ENCYCLOPEDIC ENTRY

177

Australia and Oceania: Human Geography

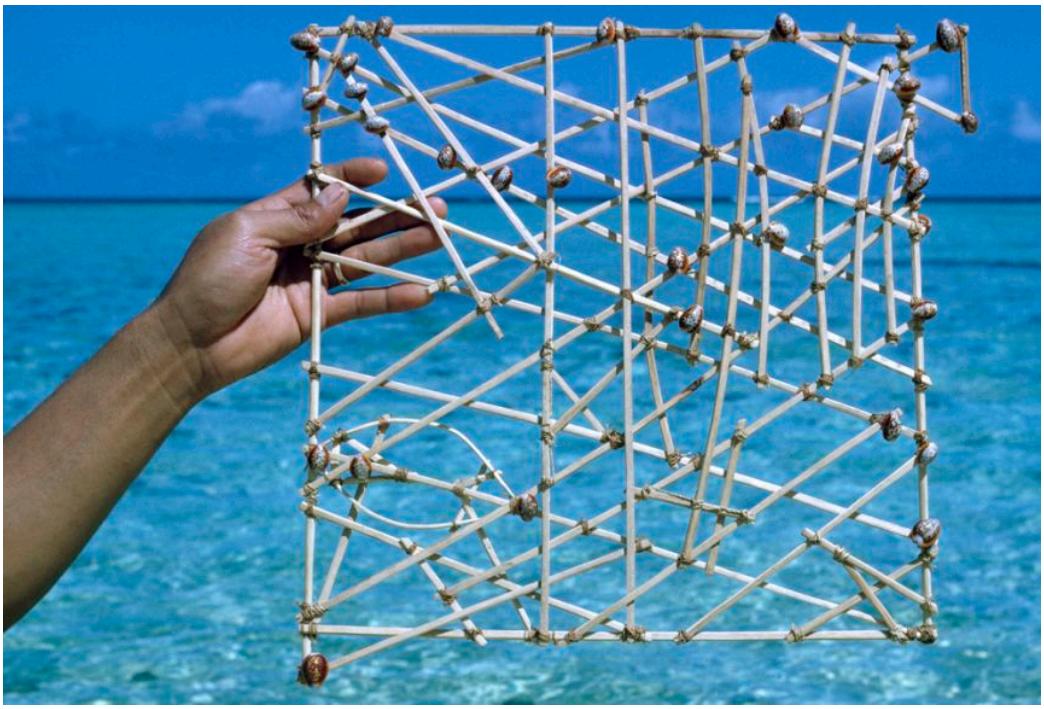
The geography of Oceania defines its historic and contemporary cultures.

GRADES

6 - 12+

SUBJECTS

Geography, Human Geography, Physical Geography, Social Studies, Economics, World History



1/8

PHOTOGRAPH

Micronesian Stick Chart

Micronesian stick charts show wave patterns and currents. The shells represent atolls and islands. Using stick charts (also called rebbelibs, medos, and mattangs) ancient mariners successfully navigated thousands of miles of the South Pacific without compasses, astrolabes or other mechanical devices.

PHOTOGRAPH BY WALTER MEAYERS EDWARDS

ARTICLE VOCABULARY

Learning materials

MAPS

- Explore Australia and Oceania in National Geographic MapMaker

Oceania is a region made up of thousands of islands throughout the Central and South Pacific Ocean. It includes Australia, the smallest continent in terms of total land area. Most of Australia and Oceania is under the Pacific, a vast body of water that is larger than all of Earth's continental landmasses and islands combined. The name "Oceania" justly establishes the Pacific Ocean as the defining characteristic of the region.

Oceania is dominated by the nation of Australia. The other two major landmasses are the microcontinent of Zealandia, which includes the countr of New Zealand, and the western half of the island of New Guinea, made up of the nation of Papua New Guinea. Oceania also includes three island regions: Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia (including the U.S. state of Hawai'i).

Melanesia includes the independent nations of Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and the islands of New Caledonia, a "sui generis collectivity" of France.

Micronesia includes the independent nations of Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Kiribati and Nauru; the Northern Mariana Islands, a commonwealth in political union with the United States; and Guam and Wake Island, two territories of the United States.

