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AUSTRALIA



Written by Terry Miller Shannon

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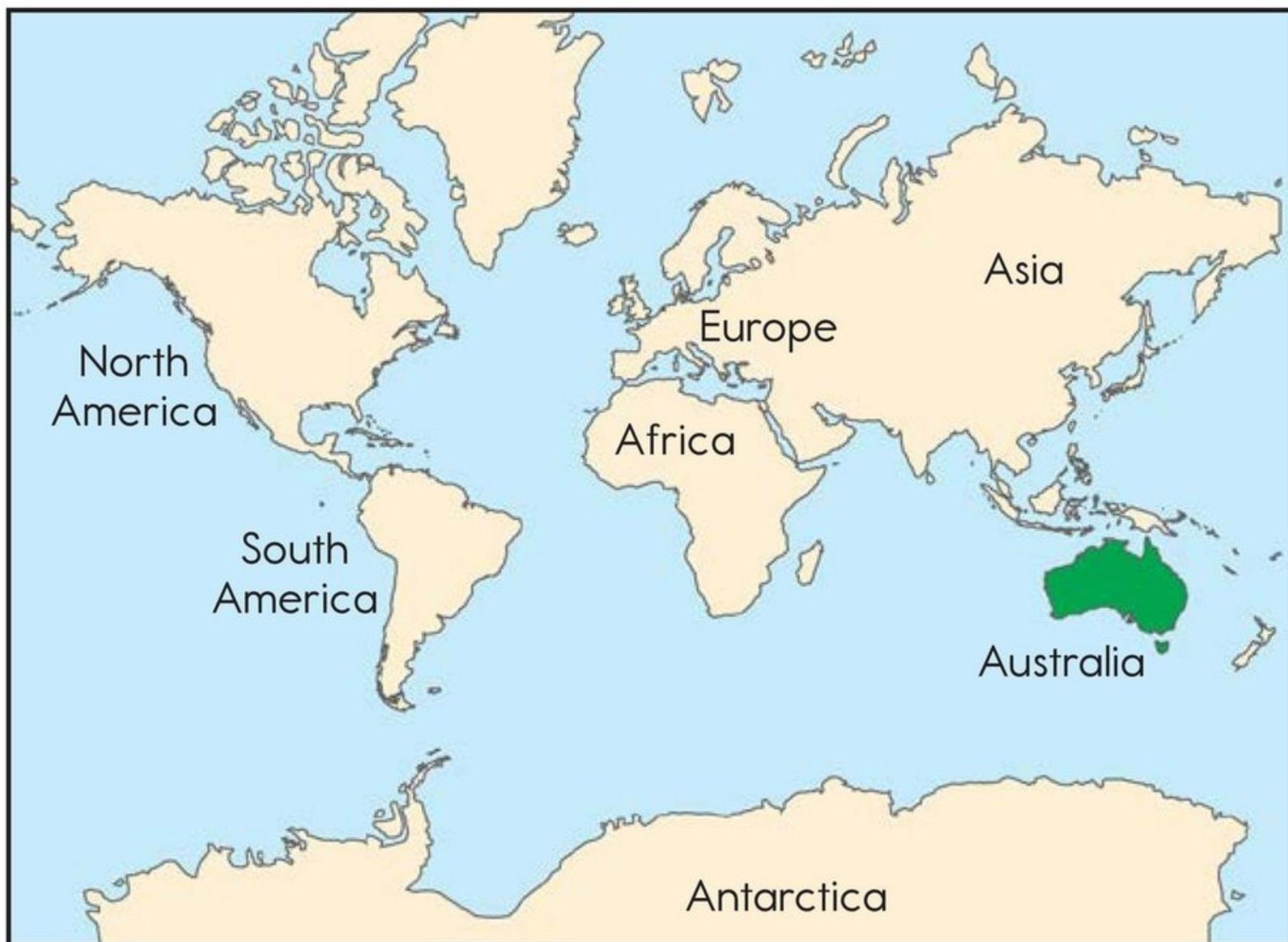


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Australia is one of the world's richest natural areas.

