

Fallout in the Outback: Nuclear Colonization and the Aboriginal People of Australia



Map of Australia ¹

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¹ “Australia – Details - Australia map showing the major cities of the continent as well parts of surrounding seas,” *CIA – The World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/australia/map>.

Fallout in the Outback: Nuclear Colonization and the Aboriginal People of Australia

Known for its beaches and wildlife, Australia has a far darker history of British colonization, nuclear colonization, proliferation, and how Aboriginal lands have historically been used. The Aboriginal tribes throughout Australia's countryside have battled the British Commonwealth for decades regarding Aboriginal land use. Lieutenant James Cook arrived on Australian land in 1770 and claimed the eastern portion of the country for the British Crown, naming it New South Wales.² In his journal, Lt. Cook writes:

Notwithstand[ing] I had in the Name of his Majesty taken possession of several places upon this coast I now once more hoisted English Coulers and in the Name of His Majesty King George the Third took possession of the whole Eastern Coast from ... Latitude [38° South] down to this place by the Name of New South Wales together with all the Bays, Harbours Rivers and Islands situate upon the said coast after which we fired three Volleys of small Arms which were Answerd by the like number from the Ship.³

As the British began arriving and settling throughout Australia, the Aboriginal tribes that inhabited the land lessened due to skirmishes and diseases brought by the British colonists. This continued well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The start of the British nuclear testing program after World War II changed the landscape of Australian Aboriginal tribes and communities.

Nuclear warfare testing rose after the end of World War II. Britain, France, the United States, and others built, studied, and detonated nuclear weapons throughout the Pacific Rim, Australia, and the United States. Damage done to the inhabitants of the islands and countries became grave. Radiation flowed through the ground and into the air. No one was immune from

² National Museum Australia, "Defining Moments: Cook claims Australia," *National Museum Australia*, updated November 16, 2022, <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/cook-claims-australia>.

³ "Lieutenant James Cook's journal, 22 August 1770," *National Museum Australia*, updated November 16, 2022, accessed December 13, 2022. <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/cook-claims-australia>.

the fallout, especially the Aboriginals in Australia. Between 1952 and 1957, the British government conducted twelve atmospheric nuclear tests in Australia, while toxic and radiological tests continued until 1963.⁴ Since the first bomb test was detonated on Aboriginal land, the natives have done all that they can to get the land back. Unfortunately, the land is now coated in radioactive waste or harmful substances within the soil. At the same time, the Aboriginal tribes have fought to keep the miners away from their sacred land, not to harm it any more. In a 2016 statement, Dr. Jillian Marsh, an Adnyamathanha Traditional Owner, stated, “The First Nations people of Australia have been bullied and pushed around, forcibly removed from their families and their country, denied access and the right to care for their own land for over 200 years.”⁵ By knowing the effects of the nuclear program and the dumping of radioactive waste, non-Aboriginal people can make informed decisions on how to further help the Aboriginal communities in Australia. The goal of this paper is to argue how the British nuclear colonization of Australia, including nuclear test sites, radioactive/nuclear waste dumping, and mining, caused the Aboriginal people to lose land. Additionally, it will also show how the Aboriginal communities fought back against the government to stop these atrocities from happening to their people and their land.

Before the arrival of Lt. Cook, Australia had been inhabited by various Aboriginal tribes for centuries. Each tribe marked out its own space within the landscape. Matthew Hall argues:

The unexplored expanses of inland Australia and the geographic austerity of the outback played into this pre-colonial representation, where unmarked or unsettled land was considered ripe for control...From the colonial imaginary to

⁴ Dimity Hawkins, “Addressing Humanitarian and Environmental Harm from Nuclear Weapons: Monte Bello, Emu Field and Maralinga Test Sites - Commonwealth of Australia,” *Pace University - International Disarmament Institute and Helene & Grant Wilson Center for Social Entrepreneurship*, October 2018, Version 7, reviewed by ICAN Positive Obligations Group, <https://disarmament.blogs.pace.edu/files/2018/10/Australia-PosObs-Country-Report-7-1-10f9q33.pdf>.

⁵ Jillian Marsh, “Adnyamathanha Traditional Owners Will Fight Nuclear Waste Dump Plan,” Media Release, 29 Apr. 2016, quoted in Jim Green, “Radioactive Waste and Australia’s Aboriginal People,” *Angelaki*, 22:3, 34, DOI: 10.1080/0969725X.2017.1387364.

contemporary policies on segregation, the demarcation of Indigenous land as empty and ultimately unknowable has enabled the justification and continuance of colonial incursion on sovereign land.⁶

Since the arrival of the first British penal colony, settlers have encroached on land that historically and physically belonged to the Indigenous tribes. This vast amount of outback land was deemed ripe for British colonization. By murdering and spreading disease among the Aboriginals, the British gained more control of the Australian continent. Lynette Russell of the Indigenous Studies Centre at Monash University in Melbourne argues, “As a settler colony, Australia has struggled to accommodate, celebrate or reconcile the relationship between the nation’s ‘First Peoples’. The original European colonisation is more frequently described as ‘settlement’ by non-Indigenous Australians, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders might be more likely to describe this as ‘invasion’.”⁷ This invasion of British colonists slowly took over native lands and used them as dumping grounds for nuclear waste. Analyzing settler colonialism allows for an investigation into the concept of land rights and native lands.

