

Australia and Oceania: Human geography

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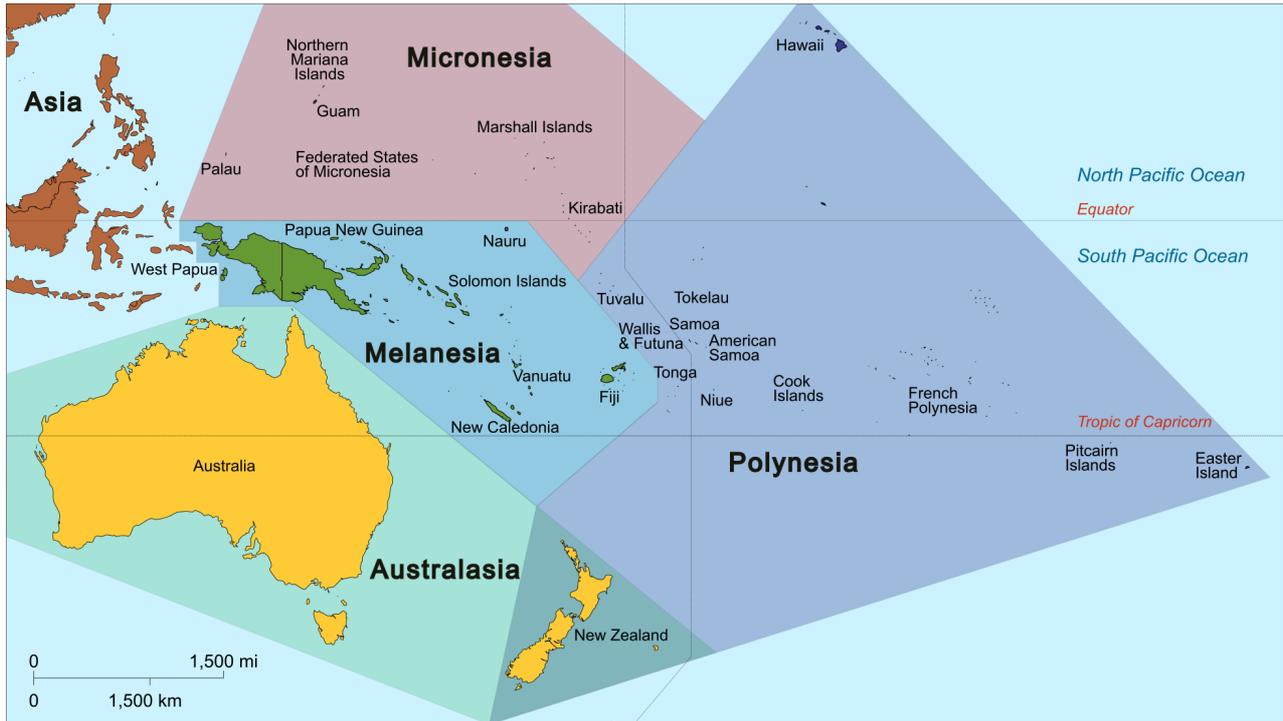
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Dugout canoes, introduced by Macassan trepangers hundreds of years ago. Northern Territory, Australia. Photo by: Auscape/ UIG/Getty Images.

Oceania is a region made up of thousands of islands throughout the Central and South Pacific Ocean. It includes Australia, the smallest continent in terms of total land area. Most of Oceania is in the Pacific, a vast body of water that is larger than all of the landmasses on Earth combined. The name “Oceania” fairly establishes the Pacific Ocean as the defining characteristic of the region.