Polynesia includes the independent nations of Samoa, Tonga and Tuvalu; the Cook Islands and Nieu, two self-governing islands in free association with New Zealand; Tokelau, an island territory of New Zealand; French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna, two French overseas collectivities; American Samoa, an unincorporated territory of the United States; and the Pitcairn Islands, a British overseas territory.

Australia and Oceania's physical geography, environment and resources, and human geography can be considered separately.

Cultural Geography

Historic Cultures

Indigenous cultures shaped, and were shaped by, the geography of Australia and Oceania. Polynesian culture, for example, developed as Southeast Asian sailors explored the South Pacific. This seafaring culture developed almost entirely from its geography.

Beginning about 1500 B.C.E., sailors began moving east from the island of New Guinea. The farther they traveled, the more advanced their navigatio became. Polynesians developed large, double-hulled vessels called outrigger canoes. Outrigger canoes could sail very quickly across the Pacific, but they could also be easily maneuvered and paddled in rough weather. Along with outrigger canoes, historic Polynesian culture relied on a sophisticated navigation system based on observations of the stars, ocean swells and the flight patterns of birds.

Polynesians were able to domesticate plants and animals and transport them to islands that lacked native flora and fauna. This allowed Polynesians to establish stable, permanent communities throughout the islands of the South Pacific. By 1000 C.E., these seafarers had colonized the islands of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. In the process, they established a unique, ocean-oriented culture that persists today.

Indigenous cultures of Australia and Oceania also changed the environments in which they lived. As they explored the South Pacific, Polynesians brought agriculture to isolated islands, for example.

In another example, the Maori had a significant impact on New Zealand's forests and fauna. Between the 14th and the 19th centuries, Maori reduced New Zealand's forest cover by about half, largely through controlled fires

used to clear land for agriculture.

Nearly 40 species of birds became extinct during this brief period of time. The mass extinction happened because of habitat destruction, hunting and competition with introduced species. Dogs (*Canis familiaris*) and rats, for example, are species that were introduced to the islands of New Zealand b the Maori.

One bird species, the moa, became extinct within a century of human arriva to New Zealand. Moa were giant birds, almost 4 meters (12 feet) tall and 23 kilograms (510 pounds). Giant moa, unable to fly, were such easy prey that the Maori were able to feed large villages with a single bird. Maori began to discard as much as half of the bird's weight as undesirable meat or useless material such as feathers. This wasteful hunting strategy, however, caused the moa to become extinct by about 1400. The extinction of the moa led to the co-extinction of the Haast's eagle, the largest bird of prey ever to have existed.

The environment also affected traditional beliefs and cultural practices of the indigenous communities in Australia. Although there are hundreds of indigenous groups native to Australia, these groups use the unified name Aboriginal Australians, or Aborigines.

Aboriginal Australian cultures often had strong spiritual relationships with the local environment. They developed myths to explain the landscape. Modern scientific research has proven that many of these myths are fairly accurate historic records.

One series of Aboriginal myths explains that the Australian coastline was once near the edge of the Great Barrier Reef, for example. The reef is now dozens, even hundreds, of meters from the shore. Geologists have proven that this story is accurate. During the last glacial period, when sea levels were lower, Australia's coastline did extend kilometers into what is now the ocean.

Contemporary Cultures

Australia and Oceania's vast, ocean-focused geography continues to influence contemporary cultures. Cultural groups and practices focus on uniting peoples and consolidating power in the face of their isolated locations and small populations. These unifying movements are seen at both national and regional levels.

Papua New Guinea demonstrates this cultural unification at the national level. The country is one of the most diverse in the world, with more than 700 Indigenous groups and 850 Indigenous languages. Indigenous groups are explicitly recognized "as viable units of Papua New Guinean society" within the nation's constitution. The constitution also identifies and promotes traditional practices as part of contemporary culture.

The indigenous groups' traditional lands are recognized by the national legislature as customary land title. Customary land title is a recognition that ownership of traditional, tribal land will remain with the Indigenous community. Almost all of the land in Papua New Guinea is held with customary land title; less than 3% of the land is privately owned.

