

# Indigenous Australians know we're the oldest living culture – it's in our Dreamtime



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Perhaps the DNA research confirming Indigenous Australians as the oldest living culture will make the rest of the world take note of rich culture and traditions contained in our oral history



*Traditional practices of fire burning are gaining a broader consideration from pastoralists, conservationists and other interested parties. Photograph: Fairfax Media/Getty Images*

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Australia's Aboriginal people have already been using the tag of "world's oldest living culture" before [given scientific confirmation in a recent study of the DNA](#) of Australia's Indigenous people. One likely response to the finding from the subjects of the research is a satisfied, "I told you so".

Scientific research often reaffirms what is in an oral history. This has been particularly so in Australia where cultural stories – often referred to as Dreamtime stories – that describe land movements and floods fit in with what later becomes known about seismic and glacial shifts from the geological record. For example, [Associate Professor Nick Reid and Professor Patrick D. Nunn have analysed stories](#) from Indigenous coastal communities and have seen a thread of discussions about the rise of tidal waters that occurred between 6,000 and 7,000 years ago. And these are the newer stories.

Other stories collected from around Cairns showed that stories recalled a time when the land covered the area that is now the Great Barrier Reef and stories from the Yorke Peninsula reference a time when there was no Spencer Gulf (it is now 50m below sea level). Reid and Nunn hypothesise that this could make these stories over 12,000 years old.

So oral history and observation can reinforce what the science says. Or science can confirm what we've been saying all along. For many older Indigenous people, the cultural stories will seem the more trustworthy. There are historic reasons why Indigenous people remain suspicious of science practiced by Europeans, who have not yet countered the legacy of their obsessions with head measuring and blood quantum.

Aboriginal culture and traditions have been often viewed through a Eurocentric gaze that has failed to see the wisdom contained within its values and teachings. Cultural stories were often illustrated for children without looking for deeper meanings and codes. These stories didn't just tell a tale of how the echidna got its spikes, they contained – like parables in the bible – a set of messages about the importance of sharing resources in a hunter-gatherer society and the consequences of selfishness.

What to European eyes looked like a primitive society contained technology, farming and aquaculture methods that would have been instructive. Bruce Pascoe in his ground-breaking book, [Dark Emu: Black Seeds – Agriculture or Accident](#), has shown from his research that Indigenous farming methods were sophisticated and extensive. The first Europeans to venture into Aboriginal lands would describe [boundless grassy plains](#).

[Grindstones found at Cuddie Springs](#) near Walgett in western New South Wales had been used to grind seeds more than 30,000 years ago. The Egyptians, Pascoe points out, didn't start baking until 17,000 BC so their title as the world's oldest bakers seems under threat from a culture that started the practice almost 15,000 years earlier. This fact alone provides a very different perspective on Australian Aboriginal culture.

The problem was, Europeans often didn't know what they were looking at when observing Indigenous people in their culture. Often blinded by their confident belief in their own racial superiority and their arrogant perception of the inferiority of all other races, it seemed impossible that other cultures could have any insights to offer. In his book, [The Biggest Estate on Earth](#), [Bill Gammage](#) deconstructs the sketches and paintings that the first colonists made of the landscape of the Sydney basin and what is revealed is not wild bushland but [carefully farmed landscapes](#) including tracts of land cleared specifically for luring grazing animals.

Pascoe identifies other aspects of Aboriginal cultural practice that have been overlooked in the colonial era – from sophisticated fishing practices to the establishment of permanent structures.

But they are not all lost. There continues, for example, to be a heavy interest in the [traditional practices of fire burning](#), which are gaining a broader consideration from pastoralists, conservationists and other interested parties who are starting to understand that perhaps a culture that has lived on a land for around 60,000 years might know a thing or two about how to maintain its delicate ecosystems.

Like many dispossessed and colonised peoples around the world, Aboriginal communities across Australia face enormous social problems including poverty, homelessness, high rates of incarceration and poor health. In communities where the social fabric has unravelled, issues like violence and substance abuse are rife.

A part of the dominant narrative, echoing the ethnocentrism of colonial thinking, is that Aboriginal culture is violent and uncivilised. Current social problems that are the result of dispossession, marginalisation and intergenerational trauma often deflects attention away from what remains the ancient wisdom of the world's oldest living culture. Governments in particular have been quick to use the rhetoric that Indigenous culture is part of the problem not part of the solution.

However, what is clear is that where Indigenous culture is strong, there are more positive outcomes for Indigenous communities. This has been shown particularly in the area of education with programs such as the [Stronger Smarter](#) approach developed by [Indigenous educationalist Chris Sarra](#) and programs for young Indigenous men, such as Shane Phillips' [Tribal Warrior programs](#). A connection with culture and a pride in heritage can be important complements to achieving success in other ways.

As western science puts a new lens on Australian Aboriginal culture, perhaps it can assist the rest of the world to see what Aboriginal people have seen all along.