

Other Aboriginal Uses of Rock – Teacher Notes

Trapping game

Stone was used to construct walls for fish traps. Fish could enter at high tide but narrow stone lined channels trapped them when the tide went out. They would be speared or collected by nets at low water.

Starting fires, communication and firestick farming

Striking together fragments of vein quartz, chert or flint produces sparks. Fire was used to keep warm, cook food, to sharpen sticks for hunting and for communication. Dampier commented that as he sailed along the coast Aboriginal fires were lit on land marking their passage. Before different groups met they often introduced their approach by lighting a fire and waiting a little way off. About 40,000 years ago when Aboriginal people first arrived on our northern shores the climate became significantly drier. Aboriginal people used controlled fire to drive animals towards hunters. The fire also burnt off old tough vegetation and encouraged the growth of young fresh plants which then attracted more animals in later seasons. In the Pilbara it is estimated that some areas were burnt approximately every 10 years

It is thought that the combination of a change to drier climate at the end of the Ice Age and Aboriginal use of fire for hunting contributed to the demise of Australian megafauna and a change to more sclerophyll (dry leaf) eucalyptus vegetation.

There are several sites on You Tube demonstrating how to light a fire using flint. Small sharp silica flakes fly off when the two rocks collide. **If you intend to demonstrate this to your students please ensure safety glasses, gloves and long sleeved shirts are worn.** Blindness and scarring were not uncommon among native stone tool makers.

Shelter

Aboriginal people used caves to provide shelter. Some caves in the Kimberley have indications of regular use for over 30,000 years.

Art - Painting

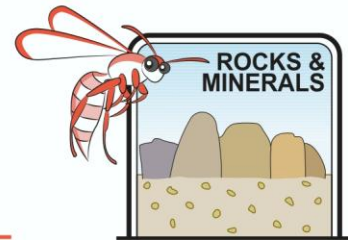
Aboriginal people used ochres, weathered iron and aluminium rich rock as pigments for their rock, wood and body painting. The red, orange and yellow ochre would be ground between stones and mixed with fat, blood or milk. The paste would either be painted using fingers or chewed stick or would be blown from the mouth to produce silhouettes. White was obtained from clay and ash. Black was made from ground charcoal and clay.

It is not considered proper for women or non-Aboriginal people to use ochre. However grout colouring purchased from hardware shops will produce the same effect without offense. PVA glue mixed with water helps the pigment to adhere.



'Water in plenty' from Punda, near Newman WA

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Art - Petroglyphs (rock – drawing)

Petroglyphs are carvings inscribed into weathered rock surfaces. The Burrup Peninsula near Dampier displays some wonderful examples. The weathered surface is removed to reveal fresh rock underneath. There are notes and a student worksheet on petroglyphs in this package.



Petroglyph of Kangaroo. Burrup Peninsula



Water sources

Aboriginal people used soaks which occur where rain water ran from rock outcrops. They often indicated water by carving concentric circles into nearby rock. They also enhanced and covered hollows in the rock where rain water collected. These were called “Gnamma” holes after the snake spirit which was said to have gnawed them. The holes were covered by rock and sticks to prevent animals drinking or fouling the water. Some holes were filled with clean sand as this also reduced the rate of evaporation and stopped animals falling in.

Aboriginal people regarded themselves as guardians of water sources.

The picture on the left shows Walga rock in the Murchison. A large gnamma hole lies in front of a soak at the base of the granite rock. This good source of water made it a major meeting point for tribes in this region.

More information on Aboriginal perspectives on water can be found in the Year 7 WASP package.

An enigma

These curiously shaped elongate basalt pebbles were found in the McDonnell Ranges in Central Australia. The rock they are made from cannot be found within a hundred kilometres. Marks on the sides indicate they have been bashed together. When hit together a pleasant ringing tone is made. They may be tjuringa (story stones) or perhaps something else. They must have been important to have been carried so far.

