It has sometimes been maintained that Aboriginal people were an unchanging people in an unchanging land before Europeans arrived in Australia. Essentially, this argument claims that Aboriginal people in 1788 CE were the same as Aboriginal people in 48,222 BCE or even earlier, which is one suggested date of when people first arrived on the continent from Papua New Guinea.

Perhaps the people who support this claim believe that more than 50,000 years of climate, tectonic, and evolutionary change did nothing to influence Aboriginal life and environment? Or perhaps they meant to say that Aboriginals only changed as much as their environment demanded? Or perhaps they meant that the overarching models that governed their interactions with the land—their spirituality and beliefs—never changed?

Whichever way one interprets the statement, it cannot be true. Pre-colonization, there were hundreds of language groups spread over 7,682,300 square kilometers throughout 50,000 (or more) years. There was bound to be change both geographically and temporally in both the land and the people.

What really influenced this idea was mid 19th century social Darwinism and philosophy, which said that Indigenous peoples were undeveloped and therefore had not changed in any substantial way from their “primitive” ancestors. They did not believe that Aboriginals had developed complex culture, which they saw as necessitating settlement, European methods of agriculture, and many material possessions. They did not understand the complex social and kinship systems that Aboriginal people had developed over time that tied them to country through totems, rituals, and spirituality.

The European misconception of Aboriginals as an unchanging people in an unchanging land becomes more understandable when concentrating on the differences between hunter-gatherers and agriculturalists in terms of material possessions, methods of managing the land, and relative isolation.

However, Aboriginal people were not unchanging; they were dynamic and adaptive in both their environment and their society. While their culture did develop a strong value of continuity over time, indigenous Australians in turns changed their environment and were changed by it through methods of control and through climate change. They themselves also changed, splintered, and evolved intellectually and physically as they filled the continent and accumulated centuries of knowledge and experience. The process continues.

By Celeste Guhl (Intern)
Fact or Fiction?
By Karen Smith

The Aboriginal Heritage Office, as it works in schools and communities, often comes across the use of resources, particularly stories, films, and books, that are from Arnhem Land or the Kimberley area and may or may not be outdated or at least have little relevance to the area in which they are being used. Sources of misinformation abound while truly reliable information is lean. No wonder communities are struggling to understand it all. But our communities are in danger of simply filling the void because they want information and will accept any form of information to tick the box.

The broader Sydney area at the time of European colonisation and invasion was documented by both the great and the not-so-good artists of the era. There were no cameras, as the first photographs of Australia were taken around the 1850’s. The artists relied on Art School techniques, or else depicted crude representations of what were actually a proud, strong people. Subjective viewpoints often impinged on a painting or drawing. Also, the time lag between seeing something and painting the subject could have been considerable. Furthermore, moral viewpoints clothed Aboriginal people when in fact they were unashamedly naked.

A painting, which had been a favourite of mine, I once thought depicted a story written by Captain Watkin Tench of my mob, the Boorooberongal. It shows an Aboriginal man (Yarramundi/Yellow Mondi) quickly scaling a tree with a stone axe while his compatriots (Gomberree, Colebee and Bollyderry) look on. A ‘glider possum’ and pink Gymea Lillies are depicted alongside the people. John Heaviside Clark was the artist, and he painted Aboriginal people in the colony for over 10 years, showing their ways of living in the environment. What I had not realised was that John Heaviside Clarke never set foot in Australia! What was he relying on to create his paintings? Spoken word, papers written by First Fleet marines or copied artistic work of others? Can we trust these depictions? How can one paint a ‘glider possum’ let alone an Aboriginal person without seeing one?

In the early days of the colony, written opinions and descriptions about the Aboriginal people and the colony were highly prized by those back in England. Good money was paid by some, and fantastical stories often were the result.

Extraordinary suppositions by some historians turned into “truths,” creations from over active minds. The quoting and requoting of their suppositions created what is seen as fact, and which today is hard to unravel.

No two maps are geographically the same, and different spellings of an unwritten language cause even more confusion. No wonder the community struggles to know what is correct and what to believe. The Aboriginal Heritage Office works with the understanding that all ‘facts’ have their limitations and that a lack of certainty is a reality for much of the Aboriginal history, culture and heritage in this area.

Thought of the Month

“[Oral stories are] critical for our people, because our history, our stories are based on oral traditions, we had no written law, written word or written language, our language is all there but it’s all an oral based tradition, so orally, all of my defining characteristics, for example, what I know of the world, come from an oral based background, from what my old people tell me, from my parents, from a whole range of people.

