



THE MARALINGA ATOMIC BOMB TESTS FIFTY YEARS ON

"They put the bomb there.

In our country Maralinga
and Emu Junction. In the
middle, right through.

All the smoke went there.
Right through and finished all
our people, in the Victorian
desert.

You look at it on the
map, nobody living in the
Victorian desert.

All our people gone."



Myra Tjunmutja Watson

On September 27, 1956, the first British atomic test at Maralinga, in the South Australian desert, codenamed 'One Tree', was conducted, on Tjarutja lands.

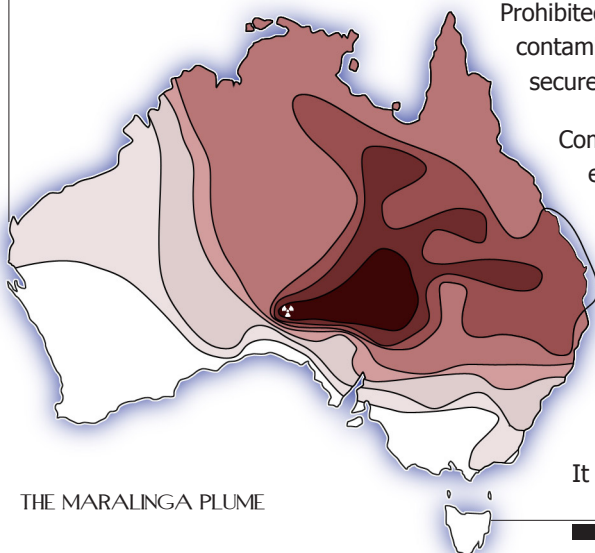
It followed similar atomic bomb detonations further north at Emu Field, and on the Monte Bello islands, off the northwest coast of Western Australia. One Tree was detonated despite poor weather conditions, resulting in significant radioactive fallout around Coober Pedy, and measured as far away as Townsville in North Queensland and Lismore in New South Wales. The cumulative fallout from the tests ultimately passed over most of Australia. Seven further nuclear devices were tested at Maralinga in the following months.

Many Indigenous communities living in the surrounding areas were not warned of the immediate nuclear threat. Despite the experience of previous atomic tests at Emu Field, where Indigenous groups around Wallatina and elsewhere recalled experiencing a "black mist" rolling through their camps after the tests, followed by widespread sickness, the 1986 Royal Commission concluded that at Maralinga "attempts to ensure Aboriginal safety [during the tests] demonstrate ignorance, incompetence and cynicism on the part of those responsible for that safety."

The test range was located in an area that was selected "on the false assumption that the area was not used by its traditional Aboriginal owners," when in actuality Indigenous people continued to move in and around the Prohibited Area – including the Milpuddie family camping in a highly contaminated bomb crater. The boundaries of the test site were not secure, and warning signs were all in English.

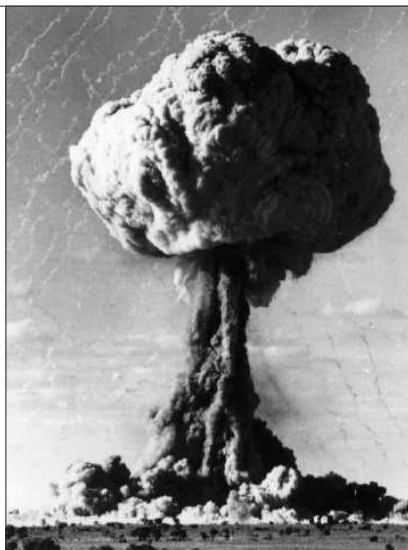
Communities across the Western Desert suffered significant radiation exposure. The fallout from the tests was extensive: radioactivity affected most of the Australian continent, leading to death and sickness, and continuing to affect individuals and communities today. Indigenous oral histories tell of a black mist that caused cancer and asthma, red and yellow-coloured smoke rising, bright flashes of light leading to blindness. There are tragic stories of families sleeping in bomb craters, nose and stomach trouble, family dying, and children orphaned.

It is the story of poison spreading far, hurting people and land.



THE MARALINGA PLUME

THE MARALINGA ATOMIC BOMB TESTS - 50 YEARS ON



To carry out the tests, thousands of Maralinga, Pitjantjatjara and Kokatha people were forcibly removed and dispossessed from their land by 'Aboriginal Protectors' and forced to relocate to government and mission-controlled enclaves.

