



KANGAROO ISLAND'S FIRST NATIONS' HISTORY

Kangaroo Island was separated from continental Australia 10,000 years ago, due to the rise in sea levels following the last glacial period. Recognised as Karta or "Island of the Dead" by mainland Aboriginal people and the custodians The Ngarrindjeri and The Ramindjeri (who a part of the Ngarrindjeri Nation), the existence of shell middens and stone tools reveal that Aboriginal people lived on Kangaroo Island as long as 16,000 years ago and up until around 2,000 years before its discovery by Europeans around the early 1800s.

The disappearance of Ngarrindjeri from the Island remains a mystery although Ramindjeri suggest that their people were always on Karta. Some believe that the island was abandoned once the sea level rose enough to make the crossing between the mainland difficult, but some coastal occupation sites have been found that have been dated post separation.

The first evidence of Aboriginal habitation on Kangaroo Island was the discovery of hammer stones (hard cobbles used to strike off lithic flakes from a lump of tool stone) at Hawk's Nest near Murray Lagoon in 1903. Fieldwork in the early 1930s near Murray Lagoon revealed further hammer stones and some massive pebble implements. Subsequent exploration revealed the presence of 47 campsites on the Island; by 1958 the number had risen to 120. There were hundreds of pebble choppers (stone tools with irregular cutting edges), horse hoof cores (stones with a flat base, an overhanging, step-flaked edge, and a high, domed shape like a horse's hoof) and hammer-stones. This tool industry was named the Kartan, after the name for the Island among the mainland Aboriginal people. It was based on these finds at Kangaroo Island that the first suggestion was made that colonisation by Aboriginal people might date from the Pleistocene (2.6 million years to 11,700 years ago).

Ngurunderi is one of the great ancestral Dreaming 'heroes' of the Ngarrindjeri people. This dreaming story is the only one connected to Kangaroo Island with his exploits known in detail by all of the different

Ngarrindjeri clans at the time of European arrival in South Australia. The first published version of the Ngurunderi Dreaming appeared in an Adelaide newspaper in 1842, just six years after the colony of South Australia was proclaimed by the British. This dreaming story tells of the Backstairs Passage flooding and stresses the over-arching importance of Ngurunderi as the main shaper of the distinctive landscape in which the Ngarrindjeri people still live today. A shorter version of the Ngurunderi story says...

"Long ago, Ngurunderi's two wives ran away from him, and he was forced to follow them. He pursued them and as he did so he crossed Lake Albert and went along the beach to Cape Jervis. When he arrived there, he saw his wives wading half-way across the shallow channel which divided Naroongowie (Kangaroo Island) from the mainland. He was determined to punish his wives, and angrily ordered the water to rise up and drown them. With a terrific rush the waters roared and the women were carried back towards the mainland. Although they tried frantically to swim against the tidal wave, they were powerless to do so and were drowned. They became the rocky Pages Islands. Ngurunderi knew that it was time for him to enter the spirit world. He crossed to Kangaroo Island and traveled to its western end. After first throwing his spears into the sea, he dived in, before rising to become a star in the Milky Way."

In July 1836 the first settlers of the South Australian Company landed on Kangaroo Island, officially founding the colony of South Australia. Prior to their arrival, a small community of European, American and Aboriginal people were living on Kangaroo Island beyond colonial control from 1802 and perhaps earlier. Sealers lived with Aboriginal women who hunted and labored for them, trapping wallabies and skinning seals and wallabies for trading. The first known children born on Kangaroo Island came from these relationships with one being the offspring of Ramindjeri woman Karlinga and a sealer William Walker.

The earliest colonial record of a known Aboriginal person on Kangaroo Island is that of the Tasmanian woman named Dinah, who was thought to have been here with sealers in 1823. Other colonial records suggest that sealers were taking Aboriginal women from Bass Strait at least as early as 1810.

Aboriginal women were important, not just as 'wives', but as hunters and laborers and were significant contributors to the economic growth of the region. To satisfy sealers' demand for wives, expeditions specifically to obtain Aboriginal women, were organised to mainland Australia and Tasmania. In 1827 some sealers ambushed a group of Tasmanians living at Cape Grim in north western Tasmania. Seven women were captured and carried off to Kangaroo Island.

The historian Dutton claimed that there were seven white men and about fourteen Aboriginal women living on Kangaroo Island in 1836. The number of Aboriginal people taken to Kangaroo Island will never be known, and there is no detailed record of arrivals or departures before 1836. Nor is there any record of how many

Ngarrindjeri were on Karta prior to these records. In 1841 the first census of South Australia listed thirteen 'native women and children' living on Kangaroo Island out of a total population of ninety people.

Together, the descendants of sealers and mostly Tasmanian Aboriginals and the 'official' colonists farmed and participated in community life, establishing local councils, schools and cricket clubs.

The families of the 'official' colonists who've remained on the island hold their history close to them in stories passed down through the generations, but for the descendants of the Tasmanian Aboriginal women and the sealers who kidnapped them, their past became invisible. Many left the island and of those who remained, their children often knew nothing of their heritage.

In recent times this has changed with a growing interest and curiosity about the island's First Nations' history and acknowledgement by local Island families of their Aboriginal heritage.

Discover More...

Learn more about Kangaroo Island's First Nations' history through these resources.

- **The Aboriginal Presence on Kangaroo Island, South Australia** by Philip A. Clarke
- **Kangaroo Island Unearthed** : An audio program from Radio National Hindsight about how Aboriginals and Aboriginality became invisible within one isolated community.