- Jenny Munro in Bo-rû-ne Ya-goo-na Par-ry-boo-go: Yesterday Today Tomorrow: An Aboriginal History of Willoughby by Jessica Currie in association with Willoughby City Council and the AHO
I found myself missing my mother’s TexMex cooking, so I decided to wrangle up some ingredients and bring a bit of home to my host family here! Enchiladas are the perfect TexMex dinner in my opinion because they’re quick, simple, and pleasing to even the pickiest of eaters due to their versatility. You can add and subtract ingredients as needed!

The first things you'll need to do are to preheat your oven to 180°C and “brown the beef” by cooking it in a large frying pan. To make this a vegetarian dish, instead boil rice and then fry it in taco seasoning. After draining the grease (or frying the rice), turn the stove onto a low heat and add your taco seasoning, chopped onion, capsicum, and corn. Stir in the refried beans and let the mixture sit while you microwave a few tortillas for 10-15 seconds to soften them up for rolling.

Put a few dollops of the mix onto a wrap, sprinkle in some shredded cheese, and roll it up tightly before placing it in a greased or oiled rectangular glass baking dish. Repeat until you run out of wraps (should be 8-10). When all your enchiladas are wrapped, cover them in enchilada sauce. Spread the sauce around with a spoon to cover all the edges, nooks, and crannies. Lastly, sprinkle the rest of the shredded cheese over them, and bake them for 20 minutes or until the cheese on top is slightly crispy.

Ingredients:
- 1 Package of 8-10 large wraps (“tortillas”)
- 500g beef mince (“ground beef”)
- 1 packet taco seasoning
- 1 Onion
- 1 Capsicum
- 1 can refried beans
- 1 can corn
- 500g-1kg shredded cheese
- 1 jar enchilada sauce

The AHO was invited to participate at this huge event held in Sydney in November. The Congress is a landmark global forum on protected areas held every ten years. It is considered the world’s most influential gathering of people involved in protected area management. The ultimate aim of the Congress is to position parks and protected areas firmly within broader goals of economic and community wellbeing. The theme of this year’s Congress hosted by Australia was Parks, People, Planet: Inspiring Solutions.

Indigenous people from around the world attended representing thousands of language groups and enormous areas of important land, water and coastal biodiversity and cultural heritage. Many Indigenous peoples still face violence, dispossession, land degradation and the loss of basic rights. On the plus side more and more groups are using new technologies and working in partnership with NGOs and governments to better protect their lands. Establishing protected areas is helping to reduce impacts and ensure the irreplaceable values of these areas are maintained into the future. We came away from the Congress both shocked and inspired. There are many, many problems but equally many determined to do their best to improve the situation. If we all do the small things within our power then by sheer weight of numbers the effect becomes tangible!

The increasing effects of climate change on cultural heritage (coastal erosion, wildfire, flooding) are frightening but the courage and determination of so many in trying to address these issues is inspiring. Combining Indigenous knowledge and respect for local environments with modern technology, scientific rigour and strong government policy and enforcement seem the best solutions for what we are facing – a totally new equation of human population, environmental stability and climatic change.
Sydney Institute of Marine Sciences has been running a public lecture series that offers up a range of illuminating perspectives on Sydney Harbour. Their most recent lecture played host to Dr. Val Attenbrow and Dr. Ian Hoskins. One of our volunteers, Chris McClure, was in attendance and kindly agreed to share what he took from the experience...

SIMS conducts advanced research into our marine environment. Founded in 2005, its Sydney Harbour Research program aims to identify, preserve and enhance the resilience of those species and habitats in the Harbour that have high ecosystem and conservation value and to enhance the capacity of government in making key management decision regarding the harbour.

Firstly, Dr Val Attenborough presented a short and subject specific address entitled Aboriginal Fishing In Port Jackson and the Introduction of Shell Fish Hooks.

Whilst it did not seem that the First Fleet were well equipped to document the culture of the Indigenous population, some information, including that available from the works of convict artists and later efforts by settlers/soldiers like Watkin Tench, has given archaeologists some guidance in their more recent research into traditional fishing techniques in Sydney Harbour.

From the beginning, Aboriginal men were observed using spears to fish, whilst the women used line, net and shell hooks. Shore and canoe fishing was a common part of life, as one would expect, with (at that time) a huge variety of food sources available. Tidal traps were also used in the Harbour until the 1900s. The food source had by then been seriously impacted by the settlers and the heavy industry located all around the harbour led to serious pollution.

Oddly, it seems that only the bream and mullet species received Aboriginal names.

Coastal shell hooks have been found as far south as Southern Victoria and as far north as Keppel Island in Queensland. Bone and stone hooks have also been discovered in many places where shell was unavailable.

Val believes her archaeological evidence, dating back 5,000 years, is the best available; however when one considers that Aboriginal settlement began more than 40,000 years ago, and that at one time the coastline was 5-10 kilometres further out to sea, it would seem to indicate that much of the evidence of Aboriginal settlement and culture may never be known, or at least able to be authenticated.

