Yugambeh Nation

Name: _____

Date: _____

AGES 13 TO 16 · HISTORY

The “Empty Land” Myth

Most people are taught that before 1788, Aboriginal groups were tiny—maybe a few groups of 150 people wandering a vast area here and there.

But the data says otherwise.

If we look at the historical records through a lens of science and statistics, we find a society that was far larger, denser, and more complex than the history books suggest.

The Survivor Snapshot

In the 1860s, settlers recorded three local clans meeting with 600 people (about 200 per clan).

In the 1850s, Gresty, a Park Ranger, estimated 2,500 people living across the Logan, Albert, Coomera, Nerang and Tweed river systems.

But here is the truth: These weren’t "starting" numbers. They were "survivor" numbers.

By 1850, Yugambeh Country had already endured 70 years of a biological apocalypse that moved faster than the frontier itself.

The Math of a Massacre (Inverse Modeling)

To have 2,500 people left in 1850 after decades of "Ghost Epidemics," the original population had to be massive. Let’s look at the stages of decline:

- 1840s–50s: The Frontier War (+40% pop.)

Direct colonial violence and being pushed off traditional food sources caused immediate spikes in mortality.

- 1829–31: The Second Smallpox Wave (+50% pop.)

A massive outbreak swept through Eastern Australia. In "virgin soil" populations, smallpox has a 50–90% fatality rate.

- 1790s–1820s: The Fertility Gap (+20% pop.)

The introduction of European diseases like syphilis meant fewer babies were born and fewer survived. The population wasn't just dying; it was being prevented from renewing.

- 1789: The First Great Pox (+50% pop.)

Smallpox hit Sydney in 1789 and traveled down Indigenous trade routes to the Gold Coast decades before the first white settler arrived.

The Reality: 9,000 to 15,000 People

When you work the math backward, the evidence is clear:

The resource-rich Yugambeh river systems—some of the most fertile land on earth—didn't support small groups of a few dozen people. They supported upwards of 15,000.

We aren't talking about the loss of a few "bands" of hunters. We are talking about the collapse of a dense, thriving nation.

Because when we realise how many people were actually here, we realise the true scale of what was taken—and the incredible strength of the descendants who are still here today.

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SURVIVOR NUMBERS

Questions

Questions

1. What is the “empty land” myth?

2. What two records of Yugambeh numbers does the Reading give, and from when?

3. Why does the Reading say these were “survivor” numbers rather than “starting” numbers?

4. How could smallpox reach the Gold Coast decades before the first white settler arrived?

5. What does the Reading mean by a “virgin soil” population?

6. Why does it matter how many people were really here?

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