INTRODUCTION

Rainbow serpents carving out large valleys in the landscape, tortoises losing their tails, and chicken hawks stealing fire; Aboriginal culture is composed of fascinating stories used to illustrate the creation story and lessons from the past. Without any written language, these elaborate stories were passed down through generations largely through word of mouth but also by art. Rock paintings find themselves scattered across the arid landscape. Most of these paintings depict past stories meant to illustrate or explain subjects pertinent to the Aboriginal people. More recently, canvas paintings have become more commonplace, reinforcing the ideas presented in rock art.

There is much to be learned from these paintings. The following pages will analyze select paintings and explain how they represent Aboriginal land management practices. We will then explore the impact that European colonization had on these practices. I must note however that many of these paintings and Aboriginal stories I will be unable to accurately describe. Certain aspects of stories are reserved only for Aboriginal people to know, and in many cases are gender specific so cannot be mentioned in papers in fear that the other gender may read the story. However, I will explain the parts that I know and from this limited information, illustrate how they represent Aboriginal treatment of the land. But before we can begin to look at the paintings, we must first understand the motives behind the art, the Dreaming.

THE DREAMING

Unlike the imaginative stories that happen when you and I fall asleep, the Dreaming for Aboriginals is much more important and critical to their culture. Describing stories of ancestral beings that created the natural world, the Dreaming provides a way for the past to be linked to the present. Much more complex than a simple set of stories passed down among generations, Dreaming refers to both the creation story (also known as the Dreamtime), but also to a group or individuals set of beliefs. Aboriginal people refer to Australia as being made up of multiple countries. Each country has specific Dreamings associated to its people. On top of country specific Dreamings, individuals will also be assigned a personal Dreaming once they are born. (Rose, 1996). So what does it mean to have a Dreaming?

Suppose I had Kangaroo Dreaming. This would mean that it would be my responsibility to look after all Kangaroos. If I came across an injured Kangaroo, I would go and take care of it until it was better again. In essence, I would oversee all the Kangaroos and ensure that they were in balance with the natural world around them. It would also be known to all surrounding countries that I had Kangaroo Dreaming, so if anyone ever wanted to paint a picture of a Kangaroo, they would first have to get permission from me. In essence, I adopt my Dreaming and spend the rest of my lifetime looking after it.

And Dreamings not only refer to animals, but to plants and feelings as well. Every aspect of the world around them and how they interact with one another is depicted through a Dreaming. And resultanty, a code of accountability was established which ensured that everyone was always looking
out for the world around them. By assigning individual stewardship towards nature, Aboriginal people take great pride in their Dreaming and environment. For the most part, this is what has allowed them to live in harmony with nature for so long and serves as the fundamental basis of Aboriginal land management practices (Rose, 1996).

PAINTING THE STORY

Role of Fire

Described by Aboriginals as ‘cleaning up the country,’ the use of fire has been a key aspect to their culture throughout history. One Aboriginal elder describes it this way:

“‘Burn grass’ takes place after the wet season when the grass starts drying off. This takes place every year. The country tells you when and where to burn. To carry out this task you must know your country. You wouldn’t, you just would not attempt to burn someone else’s country. One of the reasons for burning is saving country. If we don’t burn our country every year, we are not looking after our country” (Rose, 1996).

Depicted in Figure 1 by the curvy red lines, controlled fires (also known as cool fires) are used as a way to provide food and to manage the land. In the painting, it can be seen that the fire encircles numerous black rings. These rings, which represent watering holes and rock formations, were the places in which animals were most often found (Betz, Songlines Aboriginal Art). By setting fire in such areas, hunters were able to drive the animals into traps and hunting parties which made capturing food easier. The fires also clear the land which makes it simpler to both move around and see the tracks of animals.

The second use of fire by Aboriginal people is known as “firestick” farming. As with using fire for hunting purposes, firestick farming involves burning small patches of land in a regular pattern. Australia is home to over 700 species of eucalypts trees, whose leaves contain very flammable oils. As these fallen leaves and sticks build up on the ground, they create what is known as a fuel load. If not managed properly, fuel loads can grow quite large. If a wild fire comes across large fuel loads the flames can quickly spread, reaching high into the canopy. These fires can become extremely dangerous to those in its’ path. By setting controlled, regular fires to small areas, these fuel loads can be properly managed, ensuring that future fires do not get out of control (Michie, 2005).