British nuclear testing in Australia between 1952 and 1963 at Maralinga, Emu Fields, Christmas Island and Monto Bello was officially unquestioned because of the close military ties between Australia and 'Mother' England. Permission was not sought for the tests from affected Aboriginal groups such as the Pitjantjatjara, Tjarutja and Kokatha. The racist logic of imperialism underscored the tests; officials of the day condemned "placing the affairs of a handful of natives above those of the British Commonwealth of Nations" as "lamentable" and ludicrous. This racism continues today when the voices of Indigenous people and communities directly affected by uranium mines, waste dumps or lingering contamination are ignored and silenced in favour of the voices profiting from the nuclear industry. Maralinga is testimony to the radioactive racism inherent in the nuclear industry.

50 years later, the legacy of Maralinga remains. In 2001 the British Ministry of Defence acknowledged that military personnel from Britain, Australia and New Zealand were used as "guinea pigs". They were inadequately trained, not made fully aware of the dangers of the tests and sometimes intentionally exposed to radiation in order to observe its effects on humans. Many of the veterans carry a high incidence of cancer and genetic damage, passed on to their children and grandchildren. The veterans of these tests, along with the Indigenous groups of the area, still have not been adequately compensated or acknowledged.

EFFECTS ON COUNTRY AND FAILED CLEAN-UP OF MARALINGA



"... a cheap and nasty solution that wouldn't be adopted on white-fellas land.."

The nuclear weapons detonated contain radioactive substances poisonous for up to 250,000 years, already contaminating land and water systems; and affecting fragile desert eco-systems and the underground water basins which sustain them.

The contamination from the tests still lingers in the ground; approximately 8,000 kg of uranium, 24 kg of plutonium, and 100 kg of beryllium from the 'minor trials' at Maralinga. In the late 1990s the Federal Government committed to a clean-up which they declared 'successful' in 2002. The clean-up is widely considered to have been grossly inadequate. The government breached its own standards for the disposal of long-lived radioactive waste by burying plutonium-contaminated debris in shallow, unlined trenches "with no regard for its longevity or toxicity, and no regard to the suitability of the site," as nuclear engineer Alan Parkinson commented.

Dr. Geoff Williams, a senior officer from the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency (ARPANSA) described the 'clean-up' as marred by a "host of indiscretions, short-cuts and cover-ups." Alan Parkinson, who was initially appointed as the Government's Representative to oversee the clean-up but later removed, argues: "What was done at Maralinga was a cheap and nasty solution that wouldn't be adopted on white-fellas land."

The poison still lingers.

IN AUSTRALIA TODAY

Climate change is happening – and governments and corporations are being forced to respond to a consensus of scientists worldwide, and a strong global movement taking action to avert dangerous climate change. In Australia, the nuclear industry and other pro-nuclear advocates have been quick to reinvent nuclear power as “clean, green and safe” and a “solution” to climate change. But nuclear power is no solution to climate change: it is too dangerous, too costly, too slow and makes little impact on greenhouse pollution. That is why most of the industrialised world is rejecting the nuclear option in favour of renewable energy and improved efficiency.

With 40% of the world’s known uranium reserves in Australia, however, the Federal Government and other nuclear industry players are keen to cash in on the recent enthusiasm for nuclear power.

The patterns of short-sightedness and discrimination that characterised the Maralinga tests continue. In the 1950s, it is very likely that uranium mined in South Australia was sold to another country, and returned as bombs to be exploded on land not far from where it was extracted. Today, South Australian uranium is again being sent overseas, with a growing push for the subsequent wastes to be returned and dumped on Indigenous land in the Northern Territory. As the Federal Government looks to sell uranium to countries like China and India, there appears a very real risk that Australian uranium may again end up in warheads, as countries continue to allow the diminishing effectiveness of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.



Likewise, government and the nuclear industry’s pattern of discrimination against Indigenous cultures can be seen today in legislation like the Roxby Downs Indenture Act. This Act allows BHP Billiton’s operations at its Olympic Dam (Roxby Downs) uranium mine to supercede a variety of other crucial pieces of legislation, including the Aboriginal Heritage Act. The interests of the nuclear industry continue to be granted precedence over the legislated rights of Indigenous Australians.

Australia has three existing uranium mines – the Ranger Mine in the Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory, and the Beverley and Olympic Dam (Roxby Downs) mines in South Australia. BHP Billiton is planning a \$5 billion expansion of the Olympic Dam mine to make it the largest mine on the planet, and Australia the largest producer and exporter of uranium in the world.

