

Trading tales

What do you do when you need something that you don't have? Often we just go to a shop and buy it. Or sometimes, we borrow it from a friend or maybe swap something for it. This is called 'trading'. These days, we usually trade money for an item that we want or need. But this hasn't always been the case. Thousands of years ago, before money existed, people from all over the world would trade all sorts of interesting things for the different products and services they needed.

Trade by First Australians

Have you ever heard of the 'Silk road'? This was an ancient trade route across Asia and Europe which dates back to as far as 200 BC.

During this time, First Australians were using their own trade routes along overland pathways which connected different groups across our entire country and in the Torres Straits.

The routes criss-crossed the country and intersected at significant sites such as water holes, rivers and places with spiritual importance. Often these sites were also places where important materials (such as red ochre, greenstone or pearl shells) could be found.

The trade pathways were not just random tracks. The First Australians used sacred pathways and songlines to guide them in their trading.

Australia is a large country, meaning the items needed by one group were often a long way away. For example, greenstone (used to make stone axes) could be found along the east coast of Victoria and New South Wales. The groups that made these axes would trade them with nearby groups, who would then trade with another group and so on (forming a sort of 'trading chain'). Eventually the axes would arrive many thousands of kilometres away.

Trading could happen just between two people, or with lots of people, at trading centres and market sites. The First Australians created a healthy, booming trading system.

What was traded?

When we think about current trading, we often purchase things we need to improve our quality of life. This was the same for First Australians who traded many physical items such as tools, materials (ochre, wood, greenstone, etc.), traditional medicines, shells and weapons. However, they also traded songs, dances, art, stories, rituals and ceremonies. These connected the people to the land, sky and animals.



Greenstone axe made from traded materials.

Investigating Australian Coins

Trading non-tangible (things we can't touch) items such as songs, dances, stories and ceremonies is an interesting idea isn't it? Trade was not only about sharing resources, it was also about strengthening relationships between people. To be able to trade, groups from different areas had to respect the rights and cultures of other groups. This often helped in times of conflict where groups were able to settle disputes by meeting to discuss Dreaming laws and to share gifts of respect. Sharing stories, songs and rituals allowed groups to learn about each other, share cultural knowledge and build an understanding of, and respect for each other.

More information

If you would like more information about the trading practices and routes of the First Australians here are some excellent websites.

australianmuseum.net.au

www.indigenoustralia.info

qmtalksscience.wordpress.com/

www.qhatlas.com.au/