

ALONE ACROSS

Australia

*...a story about a man who
takes his dog for a walk*



A STUDY GUIDE
BY GERALDINE CARRODUS

Alone Across Australia is a remarkable tale of the journey of one man and his dog. Travelling 2,500 kilometres across Australia, Jon Muir and his dog Seraphine walked from Port Augusta at the top of Spencer Gulf on the South Australian coast to Burketown on the Gulf of Carpentaria. This was Muir's fourth attempt to undertake this odyssey and Seraphine's second.

MUIR'S only travel equipment was a loaded wheeled cart which he pulled behind him, and a pair of poles like ski stocks which he used to assist his movement. Muir described the cart as weighing the equivalent of two grown men, and there were times when he was required to drag or even carry this contraption, as the wheels became bogged or the ground was too rutted for the wheels to turn smoothly. The cart contained his camping gear, basic food, a gun, maps and a compass, and his camera and sound recording equipment.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the journey was the way in which Muir managed to set up his camera to record his experiences over all but the last few days of the 128 day odyssey. Although some additional film was shot twelve months after the journey, Muir completed the expedition on his

own and managed to record virtually all of it on film and sound equipment. At times this was easily accomplished, with Muir speaking to a camera which had obviously been set up at one of his camping sites. More complicated and often requiring several different set-ups were some of the longer-range shots such as Muir and Seraphine trudging up a red rock hill.

The journey was not an easy one. Muir, in his attempt to live off the land in the manner of the indigenous Australians, faced most of the challenges that this harsh land can dish out to him – drought, scorching heat, torrential rain, wild dingoes, hunger, loneliness, physical and mental exhaustion. Nevertheless, he accomplished his mission in just 128 days. It is a tribute to Muir's resilience that, despite losing one third of his bodyweight over the course of the journey, he embarked upon a journey to the North Pole only

four months later.

Alone Across Australia is a valuable educational resource for students exploring a range of subjects and topics, including English, Geography, Science, Environmental Studies, Social Studies, Religious Studies, and Psychology. The film could stimulate thought and discussion on some of the following themes:

- Human determination and resilience
- The nature of the Australian environment
- The ways in which indigenous Australians lived in harmony with the land
- The relationship between man and 'man's best friend'
- The differences between human 'needs' and human 'wants'



Jon

IT IS HARDLY SURPRISING

that a man such as Jon Muir, who would undertake a journey like this, is not exactly a man of the mainstream.

One of his mountaineering friends has said 'It's tempting to say he's a raving nutter'; another called him 'one of the most versatile adventurers in the world'.

- Born in 1961, near Sydney, Jon Muir developed an interest in mountaineering and rock climbing as a child, and formed the intention to climb Mt Everest when he was still a teenager. He fulfilled this dream at the age of twenty-seven and has visited the Himalayas on nine different expeditions in total. He stood alone on the summit of Everest in 1988.

- Nevertheless, Muir's adventures have not been confined to mountaineering. He has trekked to both the North and South Poles and has made several solo kayak journeys including one that took fifty-two days.

- Muir, who was awarded the Order of Australia medal in 1989, has a deep affinity with the land and, despite the difficulties that he faces, an ability to live and work with the Australian environment. He is an appealing and charismatic character with a sardonic sense of humour and an inspiring determination. Muir was also recognized as the Australian Geographic Society's Adventurer of the Year in 2001 and received a Centenary Medal in 2003

Muir



The making of *Alone Across Australia*

FEW films of any kind, let alone significant documentaries, have production crews in single figures, but with *Alone Across Australia* Jon Muir virtually made the film himself. He returned from the journey with over twenty-five hours of footage that he had captured along the way. Twelve weeks were spent in the cutting room with editor Sally Fryer to complete the film. Muir's principal credits are producer, director, camera and sound as well as on-camera star. Perhaps Seraphine should be given equal billing with Muir.