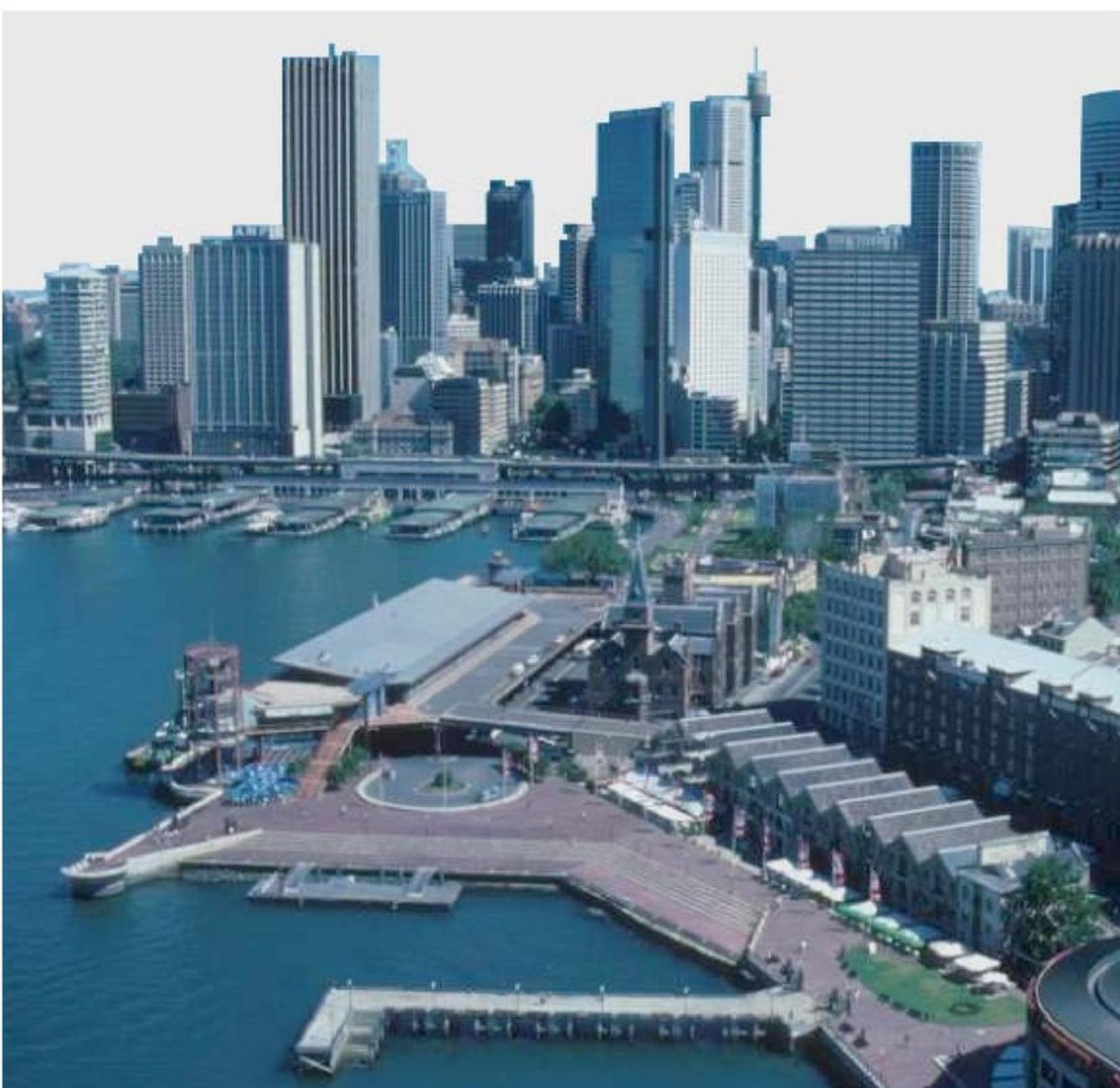
Introduction

The official name of Australia is the Commonwealth of Australia, but Australians call their land “Oz.” It is a place so unique, it might have come from a fantasy story rather than real life. Many of the things you see in Australia, from the incredible landscapes to the amazing creatures, are unlike anything else on Earth.

Australia has a rich and fascinating history. A group of people called Aborigines has lived in Australia for over 40,000 years. Britain claimed Australia just over 200 years ago. Since then, the country has changed from a small **colony** to a nation with approximately 22 million citizens.

