

When travelling through the arid regions of Australia, Aboriginal people would move from waterhole to waterhole. The Butchulla people of Fraser Island have a story that tells how the water first got to the plains, and it is told for us here by Olga Miller.

How the water got to the plains

A Dreamtime story

Way, way back in the first time, when everything was new, there was a group of Aboriginal people living on a mountain. It was a lovely place, but everyone was worried. It had not rained for a long, long time and they were very short of water.

They had some wells but these, except for one, were empty. When it had rained before, the water had just run down the side of the mountain, into the sea, which was far, far away. Now, on the other side of the mountain, there were just some big, dry plains where nothing grew.

Weeri and Walawidbit were two greedy men. They decided to steal the last of the water for themselves and then run away.

In secret, they made a large water-carrier, which was called an eel-a-mun. When everyone was asleep, they stole the water from the last well and hurried off.

When the people woke up, there was no water for them. This was very bad, because there were little children and babies needing water and also the old people. And also, it was very hot.

The Elders called all the people together and it was then that they saw that two men were missing.

Looking around, they found the tracks of the two men. Quickly, the warriors followed these tracks, which led down the other side of the mountain to the big plains and they could see the men in the distance.

The water-carrier was very heavy and Weeri and Walawidbit were walking slowly. This was because they thought they were safe. However, when they saw the warriors coming they ran, too.

The best spearmen in the group ran to a cliff which jutted out and threw all the spears they had. One hit the eel-a-mun and dropped off. However, it did make a hole in the water-carrier. On and on across the plains ran the two men. They did not notice that the water was leaking out until the carrier was almost empty. This was why they had been able to run faster and by this time, the warriors had caught up.

Now, this was way back in the first time, when very strange things happened. So the warriors took the men back home and the Elders called a big meeting. It was decided that the two men had to be punished for stealing and also, for thinking of themselves first and not the community.

So the Wonmutta, the clever man, made some very strong magic and Weeree was changed into the very first emu. He went running down the mountain, out onto the plains, in shame. Walawidbit was changed into the very first blue-tongued lizard and he crawled away to hide in the rocks.

But, a wonderful thing had happened. Wherever the water had leaked onto the plains, there were now beautiful billabongs, or waterholes. There was grass and flowers and lovely water lilies and then there were shrubs and trees. And soon, the birds came and everyone was happy because there was enough water for everyone.

And that is how the water got to the plains.