

Many Human Footprints – *forty thousand years walking the Country*

Aboriginal people have been on the continent for at least 65,000 years. They developed an intricate connection to the land, even in its most inhospitable regions. They adapted and survived major climatic and environmental changes over that time. Archaeological fieldwork has placed Aboriginal occupation of the Lake Eyre Basin at around 40,000 years ago.



Language

Of the 250 language groups, nearly 70 were in the Lake Eyre Basin. In South Australia, the main groups along the Diamantina River were the Wangkangurru Yarluyandi, with the Dieri who lived south of the Warburton River along Cooper Creek.

Dieri group adorned for corroboree, Lake Killalpaninna



A Land Formed by the Creation Ancestors

A common factor for all these diverse language groups was their spiritual connection to Country. The landscape features and the laws governing life were laid down by the deeds and journeys of the great Dreamtime Ancestors. Knowledge of these ceremonial songs and stories attained throughout life provided a map of food and water sources that sustained a rich lifestyle.



Interaction and Pastoralism

Pastoralists were creeping northwards by the late 1850s. By 1859 there were 10,000 sheep on Blanchewater Station, which extended to Lake Hope. Clashes arose as the first sheep and cattle runs established by Thomas Elder, at Lake Hope, competed with Aboriginal groups for vital water and food resources.

Blanchewater Station was a stepping point for explorers who went looking for the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition in 1860. A.W. Howitt, one of the explorers leading a search party for Burke and Wills, was told by Dieri head-man Jalina-piramurana to tell the “white fellows”, who they had heard were coming to settle in their Country, to “set down with their cattle on one side of the lake, and leave the other side to the Dieri, so that they might live peaceably together”. Howitt then noted: “After the settlement of the district the usual consequences followed”.



Explorer A.W Howitt meeting with the Dieri.

Survival in Constant Change

The many different eco-systems in the Lake Eyre Basin desert river system provided its Aboriginal inhabitants with a rich diversity of resources. As custodians of Country, they maintained these seasonal resources through flood and drought.

In ‘boom’ times when Nardoo was plentiful, Aboriginal people ground Nardoo seeds into flour, from which they made cakes, using large grinding stones.

Early explorers Burke and Wills tried, unsuccessfully, to survive on Nardoo. Without the traditional knowledge they prepared it incorrectly. They both died from exhaustion and malnutrition in June 1861.

Traditional Owners at the Killalpaninna Mission site church



Frontier Law and Retribution

These search parties led to the opening up of the country along the Cooper and Diamantina catchments. The intrusion of more settlers and stock led to conflict and resistance. Despite the presence of police posts at Kopperamanna and Andrewilla Waterhole, a party, possibly supported by the police, took part in a massacre at Koonchera Waterhole. The arrival of German missionaries in 1868 at Lake Kopperamanna and Lake Killalpaninna initially added to the tension.

The Lutheran mission at Lake Killalpaninna eventually provided a refuge for Dieri and many other groups seeking protection from the conflicts between white pastoralists and Traditional Owners.