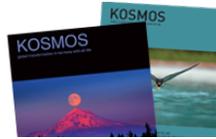




KOSMOS
Journal for Global Transformation



SUBSCRIBE TO KOSMOS JOURNAL
print or digital editions

Transforming: ECONOMICS GOVERNANCE LAW MEDIA BUSINESS EDUCATION SCIENCE SPIRITUALITY
GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP PEACEBUILDING LOCAL RESILIENCE THE COMMONS LIVING EARTH CONSCIOUSNESS MORE TOPICS

Kosmos Journal / November 17, 2015 Newsletter / Indigenous Stories: Enduring Memories of Ancient Sea Rise

Indigenous Stories: Enduring Memories of Ancient Sea Rise



By John Upton via Climate Central

To most of us, the rush of the oceans that followed the last ice age seems like a prehistoric epoch. But the historic occasion was dutifully recorded — coast to coast — by the original inhabitants of the land Down Under.

Without using written languages, Australian tribes passed memories of life before, and during, post-glacial shoreline inundations through hundreds of generations as high-fidelity oral history. Some tribes can still point to islands that no longer exist — and provide their original names.

That's the conclusion of linguists and a geographer, who have together identified 18 Aboriginal stories — many of which were transcribed by early settlers before the tribes that told them succumbed to murderous and disease-spreading immigrants from afar — that they say accurately described geographical features that predated the last post-ice age rising of the seas.

"It's quite gobsmacking to think that a story could be told for 10,000 years," Nicholas Reid, a

linguist at Australia's University of New England specializing in Aboriginal Australian languages, said. "It's almost unimaginable that people would transmit stories about things like islands that are currently underwater accurately across 400 generations."

The Australian National University led research, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, tracked prehistoric changes in sea levels. The study included this figure, showing the oceans rising more than 100 meters (330 feet) during the past 20,000 years. How could such tales survive hundreds of generations without being written down?

"There are aspects of storytelling in Australia that involved kin-based responsibilities to tell the stories accurately," Reid said. That rigor provided "cross-generational scaffolding" that "can keep a story true."

Reid and a fellow linguist teamed up with Patrick Nunn, a geography professor at the University of the Sunshine Coast. They combed through documented Aboriginal Australian stories for tales describing times when sea levels were lower than today. The team analyzed the contours of the land where the stories were told and used scientific reconstructions of prehistoric sea levels to date the origins of each of the stories

How do Indigenous Tales Survive Centuries?

Excerpt from an interview With Patrick Nunn and Nick Reid

A hint about how these stories may have survived for so long is the practice of storytelling used by contemporary Aboriginal clans.

"Western culture tends to value innovation whereas Aboriginal cultures throughout Australia tend to be deeply conservative," says Reid. They value consistency.

Reid says clans have very explicit mechanisms for teaching people to tell oral histories, as well as tasking others to ensure the orator tells stories accurately.

For instance, when children are told tales by their parents, they are tasked with quizzing the details and cross-checking them with

Connect to Kosmos



Join Our Newsletter

Keep up-to-date with fresh news you need to know about.

Sign-up is FREE!

your email address

Sign Up



Read a Free Sample Issue

Browse a sample digital edition of Kosmos Journal on your computer or mobile device.

Read now



Donate to Our Mission

We depend greatly on the generosity of donations from our readers like you. Donate to Kosmos

Popular Articles this Week

[What Does it Mean to be a Global Citizen?](#)

[Collective Presencing: A New Human Capacity](#)

[Editorial | Activists for the Evolution of Life](#)

[A Dark Night of the Soul and the Discovery of Meaning](#)

Latest News



[Editorial | Activists for the Evolution of Life](#)

Jan 12, 2016

by Kosmos Editor, Nancy Roof The only way I can deal with stories of...

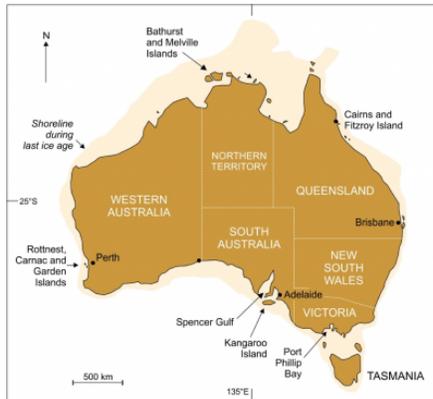
— back to times when fewer than 10 million people were thought to have inhabited the planet.

Nunn has drafted a paper describing sea level rise history in the 18 identified Aboriginal Australian stories, which he plans to publish in a peer-reviewed journal. He's also scouring the globe for similar examples of stories that describe ancient environmental change.

"There's a comparably old tradition among the Klamath of Oregon that must be at least 7,700 years old – it refers to the last eruption of Mount Mazama, which formed Crater Lake," Nunn said. "I'm also working on ancient inundation stories and myths from India, and I've been trying to stimulate some interest among Asian scholars."

The highlights of the results of the trio's preliminary analysis of six of the ancient Australian tales was presented during an indigenous language conference in Japan. The stories describe permanent coastal flooding. In some cases, they describe times when dry land occupied space now submerged by water. In others, they tell of wading out to islands that can now only be reached by boat.