Muir set up his own camera and microphone to record the journey in all its highs and lows. At the death of Seraphine the camera became his only friend and confidante (a little like Wilson, the volleyball, in *Cast Away*), and even at such a moment Muir used over five different set-ups to record the single scene of Seraphine's death and burial.

Twelve months after the journey was completed, Muir returned with co-director and producer Ian Darling and a crew, to film interviews with those he had met along the way. The crew also filmed three extremely long-range shots featuring Muir, to demonstrate his 'aleness' in the Australian landscape and the vastness of the unforgiving terrain that he had walked through.

Before watching the Film

- Think about a time when you have been forced to be alone for a period of time, or to accomplish an important task on your own. List the features of the experience that you found difficult and those that you found satisfying and rewarding.
- What journey would you like to make that would challenge your abilities and resources? How would you prepare for the journey, physically and emotionally? Do you believe that you could make a challenging journey alone?
- What is it that makes some individuals want to make extraordinary journeys and face extreme challenges, while the vast majority of people are content to remain within their comfort zones? Consider the role of the following:
 - Personality and character
 - Experiences, especially in childhood
 - Role models (relatives, teachers, other adventurers, heroes)
 - The desire to make up for some perceived inadequacy or loss



- Is it heroic or foolhardy to risk one's life (and possibly the lives of others involved in search and rescue) in pursuit of extreme challenges?
- Muir's journey took him through some of the harshest and most difficult terrain in Australia. Conduct research into ONE of the following areas or regions, paying attention to latitude and longitude, terrain, climate, vegetation, native animals and insects, land use and significant settlements or towns:

- The Salt Lakes
- The Gibber Plains
- Sturt Desert
- The Simpson Desert
- Use the internet to research one of Jon Muir's other expeditions or accomplishments. You could look at:
 - His ascent of Grande Jorasses, France (1982)
 - His Everest expedition (1988)
 - His Aconcagua (Argentina) expedition (1990)
 - His South Polar expedition (1999)
 - His North Polar expedition (2002)

- Examine the life and achievements of another person who has triumphed over difficult or impossible odds. Attempt to explain that person's success. Some suggestions include: Burke and Wills, Sir Edmund Hillary, Ernest Shackleton, Kay Cottee, John McDowell Stuart, Jesse Martin, Weary Dunlop, Sorrel Wilby or Robyn Davidson.





As You Watch the Documentary

THINK about the following issues and questions as you watch *Alone Across Australia*. Be prepared to discuss the themes raised and to support your point of view on some of the more controversial issues. Your responses to these will help you to address the questions and activities that follow.

- As he sets out, Jon Muir says that he feels 'sort of a bit nervy at the moment'. After the first day, can you understand his anxiety?
- Muir says of the Salt Lakes area '... it's been a friend, it's been a foe, I've cursed it, I've loved it, I've admired it, I've certainly enjoyed it ...' What difficulties does he encounter while he is in the area of the Salt Lakes and how does he deal with them?
- Do you have any sense, at this stage, that he may not make it? What gives you this impression?
- Identify all of the different ways in which he supplements his food supply using sources from the environment along the way.
- As Muir crosses the Gibber country, he seems to settle into the journey. Make a note of some of the reflections that he makes upon being alone and on food, shelter and companionship.
- Why do you think that Muir did not accept any help from the Mitchells at Muloorina Station?
- To what extent do you think the knowledge of up to 60,000 years of Aboriginal survival in this environment gives Muir confidence as he crosses this unforgiving terrain?
- What is ironic about the statement by John Hammond of Mungerannie Station, when he says 'Guys out here, when a motorbike breaks down and they have to walk 20k back to the homestead ... that's a pretty mean feat'?
- Sixty-eight days into the journey, Muir has serious doubts... 'I'm really struggling here' and 'I guess I'm feeling slightly pessimistic' are some of his observations. What strategies does Muir use to overcome this 'down'? Think about how you would have dealt with this situation.
- Muir comments in a matter of fact way that he shot a dingo. How do you react to this statement? Do you think he was wise to make this admission?
- Muir comments that he always carries a photograph of his grandfather, a survivor of four years of the First World War. 'It gives me strength and helps me deal with my own problems ...' Is there something in your life that helps you to see your troubles in perspective?
- What problems flowed from Muir's decision to abandon his cart and travel on with a pack on his back?
- Ben Knight of Linda Downs Station suggests that they were a little anxious when they heard of Muir's approach, but that anxiety was immediately dispelled 'once we saw him'. Why do you think that this was so? (Draw on what you already know about Muir to answer this question).
- Seraphine's death was obviously

