

Rethinking Indigenous Australia's agricultural past

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IMAGE: ABORIGINES USING FIRE TO HUNT KANGAROOS BY JOSEPH LYCETT, APPROXIMATELY 1775-1828. (NLA NLA.PC-AN2962715-S20)

*It has long been thought that prior to white settlement, Indigenous Australians lived a nomadic, hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Now some scholars argue that the first Australians practised forms of agriculture and aquaculture, writes **Cathy Pryor**.*

When explorer and surveyor Major Thomas Mitchell ventured into Australia's inland in the early 1800s, he recorded in his journals his impressions of the landscape. Around him he noted expanses of bright yellow herbs, nine miles of grain-like grass, cut and stooped, and earthen clods that had been turned up, resembling 'ground broken by the hoe'.

Mitchell, like other early explorers, noted what many white Australians would later overlook: there was evidence everywhere on this vast continent that Aboriginal Australians managed

the land.

Historians, writers and academics are now rethinking Australia's perception of Indigenous land management. They argue that the first Australians had complex systems of agriculture that went far beyond the hunter-gatherer tag. They were, in fact, our first farmers, whose intimate knowledge of managing native plants and animals sustained them for thousands of years.

Indigenous writer Bruce Pascoe has recently published a book called *Dark Emu: Black seeds, agriculture or accident?* that challenges the popular perception of our Indigenous past. He argues that the economy and culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people has been 'grossly undervalued' for the past 200

hundred years. The early writings of white explorers and settlers are central to his argument; they described the cultivated way Indigenous people managed the land.

'Hunter-gatherer societies forage and hunt for food and do not employ agricultural methods or build permanent dwellings,' he writes.

'But as I read these early journals, I came across repeated references to people building dams and wells, planting, irrigating and harvesting seed, preserving the surplus and storing it in houses, sheds or secure vessels ... and manipulating the landscape.'

Dark Emu echoes historian Bill Gammage's *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines made Australia*, published in 2011.

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BRUCE PASCOE, WRITER



IMAGE: FIRE HAS BEEN USED IN INDIGENOUS LAND MANAGEMENT FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS.

Gammage argues that early Australia was 'a farm without fences', and he too points to myriad early journal entries that reflect the fact that Indigenous Australians did cultivate the land. 'I think the skill in which Aboriginal people gathered food and resources is very well known. The key point is that they actually organized the landscape so as to make those resources predictable,' he says.

'The gathering is really the end point of a very sophisticated farming process.'

Gammage argues that early landscape paintings give an accurate picture of what Australia looked like prior to white settlement. Contrary to the popular opinion that the early painters simply romanticised the landscape to make it look more British or European, Gammage argues what they painted was actually much closer to reality: the trees weren't dense, the land was not completely forested and some areas did, in fact, look like the parks that early explorers described.

The view differs to what we might now think of as wilderness because Indigenous Australians had changed the landscape by clearing out undergrowth, thinning trees and opening up clearings through the clever use of fire.

'Aboriginal people used fire to distribute plant communities, like grass or open forest, across the country and the reason for doing that was to associate food for animals with shelter for animals,' he says.

'The most common example is you create grass, which is food for grazing animals like kangaroos, you put next to that an open forest which is their shelter and that encourages the

kangaroos or the grazers to come from the shelter onto the grass.'

'Then you burn the grass and a fortnight later you get this sweet, fresh growth, that lures the kangaroos to that particular spot ... and they can be harvested more easily.'

Some scholars also believe that aquaculture was also an integral part of the pre-settlement Indigenous economy.



IMAGE: FISHING IN THE BREWARRINA FISH TRAPS, NSW

Heather Builth is a consultant archaeologist whose work in the 1990s recognised the ingenuity of the **Budj Bim eel traps** that were used in the Lake Condah district of western Victoria.

The stones and foundations that remain today have been dated to more than 6000 years old, and are just a fraction of an enormous system that weaved its way from the ocean to inland areas of the district.

Similar fish trap structures can be found on the **Barwon Darling River** in western New South Wales.

At Lake Condah, evidence remains of the stone foundations of wooden and thatched domed homes where Indigenous people once congregated.

Local man Jimmy Onus says his grandfather still used the eel traps when he was growing up and he remembers being told stories of how they were used.

'He told us we used to get the eels and how important they were to our diet and way of living,' he says. 'It wasn't just food. We also used the oil to keep warm and even to keep insects away.' Eels were smoked in the hollows of trees, stored for lean times or traded with other Indigenous clans in the district. Builth says this was 'a marvelous system' that sustained a village of thousands three seasons out of four.

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'I have mapped 100 square kilometres of man-made, constructed, modified land which ended up resulting in a network of channels and connected wetlands,' says Builth.

'The connected wetlands themselves are all in a mosaic, but they were not natural. The wetlands had been dammed up to ensure the water stayed in them in times of drought.' There is hope that this kind of ancient knowledge could one day restart industries such as eel aquaculture and wild rice agriculture to provide employment and income for Indigenous communities.

Around Mallacoota in eastern Victoria, a group is propagating wild yam daisies in their backyards to see if it would be one day possible to grow them on a larger scale.

Central to the future, however, is the protection of the sites that still exist. Builth believes there could be more sites in Australia that are just as significant as the eel traps at Lake Condah. In north-western Victoria, the Mallee Catchment Management Authority is working with farmers and other landholders to educate them on how to look out for signs of Aboriginal agriculture, such as living sites and artefacts, to protect Indigenous history on their land.

Bruce Pascoe says he would like far more archaeological work done in Australia to document and protect our Indigenous past and recognise what was lost when Europeans arrived.

'The gathering stories have taken over somewhat from the farming stories because gathering was all that was left for people once the land was taken away,' he says.

'You couldn't do broad acre agricultural activities once the land had been taken from you.'

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Guests

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Jimmy Onus

Gunditjmara man from the Lake Condah district of western Victoria

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Associate Head of the School of Environment, Charles Darwin University

Lorraine Williams

Larrakia woman who has been working on the native rice project

Ken Stewart

Indigenous facilitator with the Mallee Catchment Management Authority, north-western Victoria