



Jackie Stephenson picks up some skills in the Outback.

Outback adventure changes the way Jackie Stephenson ('04) looks at herself and others

Studying Australia's indigenous cultures last summer left a lasting impression on 20-year-old senior Jackie Stephenson, who says her experience Down Under changed the way she looks at herself and others.

Stephenson ('02) joined a group of American and Australian students on a two-week field trip into the heart of Australia's northern bushland to study firsthand the traditional and contemporary lifestyles of the country's original inhabitants - the aborigines of mainland Australia and the Torres Strait islanders who occupy a band of islands to the north of the continent. "I hardly knew anything about Australia's indigenous cultures before I went on the trip," says Stephenson, "so everything I learned was new."

Talking to aboriginal student Stanley Pablo about spirituality struck a particular chord with Stephenson. "It was amazing to find that I share a lot of the beliefs the aborigines have. For example, their belief in God corresponds with the Christian belief. Stanley told me, 'We do believe in a God - that there's a higher power.' He said, 'The way we look at it is that every animal is a piece of God, and every plant is a piece of God, and all that together equals God.' I've always thought that as well."

Each year the School of Indigenous Australian Studies at James Cook University in Queensland, Australia, offers international students the opportunity to participate in field trips like this. Stephenson was among a group of U.S. students who traveled to Australia to take the short course Dreaming Tracks to Superhighways. The course gives students a better understanding of Australia's indigenous cultures through activities both on campus and in the outback. Field trips are led by indigenous people willing to share their knowledge with students.

Beginning in the coastal town of Townsville, students journeyed more than 3,000 kilometers inland through Cape York Peninsula to the very northernmost tip of the Australian mainland and across to Thursday Island, the major population center for the Torres Strait. It was a long and dusty trek by bus, and each night was spent at a different campsite. The trip is one even Australians rarely have the opportunity to make.

Visiting remote towns typical of northern outback Australia, the group met with local aboriginal and Torres Strait islander elders for informal lessons. Walks in the bush and nights by the campfire became outdoor classrooms, where students were encouraged to discuss their personal thoughts and feelings.

It is believed that at least 40,000 years ago - or possibly much earlier - aborigines made their way southwards from Southeast Asia by sea crossings and overland bridges. In the Torres Strait, a mixture of people from Melanesia and Polynesia are said to have occupied the small tropical islands that lie between Australia and Papua New Guinea for at least 4,000 years, although these timeframes remain a matter for conjecture.

While the aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait islanders are two distinct cultural groups, they both share a deep affinity for the environment - the physical landscape and native plants and animals. Traditionally, tribal groups have their own cultural and spiritual traditions and languages. Sadly, many of these languages have been almost completely lost since European settlement in the 1770s. Tribal groups have begun to win back their traditional lands through the courts and are regaining a sense of self-determination. However, multiple generations continue to battle with racism, alcoholism, unemployment, poor health care and the legacy of displacement.

"I have always felt like I'm an accepting person, but [this trip] opened my eyes to a new perspective, kind of seeing it through the eyes of the aborigines," Stephenson says. "I think about the white privileges - how although I'm not a racist person, I can hide behind my whiteness and just sort of flow through life without having to think about skin color."

Rather than being taboo, the hardships aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait islanders face were openly discussed on this trip. Leading discussions were aboriginal guide Russell "Rusty" Butler and JCU professor and head of indigenous studies Jeannie Herbert, who describes the course as a "warts and all" look at indigenous life.

"It is confronting," Herbert says, "but it's also a powerful experience that is life changing for some students. It destroys stereotypes and can change a student's whole perspective on indigenous Australians and the issues that are important to them. Students tend to take a deep look at their own values afterwards."

Today the majority of aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait islanders live modern lives, although Cape York communities are often very isolated. On Thursday Island and nearby Horn Island, a rich meshing of cultures - Chinese, Japanese, Melanesian, Polynesian, European and aboriginal - makes for a unique, laid-back lifestyle.

A visit to Horn Island, gave students a chance to learn about the significant contribution Torres Strait islanders made to Australian and U.S. efforts in World War II.

Both aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait islanders pass on their history orally through storytelling. Students were lucky enough to hear Butler share fables of the Dreamtime and explain the many uses for bush plants and animals. He also provided an insight into contemporary attitudes and coached students in the very difficult art of throwing traditional hunting tools like boomerangs and spears.

"I've never seen such blue water before," says Stephenson, after hiking to the northernmost point of the Australian mainland and traveling through the Torres Strait by ferry. "I really liked meeting everyone here in our group. We were from all over America, so we learned about each other and different places back home, too."

- Story by Joanna Mather, media liaison, James Cook University