"This paper makes the case that endangered Indigenous languages can be repositories for factual knowledge across time depths far greater than previously imagined," the researchers wrote in their paper, "forcing a rethink of the ways in which such traditions have been dismissed."



Map showing locations of Aboriginal stories dealing with rising seas. Source: University of the Sunshine Coast

Port Phillip Bay

Numerous tribes described a time when the bay was mostly dry land. An 1859 report produced for the state government described tribal descendants recalling when the bay "was a kangaroo ground." The author of that report wrote that the descendants would tell him, "Plenty catch kangaroo and plenty catch opossum there." The researchers determined that these stories recount a time when seas were about 30 feet lower than today, suggesting that the stories are 7,800 to 9,350 years old.

Kangaroo Island

The Ngarrindjeri people tell stories of Ngurunderi, an ancestral character steeped in mythology. In one of their stories, Ngurunderi chased his wives until they sought refuge by fleeing to Kangaroo Island — which they could do mostly by foot. Ngurunderi angrily rose the seas, turning the women into rocks that now jut out of the water between the island and the mainland. Assuming this dark tale is based on true geographical changes, it originated at a time when seas were about 100 feet lower than they are today, which would date the story at 9,800 to 10,650 years ago.

Tiwi Islands

A story told by the Tiwi people describes the mythological creation of Bathurst and Melville islands off Australia's northern coastline, where they live. An old woman is said to have crawled between the

their grandparents.

"People take these relationships very seriously," says Reid.

"The beauty of the relationship is that it is cross-generational and that provides a kind of scaffolding that's very successful at keeping stories accurate, not succumbing to a Chinese whispers effect." This feature of oral tradition appears to be specific to Australia.

Reid says most of the stories were recorded by "well-meaning white people who interacted with Aboriginal people in the early days of the colony" such as missionaries and government surveyors.

Academic historians have often scoffed at oral traditions, regarding them as fables or legends devoid of facts.

"Anglo-Australians have really ignored what Aboriginal people may know about Australia for quite a long time. We've come in and superimposed Western science," says Nunn.

Only recently have scientists realised these stories may contribute to our understanding of natural phenomena, says Nunn.

The pair are keen to track down more version of stories as well as new tales.

"We suspect we're just scratching the surface," says Reid.



Extreme inequality as the antithesis of human rights

Jan 12, 2016 2 by Philip Alston, via Open Democracy 'Even in the realm of civil and...



To Change Everything, It's Going To Take Everything...

Jan 12, 2016 1 by John Foran, via Common Dreams OK, here's the idea. We're in a crisis...



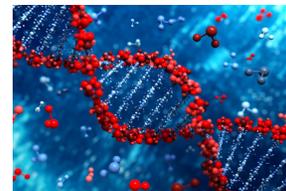
Civic Enterprise | Rethinking the Think Tank

Jan 12, 2016 0 By Anne-Marie Slaughter and Ben Scott, via Washington Monthly 'People no...



Transpartisan | A Working Definition

Jan 12, 2016 2 via Mediator's Foundation Partisan: adopting as one's own a single...



We Were Global Citizens Before We Were Born

Jan 12, 2016 2 by Mark Gerzon an excerpt from Kosmos Journal The truth is: we were...



islands, followed by a flow of water. The story is interpreted as the settling of what now are islands, followed by subsequent flooding around them, which the researchers calculate would have occurred 8,200 to 9,650 years ago.



Featured image: A young Tiwi islander.
Source: Celine Massa/Flickr

← A Tale of Two Futures: Planetary Realism in the Time of Climate Change

Telling it Slant →

Share this:



Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment

Name *

Email *

Website



CAPTCHA Code *

Post Comment

Reader comments on "Indigenous Stories: Enduring Memories of Ancient Sea Rise"

1.  Melinda
November 26, 2015 at 9:38 am

I would love to read these 'stories.' Has anyone written them down? They sound amazing!

Reply ↓

Follow Kosmos on Twitter

Join the Conversation on Facebook



Kosmos Journal
10,843 likes

Liked Sign Up

You like this

Your Kosmos

- Customer Service
 - Returns and Refunds
 - Privacy Policy
 - Terms of Service
 - Contact Us
- About
- Log in to My Account
- Subscribe to Kosmos Journal



Kosmos Journal @KosmosJournal 1h
Art of the Tarot | The Moon
Happy Full Moon Weekend!

The Moon in Tarot is said to represent the intuition,... <fb.me/4EqhBk1oa>

Sign Up For Our Newsletter

Sign-up is FREE!
No SPAM guaranteed.
Keep up-to-date with fresh news you need to know about.



Kosmos Journal @KosmosJournal 21 Jan
In the current edition of Kosmos Journal, a letter from Editor Nancy Roof....
<fb.me/29kBP0yRz>

Sign-up is FREE!



Kosmos Journal @KosmosJournal 21 Jan
Connecting the dots increases the impact of our fight against injustices. Inequality continues to expand across...
<fb.me/27OyUoVnf>