Similar to the United States, colonization brought problems for Indigenous Australian tribes who consider their land sacred. For numerous native tribes all around the world, the land is a living thing. The British and Australian governments have consistently removed Aboriginal tribes from their land for decades, while they passed numerous laws and statutes to alleviate concerns. Native title in Australia has continued to be a highly contested issue. According to the Australian Attorney-General’s Department:

There are fundamental differences between land rights and native title. Land rights are rights created by the Australian, state or territory governments. Land rights usually comprise a grant of freehold or perpetual lease title to Indigenous

⁶ Matthew Hall, “The Whiteness of the Bomb: Nuclear Weaponry, Race and the Nation in Australian Indigenous Poetics,” *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture* 65, no. 3, (2008): 155, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20512856.2018.1546649>.

⁷ Lynette Russell, “Settler colonial studies: eliminating the native and creating the nation,” *Postcolonial Studies* 2020, Vol. 23, No. 1, 154, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2020.1727956>.

Australians. By contrast, native title arises as a result of recognition, under Australian common law, of pre-existing Indigenous rights and interests according to traditional laws and customs. Native title is not a grant or right created by governments.⁸

In a 1992 Australian Supreme Court Case, *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)* (“*Mabo case*”), the Supreme Court argued, “...in the absence of clear and unambiguous statutory provision to the contrary, extinguishment of native title by the Crown by inconsistent grant is wrongful and gives rise to a claim for compensatory damages.”⁹ In 1992, the Government would now recognize the land, in this court case, as Aboriginal and begin to cede the land back to the tribes. There was only one problem – the land had been radiated and carried various harmful substances.

The Aboriginal lifestyle throughout Australia has been contentious since the arrival of the British on the continent, but the end of World War II and the start of the Cold War changed the nuclear outlook of various countries. These nuclear decisions caused massive ripples throughout the Aboriginal communities. Roger Cross argues, “...the Aboriginal experience during the atomic bomb tests was consistent with the belief in the supremacy of British civilization and the cultural hegemony that goes with Western thought—involving at best an ignorance of other lifestyles and at worst a systematic destruction of lifestyles alien to its own.”¹⁰ By ignoring the life and culture of the Aborigines, the British Commonwealth appeared to choose their policies over the ideologies of the Australian Aboriginals. Australia became a minefield of radioactive waste and contaminated land. According to Eric Nelson, “From 1953 to 1963, the British government tested a series of atomic weapons at Australian sites they dubbed Emu and

⁸ “Native Title,” *Australian Government: Attorney-General’s Department*, <https://www.ag.gov.au/legal-system/native-title>.

⁹ High Court of Australia, “*Mabo v Queensland (No 2)* (“*Mabo case*”) [1992] HCA 23; (1992) 175 CLR 1 (3 June 1992),” High Court of Australia, <http://www8.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/cases/cth/HCA/1992/23.html>.

¹⁰ Roger Cross, “British Nuclear Tests and the Indigenous People of Australia,” *British Nuclear Weapons Programme: 1952-2002*, eds. Douglas Holdstock and Frank Barnaby (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 2005), 76.

Maralinga. Nine nuclear explosions and hundreds of pre-tests left about 90 square miles contaminated with intense radiation.”¹¹ Radioactive waste particles dispersed throughout the air and soil of these historical Aboriginal lands. As the British ramped up testing, more land and people were affected throughout the country and beyond.



Map of Australian Nuclear and Uranium Sites ¹²

As can be seen in the map above, nuclear testing was not confined to a specific spot within the continent. The British conducted nuclear testing throughout the continent and this affected the lives of Aboriginal Australians and even other communities. Quoted in a 2016 *Business Insights* article, Robin Matthews, husband of a Maralinga Tjarutja woman and former tuna fisherman, stated that the region is called “devil country” and that “...families just disappeared in this place. Whether they got caught in the radiation or the bombs...they never

¹¹ Eric Nelson, “Britain’s Aboriginal Sin,” *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 48, no. 6, July 1992, 8, DOI:10.1080/00963402.1992.11456279.