On top of controlling fuel loads, cool fires also manage the land by encouraging the growth of new plants. The ash left behind by fires contain valuable nutrients needed by young plants. Not only does the fire provide nutrients to the plants, but many Australian plants rely on fire for flowering and germination. By encouraging new growth, grazing patches are created which attract game such as
kangaroos and wallabies. This once again herds the animals into pre-known locations making it easier to hunt (Rose, 1996).

**Sacred Sites**

One of the cornerstones of Aboriginal culture is the importance of sacred sites. Scattered throughout the continent, each region of Australia has their own separate sacred spots, interlinked through stories of the past Dreamtime. The most well-known sacred site to both Aboriginals and more recently tourists is Uluru. Depicted in Figure 2, Uluru (also known by the European term Ayer’s Rock) is the largest monolith in the world. It is considered to be the birthplace of the Rainbow Serpent, mother to all living creatures.

![Figure 2 – Uluru, one of the most well-known Aboriginal sacred sites](image)

To the Aboriginal people, these sacred places were treated with the highest level of respect. No hunting, gathering of food, or land clearing through the use of fire was permitted around the sacred sites. These sections of the environment in return formed tiny oases scattered throughout the unforgiving Australian landscape. Although these untouched regions of nature were formed primarily because of Aboriginal religious traditions, they had an important side effect on the environment around them. Australia, an arid and dry climate, is a land frequently affected by droughts. However, because sacred sites were completely undisturbed, life managed to flourish around them even during times of drought. This is due to the fact that many sacred sites are centered around rock formations or watering holes. These natural formations provide shade from the sun, shelter, and water for both plant and animal life. Because Aboriginals were forbidden to disturb sacred sites, these areas quickly served as safe havens for animals struggling to survive during droughts. Once the drought was over, animals then returned to the open Australian landscape. This respect for the land ensured that species were able to survive during difficult times without the disruption from human interaction (The Rose Report Two, 2007).

**Soil and Water**

The constant need for both food and water is a search which continually drives hunter-and-gatherer societies to the next location. For Aboriginal communities, the search for water was particularly important. Figures 3 shows a series of waterholes and soaks connected through multiple streams, depicting the constant reliance on water in the desert plains (Betz, Songlines Aboriginal Art).

![Figure 3 – Water in the desert](image)

However, this painting illustrates another important aspect of the Australian desert. We see that half of the painting is a darker shade than its other half. This difference demonstrates the occasional tendency for
the desert to flood (Betz, Songlines Aboriginal Art). Although it seems to be out of place in a desert, Australian soils are very prone to flooding. Composed mostly of red siliceous and earthy sands, the soil is derived largely from sandstone, its parent material, and has been weathered by the wind into fine alluvial sands. This has caused the soils to have very low infiltration rates in dry states. Consequently, it is common for streams to overflow from heavy rains and sweep across the plains in sheets of water. These flash floods taught Aboriginal communities how to read the environment and landscape around them. Predicting when heavy rains would be coming and understanding what types of soil they were on was critical to ensure their clan would survive (The Rose Report One, 2007).

**Size of Groups**

Due to the fact that Aboriginals were constantly moving around, their traveling parties tended to be small, familial groups. However, these groups, depicted in Figure 4 by the small circles, would periodically gather together to celebrate special ceremonies and rituals (Betz, Songlines Aboriginal Art). This periodic pattern of traveling around the country has an important impact on resource use. Many ceremonial sites were only accessible during good seasons and were not traveled to during mediocre conditions. When clans were given the chance to make the journey to the sacred locations, they began to rely upon those resources which were rarely used. This allowed the resources located around the frequented main water sources time to recover (The Rose Report Two, 2007).

**Gathering to Ensure Sustainability**

Aboriginals are prime examples of an indigenous group of people who understand how to live in harmony with their surroundings. The clearest example of this is by observing their gathering techniques. For example, when collecting eggs from birds’ nests, a few eggs are always left behind to ensure that they do not kill off any species. The same is done when collecting seeds.

