

Australia's First Peoples

Australia is made up of many different and distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, each with their own culture, language, beliefs and practices.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the **first peoples** of Australia, meaning they were here for thousands of years prior to colonisation.

There are varying estimates for how long Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have lived on this continent, however, upwards of 60,000 years is what current research reveals.



The Torres Strait region is located between the tip of Cape York and Papua New Guinea and is made up of over two hundred islands. Seventeen of these islands are inhabited. There are also two Torres Strait Islander communities, Bamaga and Seisia, on the northern peninsula area of mainland of Australia. The Torres Strait is also home to the Aboriginal Nations.

Aboriginal peoples come from all areas of mainland Australia, including Tasmania and other islands.

Who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

In 2016, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples made up just 3.3 per cent of the Australian population. Of that group, the majority were under the age of twenty five.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples live in urban, regional and remote areas and are present in all communities, not necessarily on their traditional lands or islands.

Like all people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples don't all look the same whether it be skin colour, hair, nose, or height. The current definition, proposed by the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs in the 1980s, is that an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person is:

- of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent;
- identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; and
- is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives or has lived.

What term is best to use?

'**Indigenous Australian**' is a general term covering two very distinct cultural groups: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These terms are umbrella terms representing different nations, each with their own culture, language, beliefs and practices.

There is a growing preference for **First Nations Australians** as a more encompassing term, because while it also is generic, it acknowledges the diversity of Australia's First Peoples.

Ways of identifying are personal and individual; it's always best to ask people what they prefer.

Aboriginal peoples

Aboriginal peoples may choose to identify with their **language groups** and traditional country, for example, Gunditjama people are the traditional custodians of western Victoria, and the Yawuru people are of Broome in Western Australia.

Aboriginal peoples might describe themselves in ways that **relate to their Country**, such as 'saltwater people' for those who live on the coast or on islands, or 'rainforest', 'desert' to name a few.

Some Aboriginal people prefer to be referred to by their **regional identity**, such as Koori, Murri, Nunga or others. These names 'place', similar to saying you're a 'Queenslander' or 'Tasmanian'.

Torres Strait Islander peoples

Torres Strait Islanders generally define themselves as being from specific islands, tribes, family groups and/or sea country. In the Torres Strait, you may live in one community but have historical ties across multiple different islands.

Torres Strait Islanders may also refer to themselves as Zenadh Kes. This term was created by the late Mr Ephraim Bani, an Elder who sought to redefine the European name for the region (the Torres Strait). The term 'Zenadh Kes' is an amalgamation of Torres Strait language names for the four winds passing through the region.

In the Torres Strait, people may refer to a cluster or group of islands to define different sections of the Torres Strait region. These include Top Western, Western Islands, Central Islands and so on.



Image is courtesy of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ministry Team of the Salvation Army.

Questions:

1. Who are the first peoples of Australia?

2. What does “first peoples” mean?

3. Where do the Torres Strait Islander peoples originate from? And where do Aboriginal people come from?

4. Where do the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples live? Do they always live in their traditional lands?

5. Who is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person? Do they all look the same?

6. What are the preferred terms to use when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

7. What are 3 common ways an Aboriginal person identify her/himself with?

8. What term may Torres Strait Islanders use to refer themselves as?