¹² “Australian Map,” *Friends of the Earth – Australia*, <https://www.foe.org.au/anti-nuclear-archive>.

reappeared.”¹³ As Britain used the lands for nuclear testing and dropped bombs on the open landscape, specifically Maralinga and Emu Field, entire tribes relocated to other areas. For those who stayed, their lives changed forever. Matthews also stated, “I’ve found all sorts of things out here and one day I believe that I will find skeletons.”¹⁴ The contaminated land that is now being given back to the tribes contains massive amounts of nuclear and radioactive waste. Maralinga represents a significant parcel of contaminated land.

Maralinga became a major testing site in Britain’s race to understand nuclear weapons during the Cold War. These detonations left the land covered in nuclear and radioactive waste. (See Appendix A) However, while testing commenced, some tribal members stayed in the area and received exposure to high levels of radiation. Kingsley Palmer argues:

Even with the appointment in 1956 of an additional Patrol Officer, it was evident to the Patrol Officers themselves, as well as the Royal Commission (set up in 1984 to inquire into the conduct of the tests) that there were Aborigines living in the prohibited area during testing. It was also clear that at least one family of Aborigines traversed and camped in the test area incurring considerable contamination, and that others suffered hardship and perhaps death as a result of being told to evacuate their lands. Others may have experienced sickness and perhaps blindness as a result of contact with contaminated clouds following one of the tests.¹⁵

The British government tried to clean up the site in Maralinga but might have done more damage to the grounds. Nelson reports that in 1967, a British cleanup attempt called “Operation Bumbry” only “plowed topsoil under to reduce surface contamination, which will make further cleanups more difficult,” but stressed that there are “at least 50 pounds of plutonium, buried in pits,

¹³ “Britain’s outback bomb test site is open for visitors; Aborigines say it is time to turn the page on a ‘very dark chapter’ of Australian history. Bernard Lagan reports,” *Times* [London, England], 1 Jan. 2016: 32, *Business Insights: Global*, <https://link-gale-com.libproxy.uccs.edu/apps/doc/A438818806/GBIB?u=colosprings&sid=summon&xid=16ea7e4f>.

¹⁴ “Britain’s outback bomb test site is open for visitors,” *Times* [London, England], <https://link-gale-com.libproxy.uccs.edu/apps/doc/A438818806/GBIB?u=colosprings&sid=summon&xid=16ea7e4f>.

¹⁵ Kingsley Palmer, “Dealing with the Legacy of the Past: Aborigines and Atomic Testing in South Australia,” *Aboriginal History* 14, no. 1/2 (1990), 198, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24045775>.

scattered in pieces, or in surface dust require removal or stabilization.”¹⁶ Some may ask why the Aborigines would have stayed, but one argument would be connected to the land itself and its meaning to the tribal members. This land contains sacred spaces, burial plots of loved ones lost, and natural resources that the Aboriginal people used for centuries. Now the land is contaminated, and most are scared to return. Numerous attempts have been made to clean up the sites, but containing nuclear and radioactive waste is not an easy or quick process.

Maralinga has become a site of destruction. In a 1991 *Times* article, Robert Cockburn found a study that traced plutonium to the full extent on the Aboriginal land and states, “They found that their open-air way of life made them highly vulnerable to the threat of plutonium, the most deadly carcinogen known.”¹⁷ Nelson argued in 1992, that the Pitjantjatjara land in southern Australia has exposed the tribal group to “dangerous levels of radiation” and that the land is uninhabitable.¹⁸ In 1984, the traditional lands inside of Maralinga were given back to the Tjarutja Aborigines people, but in 1993, 1,200 square miles of land were denied to the Aboriginals.¹⁹ The ancestral land of the Maralinga Aborigines had been contaminated to points that were beyond livable. While the government tried, and failed, to clean up the land, those lands will never be fully clean and available for the Aboriginal people. Jim Green argues that “The federal government’s clean-up of Maralinga in the late 1990s was done on the cheap and many tonnes of plutonium-contaminated debris remain buried in shallow, unlined pits in totally unsuitable

¹⁶ Eric Nelson, “Britain’s Aboriginal Sin,” *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 48, no. 6, July 1992, 8, DOI:10.1080/00963402.1992.11456279.

¹⁷ Robert Cockburn, “Aborigines demand nuclear payment,” *Times*, March 9, 1991, 8, *The Times Digital Archive*, <https://link-gale-com.libproxy.uccs.edu/apps/doc/IF0501843195/TTDA?u=colosprings&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=5b95fdb3>.

¹⁸ Nelson, “Britain’s Aboriginal Sin,” 9.