Australia's population is also unique. Although Australia has lots of industry, most areas have almost no people. Those underpopulated areas are known as the outback, and the people who live there have a frontier spirit, even in this day. However, most Australians live in cities and lead modern lives.

To learn more about the fascinating country called Australia, simply turn the page. Welcome to Australia!



Most Australians live in coastal towns and cities, such as Sydney.

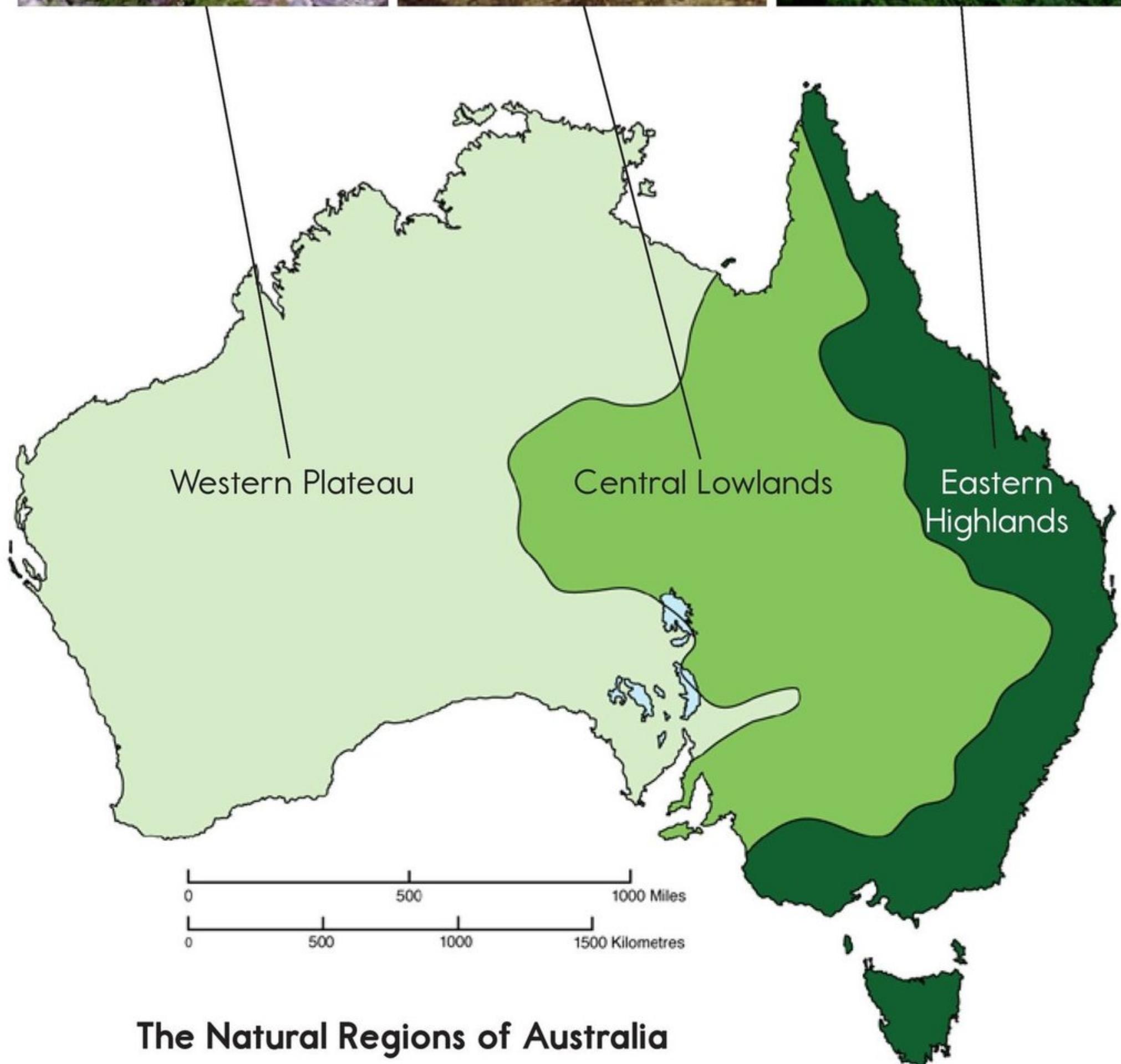
Geography

Australia is the only country that is also a **continent** (landmass). Australia is the oldest continent, at 40 million years old, the smallest continent, and the world's largest island! It is also the world's flattest continent. Australia is the sixth largest country in the world. It is as large as the United States (not counting Hawaii and Alaska). The continent covers 7,692,024 square kilometers (2,969,907 sq mi) of land.