A second nuclear reactor in Lucas Heights, Sydney, was recently granted approval to begin operation, on the grounds there is an adequate storage facility for the waste it generates. The repackaging of nuclear energy as “clean energy” cannot hide the ongoing thorn in the nuclear industry’s backside: the problem of nuclear waste. There is still no safe way of disposing of nuclear waste, and there are still no storage plans for the more than 250,000 tonnes of high-level radioactive waste already in existence.

Regardless, the Federal Government is working hard to force a low and intermediate-level nuclear waste dump on the Northern Territory. On December 8 last year, the Federal Government passed legislation clearing the construction of a national nuclear waste dump in the Northern Territory. This proposal has been met with opposition from almost all sides of Northern Territory politics, alongside Indigenous landowners, and environment and community groups. The dump proposal is crucial to the recent commissioning of the replacement nuclear reactor at Lucas Heights, as the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO) was required to demonstrate they had a comprehensive plan for waste disposal before the reactor was granted a license to operate.

The reframing of the nuclear industry and ‘debate’ is a distraction from the real debate about climate change – energy reduction and moving to renewable energy. State and Federal Governments seem determined to gratify nuclear and fossil fuel industries – at the expense of indigenous communities; and creating environmental destruction, long-lived radioactive waste, and dangerous climate change.

“The patterns of short-sightedness and discrimination that characterised the Maralinga tests continue.”

GET INVOLVED

The nuclear industry is seeing its biggest revival in decades – with extensive exploration, pushing for new uranium mines and enrichment in Australia, a new reactor to operate in Sydney, the possibility of nuclear power, and plans for a radioactive waste dump in the Northern Territory. But it's going to be a short-lived revival – the nuclear industry is no answer to climate change, renewable energy works and is non-polluting, and we've got the people power to create a sustainable and safe future!

There are events happening across Australia to mark the 50th Anniversary of the Maralinga Atomic Tests. Film screenings, community festivals and commemorations, creative actions, forums, art exhibitions, theatre and more. Get along to events in your area, and get active in your local community group.



👤 **Melbourne** - see www.melbourne.foe.org.au - Michaela Stubbs
Michaela.Stubbs@foe.org.au or call 0429 136 935

👤 **Adelaide** - see <http://cleanfutures.blogspot.com> - Joel Catchlove
joel.catchlove@foe.org.au or call 0403 886 951

👤 **Perth** - see www.anawa.org.au or contact Nicola Paris
Nicola.paris@aph.gov.au or call 0422 990 040

👤 **Alice Springs** - contact Nat Wasley
natwasley@alec.org.au or call 0429 900 774

👤 **Darwin** - see www.ecnt.org or contact Emma King
ecnturanium@iinet.net.au or call 0428 818 109

👤 **Townsville** - contact Lauren Hodgson
lauren.hodgson@jcu.edu.au or call 07 4781 7059

👤 **Brisbane** - contact Robin Taubenfeld
nuclearfreequeensland@yahoo.com.au or call 0411 118 737

👤 **Byron Bay** - contact beyondnuclearbyron@yahoo.com.au
Catherine Atoms on 0404 899 619

👤 **NSW Central Coast** - premiere season of Maralinga theatre
performance - call 02 4343 0111 for bookings

👤 **Newcastle** - contact Nissa Phillips
nissalee@pnc.com.au or call 0413 347 811

👤 **Sydney** - contact Bek Spies
lockie_1@yahoo.com / 0403 647 059

👤 **Canberra** - contact nonukescanberra@yahoo.com.au

www.no-waste.org

Northern Territory No Waste Alliance

www.foe.org.au

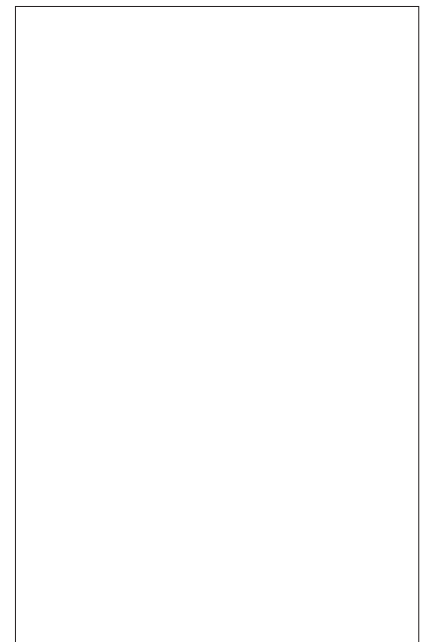
Friends of the Earth Australia

www.asen.org.au

Australian Student Environment
Network

www.anawa.org.au

Anti-Nuclear Alliance of WA



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