

'Forty thousand years can make a difference to the state of things.'  
- Midnight Oil 'The Dead Heart'

The discovery of ancient human remains at Lake Mungo in 1968 revolutionised our understanding of the antiquity of Aboriginal civilisation in Australia. It was previously assumed that our continent had been settled by humans only in the past few thousand years or less. But research undertaken on the Mungo remains showed that Australia had been inhabited by humans for longer even than the Americas. Mungo Lady was dated initially to 26,000 years, a date that was later revised to 42,000 years after further investigation. A similar date was eventually ascribed to a later discovery in the same area, known as Mungo Man. Mungo Lady and Mungo Man are some of the oldest remains of modern humans ever discovered outside of Africa. Mungo Lady is the oldest known cremation in the world, giving some idea of just how long spiritual beliefs have characterised our species. As geologist Jim Bowler puts it, the significance of these discoveries 'extends far beyond mere academic interest. Non-indigenous Australians too often have a desperately limited frame of historical reference. The Lake Mungo region provides a record of land and people that we latter-day arrivals have failed to incorporate into our own Australian psyche. We have yet to penetrate the depths of time and cultural treasures revealed by those ancestors of indigenous Australians.'

When this ABC/BBC co-production was broadcast in 1975, the Mungo discoveries were very recent. Even though the age of the remains was uncertain, the specialists interpreting them realised they were old enough to radically re-cast earlier notions of the human history of the Australian continent. In this clip we meet the major players in the Mungo discoveries and survey the landscape in which they were found.

*In presenting this archival clip, the ABC acknowledges the Aboriginal groups affiliated with Lake Mungo: the Ngiyampaa, the Mutthi Mutthi and the Paakantji. The ABC understands that the recovery and management of the remains of ancestors is an issue of great sensitivity to Aboriginal people. The ABC thanks the Willandra Lakes Elders Council for providing advice and approval to present this footage, and warns that the clip contains images of deceased persons. Special thanks to Richard Minter and Ricky Mitchell.*