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Living It Up Down Under: Working in an Australian Setting

Australia is a continent, an island and a country. Often referred to as “the big country”, it is the sixth largest country in the world. It is 50% larger than Europe and about the same size as the 48 mainland states of the USA, but has a population density of only two people per square kilometer—the lowest in the world. The Australian landmass separated from the other continents over 50 million years ago, providing a setting for the development of unique flora, fauna, and habitats (Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade, 2005). Because of its unique environmental setting, Australia poses particular challenges for archaeological fieldwork, which will be discussed in this chapter. We also consider the nature of the Australian character and lifestyle, and how this impacts upon archaeological practice, and some of the practical issues that need to be navigated by any overseas archaeologist who wishes to work in Australia.

4.1. Climate and Environment

The Australian seasons are the reverse of those in the northern hemisphere: when people are floundering through snow in Europe or North America, they are swimming or surfing in Australia, and when people are enjoying summer in the north, Australians are experiencing a non-centrally-heated winter. Australian winters, however, are relatively mild, and only a few parts of the country ever see snow. Because it is a big country, Australia has a wide variety of environments. The Australian climate ranges from arid and semi-arid in the interior, to mediterranean in the south, maritime and subtropical in the east and tropical in the north (Figure 4.1). The northern section of the continent experiences a monsoonal climate, with a distinct rainy season known as “The Wet”, which spans from November to April. Around 60% of the landmass is classified as arid (desert) or semi-arid (Arthur & Morphy, 2005b:28). Most of the country receives more than 3,000 hours of sunshine a year, around 70 per cent of the total possible sunshine hours. As you can imagine, summer in Australia is not like summer in the northern hemisphere—it is much hotter, lasts longer and the Ultra Violet radiation is more extreme (which has definite health and safety implications—see section on “Slip, Slap, Slop”).

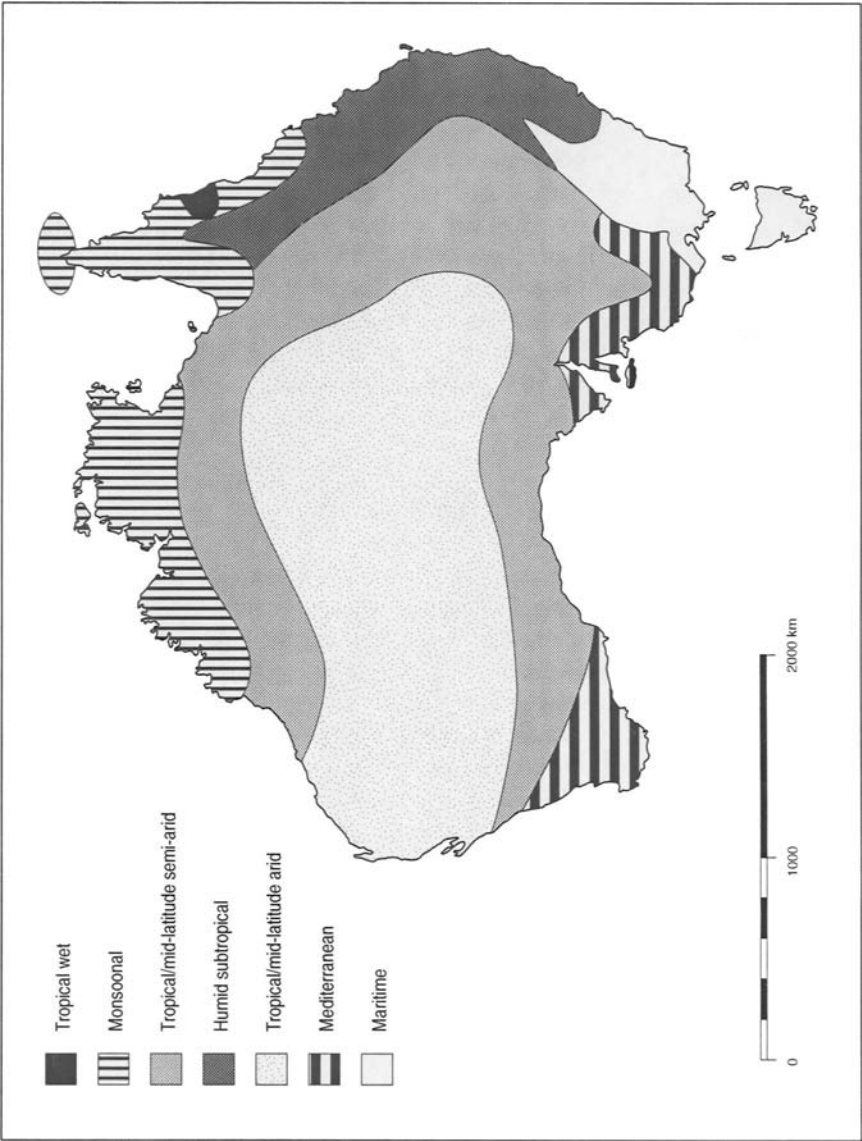


FIGURE 4.1. Climatic regions in Australia (after Arthur and Morphy (2005b)).