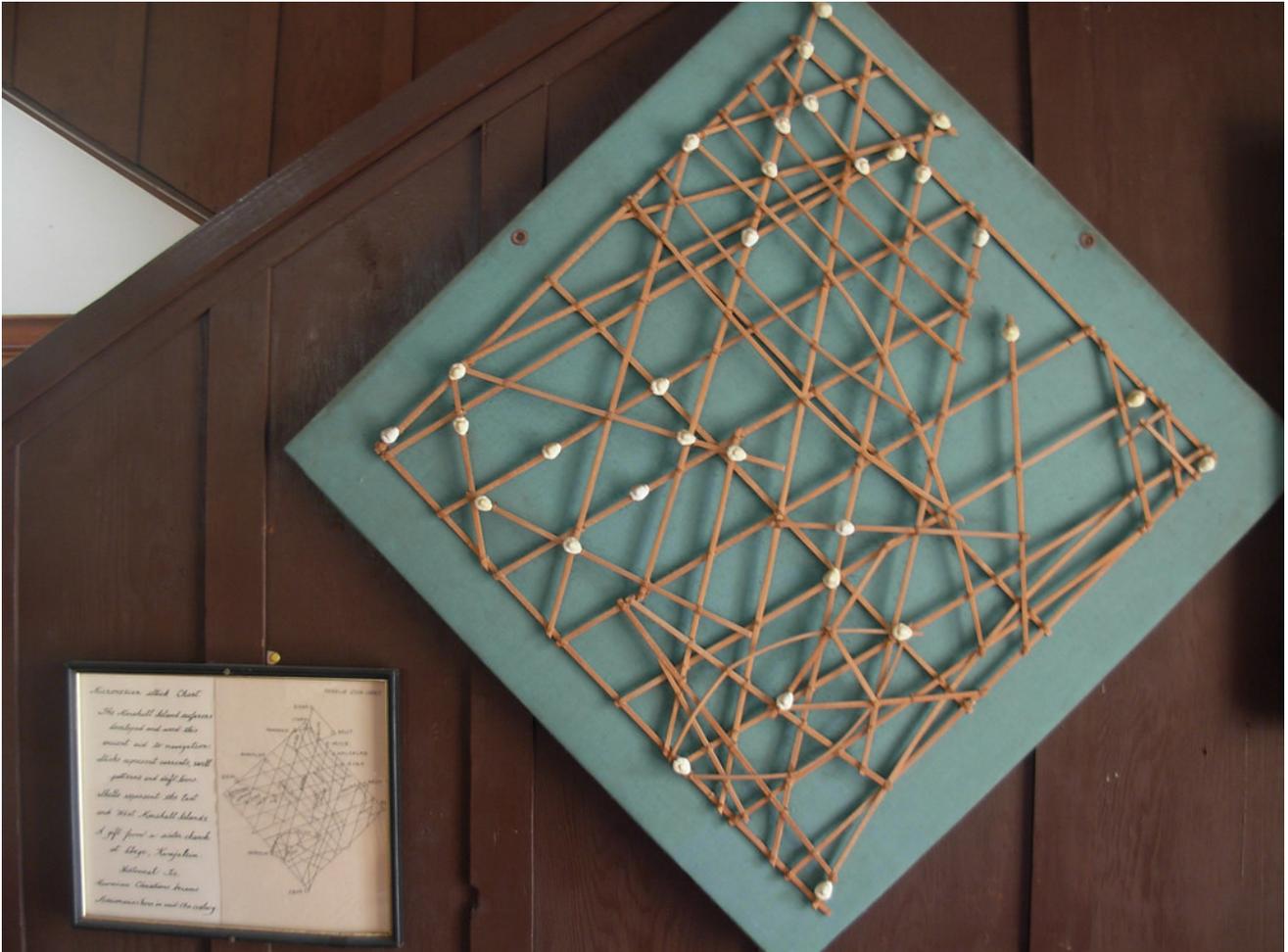
Australia takes up much of Oceania. There are two other major landmasses. One is the country of New Zealand. The other is the island of New Guinea. It is made up of the nation of Papua New Guinea on one-half of the island and Papua (Owned by Indonesia) on the other half.



Oceania also includes three island regions: Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia (which includes the U.S. state of Hawaii). Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia are each made up of many islands. Some are independent nations while others belong to countries like France and the United States.