For me, Val’s address highlighted the somewhat mysterious, other-worldly nature of Sydney’s Aboriginal population, sadly, at a time of increasing interest in their culture.

Secondly, North Sydney Council historian Dr Ian Hoskins spoke of some of his research about Sydney’s coast, touching on the creation of our harbour which is a drowned river valley. Of course, Aboriginal settlement and culture have played a big part in the harbour’s history.

Governor Phillip’s mandate was to establish an agricultural settlement, along European lines. Fishing or the use of local foods, as per common Aboriginal practice, had not been considered but no doubt soon became essential as the white settlement fought off starvation. Phillip soon discovered the territorial nature of the Aboriginal population as the fish, seals, whale and other food stocks were soon depleted.

Ian detailed the heavy industry and agriculture (with consequent land clearing) that followed. White set-
Over the course of my internship with the Aboriginal Heritage Office I have attended several walks and lectures lead by our wonderful resident Education Officer, Karen Smith. I feel so lucky to have been able to explore Little Manly, Campbell Park, and even Lane Cove via the Parramatta River! But the excursion I've enjoyed most so far was Berry Island Reserve. I was extremely impressed by the park and bushland not only because of the beauty that it offered but also because of the rich biodiversity and Aboriginal heritage present.

The walk itself was held for education officials at North Sydney’s branch of the Australian Catholic University. I enjoyed seeing the responses of adults to the brief lecture and walk because previously I had only attended events with school children. Even though the questions children ask can be charming or insightful, I appreciate the knowledge local Australian adults bring to conversations involving Aboriginal heritage. While most of the guests I interacted with at Berry Island did not have much prior knowledge of the area or the specific Aboriginal heritage sites we visited, they were all very interested in the flora and the history of Berry Island and Sydney’s first inhabitants and they helped me understand how Australians interact with their history and local nature reserves.

The reserve itself I loved for several reasons. Upon arrival I was able to appreciate that the park was set right on the water and had some pretty views of the harbor and the city, including the Harbor Bridge. After we entered the forested area I was struck by the huge termite nests and the winding “grandma trees” that wrap their arms around everything. I was also fascinated by the red sap leaking from some of the trees and the lovely sandstone path.

The most amazing things about the reserve, however, are the Aboriginal sites. Present are shell middens, a rock engraving, a grinding groove, and a smoke stained cave. Being in the presence of such tangible evidence of ancient Aboriginal life was awe-inspiring after all my work at the Aboriginal Heritage Office. Seeing these sites has been one of the most rewarding experiences during my time here, and I encourage anyone interested in learning about and seeing more Aboriginal sites to visit Berry Island.

Movie Review

Thursday's Fictions dir. by Richard Allen

Described by the director as a surreal dance fantasy, this film combines many forms of art to create a unique and stunning whole. The plot, which revolves around the idea of reincarnation, is quite strange and somewhat hard to follow because the film focuses more on art and aesthetics than cause-and-effect. The basic story though, is that a woman named Thursday has realized that she will die soon and be reincarnated. She wants to elude reincarnation by burying her fictions, which are manifested as dancers, with her in the hopes that she will find them in her next life. Her lover Friday, her policeman pursuer Saturday, and her son Wednesday interact with her fictions in various ways, and the final question is: what will happen to Thursday? A beautiful, haunting, and hopeful film.

⭐⭐⭐⭐

Track of the Month

From the Crown to the Sea

This walk in Pittwater's Newport suburb spans four of the council's nature reserves and requires a few minutes walk in between the parks. The reserves—Crown of Newport, Attunga, Porter, and Kanimbla—offer sandstone heaths, open forests and scrub, closed forests, coastal scrub, and coastal dunes as you progress closer to the sea at Newport beach.

Crown of Newport is a remnant rainforest which houses a wide variety of wildlife under its marvellous canopies. Though there is a steep climb, waterfall features and stunning biodiversity will provide ample distraction along the way.

Attunga is the roughest of the bunch and may prove a challenge to less mobile walkers. The reserve is a vast coastal scrubland with great views out to sea.

Porter is the easiest to walk because it was once razed by cattle and other methods of overuse. Recently regenerated, the area is a great example of the recent resurgence of concern over our bushland.

The last reserve, Kanimbla, is the smallest, but it still provides a moderate to steep walk. This reserve has been hit hardest by human inconsideration, and it is up to us to make sure it survives the impact.

Keep an eye out for sites of Aboriginal importance along the walk, and tread lightly! For more information, visit http://www.pittwater.nsw.gov.au/environment/bushland/bushland_reserves/walking_tracks/crown_to_the_sea.

Medium to hard difficulty walk, roughly 2 hours. Always take water, hat, swimmers and sun screen.