

Trade Routes

Aboriginal Trade Routes

Prior to European contact, a Aboriginal communities had established a complex web of trade routes all over the continent.

Trade was practised between neighbouring language groups as well as over vast distances between language groups of different environmental regions.

Trade was vital to Aboriginal existence in some areas as it improved the quality of life for members of family groups.



For various reasons food was not traded over large distances, however other highly valued or scarce resources were traded.

Stones, ochres, tools, ceremonial items and other resources that were not normally available within one area could be obtained through trade from another area. Trade was not only seen as a method of sharing resources but as a form of social control and law. Trade required people from different areas and different cultures to respect each others' rights, boundaries and cultural differences. It enabled the development of good relationships between neighbouring language groups by providing an avenue for settling disputes between warring groups, meeting to discuss Dreaming laws and for sharing gifts of respect.

Trade also enabled members from different language to share aspects of The Dreaming. Specific cultural knowledge and practices were shared and re-enforced during meetings. Great respect was developed through an understanding of cultural differences and religious traditions. Many maps have been developed that indicate trade routes through Australia. These trade routes differed depending on the items that were to be traded. Maps can provide a rough estimate of The Dreaming trails but cannot depict the complexity of the systems involved in trading all over the continent.

Dreaming trails or trade routes would not always be fully travelled by Aboriginal peoples of one specific area. For example, shells to be traded from Cape York area may have travelled down trade routes of the east coast of Australia then inland through a variety of language group area and cultural regions. Eventually they would be traded with special ochres from the south west and these would then be traded over and over again along The Dreaming Trail to those in the Cape York area.