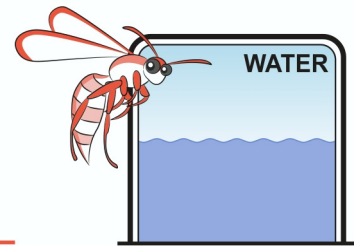


## An Aboriginal Perspective - Teacher Notes



Aboriginal people first arrived in Australia about 40,000 years ago during the last Ice Age when sea levels were lower than they are today. They travelled from north to south following the coast and rivers, even crossing over to Tasmania. Rising seas have covered signs of this early habitation. However midden heaps of abalone shells from seafood feasts lie offshore along our coasts.

As they lived their “hunter gatherer” life their movements were restricted by access to water and often followed seasonal rainfall patterns. Rainfall not only controlled available surface water but also encouraged food supply for the animals they hunted. Most of the Aboriginal population of Australia lived, traded and hunted along rivers.



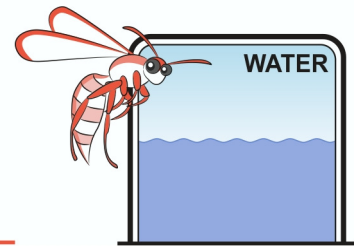
Groups protected and maintained their water sources and vigorously defended them against animal damage and incursion by other groups. Inland, dependable water sources such as rivers, billabongs, wells, soaks and gnamma holes were respected and were often signposted by rock art with concentric circles. (Gnamma are Dreamtime creatures that gnawed the holes into rock).



Gnamma hole Barlangi near Sandstone (infilled – cap stone missing) Photograph by G O Churchard

Their locations were passed on as an essential part of folklore. People also carried water in bailer shells and kangaroo skin bags for short-term use. Water sources would be treated with great respect. Shallow wells in sandy country would be filled with clean sand to stop animals fouling water. Gnamma holes were capped by stones and branches to minimise water loss from evaporation

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and from thirsty animals drinking. Because many groups might meet at good water sources, there were often rules of behaviour to minimise conflict.

On the Swan River men would travel down one bank with women and children travelling down the other. They re-joined by crossing the limestone bar that ran across the mouth of the Swan river. This limestone ridge was exploded by CY O'Connor to open the mouth of the river to ships.



Runoff soak at Walga Rock

Photograph by G O Churchard

Many rivers courses in Western Australia are attributed to the movements of the Wagy (rainbow serpent) carving out the watercourse on its journey across the land. Aboriginal people did not separate water from the land and the sky in their connection to Country. The importance of water is also represented by the many names for billabongs, springs, soaks, rain, mist and cloud types found in most Aboriginal languages. Strangers were sometimes “watered” when entering Country.

It is thought that the bunyip legend may be the result of inland people watching a coastal dance about a seal.

Remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia do not always have guaranteed access to continuous clean potable water. Hospitalisation of Aboriginal children under five years old is primarily due to dehydration resulting from diarrhoea. Water borne disease and high levels of dissolved minerals target the very young and very old. In the past when people only stayed a short time at any one place, disease did not have time to build up to infectious levels and high levels of dissolved mineral salts water could be tolerated for a short time.