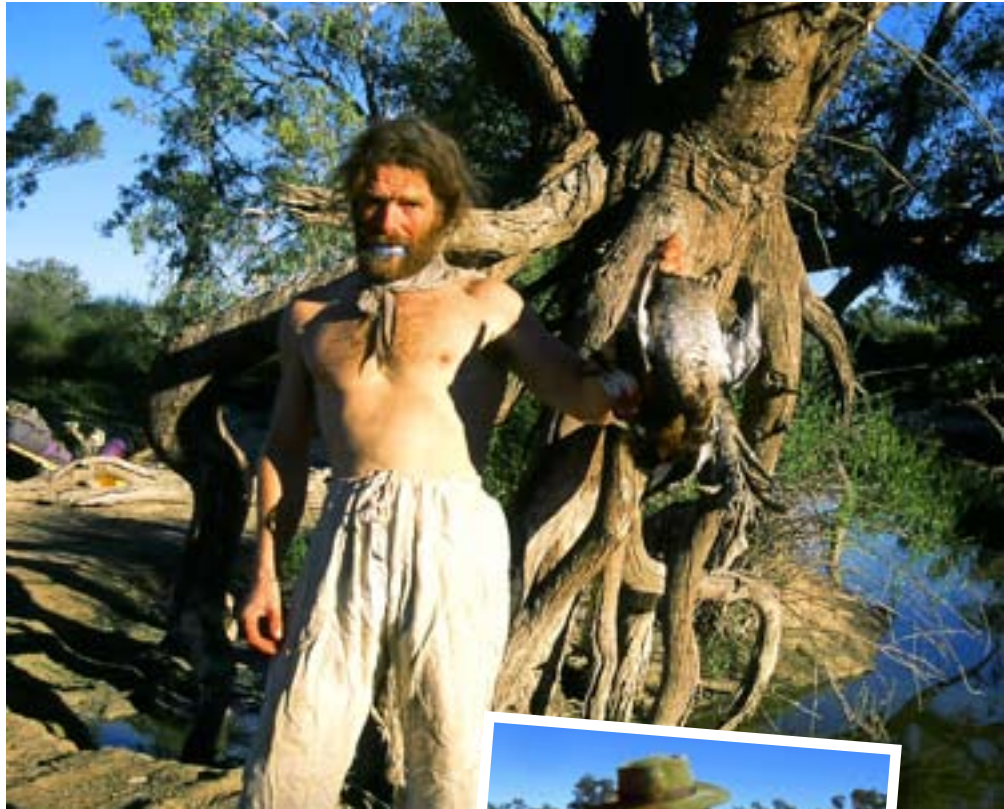


a shattering experience for Muir. Identify the range of emotions that he admits to. What other feelings would he have experienced?

- At Riversleigh Station, Muir hears for the first time about the events of 11 September. Do you think that this news would have had an impact on Muir, or would this event have seemed so far removed from Muir's experience that it would appear irrelevant?
- How understandable is Muir's observation at the end of the journey – 'Arriving in Burketown was actually quite anti-climactic ...'?