Indigenous groups regularly work with the government and private

companies to harvest the resources on tribal land. Conflicts over land use and resource rights continue to occur between indigenous groups, the government and corporations.

Cultural practices, especially in sports and the arts, aim to unite Australia and Oceania's isolated peoples at a regional level. Rugby is a very popular sport throughout the continent—more popular than soccer, baseball or cricket. Rugby league is the national sport of Papua New Guinea. Rugby union, which has fewer players and slightly different rules than rugby league, is the national sport of New Zealand, Samoa, Fiji and Tonga.

Australia and New Zealand have world-famous teams in both rugby league and rugby union. Australia has won the Rugby League World Cup a record nine times and the Rugby (Union) World Cup twice. The two countries have often hosted these tournaments, sometimes jointly, and many countries participate. The tournaments, regional play, and friendly games that occur between these countries make rugby a truly unifying sport in Australia and Oceania.

The arts are another unifying cultural practice in Australia and Oceania. The Festival of Pacific Arts is a festival hosted every four years in a different country. The festival encourages diverse expressions of Pacific-wide culture, focusing on traditional song and dance. More than 2,000 participants from 27 countries attend the festival. Each country is represented by a group of artist-delegates and each festival is centered on a specific theme. The theme of the last festival, held in Pago Pago, American Samoa, was "Threading the Oceania *'Ula*." The *'ula* is a necklace that represents respect warmth, and excitement for festive occasions and is used to greet new

guests. The ʻula here symbolizes the hospitality of the Oceanic community.

The tourism industry is the unifying economic force in Australia and Oceania. Tourism is the continent's largest industry, measured by the number of jobs it creates and the money it spreads throughout the Pacific Islands.

Tourism, however, also can negatively affect the economies and ecosystem of Australia and Oceania's island nations. It can lead to overcrowding and depletion of isolated islands' scarce resources. Tourism often focuses on fishing and other recreational water sports. The waters around many Pacific Islands, as well as parts of Australia, have been overfished. Pollution from boats and cruise ships can litter the tropical ocean, while runoff from the islands may also contain pollutants.

Organizations like the Oceania Sustainable Tourism Alliance aim to promot the sustainable management of natural resources, conserve biodiversity and adapt to climate change throughout the continent. Sustainable tourisr supports development of local businesses, as opposed to global corporations such as international hotel chains, thus strengthening local an regional economies.

Political Geography

Australia and Oceania's history and development have been shaped by its political geography. Political geography is the internal and external relationships between its various governments, citizens and territories.

Historic Issues

The European colonization of Australia and Oceania defined the continent' early political geography. European exploration began in the 16th century when Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan landed on the Mariana Islands. European colonization was fueled by a desire to defend nationalist pride, increase trade opportunities, and spread the Christian faith. England, France, Germany and Spain became the most important colonial powers in the region. Today, many countries, especially Australia, New Zealand and New Caledonia, have majority European populations and a strong European culture. English is the dominant language throughout most of the continent.

Indigenous populations were treated harshly during the colonial period. European powers claimed Australia and Oceania's lands as their own because they considered them *terra nullius*, or a "no man's land" inhabited by heathen natives. Colonizers implemented their own systems of governance, land management, and trade. These efforts had severe consequences that continue to affect indigenous groups and their cultural systems today.

Foreign forces also transformed Australia and Oceania's political landscape during World War II and the Cold War. The Pacific theater was the major battle zone between Japan and the Allies during WWII. More than 215,000 Japanese, Australian and American troops died in the southern Pacific theater between 1942 and 1945.

The Battle of the Coral Sea (1942) took place in the waters between Australia, New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands. The Battle of the Coral Sea, fought by American and Australian troops against the Imperial Japanese

Navy, was significant because it was the first battle in history in which aircraft carriers were involved. The Battle of Guadalcanal (1942-43) is recognized as one of the turning points of the war. Guadalcanal is part of the Solomon Islands. In a horrific, six-month battle, the American forces defeated the Japanese, with huge numbers of casualties on both sides.

As a result of the military campaigns in Australia and Oceania, many territories were given to Allied forces, such as the Solomon Islands (United Kingdom), the Northern Mariana Islands (United States) and the Marshall Islands (United States).

