

GROUNDWATER STORIES FROM THE DREAMTIME, THREE BROTHERS (SA)

The content for this case study is taken directly from the Masters Thesis entitled "ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND GROUNDWATER" by Bradley J. Moggridge (University of Technology, Sydney, 2005). For full details, refer to the original thesis document, including a comprehensive set of references.

WARNING – THE AUTHOR OF THIS MATERIAL APOLOGISES TO ANY ABORIGINAL PERSON WHO MAY BE DISTRESSED BY THE MENTION OF THE NAMES OF PERSONS WHO MAY NOW BE DECEASED.

To Aboriginal people, the stories of the dreamtime represent the past, present and future.

Storytelling is an integral part of life for Australian Aboriginals. These stories are passed from one generation to another, usually by elders in Aboriginal communities both traditional and contemporary. The Dreaming or Dreamtime is an English translation of an Aboriginal concept that has many terms to describe. Dreamtime stories depict the very basic part of a long and complex event. Stories covered include: the creation of the land and life, protocols and tribal lore, life and death, warfare, hunting, linking every creature and every feature of the landscape, male and female roles, as well as sacred and public affairs.

These are stories of the history and culture of Aboriginal people, handed down in this way since the beginning of time and refer to all that is known and all that is understood. The stories indicate the linkages between surface water, groundwater, lakes and rivers, cave systems, natural springs, thermal springs, rain events recharging the aquifers and, in drought, excess discharge allowing culture heroes to move with watertable fluctuations. Many groundwater related sites would be dreaming sites because water that originates from below the ground, with Aboriginal people not knowing the full extent of hydrogeological processes, would deem it to be spiritually significant. The dreaming significance of these sites, for instance, would link surface and sub-surface waters through their culture heroes.

The stories are told in detail and re-enacted in ceremonies which capture the imagination of the young, primarily for educating. The teaching styles have proven to be inspiring and powerful tools in presenting the Dreamtime beliefs and cultural practices.

This is a story of how the land was populated, and that spring water is a key part of the story.

Three Brothers

"Unlike the majority of ancestors, who were products of the land they occupied, Yahberri, Mahmoon, and Birrum came from a distant land. The three brothers, together with their grandmother, arrived in a canoe made from the bark of the hoop pine, goondool.

They found rivers and coastal waters teeming with fish, flocks of birds flying overhead, and animals browsing among trees, grass, and herbs. There were few people in the newly-found land at that time.

Landing at the mouth of a river, they set up camp and lived with their grandmother for some years. Eventually the brothers felt an urge to visit other parts of this favoured land. Leaving their grandmother behind, they set out in the canoe they had preserved, leading up the east coast until they sighted a cluster of black rocks on the shore. They had exhausted their supply of water, and hoped they might find some in basins and hollows in the rocks. They landed, but in spite of searching diligently could find no water. One of the brothers drove his spear into the sand at the foot of the rocks, and a spring of clear, cold water welled up.

Quenching their thirst and filling all the vessels in the canoe with fresh water, they continued on their way, and arrived at a tall headland. They disembarked and, leaving the canoe there, separated and went inland. Each of the brothers visited a different part of the continent for the purpose of populating the land. How they accomplished this notable feat is not known, but it may well be that they did so by the exercise of supernatural powers, either by impregnating the few women they found, or by the institution of fertility rites. The second possibility is the more likely. For in due course they made bora rings for the exercising of initiation ceremonies, as well as providing tribal laws.



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The blue haze that comes to distant mountains, especially in the spring, is a living reminder of their sojourn. Swathed in a blue mist, the daughters of Yahberri, Mahmoon, and Birrum revisit the earth every year, to promote new life and growth.

That, in brief, is the saga of the three brothers who came from the sea that there might be people on the earth" (Reed, 1999).

Reference:

Reed A W (1999) **Aboriginal Myths, Legends & Fables.**
Reed New Holland Australia.

Going further

1. Research other Dreamtime stories related to groundwater. Tell others a story about what you learned.
2. Look for other examples from around the world where storytelling about water and groundwater is important in indigenous culture. Are their similarities to the Dreamtime stories? Plan and undertake an activity that will involve others in what you have learned.



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