



## NOONGAR HISTORY AND CULTURE

The earliest evidence of Noongar occupation of the south-west was around 45,000 BP (Before Present). Evidence suggests the caves at Devil's Lair, hidden among the hills of Margaret River, is the oldest site in Noongar country dated to c. 47,000 years BP. There are other similarly ancient sites near Albany and Perth.

The Noongar people were hunters and gatherers who lived in extended family groups, occupying specific parts of the country - trading with neighbouring groups and sometimes intermarrying.

Population estimates vary significantly for Noongar Country prior to the arrival of Europeans. But given the richness of Noongar country, it is reasonable to estimate that pre-European population figures were in the tens of thousands of people.

When the Governor of the new colony, Captain James Stirling, claimed traditional lands as 'terra nullius' (a land belonging to no-one), the rights of the Noongar people were disregarded.

The expectations of settlers, who equated land ownership with personal wealth, saw the greed for land an end in itself and the Noongar people further dispossessed of their traditional lands and culture.

The Noongar people ignored the colonist's fences and hunted their domestic animals. Those who were caught were shot, gaoled or transported out of the colony to other areas around the State.

Frontier violence, as well as diseases such as influenza and smallpox, took a heavy toll on the Indigenous population.

The attitude of the Crown was to suppress any Noongar uprising, regardless of the cost to the Indigenous population. In 1834 the Mounted Police Corp, most of whom had previous military experience (some having fought against Aboriginal people in Tasmania) were used as a strike force against the Murray River people. In the ensuing massacre - known as the Battle of Pinjarra - few men, women and children were allowed to escape.

In the 1840's, the Aboriginal people of WA became subject to legislation and were oppressed by a range of discriminatory laws, which included restrictions on lifestyle, language and cultural practice, movement near towns and through traditional areas of country, employment and the denial of citizenship. Their right to an identity was stripped.

By 1901 the number of Noongar people in the region was estimated to be as few as 1500.

The 1905 Aborigines Act was the first official government policy that would attempt to break the Noongar people's association with their traditional lands. The Act gave the government the power to control the everyday lives of the Noongar people, further disenfranchising them from society and ostracising them from their traditional history and culture.

Noongars were forced from their lands and placed in missions and settlements notorious for poor living conditions. Children of mixed descent were forcibly removed from their families and placed in missions and settlements. They were being 'saved' from the influence of their own families and community.

By 1915 nearly 15 per cent of the Noongar population were forced from their traditional homelands and interned at the Moore River Native Settlement, 100 kilometres north of Perth. Such government policies instilled a severe lack of self-worth and self-knowledge, in a people not recognised by the predominantly white community.

During the 1950's Aboriginal people were actually placed under the jurisdiction of the Flora and Fauna Act - not even recognised as human beings.

In 1951 the government of the day introduced an assimilation policy for the Aboriginal population; 'allowing' them to live like 'white Australians'. Many settlements were closed and most of the legislation restricting the lives of Aboriginal people was withdrawn. The removal of 'light skinned' children continued, however, until 1963.

This stolen generation of children were placed in institutions, in foster care, and with adoptive families. They accepted substandard living, were poor and uneducated. They were vulnerable to brutality and abuse. The fragmentation of Aboriginal families and culture continued.

It was also during the 1950's that many Noongar people dispersed, migrating in search of work and settling in towns along the coastal strip between Geraldton and Broome. Others remained on their lands, wanting to preserve their traditional way of life.

In 1967 a referendum was passed that recognised Aboriginal people as citizens of the Commonwealth. With this recognition of citizenship in their own country, came the right to vote and the right to equal pay for Aboriginal station hands.

But it also saw the cattle industry react by phasing out Aboriginal labour, further damaging the lives of rural Aborigines. Aboriginal people, who had been living on their traditional lands and working for nominal payment from the station owners, were now driven from their homes.

Noongar people were finally recognised as citizens of Western Australia and were allowed to vote for whoever they believe would represent their needs.

In 1976 the Land Rights movement gathered impetus with the recognition of land rights in the Northern Territory. The Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act is passed by the Federal Parliament and provided recognition of Aboriginal land ownership by about 11,000 Aboriginal people.

After more than a century of oppression Aboriginal people were free to rejoice in their traditional culture on their traditional lands.

The 1992 Mabo decision reversed the notion that Australia was 'terra nullius' and in 1993 the Native Title Act was passed in Federal Parliament. While Aboriginal people were recognised in the courts as the traditional owners of the land, the fight for native title justice continues.

A new era in the search for land justice began in December 2001 with the creation of the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council. This culminated in September 2003 with the lodgement of a Single Noongar Claim, covering the entire south-west and representing all Noongars.

Despite the inequality and being subject to blatant racism in the past, Noongar people have retained a vibrant culture and strong identity. As the Noongar nation re-emerges, Noongars are producing a wide range of political, community, cultural and sporting role models whose actions will define the path of a people.