

Using *Dark Emu* in the Geography classroom

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Written for the Geography Teachers' Association of Victoria. Permission to reprint

Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the birth of agriculture (2018) is a critically acclaimed book that re-examines the culture and society of pre-colonial Aboriginal Australians. Author Bruce Pascoe presents a logical and convincing argument for the presence of pre-European Aboriginal economy and, in doing so, challenges the notion that Aboriginal Australians were hunter-gatherers. His call for a revision of history is compelling. Using evidence from a range of sources, including the diaries of early colonists and explorers, Pascoe encourages readers to look beyond what they may have been taught at school or seen portrayed in mainstream media and question the dominant historical narrative as constructed by white Australians.

Figure 1: Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the birth of agriculture by Bruce Pascoe

Pascoe explores multiple facets of Aboriginal society to portray a thriving pre-colonial civilisation. He points to the cultivation of the yam daisy as evidence of domesticated plants, the use of fire as a tool to promote natural regeneration and control the surrounding environment, and numerous examples of fishing techniques that were established well before colonists arrived.

Dark Emu is an important text, not least because it allows the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum. It presents an alternative view of the past, bringing forward the voices of those previously silenced, while serving as a reminder for students that history can be presented differently as a result of different interpretations.

Dark Emu in the Classroom: Teacher Resources for High School Geography is a PDF and print resource which

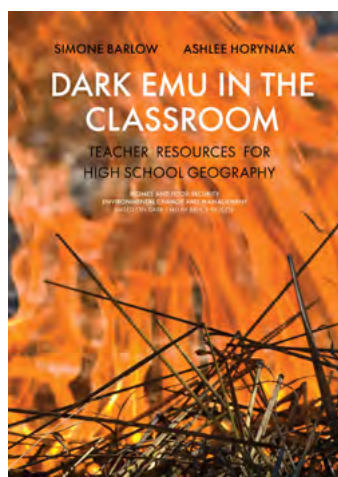
One challenge teachers often face is teaching cultures of which they have very little knowledge or experience. While it can be uncomfortable for non-Indigenous teachers to teach about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, it is better to try than not attempt it at all. One approach is for teachers to educate themselves as best they can, and *Dark Emu* is a fantastic place to start. Moreover, the inclusion of this text is one way of stopping teaching about Aboriginal people and start including Aboriginal perspectives across a range of topics.

Dark Emu in the Classroom: Teacher Resources for High School Geography presents curriculum content from an Aboriginal Peoples' perspective for the topics:

- Biomes and Food Security (Level 9)
- Environmental Change and Management (Level 10).

The lessons have been designed to be used individually or in a sequence. Teachers can select activities that are appropriate for their students. Differentiation options are included for less-able and more-able students. Activities have also been included that cover the capabilities that are transferable across disciplines: ethical, personal and social, critical and creative thinking and intercultural. There are also activities with a focus on both literacy and numeracy skills.

The following lesson is an excerpt from the forthcoming teacher resource book – *Dark Emu in the Classroom: Teacher Resources for High School Geography* (2019).



has been published to assist teachers using the concepts in *Dark Emu* in their teaching. This resource offers teachers a way to embed the Victorian Curriculum's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-cultural perspectives in the subject of Geography.

Figure 2: Cover of the teacher resource for Dark Emu in the Classroom: Teacher Resources for High School Geography

CLASSROOM RESOURCES

How have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders changed biomes to produce food?

Learning intentions

For students to:

- analyse the impact that firestick farming has on the land
- challenge Western assumptions about fire.

Key inquiry questions

- What is firestick farming?
- What are the consequences of firestick farming on the land?
- How have people changed biomes?
- Should firestick farming be adopted as a method of managing the landscapes of rural Australia?

Key vocabulary

Firestick farming, terrestrial biomes, cultivated, controlled burns.

Time required: 45 minutes.

Materials

- Handout 1: *Dark Emu* Synopsis – Fire (one per student).
- Handout 2: *Anticipation Guide* (one per student).
- Handout 3: *How have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people used fire as a tool?* (one per student).

Teacher instructions

Prior knowledge

It is expected that students have learnt about:

1. The characteristics of major terrestrial biomes across Earth.
2. The range of biomes in Australia.

Starter

1. Distribute **Handout 2: Anticipation Guide** to students to complete individually. They should respond to each statement, indicating whether they agree and write down the justification for their thoughts. You may wish to explain that these statements will preview the content of the day's lesson.
2. Discuss student answers as a class.

