

Aboriginal legends an untapped record of natural history written in the stars

March 3 2015, by Amy Coopes



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Aboriginal legends could offer a vast untapped record of natural history, including meteorite strikes, stretching back thousands of years, according to new UNSW research.

Dr Duane Hamacher from the UNSW Indigenous Astronomy Group has uncovered evidence linking Aboriginal stories about meteor events with impact craters dating back some 4,700 years.

Dr Hamacher, an astrophysicist studying Indigenous astronomy, examined [meteorite](#) accounts from Aboriginal communities across

Australia to determine if they were linked to known meteoritic events.

His study, published in the latest edition of peer-reviewed journal *Archaeoastronomy*, found "definitive links" between known meteorite craters and local Aboriginal traditions.

One of the meteorite strikes, at a place called Henbury in the Northern Territory, occurred around 4,700 years ago.

Dr Hamacher said the level of detail contained in the local oral traditions suggested the Henbury event had been witnessed and its legend passed down through generations over thousands of years – a remarkable record.

"Aboriginal men refused to go near the cluster of craters, claiming it was where the fire-devil ran down from the sun, hit the ground, and killed everyone. The fire-devil burned the people for breaking sacred law," said Dr Hamacher.

"There are similar stories in Aboriginal traditions across Australia of fiery stars falling from the sky, producing a deafening sound, blowing debris across the land and setting the ground on fire."



Dr Duane Hamacher: "Aboriginal oral traditions contain detailed knowledge about the natural world, including events like tsunamis and meteor strikes."

Credit: Maja Baska

In some instances Dr Hamacher said stories by Aboriginal people led to the discovery of meteorites by local settlers.

For example, in 1855 a farmer found a 32kg octahedrite near Stockinbingal in the NSW Riverina after local Aboriginal tales of a yeo-yeo or devil led him there.

"Aboriginal oral traditions contain detailed knowledge about the natural world. These include stories about rare events like tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, meteorite impacts and solar eclipses," Dr Hamacher said.

"By merging scientific data with descriptions in oral tradition we can show that many of the stories are accounts of real-life events. So Aboriginal stories could lead us to places where natural disasters occurred."

Dr Hamacher said his findings challenged the view that oral traditions only last a few generations.

"The story of Henbury is an example of an oral tradition that was passed down more than 200 generations. This is important evidence for social scientists studying oral traditions."

More information: "Recorded Accounts of Meteoritic Events in the Oral Traditions of Indigenous Australians." *arXiv:1408.6368*
arxiv.org/abs/1408.6368

Provided by University of New South Wales

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