Historic Cultures

Indigenous cultures are closely tied to the geography of Oceania. Polynesian culture, for example, developed as Southeast Asian sailors explored the South Pacific. This seafaring culture developed almost entirely from its geography.



Beginning about 1500 B.C., sailors began moving east from the island of New Guinea. The farther they traveled, the more advanced their navigation became. Polynesians developed large, double-hulled boats called outrigger canoes. Polynesian culture also relied on a sophisticated navigation system based on observations of the stars, oceans and birds.

Polynesians were able to domesticate plants and animals and transport them to islands that lacked them. This allowed Polynesians to establish stable, permanent communities throughout the islands of the South Pacific. By the year A.D. 1000, these seafarers had colonized the islands of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. In the process, they established a unique, ocean-oriented culture that persists today.

Indigenous cultures of Oceania also changed the environments in which they lived. As they explored the South Pacific, Polynesians brought agriculture to isolated islands, for example.

In another example, the Maori people had a significant effect on New Zealand's forests and animals. Between the 14th and the 19th centuries, Maori reduced New Zealand's forest cover by about half, largely through controlled fires used to clear land for agriculture.



Nearly 40 species of birds died out during this brief period of time. This was due to habitat destruction, hunting and competition with new species. Dogs and rats, for example, were introduced to the islands of New Zealand by the Maori.

Aboriginal Australian cultures often had strong relationships with the local environment. They developed myths to explain the landscape. Modern scientific research has proven that many of these myths are fairly accurate historic records of the land and how the environment changed.

Contemporary Cultures

Oceania's vast, ocean-focused geography continues to influence modern cultures. Cultural groups and practices focus on uniting despite their isolated locations and small populations.



Papua New Guinea is one of the most varied countries in the world, with more than 700 indigenous groups and 850 languages. The government recognizes that traditional, tribal land belongs to the indigenous community. Almost all of the land in Papua New Guinea fits this category. Less than 3 percent of the land is privately owned.

But there are disagreements over land use and rights to farm and do mining between indigenous groups, the government and corporations.

Rugby is a very popular sport throughout the continent — more popular than soccer, baseball or cricket. The tournaments and games that occur between these countries make rugby a unifying sport in Oceania.



The arts are another unifying cultural practice in Oceania. The Festival of Pacific Arts is a festival hosted every four years in a different country. The festival encourages different expressions of Pacific-wide culture, focusing on traditional song and dance.