During the Cold War, the isolated islands of Australia and Oceania became a popular location for American, British and French nuclear testing. The most famous of these experiments were carried out on the Bikini Atoll, part of the Marshall Islands. The U.S. began testing atomic weaponry at the Bikini Atoll in 1946.

These tests had devastating human and environmental impacts on the islands. Many people were forcibly removed from their island homes. People who witnessed the tests suffered from high rates of cancer. The ecosystem and habitats of the island were permanently altered. For example, the detonation of the world's first hydrogen bomb, on the Enewetak Atoll, Marshall Islands, completely vaporized the island of Elugelab. Millions of gallons of water in Elugelab's lagoon turned to steam, and the coral reef was fractured.

The last nuclear test in the region, on the island of Mururoa, French Polynesia, was conducted in 1996.

Contemporary Issues

Over the last half-decade, Australia and Oceania's indigenous groups have fought to extend their political rights and cultural significance in their hom countries. New Zealand's Maori and Aboriginal Australians are the main drivers of this movement.

The Maori Party was established in 2004 to represent the rights of the Maori in New Zealand. The party's achievements for the Maori people are numerous. The party founded the Maori Economic Taskforce to increase economic opportunity, secured a multi-million dollar economic package fo environmental initiatives, and created a yearly fund of $5 million to help Maori health providers develop culturally sensitive programs.

The Maori Party is also working to incorporate the Treaty of Waitangi with New Zealand's constitution. Signed in 1840, the Treaty of Waitangi recognized Maori land and property ownership, and gave Maori the same rights as the British. The treaty, however, was never truly enforced, and the Maori suffered from mistreatment and discrimination. Today, the Maori Party is looking to legitimize the Treaty of Waitangi in order to claim lands lost during colonization.

Aboriginal Australians, much like the Maori, can be defined as a marginalized population, or a group of people who are treated as less significant than the majority population. Aborigines suffer from disproportionately high rates of disease, imprisonment, and unemployment. Aborigines' life expectancy is about 18 to 19 years less than non-indigenous people.

Aborigines have a tense relationship with their home country. In 2007, the Northern Territory National Emergency Response, a federal program, was created to address concerns about Aboriginal communities in Australia's isolated Northern Territory. The program put sanctions on several Aboriginal communities that were charged with child abuse. Sanctions included restrictions on the purchase of alcohol and access to pornography. These sanctions have been condemned as racist by the United Nations.

The government of Australia is working to resolve these tensions. In 2010, Ken Wyatt became the first Aboriginal Australian elected to the Australian House of Representatives. In 2008, former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued a public apology to members of the "Stolen Generations." The Stolen Generations were Aboriginal children taken from their families and raised under European supervision in group homes. This policy began in 1869 and officially ended in 1969.

Future Issues

Australia and Oceania's political and financial future rests largely on its efforts to minimize the effects of climate change. In fact, many scientists argue that Australia and Oceania is the continent most vulnerable to climate change because of its climate and geography.

The heavily coastal populations of the continent's small islands are vulnerable to flooding and erosion because of sea level rise. Fiji's shoreline has been receding about 15 centimeters (6 inches) per year over the last 90 years, while Samoa has lost about half a meter (1.5 feet) per year during that same time span. Warming temperatures have severely damaged many of

Australia and Oceania's coral reef ecosystems, contributed to major droughts in Australia, and increased glacier melt in New Zealand and Papua New Guinea.

Governments and intergovernmental agencies in Australia and Oceania are taking steps to minimize the effects of climate change. As part of the 2009 Copenhagen Accord, countries such as Australia and New Zealand agreed to reduce carbon emissions. Other Oceanic countries, such as Tuvalu, argued that the international agreement unfairly disadvantages developing countries, especially small island states.

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) advocates increased support from the international community to assist these island states in their efforts to adapt to climate change. As part of the Pacific Environment Community initiative, the PIF secured about $66 million from Japan to support projects that focus on solar power generation and seawater desalination.

Audio & Video

National Geographic: An Aboriginal Homecoming

Wayfinders: A Pacific Odyssey

Website

National Geographic Travel: Australia and Oceania

Credits

User Permissions

RELATED RESOURCES

National Geographic Headquarters

1600 M St. NW

Washington, DC 20036