Australia is located in the southern **hemisphere** (half of the earth). The Indian Ocean borders Australia on the west and south, while the Pacific Ocean surrounds the northern and eastern edges. The country of Australia includes the island state of Tasmania, which is 240 kilometers (150 mi) off Australia's southern tip, across the Bass Strait.

There are three main areas in Australia: the Western Plateau, the Central Lowlands, and the Eastern Highlands. The Western Plateau, covering two-thirds of Australia, is a flat, dry, desert area with hot weather. Scientists have found the world's oldest rocks in the Western Plateau. Dry grasslands are found in the Central Lowlands, where it is hot all year during the day,

but can be very cold at night. The Great Dividing Range, part of the Eastern Highlands, holds rivers, valleys, and Australia's highest mountains.





(Clockwise from top left) Kangaroos, crocodiles, koala bears, Tasmanian devils, cockatoos, and frilled lizards have become symbols of Australia.

Animals

Australia's animals are amazing! Because of the continent's isolation and harsh conditions, animals seen nowhere else on Earth have developed.

Today, some of these animals are **threatened** (in danger of dying out and becoming extinct). As cities grow larger, the natural areas have grown smaller. Homes and food for some animals are becoming scarce.

Only in Australia can you find a platypus. This unusual animal has four legs, fur, beady eyes, a tail like a beaver's, a duck's bill, and webbed feet. When a British scientist first saw a platypus, he believed someone was playing a practical joke! An adult male platypus has a venomous spur on its back ankles. Although a platypus is a **mammal** (a warm-blooded animal that nurses its young), females lay eggs.



Platypus

There are around 700 types of Australian snakes and lizards. When one lizard called a **thorny devil** feels threatened, it inflates with air to look bigger and shows its skin spikes. If it's really scared, it tucks its head between its front legs, and a big spiny knob sticks out on the back

of its neck—like a fake head. A thorny devil can eat thousands of ants in one day.



Thorny devil



Koalas eat only one thing: eucalyptus leaves.

Koalas look like teddy bears, but they aren't bears at all. They're actually related to the kangaroo, another common Australian animal. Koalas are the only animals besides **primates** (a group of animals that includes humans, apes, and monkeys) that have unique fingerprints.

Many of Australia's mammals are **marsupials**. A marsupial gives birth to a tiny, helpless baby that lives in a pouch or pocket on its mother's body. On other continents, most marsupials disappeared long ago. But Australia's isolation allowed marsupials to thrive. Kangaroos, wallabies, and koalas are all marsupials.

The animals on these pages are just a few of the large number of creatures found only in Australia!



Uluru, also known as Ayers Rock, is one of the most famous sights in Australia.

The Outback

The Australian outback is the huge dry inland area. Rain may not fall there for years at a time. There can be hundreds of miles between “towns,” which are usually just a few buildings. The outback has enormous deserts. There are also some mountainous regions.

There are many colorfully gorgeous sights here: enormous golden plains, red rocks, and purple mountain ranges. The landscape is empty and stretches forever. This is truly frontier country for hardy pioneers.

If you visit the outback, keep your eye out for wild camels! The animals were brought there in the 1870s as desert transportation. Today, the largest number of wild camels in the world lives in the outback. Some tourist places offer camel tours to visitors.

Some residents of the outback live and work on enormous ranches called *stations*. Some stations are actually larger than some small countries! Other people work in mining and oil production. The only city in the outback, Alice Springs, welcomes tourists who come to visit Uluru.

