



BUSH NEWS

from the Natural Areas of Kedron Brook & Environs

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GreenBrook Association

THE PREHISTORY OF AUSTRALIA (Part 2)

Aborigines arrived in Australia at least 65 000 years ago. While we know virtually nothing of their early years, Tim Flannery, in his recent book *The Future Eaters*, suggests what must have happened.

No Australian animal had ever seen a human before. We know how such animals react from the well-documented accounts of the discovery of Lord Howe Island in 1788. Totally unafraid, they were caught by hand and slaughtered in their thousands. Sixty percent of the land birds on the island were extinct within two centuries.

New Zealand was settled by the Maori about 900 years ago. Among the animals they found was a large flightless bird, the moa. All that remains today are the moa butchering sites and cooking ovens, some containing the remains of nearly 100 000 birds.

The moa had become extinct by 600 years ago, and was followed ultimately by famine for the Maori. By the time Europeans found New Zealand the Maori had become exceedingly warlike, with much of their protein being obtained through cannibalism.

Another Pacific island, Easter Island, had suffered a similar fate. It was settled about 1100 years ago, and by the time Europeans

arrived in 1722, the previously large Polynesian population had crashed and the survivors were starving. On the whole island not a single tree remained standing.

There is the same evidence of massive extinctions and environmental degradation on New Caledonia. However, New Caledonia had been settled for 3500 years when discovered by Cook, long enough for the inhabitants to adjust to their environment. Cook found them to be 'friendly, honest and peaceful'.



As with the Maori in New Zealand, the first Aborigines found an abundance of giant animals in Australia. Presumably they feasted and multiplied, and then suffered as the extinctions set in.

The loss of the megafauna must have caused a tremendous increase in the standing crop of fuel, and Flannery speculates that this would have resulted in huge wildfires, adding to the severity of the adjustment that they must have faced.

As discussed in the last issue, Aborigines must have faced a similar period of adjustment during the last ice age. Some of their practices start to make sense if considered in the context of this past.

Whether or not it stemmed from their experiences with wildfires, the Aborigines ultimately became masters in the use of fire. In doing so they must have contributed greatly to Australia's change in vegetation from dry rainforest to eucalypt woodland.

Another characteristic of Aborigines that appears to relate back to a difficult beginning is their use of totems as a kind of religion.

A totem is an animal or plant that is allocated to a person at birth, and with which that person has a special relationship. The aboriginal use of totems is extremely complex. An individual can have one totem at a personal level, another which is associated with his or her mother or father, another because of a tribal sub-grouping and another at the tribal level. Each totem can also have a number of secondary totems associated with it.

As a general rule, a person is prevented from eating the animal or plant which is their totem. A tribe, therefore, is prevented from relying on a single animal or plant for its food.

Totemism can therefore be seen as a practical way to lessen the likelihood that a food species could again become extinct.

An Aborigine was also required to regularly perform ceremonies to perpetuate his or her totem species. In part, these involved activities at a succession of sacred places where the totemic spirit left some mark on the landscape during the Dreaming.



The ceremonies called for a reenactment of the journey taken by the totemic spirit, which involved a trip of, perhaps, several weeks. These trips were referred to as 'walkabouts' by people who had no inkling of their purpose. Ironically, 'going walkabout' was generally considered to indicate a lack of purpose in the lives of the Aborigines.

Religion was also used to set aside reserves as refuges for food species. Certain mountain summits behind Cooktown were regarded as 'story places' in which hunting was banned, and it has recently been discovered that these were of sufficient size to maintain populations of the local kangaroos, regardless of the extent of hunting outside the reserves.

So the impact of Aborigines on Australia was a mixed one. On the one hand they probably totally changed the vegetation of the

continent. They were also responsible for the extinction of countless of species.

On the other hand, they came to develop such an intimate understanding of the land, and of the degree to which they depended on the land for survival, that they structured their whole lifestyle around the needs of the land.

Percy Trezise, who has spent a lifetime studying the rock art of Cape York, has even suggested that they became "the first, perhaps the only, people in the world that controlled all populations for the good of all species".

Postscript

This article originated from what was to be some light Christmas reading. Because of space restrictions it is clearly an inadequate coverage of the subject. And yet this story, based partly on very recent information, is vastly different to what most of us have been told in the past. I thoroughly recommend a full reading of Tim Flannery's book *The Future Eaters*.

Frank Box

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WINTER IS HERE!

Winter is probably the best time of year to enjoy the park. Many birds breed during winter rather than in spring, and so there is often plenty to see.

Certainly winter is the most pleasant time for working. Over the next few months we shall be planting rainforest species in an area that has always had a problem with weeds, in the hope of trying to shade them out.

We would love some assistance. We shall be working on:

- 19 July
- 16 August
- 20 September

Meet at 8.30am at the Blandford St entrance to Grange Forest Park.

Bob Devine

PLANT OF THE MONTH

Mallotus claoxyloides - 'Scent of the Bush'

It is this plant which gives our local bush its distinctive smell. The delightful fragrance will permeate your garden.

It is a shrub to 6m, and able to tolerate sun or part-shade. It is slow-growing and so can be grown in a pot.

Available from Perrotts Nursery, Elkhorn St, Enoggera

