

# Totem

Year 3 – Humanities and Social Sciences

Year 4 – The Arts



**(HASS; Yr 3, ACHASSK062)**

The importance of Country/Place to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples who belong to a local area

**(HASS; Yr 3, ACHASSI053)**

Locate and collect information and data from different sources, including observations

**(HASS – Geography; Yr 4, ACHASSK088)**

The importance of environments, including natural vegetation, to animals and people

**(HASS – Geography; Yr 4, ACHASSK089)**

The custodial responsibility Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have for Country/Place, and how this influences views about sustainability

**(The Arts – Visual Arts; Yr 3 & 4, ACAVAM110)**

Explore ideas and artworks from different cultures and times, including artwork by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, to use as inspiration for their own representations

**Cross-curriculum priority**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures; Sustainability

# Totem

## Significant animals, and the spirit of the bush

Both Aunty Di and Aunty Dale, from their two different cultures (*Wurundjeri* and *Noongar*), mention animals and birds that are important to them. Aunty Di says her mother's name is Walert which means possum, and she says that it is in her mother's honour that she wears the possum skin. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures across Australia adhere to the belief in totem – or spirit – of an animal that protects and guides you and your clan.

**Duration:**

45 minutes

**Location:**

Outdoors would be nice; the classroom if not possible

**Notes:**

“On my koort, on my heart. If we care for  
Country, Country will care for us.  
That’s the first thing we always do, we care  
for our Country.”

– Aunty Di Kerr, Senior Wurundjeri Elder

## Country

👁 Watch **The One with the Welcome**



### 🔍 Discuss the concept of Country.

- Read Aunty Di’s words above. What do students think she means when she says: “If we care for Country, Country will care for us”?
- Discuss the difference between referring to ‘a country’, such as France, Ireland, Canada, Thailand – which is a nation state; and referring to ‘Country’, a concept that includes the traditional lands of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander group, and their connection and care for that landscape.
- For many people, Country – traditional lands – is tied to ancestors, stories, places, foods, and significant animals and birds. To be 'On Country' is to be on and engaged with your traditional lands.

## Possum

- Introduce the term ‘totem’ and ask students if anyone knows what a totem is.
- Someone may mention totem poles – which is a good start. Totem poles were erected by the First Nations of the West Coast of Canada and Alaska. They are carvings of significant animals and birds. The word ‘totem’ does not refer to the pole or the carving – it refers to the animal(s), which has/have powers and relationships with people.
- Watch the episode again, paying close attention to the moment in which Aunty Di, of the Wurundjeri people of Victoria, explains the significance of the possum skin she wears.
- Ask students to tell you Aunty Di’s mother’s name (Walert).
- When did Aunty Di get her first possum skin? (When she was born.) She has gained possum skins as she’s grown older, and now that she is an adult, she has a full cloak. When a person dies, they are buried in their cloak.
- Explain that animals are important to family and language groups in Aboriginal cultures across Australia. Each one operates slightly differently, but the principle is very clear: the totem protects / is guardian to a group of people – and the people, in turn, care for and protect the totem animal. This means certain people will never hunt or kill the animal that is their totem.

‘These kookaburras are so peaceful.  
They’re so quiet. They’re just sitting here being  
very wise. I feel like they’re our guardians today.  
I feel very welcome here.’

– Aunty Dale Tilbrook, Wardandi Bibbulmun Elder

## Kookaburra

- Ask students if they think birds can be totems, too.
- They collect examples of animals and birds that have powers and strong personalities. They explore the location of Country for the people of these stories (a map will help – see Resources for the AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia).
- They write a description of the character of the animals or birds they have encountered in the stories.
- **?** **Discuss** how all sorts of living things, including some plants, can be totems (which we call ‘totemic’). Your totem might be frog, or goanna, possum or kookaburra.
- Students watch/read Dreaming stories from local Aboriginal cultures, or from Torres Strait Islander cultures (some examples are available in Resources below).