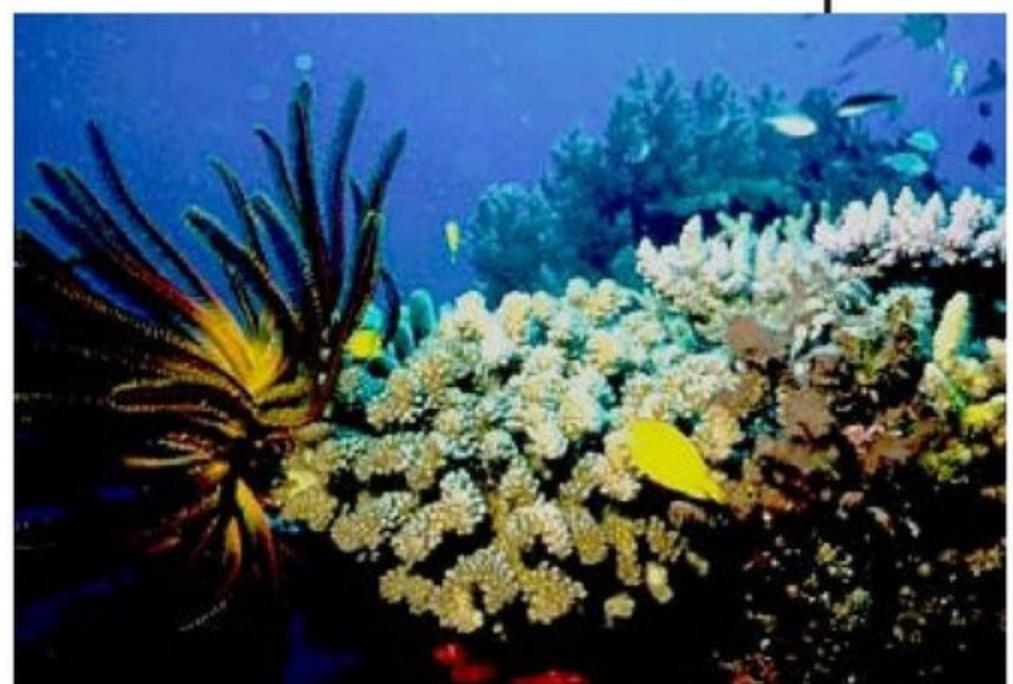


Stations in the outback seem to go on forever.

Do You Know?

The Great Barrier Reef, off the coast of Australia, is the largest coral reef system in the world. It is home to more than 2,000 types of fish, many types of coral, and other sea creatures, sea plants, and birds.

Just how big is the Great Barrier Reef? You can actually see it from space!





Aborigines lived entirely off the animals and plants they hunted and gathered.

Do You Know?