¹⁹ Rueter in Canberra, “UK pays £20m for test site cleanup,” *Times*, 30 June 1993, 13, *The Times Digital Archive*, accessed 11 April 2022, <https://link-gale-com.libproxy.uccs.edu/apps/doc/IF0503363203/TTDA?u=colosprings&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=aee2a844>.

geology.”²⁰ Maralinga may lie in the heart of the argument towards nuclear testing and radioactive waste in Australia. Still, various other areas of Australia have become more prone in recent decades to the Australian government’s ideas on where to place more nuclear waste dumping sites throughout the country.

Throughout the Australian Outback, various tribes and tribal organizations have worked to prevent their lands from becoming dumping grounds. In 2003, the federal government seized land using the Lands Acquisition Act of 1989, but in doing so the Aboriginal people were given no forewarning and were not consulted, which caused Native Title rights to be “extinguished with the stroke of a pen.”²¹ In the town of Muckaty, in the Northern Territory of Australia on Warlmanpa land, the Aboriginal tribe successfully ended the opportunity for the Australian government to use the land as yet another nuclear dump site. In the *Indigenous Law Bulletin*, Marlene Bennet argued, “In 2005, a number of remote sites controlled by the Federal Department of Defence were targeted by the Federal Government. Former Science Minister, Julie Bishop described them as ‘some distance from any form of civilisation’, [sic] despite all having Aboriginal communities living nearby who had occupied the land for thousands of years.”²² The Aboriginal people of the Warlmanpa land successfully denied the government from using their land as a dumping site for nuclear waste. While nuclear testing has ceased within Australian boundaries, uranium mining has become another obstacle that various Aboriginal tribes have

²⁰ Jim Green, “Radioactive Waste and the Nuclear War on Australia’s Aboriginal People,” *Chain Reaction*, no. 127, August 2016, 31, <https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.uccs.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eih&AN=117450603&site=ehost-live>.

²¹ Jim Green, “Radioactive Waste and Australia’s Aboriginal People,” 46.

²² Marlene Bennett, “Standing up for Country: How Traditional Owners Stopped a Nuclear Waste Dump at Muckaty,” *Indigenous Law Bulletin* 8, no. 14 (September/October 2014), 7-8, <https://heinonline-org.libproxy.uccs.edu/HOL/SelectPage?handle=hein.journals/indibull8&collection=journals&page=7&lname=BENNETT>.

fought back against, with the hope that the government would not take over their lands and destroy more sacred spaces.



Australia's Uranium Mines ²³

Globally, Australia is a hot spot for uranium, and the mining of uranium has risen since it was first mined in 1906. Uranium is a key component in nuclear weapons. The World Nuclear Association states that Australia possesses 28% of the world's uranium resources and the country's uranium resources hold 1,692,700 tonnes.²⁴ Most of the uranium resources lie on Aboriginal land in the country. According to Jessica Urwin, a Ph.D. candidate at Australian National University, "Aboriginal communities remain at a disproportionate risk because large uranium deposits exist in lands deemed sacred and significant, while the testing and dumping of nuclear material is rarely undertaken in areas inhabited by settlers."²⁵ These lands have been

²³ World Nuclear Association, "Australia's Uranium Mines," *World Nuclear Association*, updated June 2022, accessed January 23, 2023, <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-a-f/appendices/australia-s-uranium-mines.aspx>.

²⁴ World Nuclear Association, "What is Uranium? How Does it Work?" *World Nuclear Association*, updated August 2022, accessed January 13, 2023, <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/nuclear-fuel-cycle/introduction/what-is-uranium-how-does-it-work.aspx>.

²⁵ Jessica Urwin, "Uranium mines harm Indigenous people – so why have we approved a new one?" *The Conversation*, published May 1, 2019, updated May 5, 2019, accessed January 14, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/uranium-mines-harm-indigenous-people-so-why-have-we-approved-a-new-one-116262>.

mined since the early twentieth century. Uranium, like other components in nuclear testing, is also not stable and accidents have occurred. Damaged when amateur prospectors tried mining uranium from Radium Hill in 1906, Ngadjuri and Wilyakali lands became a place where “an estimated 100,000 tonnes of toxic mine residue (tailings) remain at Radium Hill with the potential to leach radioactive material into the environment.”²⁶ As uranium mining grew in Australia, so did the number of mines that encroached on Aboriginal land and caused outrage among the tribal people and their communities. These Aboriginal people knew that they needed to at least attempt to stop the government from taking over any more of their land and sacred spaces.

