Watercraft were needed around the coastline, rivers and lakes. However, watercraft were not found wherever there was water. Even today there are many places around the Australian coastline which are unsuitable for the use of small watercraft, for example the coastline that looks over the Great Australian Bight. This is one part of Australia which remains unsettled even today. The coast is fringed by cliffs and the seas are usually very rough. There is no evidence to suggest that Aboriginal people sailed watercraft there either. Not until you reach Albany, on the south-west coast of Western Australia, can you find evidence of a watercraft being used.

There is little evidence of watercraft being used along rugged sections of the coastline in southern Australia.
In 1850, a European pioneer named Austin described a log used by local people to cross the Gascoyne River on the Western Australian coast as: “... a light log, 11 feet (3.3 metres) long and 10 inches (25 centimetres) in diameter. At one end it was curved to an angle of 160° and pegs were driven in on each side of this end, on which were two layers of small twigs bound up with bark, forming a basket like a dish, about half the length of the raft.”

Evidently this was not simply a log rolled into the water for someone to ride on. It had been shaped and adapted to enable a person to travel on it and carry goods in a carefully constructed basket. These could have included fish, water birds or other foods gathered from the river.

There were three main types of watercraft made by the Aboriginal people: dugout canoes, bark canoes and rafts.

A bark canoe.
Dugout canoes

Dugout canoes were hollowed out from a whole tree trunk which made them very heavy. They were mainly used in the area which stretches from eastern Arnhem Land on the Gulf of Carpentaria, around Arnhem Land to the northern coast of Western Australia. However, there have been reports that dugout canoes were found on the north-east coast of New South Wales and nearby in southern Queensland.

The design for dugout canoes and the technology for making them was brought to Australia by the Macassan people. These people sailed south annually with the monsoon winds, in their outrigger dugout canoes. They came to Australia to fish for sea cucumbers off the Arnhem Land coast. An outrigger is a framework attached to the side of a boat to give it stability.

This photo of Aborigines in the Northern Territory, making a canoe with an outrigger, was taken in 1904.
The evidence of dugout canoes being found in isolated areas of south-east Queensland and New South Wales suggests that Aborigines in this area came up with the design by themselves. However, it is more likely that either these were not really dugout canoes, or that the knowledge about how to make them had been passed along the Aboriginal trade routes all the way from Arnhem Land.

A simple dugout canoe took a long time to manufacture and it was almost impossible to make with stone tools. The Macassans used iron, and later steel axes, to make their dugout canoes, but it was still hard work.

Aborigines from the northern Australian coasts also added single or double outriggers to their canoes. Canoes with outriggers were commonly used by people around the Indian Ocean through to the Western Pacific. The Macassans sailed in outrigger canoes as did the people of Papua New Guinea, so the technology for making these canoes was easily available to Aborigines. In fact, it probably had been available to them for several centuries prior to the arrival of the Europeans.
Bark canoes

Prior to the development of dugout canoes, the most commonly used watercraft in Australia was the bark canoe. Making canoes from bark was a special skill developed solely by Aboriginal craftspeople. Bark canoes are not found among hunter-gatherer peoples in other countries.

Until recent years, tall gum trees with large scars on their trunks could be seen here and there along the banks of the Murray River which runs along the border of Victoria and New South Wales. They were called canoe trees because local Aborigines had cut large oval-shaped pieces of bark from their trunks. The canoe makers selected trees which were shaped so that they could cut out canoe-shaped pieces of bark. The bark was carefully removed so that the trees did not die, but the scars remained for the rest of the trees’ lives. Very few canoe trees can be found now. Those that still stand are important relics of Aboriginal heritage.

The bark is being removed from this tree to make a canoe.
Rafts

Small tree trunks lashed together or rolls of reeds or bark were commonly used as rafts on many rivers and lakes in inland Australia. One raft seen in Tasmania was said to be made from the trunks of two trees about 9 metres long. Four or five smaller logs were lashed to the trunks holding them about 2 metres apart. They formed a large platform, over which other smaller logs, or rolls of bark or reeds, could be laid and tied. Fires were set on mounds of mud or clay, and reed hearths were made for warmth and to cook on.
Triangular and double triangular rafts were found from the Kimberleys in the north of Western Australia across into the Gulf of Carpentaria. Matthew Flinders described a single triangular raft that he saw which was made of straight mangrove branches, lashed together in two places, with the larger ends together to form a broad end, and the smaller ends tied together into a point. Over a hundred years later near the same islands in the north of Queensland, a similar raft was seen by a Queensland Government official.

"It is V-shaped", he said, "composed of numerous light saplings (White Mangrove) with butts all at one end, the larger logs underneath and at the sides, all tied together fore and aft, a cross-tie connecting the two loops to prevent them from slipping; over the wider portion of the raft is placed a bundle of dried grass upon which the traveller sits and paddles himself along".
In parts of Western Australia rafts made of tree trunks pegged together, rather than tied, were seen by explorers around 1850. Double triangular rafts were made by laying the narrower ends of two rafts on top of one another and pegging the ends together.

A double triangular raft.