Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Indigenous Australians were the first people to live in Australia and on its nearby islands. Australia has two Indigenous peoples: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (ATSI). Aboriginal Australians began living in mainland Australia more than 60,000 years ago. Torres Strait Islanders have lived on islands between Australia and Papua New Guinea for about 10,000 years.

Each group of people lived a hunter-gatherer way of life. Men hunted larger animals such as emus and kangaroos. Women and children gathered berries, fruits, eggs and plants. People who lived on the islands or the coast caught animals like fish, turtles and dugongs and gathered shellfish like mussels and oysters.

The natural world around them (land, sea, waterways and skies) is very special to traditional ATSI people. Aboriginal people use the word Country to refer to the place where they live. Torres Strait Islanders use the word Place. Everything traditional ATSI people need comes from the environment: their food, clothing, shelter, medicines and tools.

Aboriginal people have Dreaming stories to explain how the land, people, animals and plants came to be. Torres Strait Islanders use different words to name their Creation stories, depending where they live. For example, Zogo Time is used in the islands in the east.

ATSI people did not use fences and paths to mark out the area where different groups of people lived and roamed. They used natural barriers like rivers, mountains, waterholes and trees. Each Aboriginal group has a name which usually comes from its language and land. For example, Nyungar or Noongar (south-west of Western Australia), Koori (southern New South Wales and Victoria). Torres Strait Islanders use the name of their island community; e.g. Yam or Badu.

There used to be hundreds of Aboriginal languages. Now there are only about 50 in use. Torres Strait Islanders have two traditional languages. Meriam Mir is spoken by Islanders in the east and Kala Lagaw Ya by those in the central and west.