

HOW CLOSE DID STURT GET TO THE CENTRE OF AUSTRALIA?

By Paul Hilbig.

There is an oft repeated claim that Captain Charles Sturt reached to within 280km of the centre of this country, on his 1844 Expedition into Central Australia. Sturt was not given the task of finding the centre of Australia. He was given instructions to explore a mountain range that supposedly ran SW to NE through the middle of the continent. The furthest North Sturt reached was at a camp on Eyre Creek, about 172km North of present day Birdsville. Even if he had wanted to go to the centre, I doubt that he would have made it from Eyre Creek, as this involves crossing the Simpson Desert from East to West. Sturt had enough problems getting his party back alive to Adelaide.

If, as a rough approximation, you compare the figure of 280km with the direct distance from Birdsville to Alice Springs of 597km, such a difference appears worthy of investigation.

The first thing to note is that there is in fact no official centre of Australia. What we are dealing with is, a large odd shaped continent, that is sitting on the irregularly curved surface of the earth. This results in a number of possible centre points, each of them valid, each depending on the criteria you define as important. Let us look at some of these methods for obtaining a centre.

LAMBERT GRAVITATIONAL CENTRE:- Finding the centre of gravity of Australia is best imagined as having a perfect cut-out map of Australia with thousands of tiny weights equally spaced along the coastline. The centre then, is the point where the cut-out would balance on a pin while remaining perfectly horizontal. In the Bicentennial Year of 1988, a complicated mathematical exercise was carried out by the Division of National Mapping to accurately determine this point. A monument has been erected at the site and is named after Dr. Bruce Lambert, a former Director.

CENTRE AT THE FURTHEST POINT FROM THE COASTLINE:- Think of this as putting the largest perfect circle you could fit within the coastline of Australia, that only just touches the coastline at three points. The centre of that circle becomes the centre of Australia according to this definition.

GEODETTIC MEDIAN CENTRE:- What is done here is to draw a box around Australia that just touches the Northern, Eastern, Southern, and Western most points of the continent. The geodetic median point is where the distance of the four geodesic lines joining the median point to each of the four corners is equal. (A geodesic line is the shortest line between two points on a curved surface like the earth's).

HISTORIC CENTRE:- On 22 April 1860 John McDouall Stuart wrote the following in his diary: "I find from my observations of the sun, that I am now camped in the centre of Australia". He named the mountain he was camped under, Mount Sturt, after his leader on the 1844 expedition. It has since been re-named Central Mount Stuart, in honour of Stuart's explorations that established the route of the Overland Telegraph Line.

We know the co-ordinates of these four possible centre points, as well as those of the point on Eyre Creek which was the closest that Sturt got to the 'centre'. A series of simple calculations establishes the following distances:-

Eyre Creek to:-	Lambert Gravitational Centre-	522km.
	Geodetic Median Centre-	615km.
	Historic Centre-	652km.
	Furthest point from Coast Centre-	702km.

The choice is yours as to which centre you wish to choose. What is clear is that the oft quoted 280km is incorrect. I leave it up to the scientists to argue the merits of the various choices, but being in awe of Sturt and his achievements, I choose the Historic Centre. John McDouall Stuart was the drafter responsible for mapping and recording the discoveries on the 1844 Central Expedition. He went on to gain fame as the first person to cross the continent from South to North and return safely, having learnt most of his exploring skills while in the company of Sturt.