Main activity

Distribute **Handout 1: *Dark Emu* Synopsis – Fire** and **Handout 3: *How have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people used fire as a tool?*** Ask students to

complete the reading from *Dark Emu* and then the question sheet. Tell students to discuss and infer the disadvantages of using firestick farming.

Plenary

Ask students to return to their *Anticipation Guide* and reflect on their initial answers. Ask which, if any, responses have changed.

Differentiation

For less able students:

- ask students to define bolded words before reading the synopsis
- instruct students to work with a partner to complete the advantages and disadvantages of firestick farming (Q4 of handout). Assign one side to each partner then swap answers to complete the question.

For more able students:

- extend understanding by further discussing the concept of farming by distributing the article: <http://www.theguardian.com.au/story/936405/the-first-farmers>
- extend understanding by researching the question: did firestick farming contribute to the extinction of megafauna?
- analyse the use of firestick farming as a land-management tool, using SHEEP factors (social, historical, environmental, economic, political, technological).

Suggested adaptations

To support kinaesthetic learners, the anticipation guide can be conducted as a whole class activity. Label each corner of the room as SA, A, D, SD (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree) and ask students to move to the corner that represents their response. Then ask one representative from each corner to explain their thinking.

Please contact Magabala Books at marketing@magabala.com for all enquiries about purchasing this classroom resource.

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Dark Emu teaching resource

Handout 1: *Dark Emu* Synopsis — fire

The use of fire has always played a central role in Australia's culture. Whilst fire is often viewed in western society as a threat or danger, Aboriginal Australians hold a very different perspective. Some evidence suggests that Aboriginal Australians began using fire as early as 120,000 years ago, and researchers' question whether its use contributed to the extinction of Australia's megafauna.

Fire is a tool which, when used responsibly, aids in the creation of a landscape that sustains life. One important way that Aboriginal Australians use fire is a practice called firestick farming. This involves planned and controlled burns of lower intensity in order to manage the flora and fauna within a biome. This approach to fire worked on five principles:

1. The majority of lands were rotated through in patches or a mosaic pattern, to allow plants and animals to survive in those areas not being burned.
2. The timing of the fires was adjusted throughout the year, according to the type of country to be burned and the condition that it was already in.
3. The weather conditions were strictly considered.
4. Neighbouring clans communicated, advising each other of any fire activity.
5. The burns were not to occur during the growing season of any plants.

Due to these principles of rotation, the land was cultivated into a pattern much like a mosaic, with sections of both cleared land and forest. Firestick farming provides a method for regulating and managing the natural environment in order to maximise food resources. Better soils, produced after a burn, were used for food production while the inferior soils were left for forest. The preparation of soil is considered a signifier of agriculture. It is important to recognise that this practice has had a significant impact on Australia's vegetation. Most obviously, Australia's grasslands increased. This became a way to control where animals would congregate to improve hunting and protect deliberate plantings from hungry animals. In turn, it marks a shift away from hunting big game and toward a reliance on cultivating grains and tubers, like the yam daisy. A possibly more recognised advantage of firestick farming is the prevention of wildfires. When Aboriginal people were prevented from using this knowledge, underlying vegetation grew out of control and many native species suffered.



Native Yam Daisy or Murnong

Source: Adapted from Pascoe; B. (2018). *Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the birth of agriculture*, pp.161–176.



Dark Emu teaching resource

Handout 2: Anticipation Guide

Mark your opinion according to how strongly you feel and then provide an explanation of your thinking in the space provided. SA: Strongly Agree A: Agree D: Disagree SD: Strongly Disagree

Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Explanation
Fire is dangerous.					
Fire should be considered a form of technology.					
Fires cause devastation to the landscape and should be avoided at all cost.					
Farming requires the planting of crops.					
When Europeans arrived, the landscape was dominated by trees and thick bush.					
The land as it was when Europeans arrived should be considered untouched and unmanaged.					
Australia's biomes remain constant over time.					

Dark Emu teaching resource

Handout 3: How Have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people used fire as a tool?

After reading the synopsis for Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu*, answer the following:

1. In what ways can the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' use of fire be considered an agricultural practice?

2. If technology is defined as the application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes, do you think fire can be considered a form of technology?

3. In what ways has firestick farming changed Australia's biomes?

4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of firestick farming?

Advantages	Disadvantages

5. What aspects of contemporary life might present a challenge to the adoption of fire as a tool today?
