Aboriginal traditions about flooding of the Australian coast: might they recall events that happened more than 6000 years ago?

INTRODUCTION

In six places around the Australian coast (see map), there are Aboriginal traditions that tell of the ocean rising up over the land, leaving it permanently flooded. This research sought to determine whether these traditions might recall a time after the end of the last ice age when sea level rose over the continental shelf.

PORT PHILLIP BAY

Several traditions describe the landscape and fauna of Port Phillip Bay when it was dry land. One of the more recent, from Aboriginal residents of Dromana, was that formerly to cross from Portsea to Queenscliff, one had to "walk a little, swim a little".

While it is possible that the entrance to the Bay was blocked about 1200 years ago for a few centuries, causing it to dry out, it is also possible that these traditions are older, dating from a time when sea level was 8-12 m lower than today.

Since the coldest time of the last ice age more than 16,000 years ago, sea level has generally been rising, mainly as a result of the melting of ice that had formed on land areas.

The graph on the right shows the position of sea level along the Australian coast at various times in the last 13,600 years (BP means years Before Present). It cannot be precisely determined when sea level was at particular depths so this is represented by an envelope rather than a single line.

The six sets of traditions presented can be interpreted as marking a time when the sea rose above a particular level, a time that can be estimated from this graph.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

It is likely that Aboriginal traditions recalling flooding of the Australian coast date from more than 6000 years ago, perhaps as much as 13,400 years ago. This places Aboriginal traditions among the most enduring in the world. Future work will focus on gathering and analysing more such Aboriginal traditions as well as those from similar cultures in India and perhaps elsewhere.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Aboriginal traditions presented here were obtained by the researcher solely from publicly-available archival sources. The owners of the original traditions are acknowledged with respect and gratitude. It is believed that the original owners of the traditions cited here were from the Tiwi people (Bathurst and Melville Islands), the Nyoongar people (Rottnest, Carnac and Garden Islands), the Narrungga people (Spencer Gulf), the Ngarrindjeri people (Kangaroo Island), the Bunurong people (Port Phillip Bay), and the Yindinji people (Cairns).

REFERENCES