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## Totems in art

- Access examples of Aboriginal art and/or Torres Strait Islander art for students to identify how the totem plant or animal is represented. Explore how the stories and the living creatures are woven together as part of respect for and belonging to Country.
- Several resources are listed for you under Resources.

**Resources:**  
**Totems and stories**

- ◇ ABC Indigenous – The AIATSIS map of Aboriginal Australia: <http://www.abc.net.au/indigenous/map/>
- ◇ *Aboriginal Totems by Rebecca Wilks*(PDF): <http://www.envirostories.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014TTT/Totems/ES2014-CTLLS-Totems-WEB.pdf>
- ◇ Aboriginal Culture – Religion and ceremony: <http://www.aboriginalculture.com.au/religion.html>
- ◇ Aboriginal Dreamtime Story (animation, duration 5:33): <https://youtu.be/Sle62XV0BO0>
- ◇ Albert, Mary. & Lofts, Pamela. (2004). How the birds got their colours. Sydney : Scholastic (video reading, duration 4:28: <https://youtu.be/Mda6CnUTX4U> )
- ◇ Culture Victoria – Bunjil – The Time of Chaos: <https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/meerreeng-an-here-is-my-country/bunjil/>
- ◇ Department of Education and Training, NSW – Dreaming Stories and Science – Why the magpie sings at dawn : [https://online.det.nsw.edu.au/blog/226294-informationliteracyandnarrativestructurelessonsforyear7in2013/entry/lesson\\_7\\_dreaming\\_stories\\_and](https://online.det.nsw.edu.au/blog/226294-informationliteracyandnarrativestructurelessonsforyear7in2013/entry/lesson_7_dreaming_stories_and)
- ◇ Dreamtime (video): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7oE4sKIDuU>
- ◇ Dreamtime Story (video, duration 6:00): <https://youtu.be/H7oE4sKIDuU>
- ◇ Dreise, Gregg. (2015). Kookoo kookaburra. Broome, WA : Magabala Books. (video reading, duration 6:00: <https://youtu.be/F4HzWKMC5Aw>
- ◇ Green, Mona. & Lofts, Pamela. (2004). The echidna and the shade tree : an Aboriginal story. Sydney : Scholastic
- ◇ Mowaljarlai, David Banggal. & Lofts, Pamela. (2004). When the snake bites the sun. Sydney : Scholastic (animation, duration 3:19: <https://youtu.be/HTkN-5nUvE4>
- ◇ Rainbow Serpent Story (animation, duration 1:55): <https://youtu.be/76bizcNc1RM>
- ◇ The Rainbow Serpent (animation): <https://youtu.be/pCuuRRrfOXo>
- ◇ Rainbow Serpent Dreamtime Story (animation, duration 3:50): <https://youtu.be/GSbibleovTM>
- ◇ Utemorra, Daisy. & Lofts, Pamela. (2004). Dunbi the owl. Sydney : Scholastic (video reading, duration 3:09: <https://youtu.be/Pcmvu7tsic4>)

**Resources:**  
**Aboriginal art and symbols in art**

- ◇ Aboriginal Australia Art and Culture Centre, Alice Springs – Iconography [www.aboriginalart.com.au/gallery/iconography.html](http://www.aboriginalart.com.au/gallery/iconography.html)
- ◇ Central Art – Aboriginal symbols glossary: [www.aboriginalartstore.com.au/aboriginal-art-culture/aboriginal-symbols-glossary/](http://www.aboriginalartstore.com.au/aboriginal-art-culture/aboriginal-symbols-glossary/)
- ◇ Japingka Aboriginal Art – Aboriginal art symbols and their meanings: <https://japingkaaboriginalart.com/articles/aboriginal-art-symbols/>
- ◇ Jinta Desert Art – Iconography: <http://www.jintaart.com.au/iconography/iconhmpg.htm>