There are three current uranium mines in business in Australia: Ranger Mine which resides in the Northern Territory, as well as the Olympic Dam and the Beverley-Four Mile Mine, in South Australia.²⁷ The Ranger Mine has been a hot topic for many Aboriginal people of the Mirrar tribe. The traditional owners of the land where Ranger Mine sits, the Mirrar people have felt betrayed multiple times by the government and its goals for a continued push for uranium mining. Matthew Fagan quoted a delivered report by Justice AE Woodward from 1974 that stated, “to deny the Aborigines the right to prevent mining on their land is to deny the reality of their land rights’.”²⁸ That was in 1974. This fight between the Aboriginal people and the government over uranium mining has continued well into the twenty-first century. In 2011, after the disaster at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant in Japan, many of the Mirrar people had

²⁶ Jessica Urwin, “Uranium mines harm Indigenous people,” <https://theconversation.com/uranium-mines-harm-indigenous-people-so-why-have-we-approved-a-new-one-116262>.

²⁷ World Nuclear Association, “Australia's Uranium Mines,” *World Nuclear Association*, updated June 2022, accessed January 12, 2023, <https://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-a-f/appendices/australia-s-uranium-mines.aspx>.

²⁸ AE Woodward, “*Aboriginal Land Rights Commission: Second Report* (1974),” p. 108, quoted in Matthew Fagan, “Broken Promises: Land rights, mining and the Mirrar People,” *Indigenous Law Bulletin* volume 5, issue 18, July 2002, 12, <https://heinonline-org.libproxy.uccs.edu/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/indibull5&id=468&collection=journals#>.

finally had enough of the mining industry on their land. In an article for the *Independent* out of London, England, Yvonne Margarula, a senior traditional elder, was quoted as saying, ““Uranium mining has also taken our country away from us and destroyed it – billabongs and creeks gone forever. There are hills of poisonous rock and great holes in the ground with poisonous mud.””²⁹ The government has tried desperately to open new mines throughout the country. Most of the Mirrar people have opposed the possibility of opening a second mine in Kakadu, a national park listed as a World Heritage Park where the Ranger Mine is currently mining uranium, called Jabiluka.³⁰

Jabiluka would cause more problems for the Mirrar people and the land that they traditionally own. Matthew Fagan argues that the Mirrar people did not want a road built between Jabiluka and Ranger and that “Not only were the Mirrar determined to do everything in their power to prevent Jabiluka proceeding, they also had serious concerns about radioactive waste management at Ranger and did not want processing to continue at Ranger beyond the life of the existing Ranger mine.”³¹ This radioactive waste, similar to the nuclear waste dumps that the government tried to pursue throughout the country, poisons the land and the water sources that are sacred to the Mirrar people. In fact, according to Fagan, in March of 2002, 84,500 tonnes of uranium ore were incorrectly placed by the mining company at Ranger, which led to “the contamination of waterways feeding Magela Creek, which flows through Aboriginal

²⁹ “Aborigines to block uranium mining after Japan disaster Aborigines aghast at Japan leak bar use of uranium mine.” *Independent* [London, England], April 14, 2011, 26, *Gale Business: Insights*, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://link-gale-com.libproxy.uccs.edu/apps/doc/A253965489/GBIB?u=colosprings&sid=bookmark-GBIB&xid=41ec3b08>.

³⁰ “Aborigines to block uranium,” *Independent* [London, England], 26.

³¹ Matthew Fagan, “Broken Promises: Land rights, mining and the Mirrar People,” *Indigenous Law Bulletin* volume 5, issue 18, July 2002, 12, <https://heinonline-org.libproxy.uccs.edu/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/indibull5&id=468&collection=journals#>.

communities in Kakadu.”³² The disaster that radioactive waste, like uranium, causes to the environment can become an issue for succeeding generations to come. The environment is not the only concern of the Aboriginal people.

Being pressured, in some cases, to give up their land has even caused the Australian Parliament to weigh in on the issue. In a 1997 Senate Committee impact statement, Irene Wilson of the Committee Office for the Department of the Senate stated:

Aborigines have limited control over exploration and mining on their land. This control is exercised through exploration and mining agreements that they negotiate, and the requirement under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act that land councils must consent to exploration. Once consent has been given to exploration, Aboriginal people can not withdraw consent to mining. There are a number of related issues concerning the pressure and tactics used to gain Aboriginal consent to exploration and mining, and their effect on the Aboriginal communities.³³

Arguments regarding land ownership and nuclear properties started in the early twentieth century and continue today. Ranger Mine, and the subsequent Jabiluka Mine, are not the only projects that the Aboriginal people fought to block. The Beverley and Four Mile uranium mines are located in South Australia, near the high-producing Olympic Dam and not far from the sites of the nuclear testing at Maralinga and Emu Field. The Adnyamathanha Traditional Owners found the establishment of the mines at Beverley and Four Mile an issue that was “...deeply troubling and divisive.”³⁴ In 2007, Jim Green argued that the company Healthgate Resources, owned by a company named General Atomics:

³² Supervising Scientist Division, Environment Australia, Report 170: *Investigation of the stockpiling and reporting incidents at Ranger and Jabiluka* (2002), quoted in Matthew Fagan, “Broken Promises: Land rights, mining and the Mirrar People,” *Indigenous Law Bulletin* volume 5, issue 18, July 2002, 14, <https://heinonline-org.libproxy.uccs.edu/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/indibull5&id=468&collection=journals#>.

