

Aboriginal Languages and Trade

lutruwita is the country of Tasmanian Aboriginal people and everyone has a responsibility to protect our heritage.



Fanny Cochrane-Smith and Horace Watson, National Film and Sound Archive / Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

Language and *palawa kani*

Aboriginal languages in *lutruwita* (Tasmania) developed over tens of thousands of years. In earlier generations there was some interaction with people in what is now southern Victoria until rising sea levels formed the islands of Tasmania about 12 000 years ago. All languages, like the communities who speak them, change over time. The meanings of words can change. New words are created. Other words stop being spoken.

It is uncertain exactly how many languages were spoken in Tasmania. This is partly because there are few surviving records and partly because the difference between a language and a dialect can be difficult to define. Some language researchers suggest

there were two languages (northern and southern) and others say as many as twelve. The relationships between Aboriginal tribes that enabled trade, seasonal movements and alliances relied on people with skills in more than one language. In the early years of the colony *Wurati* from the *Nununi* tribe (Bruny Island) was one person known to speak several languages.

These languages were spoken but not written. In the first generation of colonial contact in the 1800s many Aboriginal people learned to speak English. These included displaced Aboriginal children who grew up in colonial families or who lived for some time at the Orphan School in Hobart. While many Aboriginal people learned English, very few Europeans learned even part of an Aboriginal language.

Some Aboriginal words and phrases continued to be spoken through

generations in some families. Some Europeans kept their own written interpretations of Aboriginal words and phrases.

The *palawa kani* language program at the Tasmanian Aboriginal Corporation has worked extensively developing the language. This came from the memories of over thirty Aboriginal people throughout the twentieth century as well as earlier European writings of interviews, journals and other papers.

Today, the Tasmanian Government's *Dual Naming Policy* allows geographical features and places to be given both an introduced and Aboriginal language name. The Nomenclature Board is responsible for attaching names to features and places.



Aboriginal Australia Wall Map, D R Horton, Aboriginal Studies Press, AIATSIS, 1996

The current dual named places are:

- *kunanyi* / Mount Wellington
- *kanamaluka* / River Tamar
- *truwana* / Cape Barren Island
- *takayna* / Tarkine
- *putalina* / Oyster Cove
- *larapuna* / Eddystone Point
- *wukalina* / Mount William
- *yingina* / Great Lake
- *titima* / Trefoil Island
- *laraturunawn* / Sundown Point
- *nungu* / West Point
- *taypalaka* / Green Point
- *pinmatik* / Rocky Cape

Aboriginal Stone Tool - chert



Trade

Aboriginal people have maintained relationships within families and between families for thousands of generations. Aboriginal tribes developed relationships with other tribes that enabled trade, political alliances and seasonal movements to gather food. These inter-tribal relationships adapted over time and through the first generations of colonial contact.

Before colonial contact, Aboriginal tribes lived within a consistent local or regional area. These areas are known as a tribe's Country and cultural landscape. People also travelled into other areas. They often combined trade, seasonal, ceremonial and foraging purposes into one inter-tribal meeting. Sometimes several tribes gathered over several days or weeks.

These gatherings strengthened relationships and ceremonial practices. They enabled trade in items such as tools, ochre and shell necklaces. Aboriginal people also negotiated food gathering across land managed by a neighbouring tribe. These areas included grasslands to hunt kangaroo and eastern wetlands or coastal areas to gather swan eggs.

These routes were well trodden, particularly during summer, autumn and spring. Some routes were a series of grasslands kept open by regular controlled fires while others were more like formed tracks. Sometimes members of a host tribe would accompany seasonal visitors through their Country. Most clans, particularly those inland, could travel several hundred kilometres each year. One example is those tribes from the central highlands who travelled to the coast and back again.

One important trade item was ochre. Ochre was highly valued for ceremonial purposes and was traded between those tribes with ochre mines on their Country and those without the mines. Likewise, particular types of stone found in some parts of the island were traded with other tribes for use as tools. Some stone tools have been found more than one hundred kilometres from the nearest mine source of that type of stone.



Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania

Natural and Cultural Heritage Division

Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment

GPO Box 44 Hobart TAS 7001

Telephone: **1300 487 045** email: aboriginal@heritage.tas.gov.au

www.aboriginalheritage.tas.gov.au

This publication may be of assistance to you but the State of Tasmania and its employees do not accept responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or relevance to the user's purpose, of the information and therefore disclaims all liability for any error, loss or other consequence which may arise from relying on any information in this publication.



Tasmanian
Government