social welfare. The sixth-largest country in the world by land mass, its small population is concentrated in the highly urbanized east of the Australian continent. Through its isolation from other continents, Australia has become famous for its deserts and animal life, most famously marsupials such as the kangaroo.



To all appearances, Australia is a thoroughly pleasant place to live, with wonderful weather and some of the most awesome deserts in the world. But this beauty conceals some dark realities about the Australian past and the cruel treatment afforded the native people of that continent. These people are known as the **Aborigines** of Australia.

The Aborigines of a Timeless Lost Continent

Who are these people – these Aborigines? They are a primitive and dark skinned people who are thought to have arrived in Australia by boat from South East Asia during the last Ice Age, at least 50,000 years ago. They possess an intriguing culture and a complex language.

They were in Australia when the Europeans arrived. The one thing they lacked was the power of technology, and this led to their defeat by the white invaders.

The British Arrive in Australia

In 1770, **Captain James Cook** explored the coasts of Australia and claimed it for Britain. When settlers began to flow in from the early 1790s, the aboriginal people lost their control of the land.



Gold Fever Brings Wealth and White Migrants

Gold was discovered in Australia in 1851, and the wealth from gold brought immense investment to the cities of Melbourne and Sydney, but this European invasion had a severe and devastating impact on **indigenous** aboriginal people. Their loss of the land, exposure to new diseases, and defeat in violent conflict led to the deaths of a vast number of the aboriginal peoples.

Native land was forcibly taken by the European settlers. The theft continued for generations. A number of aboriginal people were forced

into government reservations and church missions. Violence against the Aboriginal peoples was a common practice, and it has been estimated that violence and disease caused the indigenous population to decline by around 90 percent.

Impact on the Surviving Aboriginal People

European settlement had a devastating impact on the entire Aboriginal population, not only those who died from disease and violence. Many well-meaning white people believed that the aboriginal people were primitive and uncultured, and needed the white race's help. Their somewhat misguided attempts to help the indigenous people are known as **paternalism**. Paternalism means looking after someone and taking care of their interests in the belief that they cannot do it themselves.

Convinced that the 'black races' had to die out, the Europeans thought they could make that process better for aboriginal people by placing them on government reserves or in church missions where they could die out in peace. This new approach to aboriginal affairs was known as '**protection**' policy. Their traditional way of life was **eroded** as they became more and more dependent on handouts from the government and the church just to survive.

From the time they first arrived in Australia, the white settlers had attempted to 'civilize' the Aboriginal people. Now, a policy of **assimilation** began to emerge. Assimilation was designed to integrate aboriginal people into white society by forcing them to live in the same way and hold the same beliefs and values as white Australians. The worst aspect of the assimilation policy was that it led to program according to which many children – particularly children from racially mixed marriages - to be forcibly taken from their parents and placed in group homes. These children have become known as the **Stolen Generations**.

Who were the Children of the Stolen Generations?

The term "Stolen Generations" describes how many Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families from the late

1800s to the 1970s. The idea was that white culture is superior to native culture. By taking the children from their parents, the authorities claimed to “improve the children” by putting them in a superior environment. The children removed were sent to orphanages. Children taken by the government authorities were often not permitted to have visits from their parents or families. Nearly every Aboriginal family was affected by these policies of forcible removal.

Why Were Children Removed?

Throughout the early 1900s, the Australian public was led to believe that aboriginal children were at risk in their own communities, and that they would receive a better education and a more civilized upbringing in government institutions such as orphanages.

The reality was that Aboriginal children were being removed in order to be exposed to ‘white values’ and ‘work habits’ with a view to their being employed by colonial settlers, and to stop their parents, families and communities from passing on their culture, language and identity to them. The children who were targeted for removal by the authorities of the time, in almost all cases, had one parent who was ‘white’ and one who was aboriginal. The objective behind the removal of these children then was often one of racial assimilation – the turning of Aborigines into copies of white people.

The children were removed and then placed in institutions - orphanages. In Western Australia, for example, removed children were often placed in dormitories, trained as farm laborers and domestic servants, and by the age of 14 were sent out to work.

The Experiences of the Children

Once removed, many children were encouraged to abandon and deny their own aboriginal heritage and language in favor of western values, norms, and the English language. The institutions to which the children were taken were to prepare ‘*part-aboriginal*’ children to take their place in a society which treated non-white people as second-class.

The Long Term Impact

Few aboriginal families have escaped the impacts of the forcible removal of children. The end result is a deep sorrow in the psyche or spirit for many aboriginal individuals, families and communities throughout Australia.

In fairness, one must mention that Australians have begun to make up for past injustices. There has emerged a strong reform campaign by both aboriginal and white Australians to make things right for Aborigines. The government formally apologized in 2008 for the past wrongs committed against the indigenous Australians. We can hope that the future will deliver justice to the Aborigines of Australia.