Depending upon the region, each clan also had different food taboos. These taboos, determined from the clan’s totems, prohibit those individuals from eating that food. The combination of multiple food taboos across the countries helped to ensure sustainability for food sources (Aboriginal Land Use, 2008). Figure 5 shows a few images of bush tucker, the term used to describe the food gathered and hunted by Aboriginals (Betz, Songlines Aboriginal Art).
Ownership vs. Partnership

Overall, the most important aspect of the traditional Aboriginal view of the world is the difference between ownership and partnership. Unlike dominant western society which tends to view humans as having ownership over the land, Aboriginal people believe that they are simply one piece of the environment, partnering with the surrounding plants and animals in which they live alongside. Although a simple painting, Figure 6 has the most important message to share with its audience. Frequently found across the Australian countryside, painted handprints represent the fact that humans are equally apart of nature as the rock in which they are painted on. With this viewpoint in mind, we must rethink how we attempt to understand Aboriginal conservation techniques. In fact, describing Aboriginal land management practices as conservation practice is simply assigning the process with a western concept. To Aboriginal people, the motives behind their treatment towards the land are driven mostly from religious and cultural responsibilities, rather than conservation responsibilities. They don’t see their lifestyle as a conservation movement, but simply as the right thing to do. It is this mindset which allowed their people to live sustainably off of the land for thousands of years (The Rose Report Two, 2007).

EUROPEAN COLONIZATION

However, during the late 1700’s, that balance started to become disrupted at the onset of the arrival of European settlers. Known to Aboriginal people as “wild time,” for nearly 100 years European convicts and soldiers were sent to Australia. Since that time, the Australian landscape has been severely altered to meet the needs, and desires, of western society.

One of the largest changes was the introduction of agriculture and pastoralism. European settlers quickly forced the Aboriginal people into watching over their sheep, while at the same time driving them off of the most productive soils. The introduction of both agriculture and pastoralism, as well as the fact that Europeans didn’t like the ‘appearance’ of their new home, led to the clearing of vegetation. According to Jared Diamond, “of its original native vegetation, 90% has now been cleared, mostly between 1920 and 1980.” The removal of land covering, combined with the tendency for the plains to flood, soon worsened the problem of erosion. Without plant covering, the ground was more directly exposed to sunlight causing the soil to become hotter and drier, further exaggerating the problem of flooding. Even worse, irrigation and dryland salinization became more of an issue. Natural dryland salinization had always been an issue, but the presence of plants would soak up the water from the ground preventing the salts from staying in the soils. Without plants in place to take up water from the soil, deep-lying salt was able to percolate to the surface with the rising water table. Combining this
with the introduction of irrigation, Australia now has some of the most extensive saline seeps in the world.

The combination of these problems has resulted in both major environmental and economic losses. With 60% of its land and 80% of its human water use currently dedicated to agriculture, agriculture today contributes less than 3% of Australia’s gross national product, clearly showing that what Europeans once thought was superior to Aboriginal practices is no longer the case (Diamond, 2006). Aboriginals now face a new situation, tourism. Sacred sites such as Uluru are now popular tourist destinations and no longer play as important a role in providing a safe-haven for animals during drought. Although tourism is hurting portions of Aboriginal land management practices, it is also exposing the public to their lifestyle. Fire is still a well-practiced form of land management and is used to educate tourists about Aboriginals unique way of caring for their land. But the most important stride has been with the Australian government and allowing Aboriginal elders to officially oversee ‘their country.’ The government is beginning to offer apologies and officially recognize the Aboriginal people as original owners of Australia, important steps at creating a bridge between Aboriginals and ‘Europeans.’ (The Rose Report Two, 2007).

**SUMMARY**

In conclusion, a fundamental difference in attitudes toward the land is what distinguishes Aboriginal and European land practices. Stemming from the idea that the environment can be objectified and controlled through human intervention, European colonization resulted in land mismanagement primarily because they felt they could treat it similarly to Europe. However, with an incomplete understanding of the local soil and practices, the land soon deteriorated. Even with all the changes that have happened though, Aboriginals still attempt to adhere to their cultural and religious practices. However the introduction of tourism has begun to alter their lifestyle. Although much of the damage originally caused by European settlers will be hard to reverse, we can still take note of some of the lessons put forth by Aboriginal artists. They paint stories of the past which serve as examples for today; it is up to us to learn from these stories.
REFERENCES


