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The Sustainability and Desirability of the Traditional Economies of Australian Aborigines: Controversial Issues

by

Clement Tisdell¹

Abstract

Aborigines have been present in Australia for around 65,000 years. This article investigates the sustainability characteristics of their economies and the contention that they were affluent. Contemporary tests of economic sustainability are applied. Hence attention is paid to the ability of their economic systems to promote the longevity of existence of *Homo sapiens* and their effectiveness in achieving intergenerational equity. Also, satisfaction of the three-pillar requirement for sustainability (namely that social, environmental and economic sustainability ought to be simultaneously satisfied) is taken into account. The view that traditional Aborigines were affluent is examined, and reasons are given why they were reluctant to acquire and accumulate material goods. Their failure to develop agriculture was consequential for their cultural and economic sustainability. This aspect is explored. Traditional Aboriginal socio-economic systems are found to be highly sustainable and may have resulted in affluence. Does this mean they were or are desirable? Difficulties in determining this are addressed.

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