³³ Irene Wilson, “IMPACT OF URANIUM MINING ON ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY,” *Parliament of Australia*, April 1997, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Former_Committees/uranium/report/c11.

³⁴ Marsh, “A Critical Analysis of the Decision Making Protocols used in Approving a Commercial Mining License for Beverley Uranium Mine in Adnyamathanha Country: Toward Effective Indigenous Participation in Caring for Cultural Resources,” quoted in Jim Green, “Radioactive Waste and Australia’s Aboriginal People,” *Angelaki*, 22:3, 41, DOI: [10.1080/0969725X.2017.1387364](https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2017.1387364).

...succeeded in imposing the Beverley uranium mine on the Adnyamathanha people in the late 1990s. The company negotiated with a small number of Native Title claimants, but did not recognise the will of the community as a whole. This divide-and-rule strategy, coupled with the joint might of industry and government, resulted in inadequate and selective consultation with the local people.³⁵

Western Australian Aboriginal tribes have also dealt with the government wanting to place a uranium mine within their lands. Geoffrey Stokes, a Wongatha leader and pastor, argued that the Aboriginal clan does not need the mining of uranium in the country and stated, ““We have sun, we’ve got wind, we’ve got people. Why should we pollute our country for money?””³⁶ The mining of uranium causes environmental damage that cannot be reversed. Unlike trying to remove nuclear waste from the ground, which has been attempted by the government in areas throughout the country, radioactive waste from uranium becomes a problem that cannot be removed. It goes into the land and rivers and becomes detrimental to the Aboriginal tribes that still live in those areas today.

The Aboriginal tribes of Australia have fought since the arrival of colonists to keep their land that is held in such high regard by the First Nations. These sacred lands have been scarred by government ideas and plans for the land. Jillian K. Marsh and Jim Green argue at conceptual tools used by the government “...include Western science and its body of experts as the primary means of identifying, classifying and managing Indigenous cultural resources, and regulatory processes that are compelled to prioritise commercial ventures. These are enshrined in legislative requirements designed to facilitate commercial development and deny sovereign rights to First

³⁵ Jim Green, “Aboriginal land rights and uranium mining.” *Arena Magazine*, August-September 2007, 8, *Gale Academic OneFile*, <https://link-gale-com.libproxy.uccs.edu/apps/doc/A174280839/AONE?u=colosprings&sid=summon&xid=a7baeb8a>.

³⁶ Jessie Boylan, “AUSTRALIA: ENOUGH OF URANIUM MINING, SAY ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES.” *Interpress Service*, August 9, 2010, *Gale Business: Insights*, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://link-gale-com.libproxy.uccs.edu/apps/doc/A234004425/GBIB?u=colosprings&sid=bookmark-GBIB&xid=083954d2>.

Nations peoples of Australia.”³⁷ All of these actions done, by both the British Commonwealth and the Australian Parliament, have become a form of environmental and systemic racism against the Aboriginal First Nations of Australia. Not only by the exclusion of Aboriginal peoples in discussions of land usage, but how both governments have used the land for their own nuclear testing, dumping, and uranium mining. All of these forms of nuclear power have come at a cost to the Aboriginal tribes throughout Australia. Green argues, “An examination of the pursuit of nuclear projects in Australia – atomic bomb tests and their aftermath, uranium mines and radioactive waste repositories – tends to confirm the prevalence of systemic racism in Australia.”³⁸ While environmental and systemic racism is present throughout the history of the First Nations in Australia, the lack of respect for the tribes and the tribal people has continued throughout the nuclear program that the British implemented in Australia.

Conclusion

British colonization of Australian land changed the course of history for the Aboriginal tribes that occupied the land. One of the concepts that the First Nations had going against them was when Lt. Cook claimed that the land was *terra nullius*, which became the longstanding ideology of “...meaning land belonging to no-one, was the legal concept used by the British government to justify the settlement of Australia.”³⁹ The Aboriginal people have fought back against the British government since Cook’s arrival, in hopes to keep the land that they deem sacred. The land where their ancestors lived and were buried. The rivers, streams, and lakes that

³⁷ Jillian K. Marsh and Jim Green, “First nations rights and colonising practices by the nuclear industry: An Australian battleground for environmental justice,” *The Extractive Industries and Society* Volume 7, Issue 3, July 2020, 871, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2019.01.010>.

³⁸ Jim Green, “Radioactive Waste and Australia’s Aboriginal People,” *Angelaki*, 22:3, 46, DOI: [10.1080/0969725X.2017.1387364](https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2017.1387364).

