AUSTRALIA’S ABORIGINES

Even as numbers of Australia’s Aborigines dwindle, the government continues to search for ways to incorporate them into the greater Australian society.

Australia’s Aborigines have resided on the continent for perhaps 40,000 or more years. They arrived from Southeast Asia during the depths of the Pleistocene ice age when sea levels were 350 feet (107 m.) or more lower than today’s sea levels because much of the world’s water was sealed in glaciers. During this period, many land bridges were exposed by the lower sea levels.

The Sunda land bridge extended from Southeast Asia to Australia, but there were narrow areas of open water here and there. The original migrants crossed from island to island by wading, swimming and boating. Eventually, they reached Australia. About 15,000 to 10,000 years ago, the glaciers began melting and sea levels rose once more, isolating the Australian Aborigine population.

Once the Aborigine population became isolated from outside cultural and genetic influences, their unique culture developed. They remained a mobile hunting and gathering society, with their own languages and dialects, religious practices and family social structure. Their physical characteristics included dark to tan skin, prominent brow ridges and thin legs and arms.

The Aborigines found a treasure of large animals in Australia, largely preserved as species because they too were isolated by the rising sea level. The result was abundant large game such as kangaroos and large birds. With primitive weapon technology, Aborigine men became very proficient at searching for and stalking game. Women were able to gather wild seeds and grind them into flour. Land was held in common with no private ownership.

The largest problem confronting the Aborigines was finding water on the dry continent of Australia. They learned the locations of springs and seeps, found they could live by harvesting water in the form of dew, and occasionally survived on the fluids obtained from small creatures such as frogs. Theirs was a life of hardship and uncertainty.

When the first Europeans arrived in Australia in 1788, there were perhaps 300,000 Aborigines in about 50 tribes spread across the continent. The Europeans believed the Aborigines were a primitive people and treated them badly, taking away their land, killing them and spreading disease among them.

Today, out of more than 20 million Australians, there are fewer than 50,000 pure Aborigines and another 144,000 of mixed Aborigine/European heritage. Although there are examples of Aborigines who have achieved considerable equality in Australian society, most still face discrimination and unofficial prejudice and remain socially, economically and politically underprivileged.

Most Aborigines today still are scattered across Australia, some working as hired hands on sheep ranches, farms and plantations, while others live on government programs. Some live on reservations, not unlike American Indian reservations.

One case study involves tiny Palm Island, located off Australia’s northeast coast. According to a Christian Science Monitor article (April 10, 2006), Palm Island is much “like a number of Aboriginal communities that are geographically and socially on the fringes. Palm Island owes some of its isolation to communal land ownership.” Most Palm Island residents are economic wards of the state, although there are many natural resources available to residents. The Great Barrier Reef is just 14 miles (23 km) offshore.

Investors have avoided Palm Island because they cannot purchase land and because the Aboriginal culture seems uninterested in developing businesses. The communal property issue was an honorable attempt by the government to preserve some Aboriginal culture, but it apparently has helped trap residents in poverty.

The issue of Aboriginal culture being poorly suited to business development, however, is much more complicated. It often takes generations of isolated cultures before social mores may change. Major issues include work ethics, timeliness, workplace cooperation, truthfulness and honesty and a host of other sociological characteristics. The problem is that people in minority cultures or those trapped in poverty sometimes don’t welcome the opportunity to change, preferring to maintain the status quo.

The Australian government has found it difficult to incorporate its Aboriginal population into mainstream culture. But, then, for the Aborigine people to adopt another culture would mean losing their native culture. There are no equitable answers to the problems with assimilating native cultures, as evidenced by past histories of the Kurds, Roma (gypsies), Basques, Kashmiris, Tamlins, Hmong, and the American Indians.

And that is Geography in the News™, March 2, 2007. #874.

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