English Questions

- Write an essay on the topic 'The real star of *Alone Across Australia* is the Australian Environment'.
- Trace the ups and downs of Muir's emotions over the course of the journey. Write a series of diary entries that reflect and attempt to explain these changes of emotion.
- Write a reflection that Muir may have written following the death of Seraphine.
- It has been suggested that the vast majority of Australians who live around the green southeastern fringe of the continent, do not really live in Australia at all; the real Australia begins about 300k inland from the coast. Imagine you are a twenty one year old who has never been out of suburban Sydney. Write a letter outlining your reactions on the occasion of your first visit to outback Australia.
- As Muir walks around the ruins of Annandale Station (formerly a part of the Kidman Empire), he comments that 'this gives me a, a sort of haunted feeling. It's a nice haunted feeling, but it does remind me that we're just shadows on the wasteland and passing ever so briefly through time and space'.



Explain in your own words what Muir means by this. Think of and describe another situation in which you may experience similar feelings.

- Muir was already traveling very light, but at Roxborough Downs, he decides to abandon his cart and jettison many of his belongings. Imagine that you are in that situation and that you made one wrong choice. Write a diary entry beginning with the words 'If only I had not left the _____ behind.'



- Muir says on arriving in Burketown 'The rewards of the journey came with each day that went by and they weren't waiting in one big package at the end at all'. This echoes sayings such as 'It is better to travel hopefully than it is to arrive' and 'Focus on the journey not the destination'. Think of a journey that you have undertaken and write an essay that picks up the themes reflected in these sayings.



History Questions

- Find out what you can about the Dingo Fence. When and why was it constructed? How successful has it been? Explore connections between the Dingo fence and the rabbit-proof fence.

- When he finds the old grindstone, Muir comments that this was 'probably the most important tool of the Aboriginal culture'. Why would such a tool have been so important? Research and write a brief report on three other important Aboriginal tools.
- Muir visits several outback stations that have played an important role in the history of Australia's pastoral industry. Conduct research into the

history and importance of either:

- Annandale Station
- Roxborough Downs Station
- Riversleigh Station

Geography Questions

- Identify three different types of terrain crossed by Jon Muir on his journey. Explain the geographical and geological origins of the terrain, and locate and explain

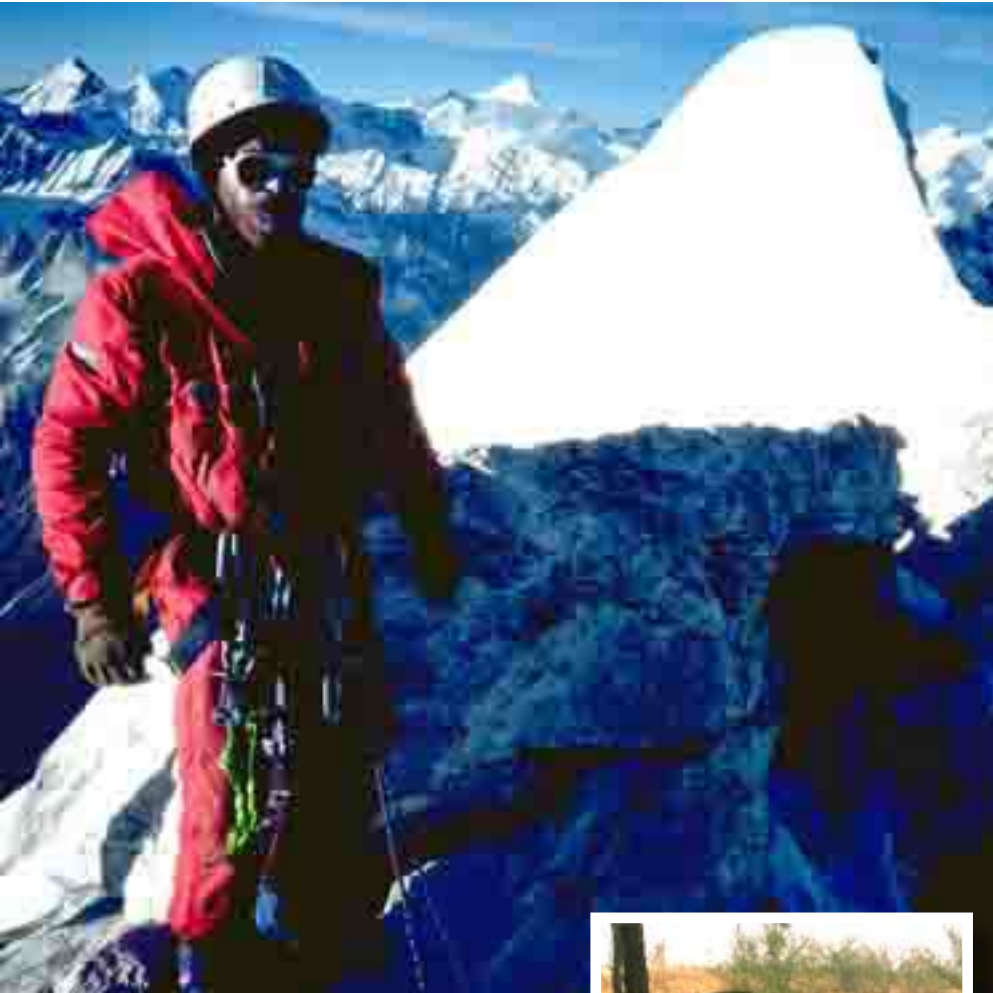
another example of such terrain elsewhere in the world.