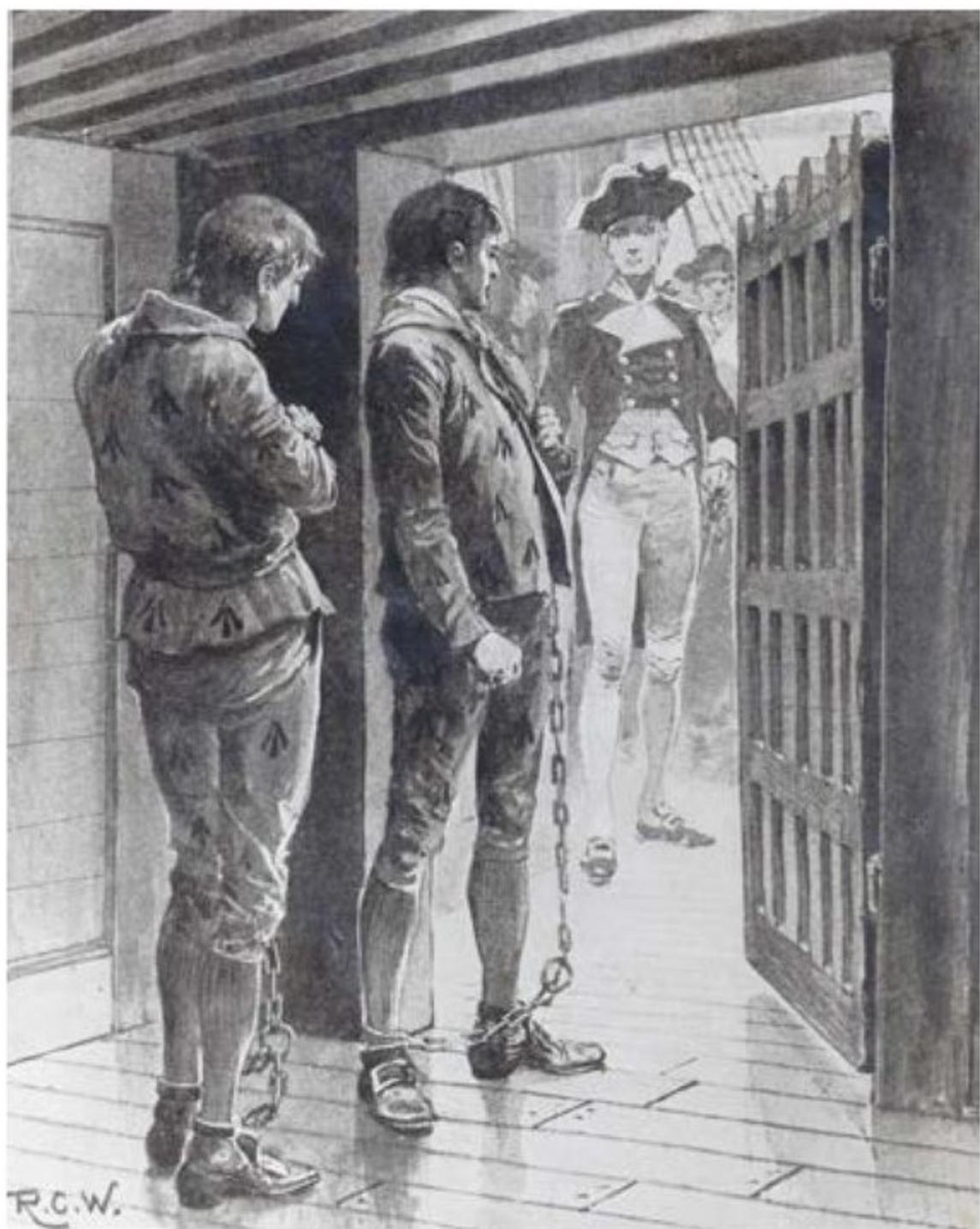
Aborigines used boomerangs in games, to hunt and fight, and to build fires by rubbing the edges against other sticks. The word *boomerang* simply means “throwing stick.” Not all boomerangs were meant to come back to the thrower. By 8,000 BC, the Aborigines invented a “returning boomerang” that would swirl in the air and return to the thrower.

History

The first people living in Australia were the Aborigines. They probably traveled by sea from Asia more than 40,000 years ago. By the time Europeans settled Australia, there may have been close to one million Aborigines in Australia. The early Aborigines were **nomads** (people who moved frequently). They hunted and gathered food in small groups and lived in temporary mud homes. They had at least 300 different languages.

In the 17th century, Dutch, Portuguese, and Spanish sailors viewed Australia from their ships. The Dutch landed in 1606 and explored for around 150 years, but decided the land was worthless. In 1688, the first Englishman, William Dampier, arrived. Although Dampier wasn't impressed with Australia, he wrote a book about what he saw.

Finally, in 1770, an Englishman, Captain James Cook, arrived in Australia. He claimed Australia's east coast for Britain, calling it New South Wales. Because of crowding in British prisons, England established a **convict colony** (a settlement of prisoners) in Australia. The first settlement had



