

GROUNDWATER STORIES FROM THE DREAMTIME, MEEM-MAA-GAR GAUNGGAN (ST MARY'S WATERHOLE, NSW)

The content for this case study is taken directly from the Masters Thesis entitled "ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND GROUNDWATER" by Bradley J. Moggridge (University of Technology, Sydney, 2005). For full details, refer to the original thesis document, including a comprehensive set of references.

WARNING – THE AUTHOR OF THIS MATERIAL APOLOGISES TO ANY ABORIGINAL PERSON WHO MAY BE DISTRESSED BY THE MENTION OF THE NAMES OF PERSONS WHO MAY NOW BE DECEASED.

To Aboriginal people, the stories of the dreamtime represent the past, present and future.

Storytelling is an integral part of life for Australian Aboriginals. These stories are passed from one generation to another, usually by elders in Aboriginal communities both traditional and contemporary. The Dreaming or Dreamtime is an English translation of an Aboriginal concept that has many terms to describe. Dreamtime stories depict the very basic part of a long and complex event. Stories covered include: the creation of the land and life, protocols and tribal lore, life and death, warfare, hunting, linking every creature and every feature of the landscape, male and female roles, as well as sacred and public affairs.

These are stories of the history and culture of Aboriginal people, handed down in this way since the beginning of time and refer to all that is known and all that is understood. The stories indicate the linkages between surface water, groundwater, lakes and rivers, cave systems, natural springs, thermal springs, rain events recharging the aquifers and, in drought, excess discharge allowing culture heroes to move with watertable fluctuations. Many groundwater related sites would be dreaming sites because water that originates from below the ground, with Aboriginal people not knowing the full extent of hydrogeological processes, would deem it to be spiritually significant. The dreaming significance of these sites, for instance, would link surface and sub-surface waters through their culture heroes.

The stories are told in detail and re-enacted in ceremonies which capture the imagination of the young, primarily for educating. The teaching styles have proven to be inspiring and powerful tools in presenting the Dreamtime beliefs and cultural practices.

The following story is an account of a mythological site given in Nayutah and Finlay (1988) of St Mary's Waterhole situated within Gumbainggeri country on the NSW north coast. The site is known as Meem-maa-gar Gaunggan to the local Aboriginal people and in a groundwater sense is a natural spring. This account indicates a spiritual belief system in place that is derived from groundwater, which has protective healing powers for pregnant Gumbainggeri Aboriginal women.

Meem-maa-gar Gaunggan (St Mary's Waterhole)

The following account is from a Gumbainggeri elder Harry Buchanan:

Harry said that during the first four or five months of her pregnancy, the women carried out a ritual at the waterhole to ensure her baby would be carried for the full term. Sometimes four or more women would perform the ritual in the water and washing themselves as high as the breasts, while asking to Wooroomparahal (God) in the sky to help carry the babies till birth.

After white people came to the district, many young Gumbainggeri women began to have miscarriages. They believed that unless they performed this ceremony, they would lose their baby. When they had completed the ceremony, the women were confident their pregnancies would go full term.

From other reports local people still don't or won't drink that water today the rules of old still exist.

Reference:

Nayutah J and Finlay G (1988) **Our Land Our Spirit**. Northern Star Limited Lismore Australia.



Australian Government
National Water Commission



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