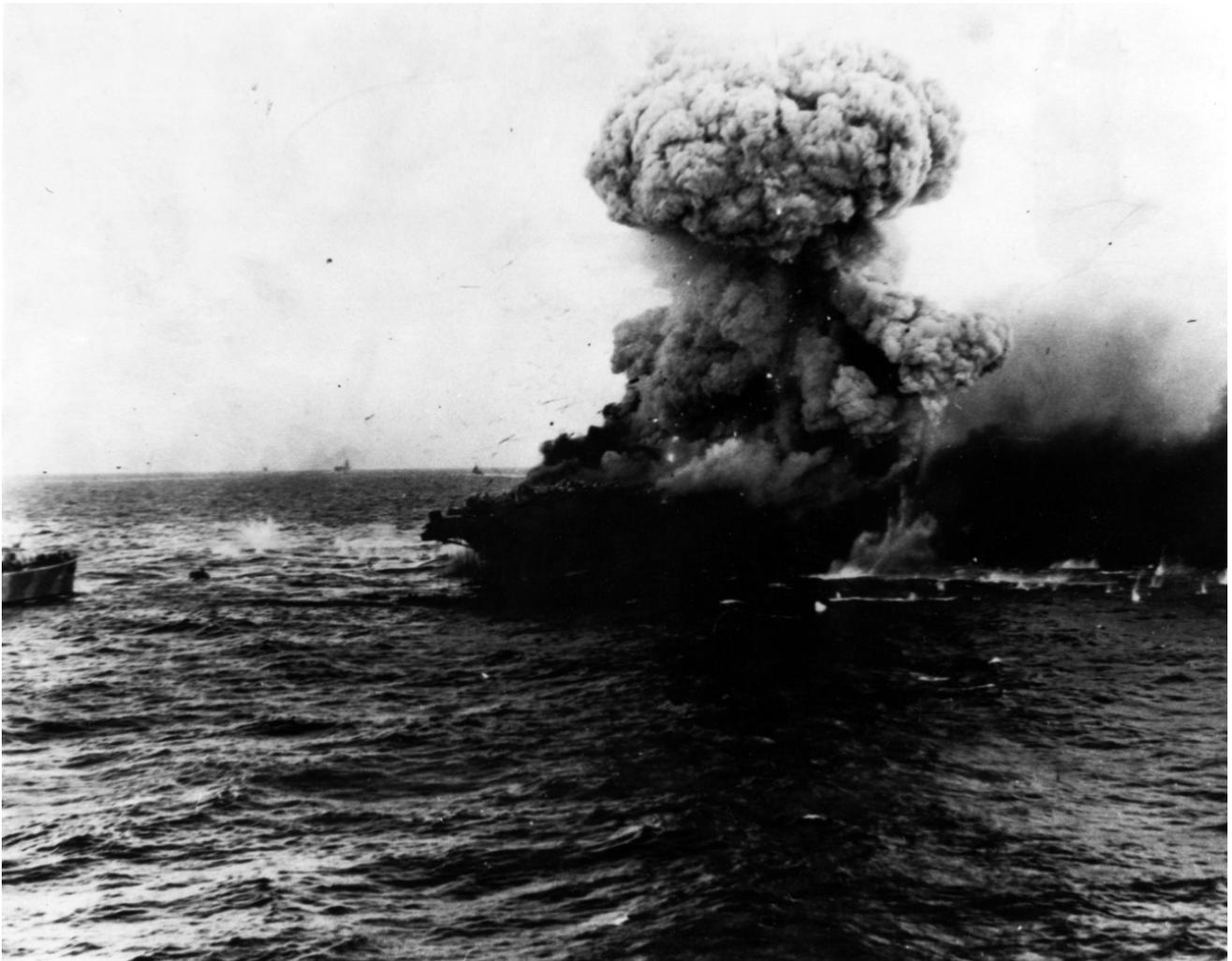
Tourism is the continent's largest industry, creating jobs and spreading money throughout the Pacific Islands.

Tourism, however, also can negatively affect economies and ecosystems. It can lead to overcrowding and depletion of isolated islands' scarce resources. The waters have been overfished. Pollution from boats and cruise ships can litter the tropical ocean, while runoff from the islands may also contain pollutants.

Historic Issues

The European colonization of Australia and Oceania defined the continent's early political geography. Exploration began in the 16th century when Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan landed on the Mariana Islands. Today, many countries in Oceania have majority European populations and a strong European culture. English is the main language throughout most of the continent.

Indigenous populations were treated harshly during the colonial period. Colonizers implemented their own systems of governance, land management and trade. These efforts had severe consequences that continue to affect indigenous groups and their cultural systems today.



During the Cold War, the isolated islands of Australia and Oceania were used for nuclear weapons testing by the American, British and French. The most well-known of these experiments were carried out on the Bikini Atoll, part of the Marshall Islands. The U.S. began testing atomic weapons at the Bikini Atoll in 1946.

These tests had devastating human and environmental impacts on the islands. Many people were forcibly removed from their island homes. People who witnessed the tests suffered from high rates of cancer. The ecosystem and habitats of the island were permanently changed.

Contemporary Issues

Over the last half-decade, Oceania's indigenous groups have fought to extend their rights in their home countries.