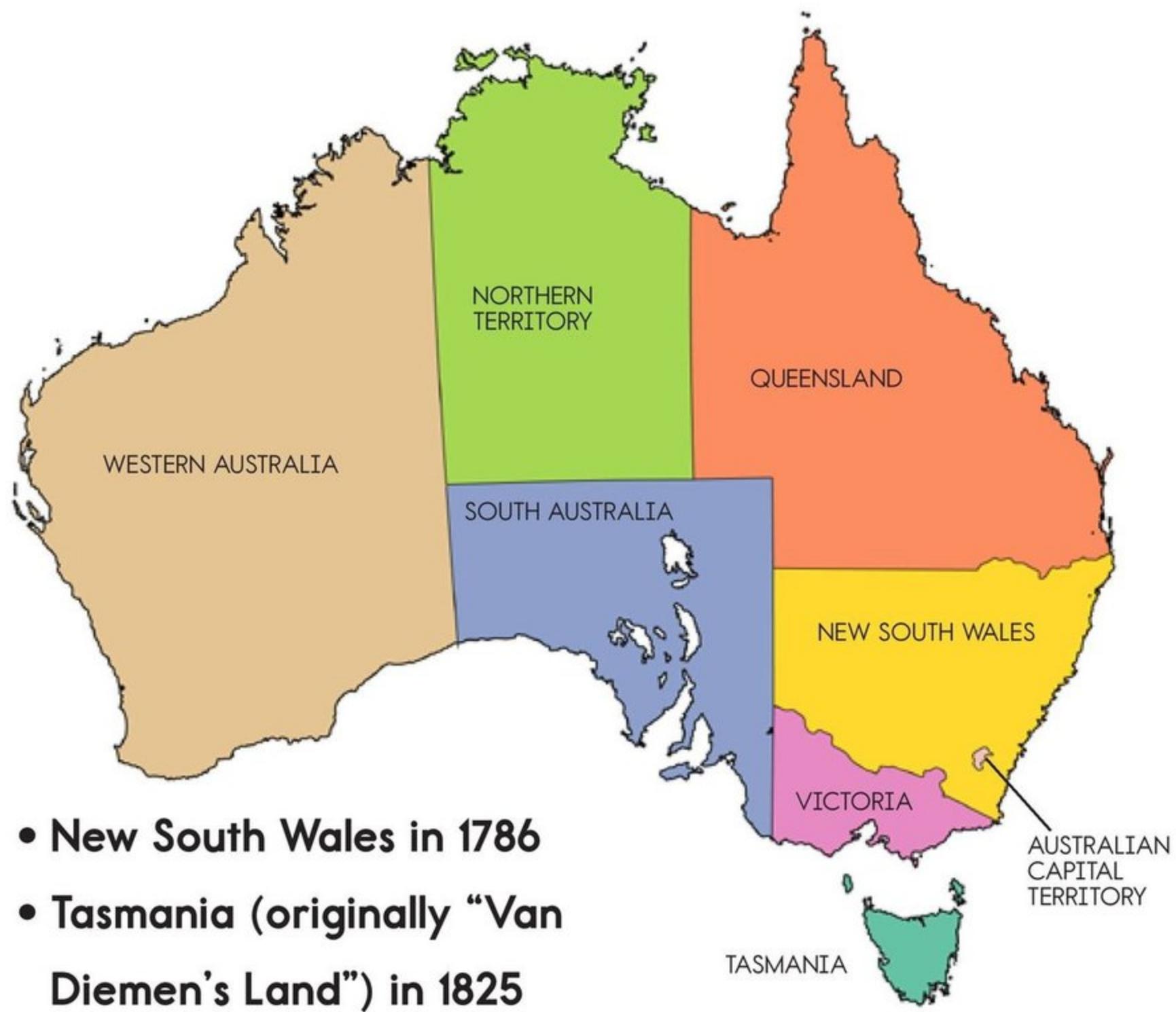
759 prisoners (568 men and 191 women), 200 soldiers, and 40 wives and children of the soldiers. These people lived in tents and ate native animals and food sent from England.

This drawing shows prisoners on a ship sailing to Botany Bay, Australia, in 1870.

When that first settlement survived, more settlers began to arrive. Free settlers set up farms, explored the land, and searched for minerals. By the early 1800s, explorers had sailed around Australia and traveled through the interior. Different colonies (groups from distant lands, still tied to the parent country) settled throughout the continent during the 19th century.

Do You Know?

Six colonies were established by free settlers and former convicts during the 1700s and 1800s.



The Aborigines did not fare well after Britain began colonizing Australia. Many died due to new diseases brought into the country. Others died because of fighting between the newcomers and the Aboriginal people. In the 1850s, the British forced many of the surviving natives to live on reservations.

Gold was discovered in New South Wales and in Victoria in 1851. In the gold rush that followed, men from all over Australia, as well as European and Chinese immigrants, rushed to the gold fields. Some found gold and became wealthy, while others did not.



A worker pours liquid Australian gold into a mold to create a standard weight gold bar.



Australian soldiers have fought in major wars.

The colonies became states. In 1901, they united under one government and called themselves the Commonwealth of Australia. Britain entered World War I in 1914, with Australia fighting alongside.