- Research the sorts of animals and creatures that are able to survive in the harsh desert landscapes crossed by Muir in his expedition. Prepare a PowerPoint presentation demonstrating the survival skills of two desert animals.
- The area crossed by Muir is largely uninhabited. Is it impossible to eke any sort of existence out of this environment, or is it uninhabited simply because it is easier and more pleasant to live elsewhere in Australia? Try to find similar areas elsewhere in the world that do provide habitation and existence for the people who live there.

General Questions

- Think of six words that you would use to describe Jon Muir. Draw a picture or sketch to illustrate each of these words.
- What are the elements that make this such a powerful documentary? Explain one in detail using at least three examples from the film as evidence for your opinion.
- To what extent is the rugged beauty of the landscape a powerful background and linking element in this documentary?





- What do you learn from this film about the differences between wants and needs? Choose, from the following list, the eight elements that you believe to be essential to your survival:
 - Laughter
 - Ice Cream
 - Sleep
 - Reading
 - Companionship
 - Water
 - A First Aid Kit
 - Music
 - Meat
 - Exercise
 - Vegetables
 - Oxygen
 - Friendship
 - Bread
 - Sunshine
 - Vitamins
- Now compare your list with two others. All three of you must discuss each element and finally agree on your list of eight. Write a short reflection on what this exercise has taught you about yourself.
- When Muir has a chance meeting with the aboriginal stockman Bob

Crombie, Bob comments: 'We ... come back across the sand and we seen someone walking and ah, it sort of surprised us. Didn't expect to see anyone out there.' Depending on your particular talents and interests use this image to create a poem or a painting.

- Consider the elements that make this such a powerful documentary. Examine the role of Muir's personality and character, the cinematography, the dialogue, the environment, the nature of Muir's undertaking, the way that the documentary has been edited. Choose the

most important of these elements and justify your choice.

- Imagine that Muir did not succeed in his journey – that he disappeared or succumbed to a terrible accident or illness. Would he still be depicted as a hero?
- The film has won at least thirty international awards. Why do you think international audiences connected so strongly with the film?

Debate Topics

- 'Alone Across Australia is a story about the triumph of the human spirit.'
- 'Jon Muir is nothing but a fool-hardy risk taker.'
- 'Man is not a dog's best friend.'
- 'If not for the Jon Muirs of this world we would still be living in caves.'
- 'Jon Muir's journey forces us to acknowledge the extraordinary skills and abilities of the traditional Aboriginal people.'

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