³⁹ “Challenging Terra Nullius,” *National Library of Australia*, <https://www.nla.gov.au/digital-classroom/senior-secondary/cook-and-pacific/cook-legend-and-legacy/challenging-terra#>.

they nurtured and cared for and their homes. Marsh and Green argue, “The imposition of the British colonial land acquisition system of property ownership was based on the myth of terra nullius and upheld by Euro-centric governance structures.”⁴⁰ After the end of World War II, and the start of the Cold War, the government took whatever means necessary to find land to do nuclear testing. With the idea that the land belonged to no one, they proceeded to remove Aboriginal people from their land and use the land for their nuclear programs. By doing this, the British changed the land forever.

Nuclear testing at Maralinga, as well as at Emu Field and Montebello Islands,⁴¹ destroyed the area, and portions of the land remain contaminated today. While Maralinga has been reopened to some capacity for tourists, it still contains traces of radiation and nuclear waste. These amounts, whether trace amounts or more, are present on the land and have caused various health issues for those who have returned to the land. Plutonium still resides within the soils in Maralinga and other test sites. Clare Fitzgerald argues, “Since they were granted access to the land again, the local Indigenous people have faced numerous emotional, social and physical hardships. Food grown near the site is too dangerous to consume, and many find plants are unable to survive in the now-sterile soil.”⁴² While the Aboriginal people have fought to regain their sacred homeland, it is being returned with substances that can cause various health ailments and contaminated food sources.

The Australian government, in recent decades, has tried to apologize and return traditional land to the Aboriginal people, knowing full well that the land is teeming with

⁴⁰ Marsh and Green, “First nations rights and colonising practices by the nuclear industry,” 875.

⁴¹ Montebello Islands was not covered in this paper but was also a major testing area for nuclear weapons by the British government.

⁴² Clare Fitzgerald, “Problems Persist In Australian Outback Decades After British Nuclear Tests,” *War History Online*, June 1, 2022, accessed March 1, 2023, <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/cold-war/plutonium-leaking-australian-outback.html?chrome=1>.

radiation and other harmful chemicals. In other cases, they have tried to take more land away from the tribes to build uranium mines or dump nuclear and radioactive waste. A Senate Committee of the Australian Parliament stated, “The mining of uranium in Australia has occurred mostly on Aboriginal land. Of the new mines being proposed, most again are on land that is owned and cared for by indigenous Australians.”⁴³ The committee further recommended that “Before issuing any further export licences the government should ensure that all of the aboriginal groups whose traditional lands may be affected by the expansion of mining operations have agreed, in the absence of any undue pressure, to the mining of that uranium.”⁴⁴ As generations of new tribal members have fought against uranium mining and other nuclear colonization, the government has slowly acknowledged its errors and has tried to apologize for the centuries-long land battles.

It is unknown how much real damage has been done from nuclear testing and dumping, as well as uranium mining, on traditional lands. Boylan found in a 1997 Australian Parliament Report that it was observed that at uranium mines, such as Olympic Dam, “...there was deep concern at the reckless degradation of sacred sites and insensitivity to their culture.”⁴⁵ In an attempt for the Australian government to have transparency with the country, they put together a Citizens’ Jury. In 2016, South Australia’s Citizens’ Jury on Nuclear Waste recommended that “There is a lack of aboriginal consent. We believe that the government should accept that the Elders have said NO and stop ignoring their opinions. The aboriginal people of South Australia (and Australia) continue to be neglected and ignored by all levels of government instead of

⁴³ “6. Indigenous Concerns,” *Parliament of Australia*, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Former_Committees/uranium/report/d07.

⁴⁴ “6. Indigenous Concerns,” *Parliament of Australia*, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Former_Committees/uranium/report/d07.

⁴⁵ Jessie Boylan, “AUSTRALIA: ENOUGH OF URANIUM MINING, SAY ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES.” *Interpress Service*, August 9, 2010, *Gale Business: Insights*, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://link-gale-com.libproxy.uccs.edu/apps/doc/A234004425/GBIB?u=colosprings&sid=bookmark-GBIB&xid=083954d2>.

respected and treated as equals.”⁴⁶ The treatment of the Aboriginal people in Australia continues to be a concern into the twenty-first century. Some have tried to show their respect for the First Nations, like the National Library of Australia, which has an Acknowledgment of Country when entering their website that states, “The National Library of Australia acknowledges Australia’s First Nations Peoples – the First Australians – as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of this land and gives respect to the Elders – past and present – and through them to all Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.”⁴⁷