A huge **depression** (a period of poverty) struck Australia in 1929. By 1931, one out of every three workers was unemployed, and many were homeless. Business and the economy improved from 1934 to 1937. During World War II, Australians fought alongside Allied soldiers.



Modern Aborigines still fight against discrimination.

Early Australian **immigration** (people moving into a country) laws had allowed mostly northern Europeans to enter the country. This changed in the 1960s and 1970s, allowing more Asian immigrants.

In 1967, voters chose to include Aborigines as citizens in all the states for the first time. Some land rights were given to Aboriginal citizens in 1972. Aborigines, Australia's poorest group, struggle to maintain their rights even today.

Modern Australia

Australia is a democracy, with three levels of government: local, state, and federal. The country's leader, who is chosen by elected lawmakers, is called the *Prime Minister*. Australians speak English, and they pay for purchases with Australian dollars. Much of Australian culture comes from Britain. Australians still honor the queen of Britain as their ceremonial head of state. In 1999, Australians voted to keep this loyalty to Britain.

In 2003, approximately 20 million people lived in Australia. Of all Australians, about 92 percent are Caucasian, or white, and 7 percent are Asian. Today, 350,000 Aboriginal people live in Australia. Almost every single Australian adult can read!



Much of Australia is open ranch land with few roads.

About 90 percent of Australians live in cities. Australian cities are modern, but they are long distances from each other.

Australia's capital city is Canberra, which is within New South Wales. Although it is the center of politics and government, it has some small-town charms. There are only around 500,000 residents. The city has art museums, the High Court of Australia, the Australian National University, and other important places.



Looking down on Canberra



Sydney's opera house is one of the most famous and unusual buildings in the world.

Sydney is Australia's largest city, with a population above four million. Within the city lie a business district, Chinatown, The Botanic Gardens, museums and art galleries, and many old buildings. Surrounding the city are national parks filled with plants and animals. Sydney is also home to some of the most beautiful beaches in the world.

Australia's other big cities include Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, and Adelaide. Like almost all of Australia's cities, these are right along the coast.



While Australia has little farmland, it is rich in minerals and precious gems.

At one time, the wool industry was Australia's largest business, but that is no longer the case. Major Australian industries include mining, the manufacture of industrial and transportation equipment, construction, food processing, chemicals, and steel. Some new industries are winemaking and tourism.

The country's natural resources include **bauxite** (a claylike material from which aluminum is obtained), coal, iron ore, copper, tin, silver, uranium, nickel, natural gas, and petroleum. Australia also exports meat, wool, wheat, sugar, and machinery.

Explore More

① At the Library

Ask your school or local librarian to help you find information about Australia. You can look up books on Australian history, the outback, Aborigines, and modern Australia. You can also find many books on unusual Australian animals, such as kangaroos, wallabies, and koalas.

② On the Internet

- A. In the address window, type *www.google.com*.
- B. Pick a subject you'd like to explore, such as the *outback*, and type it in the search window. Click on "Google Search."
- C. Read the colored links. Click on one that looks interesting.
- D. If you want to explore more links, click on the "Back" arrow on the top left.
- E. Try searching for other subjects, such as *kangaroos, Aborigines, Sydney*, or other topics.

③ In the Media

Australia produces a diverse selection of movies, music, art, and theater. Ask your teacher, parent, or librarian to help you find films that take place in Australia or music that comes from Australia. You might be surprised by the richness of Australia's landscape and modern culture.

Glossary

bauxite	a claylike material from which aluminum is obtained (p. 22)
colony	a group settled in a distant land, yet closely tied to the parent country (p. 4)
continent	mass of land (p. 6)
convict	a prisoner (p. 14)
depression	a long or severe slowing down or failing of an economy (p. 17)
hemisphere	half of the Earth (p. 6)
immigration	people moving from one country to another (p. 18)
mammal	a warm-blooded animal that nurses its young (p. 9)
marsupials	mammals that keep their young in a pouch on the female's body (p. 10)
nomads	people who move from place to place and have no permanent home (p. 13)
primate	animals such as humans, apes, or monkeys (p. 10)
threatened	at risk of becoming endangered (p. 8)

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Australia

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