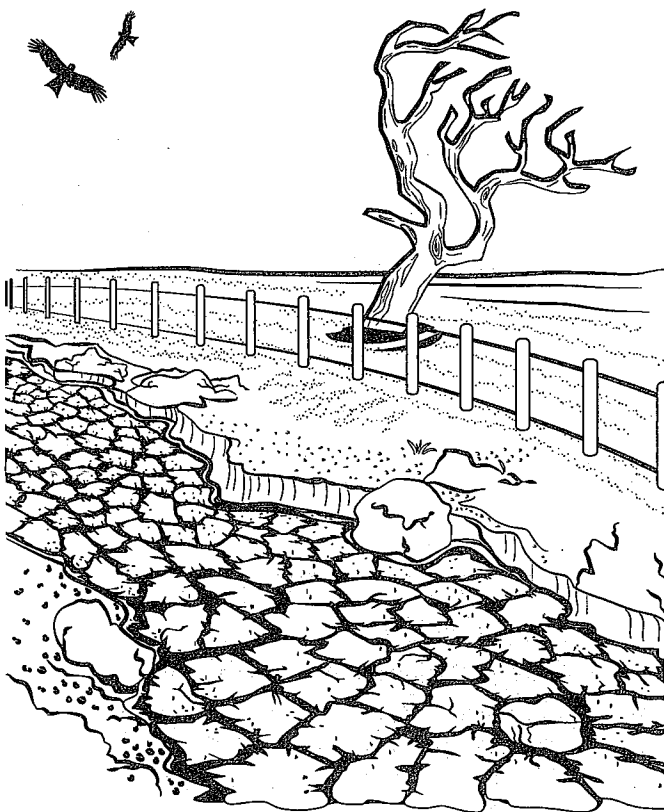


Changing the environment - 1

Before Europeans arrived, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people lived in harmony with the land; although it is believed that hunters did set fires to flush animals out of the bush. These people provided for their future by taking only what they needed, and by not eating every bird egg or all the seeds they found.

On the other hand, the Australian environment wasn't a major concern for Europeans. Those who arrived with the First Fleet had almost died of starvation in the first two years. They had to concentrate on producing food and most of them didn't even think about the consequences of their actions.

Settlers cleared and fenced land for their stock and planted crops. Natural waterholes were fouled by their animals and their hooves broke up soil and destroyed plants. The loose, fertile topsoil was then eroded by wind and water. This was the beginning of the soil erosion problem which now affects about half of the country. Another environmental issue which is threatening many farming properties today is salinity. Extensive clearing of land for crops contributed to this and there is a huge area of the country where the soil is now too salty to grow anything of value.



Forests were also cleared to produce sandalwood, cedar and pine. Trading of this wood was the beginning of Australia's timber industry. Since then, farming and forestry have resulted in the loss of 40% of the country's forests, 75% of its rainforests and 90% of its temperate woodlands.

Goldmining had a terrible effect on the environment. Over 600 000 people came to Australia between 1851 and 1860 to search for gold and they caused rapid change. Mining disrupted and destroyed ecosystems, putting pressure on the fauna and flora. Miners upturned the land, took what they wanted and moved on to do it again and again. They cut down trees and used the wood to construct buildings and mines, and as firewood. They also used and destroyed precious water supplies. The changing environment wasn't a concern for them. One of the few who was even aware of what was happening was William Howitt. He wrote '... we diggers are horribly destructive of the picturesque', but nobody took any notice of him.

Probably even more devastating than the Europeans themselves were some of the things they brought with them. These included animals, plants and seeds, as well as rats that 'jumped ship' when they landed and killed many native birds. Some of the plants, like blackberries and prickly pear, grew too well and became noxious weeds in Australia. The domestic animals that caused the most trouble were the ones that 'got away' from farms or were released and thrived in the bush. These included rabbits, goats and pigs. Feral animals also spread diseases.

Europeans wanting to live in a more familiar environment introduced animals they missed, like blackbirds, which destroyed fruit and competed with native birds for nesting sites and food. Foxes, introduced for the sport of hunting, have caused terrible problems for sheep farmers and have destroyed many native animals.

The Australian environment continues to suffer from the exploitation, lack of knowledge, understanding and concern of pioneers and those who followed them.

AC
The nature of convict or colonial presence, including the factors that influenced patterns of development, aspects of daily life of the inhabitants (including Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islander Peoples) and how the environment changed. (ACHHK094)

Changing the environment - 2

1. Why was food production such an important issue for Australia's early settlers?

(a) What is soil erosion?

(b) What are some of the causes of soil erosion?

(c) What could have been done to stop it happening?

3. (a) Why were creeks and waterholes so important in many parts of Australia?

(b) Explain how they were damaged after Europeans settled in Australia.

(c) What problems did this cause?

4. (a) Why did Aboriginal people set fire to the bush?

(b) Research to find out what effect this had on the country they burnt.

5. (a) What are some of the reasons why Europeans cleared land in the 1800s?



It is amazing to consider the environmental damage eventually caused by domestic animals when only 19 goats, 44 sheep, 4 cows, 6 horses, 5 rabbits, 32 pigs and 87 chickens arrived with the First Fleet. The number of rats arriving was not recorded!

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