The Maori Party represents the rights of the Maori in New Zealand. The party founded the Maori Economic Taskforce to increase economic opportunity and secured a multimillion-dollar economic package for environmental initiatives. It also created a fund of \$5 million a year to help Maori doctors develop culturally appropriate programs.



Aboriginal Australians, much like the Maori, can be defined as a marginalized population, or a group of people who are treated as less significant than the majority population. Aborigines suffer from higher rates of disease, imprisonment and unemployment. Aborigines' life expectancy is about 18 to 19 years less than non-indigenous people.

Aborigines have a tense relationship with their home country. In 2007, the Northern Territory National Emergency Response, a federal program, was created to address concerns about aboriginal communities in Australia's isolated Northern Territory.

The government of Australia is working to resolve these tensions. In 2010, Ken Wyatt became the first Aboriginal Australian elected to the Australian House of Representatives. In 2008, former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued a public apology to members of the “Stolen Generations.” The Stolen Generations were aboriginal children taken from their families and raised under European supervision in group homes. This policy began in 1869 and officially ended in 1969.

Future Issues

Oceania’s political and financial future rests largely on minimizing the effects of climate change. In fact, many scientists argue that Australia and Oceania is the continent that will be most affected by climate change because of its climate and geography.



The heavily coastal populations of the continent’s small islands are in danger of flooding and erosion because of sea level rise. Warming temperatures have severely damaged many coral reef ecosystems and contributed to major droughts. Glaciers are also melting faster. That increases the height of the sea level.

Governments and agencies in Australia and Oceania are taking steps to minimize the effects of climate change. Countries such as Australia and New Zealand agreed to reduce carbon emissions. Other Oceanic countries argued that the international agreement unfairly disadvantages developing countries, especially small island states.

Quiz

- 1 The following sentence from the section "Contemporary Cultures" helps prove the claim that indigenous groups have had some success at protecting their rights.

The government recognizes that traditional, tribal land belongs to the indigenous community.

Which sentence from the section "Contemporary Issues" provides further support for this claim?

- (A) Over the last half-decade, Oceania's indigenous groups have fought to extend their rights in their home countries.
- (B) The party founded the Maori Economic Taskforce to increase economic opportunity and secured a multimillion-dollar economic package for environmental initiatives.
- (C) Aboriginal Australians, much like the Maori, can be defined as a marginalized population, or a group of people who are treated as less significant than the majority population.
- (D) In 2010, Ken Wyatt became the first Aboriginal Australian elected to the Australian House of Representatives.

- 2 Read the sentences from the article.

1. *Today, many countries in Oceania have majority European populations and a strong European culture.*
2. *Aborigines' life expectancy is about 18 to 19 years less than non-indigenous people.*
3. *The Stolen Generations were aboriginal children taken from their families and raised under European supervision in group homes.*
4. *In fact, many scientists argue that Australia and Oceania is the continent that will be most affected by climate change because of its climate and geography.*

Which two sentences taken together provide the BEST evidence that colonization by other countries disrupted the indigenous culture of Oceania?

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 2 and 4
- (C) 1 and 3
- (D) 3 and 4

3 Examine the map in the introduction [paragraphs 1-3].

HOW does this image contribute to your understanding of Oceania?

- (A) by outlining the routes most often navigated by early indigenous people
- (B) by illustrating the vast ocean that early cultures traveled between islands
- (C) by contrasting the size of independent nations with those belonging to others
- (D) by showing how environmental changes have impacted the area's geography

4 Look at the images in the sections "Historic Issues" and "Future Issues."

Which option accurately compares and contrasts HOW each image affects your understanding of Oceania?

- (A) The first image shows a past cause of harm to Oceania's environment, and the other image shows an area that is now at risk.
- (B) The first image shows what Oceania's environment looked like in the past, and the other image shows what it looks like today.
- (C) The first image shows what colonial powers did to harm Oceania in the past, and the other image shows what they're doing now.
- (D) The first image shows an action taken while Oceania was under colonial rule, and the other image shows indigenous rule.