

Aborigines Department, State of Western Australia

1 April 1898 – 31 December 1908

Details

The Aborigines Department operated from 1898, It was created by the Aborigines Act 1897 that abolished the Aborigines Protection Board. The Chief Protector was head of the Department. From 1908, the Aborigines Department was taken over by the Aborigines and Fisheries Department.

The Aborigines Department was formed on 1 April 1898 as the key government organisation responsible for Aboriginal matters, including the welfare of Aboriginal children in Western Australia. It followed the Aborigines Protection Board (1886-1898). The State Records Office website provides an overview of the establishment of the Aborigines Department:

The 1897 Aborigines Act established the first Aborigines department in Western Australia. The department started to function in April 1898, as a sub-department of the Treasury, with a small staff, a permanent head called the Chief Protector of Aborigines, and a statutory grant of 5 000 pounds. In 1901, the department was assigned to the Premier's Department, a year later to the office of the Colonial Secretary, and in 1905 its control was transferred to the Minister for Commerce and Labour. About the same time, as a result of a Royal Commission appointed in 1904, it was raised to the status of a department and allocated a minimum statutory grant of 10 000 pounds.

In 1909, the Aborigines and the Fisheries Departments were amalgamated into one agency; the Aborigines and Fisheries Department. This step was due partly to a policy of financial stringency on the part of the government and partly to the expediency of running as one the two departments whose interests in that period lay mainly in the northern part of the State.

The first Chief Protector of Aborigines was Henry Charles Prinsep (who was formerly Under-Secretary for Mines). Prinsep's appointment commenced on 1 April 1898 but was without any legal authority (see the 1904 Roth Royal Commission, question 207). The Aborigines Act 1905 legalised the situation and his appointment was re-gazetted on 4 May 1906.

Charles Frederick Gale was appointed Acting Chief Protector of Aborigines during Prinsep's absence... Gale was appointed Chief Protector of Aborigines and Chief Inspector of Fisheries on 1 October 1908.

The role of Donald Edmund Pechell in the Department in the early part of the twentieth century gives an insight into its work and structure. In 1905, giving testimony to the Roth Royal Commission, Pechell was reported (*Western Mail*, 18 February 1905, p.12) as being a 'Clerk, Accountant, Etc.,' in the Aborigines Department. Pechell was asked about his duties and said: 'I attend to correspondence, all the accounts of the office, distribution of blankets, and all other work, with the exception of the administration, when Mr. Prinsep [the Chief Protector of Aborigines] is in Perth. When he is absent I have to attend to everything.' Tilbrook, in *Nyungar Tradition*, p.37) refers to Pechell as 'Acting Chief Protector' in 1908 so it is possible that Pechell's tenure extended across both Prinsep and Gale's administration.

More info

Chronology

- Aborigines Protection Board, Crown Colony of Western Australia (January 1887 - 1890)
 - Aborigines Protection Board, Colony of Western Australia (1890 - 1898)
- **Aborigines Department, State of Western Australia (1 April 1898 – 31 December 1908)**
 - Department of Aborigines and Fisheries, State of Western Australia (1 January 1909 - 1 January 1920)
 - Fisheries Department, State of Western Australia (1920 - 1964)
 - Aborigines Department, State of Western Australia (1926 - 1936)
 - Department of Native Affairs, State of Western Australia (1936 - 1954)
 - Department of Native Welfare, State of Western Australia (1955 - 1972)

Related Entries

Ran

- [Ellensbrook Farm Home \(1899 - 1917\)](#)
Date: 1899 - 1908

Related Organisations

- [Beagle Bay Mission \(1895 - 1976\)](#)
The Aborigines Department was responsible for the Aboriginal children in Beagle Bay Mission.
Date: 1898 - 1905
- [St Mary's Mission, New Norcia \(1848 - 1974\)](#)
The Aborigines Department had responsibility for the Aboriginal children in St Mary's Mission, New Norcia.
Date: 1898 - 1905
- [Chief Protector of Aborigines \(1898 - 1936\)](#)
- [Sunday Island Mission \(1899 - 1934\)](#)
The Aborigines Department had responsibility for the welfare Aboriginal children housed in Sunday Island Mission.

Related Legislation

- [Aborigines Act 1897, Western Australia \(1898 - 1906\)](#)
The *Aborigines Act 1897* created the Aborigines Department, which came into operation from 1 April 1898.
- [Aborigines Act 1905, Western Australia \(1906 - 1964\)](#)
The Aborigines Department administered the *Aborigines Act 1905*.
Date: 1906 - 1908

Related Concepts

- [Aboriginal Protection in Western Australia \(c. 1832 - c. 1972\)](#)

Resources

- State Records Office of Western Australia, of Western Australia, [An Index to the Chief Protector of Aborigines Files, 1898 - 1908](#), 1998
- [Aboriginal History](#), State Records Office of Western Australia website, 2012
- McDonald, Ashley, [Are We Family? And if so, Can I Still Sue You?](#), Murdoch University Electronic Journal of Law, March 2000

Records

Records

- [Personal Cards \(1920 - 1948\)](#)
 - [Moore River Native Settlement Medical Officer Letters \(1927 - 1944\)](#)
 - [Reports - Aboriginal Missions \(1906 - 1918\)](#)
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You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/aborigines-department-2/>