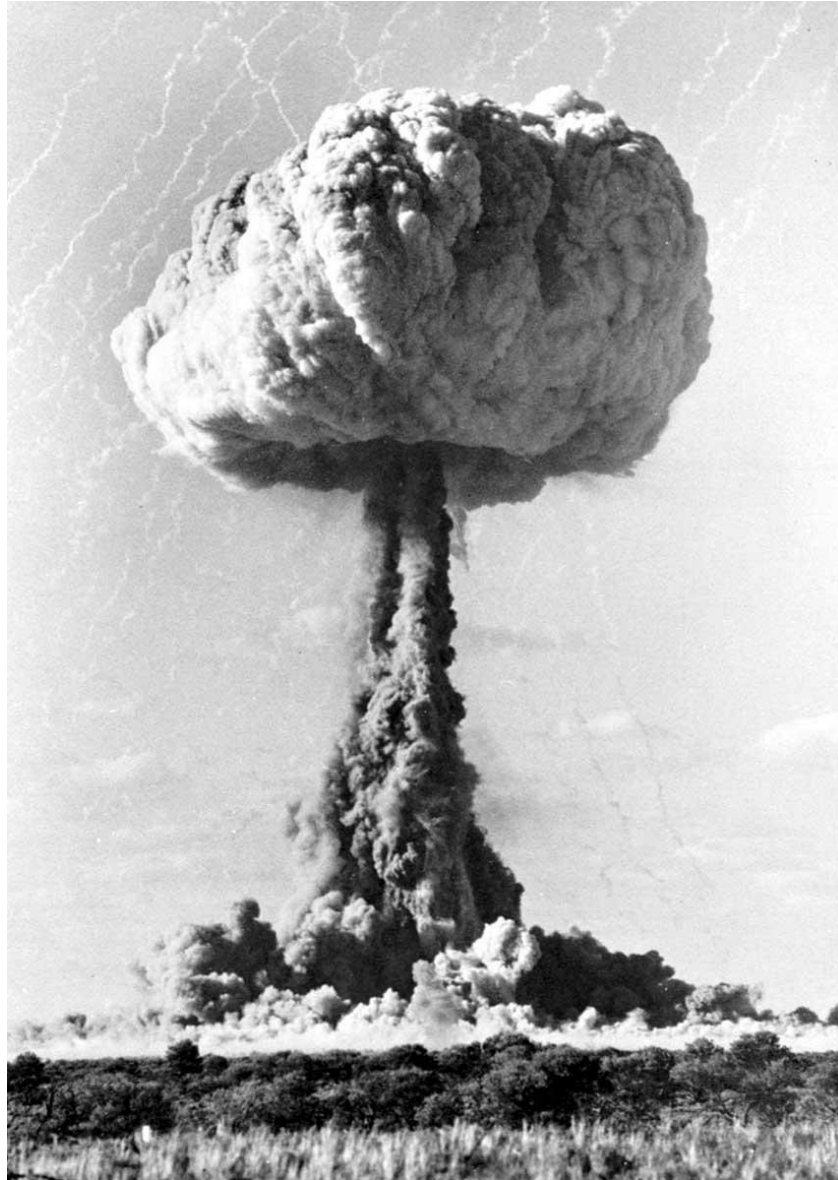
From the arrival of Lt. Cook to the start of the British nuclear program, the mining of uranium, and radioactive waste dumping, the Aboriginal people of Australia have been forcibly removed, sometimes under false pretenses, from their land. In turn, they fought back against the government desecrating their sacred land and fought to have their rights to their traditional lands restored. British colonization occurred with the colonists themselves, then the focus turned to nuclear colonization. By doing that, the British government, and later the Australian Parliament, denied the First Nations their traditional land rights. The sacred spaces were no longer theirs to occupy. Environmental and systemic racism grew throughout the nuclear proliferation. The long-term risks to the Aboriginal people of Australia are not fully known when it comes to the effects of nuclear fallout, but more research must be done to understand how the government can reverse the damage done to the First Nations. Abundant sources are available in recent years on the current effects of nuclear proliferation, but there is still more that can be done to help the Aboriginal people thrive and succeed in a country that denied them rights for so long.

⁴⁶ “South Australia’s Citizens’ Jury on Nuclear Waste: Final Report, November 2016,” embargoed 5pm Sunday 6th November, accessed February 20, 2023, https://newdemocracy.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/docs_activeprojects_sanuclearjury_Final-Report-SA-Citizens-Jury-on-Nuclear-Waste_2.pdf.

⁴⁷ “Acknowledgment of Country,” *National Library of Australia*, <https://www.nla.gov.au/>.

Appendix A

Atomic blast during Operation Buffalo nuclear tests, Maralinga, South Australia.⁴⁸



⁴⁸ “Defining Moments: Maralinga,” *National Museum Australia*, updated 6 March 2023, accessed March 10, 2023, <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/maralinga>.

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