

## Water in the Desert – Student Activity

### Water in the Desert

Finding water in the desert has always been important to Aboriginal people and anyone who lives in the Australian Outback. The bush is an enormous place, however, and no one wants to wander aimlessly looking for water. What are some things you could look for in the landscape that can be seen from a distance?

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Plants need water to grow, but some plants need more or less water than others. For example, a cactus or succulent needs very little water, whilst a great big karri tree (common in the forests in southwest Western Australia) needs lots of water. Some types of soils hold more water than other types. For example, a clay-type soil retains much more water than a sandy soil. Some eucalypt trees prefer to grow in clay-type soils, particularly wandoos (tall white eucalypt trees, pictured left), whilst other trees like jarrah and marri prefer the sandy soils.

Why would clay soils retain more water than sandy soils?

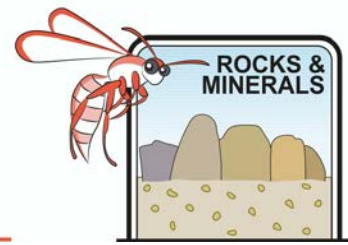
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If you spotted a wandoo tree all by itself out in the desert, what might that tell you?

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### The Canning Stock Route

In 1906, the cattle industry was an important part of life in Western Australia. There were many cattle stations in the Kimberly, but it was difficult and expensive to transport the grown cattle to the big cities of Perth and Kalgoorlie (a booming mining town) down south. The government appointed a man named Alfred Canning to explore and map out a track through the desert for the purpose of more easily transporting cattle. To make the route viable for stockmen, it was critical to find water on the way.

Alfred Canning was able to find water underground and to build wells all along his route by using the knowledge of the local Aboriginal people. However, he mistreated local Aboriginal people in the process, and his approach of sealing off the wells created problems for many more. The Canning Stock Route crosses lands belonging to 15 different language groups. These Aboriginal people had lived near their water sources, carefully managing them so the wells gave water to everyone over the long term. Alfred Canning put lids and locks on wells to restrict their use, and droving cattle used a lot of water at one time.

These lids and locks also affected the quality of the water, and sometimes resulted in animals and people drowning due to falling into the deep wells. People soon began dismantling the wells in order to more safely reach the water. The route was never used by stockmen as much as the government had anticipated, but it had a lasting impact on the Aboriginal people from that area. Today, the Canning Stock Route is a 4WD track hardy adventurers can drive in the winter months.



The Great Sandy Desert receives an average of 370 mm of rain per year; in comparison, Perth receives an average annual rainfall of 730 mm. Using what you know about rainfall and aquifers, discuss possible differences in water use between these two regions.

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