

HOT NORTH WIND AND FIX THE FISHTRAPS SEASON

Aboriginal people were skilled astronomers. Like at Stonehenge, they often used circular stone arrangements to map the summer and winter solstices and the lunar cycles.

Aboriginal people used an ordinal counting system that went from first to twenty-eighth and stopped there. This showed they understood the relationship between the rotation of the Earth, its movement around the Sun, and the movement of the Moon around the Earth.

We know this is so, because from one observed full moon to the next full moon is twenty-nine and a half days. So Aboriginal people understood the planetary movements, then compensated for this and worked on a thirteen month lunar calendar of twenty-eight days each.

Well, actually the month ending at the summer solstice had twenty-nine days, because 13 times 28 equals 364 days. So there was a one day adjustment on the summer solstice each year. And of course every four years there was a two day, leap-year adjustment.

In the Melbourne area the Aboriginal season referred to in Europe as Summer therefore began at the summer solstice on December 22nd. However it only lasted two lunar months from December 22nd to February 15th.

This is because it was followed by the eel harvest season, which went for about one lunar month from February 16th to March 15th. So whilst this was also the 'Summer' period it was defined by its particular seasonal activity.

When I was young my grandfather told me that the Aboriginal summer period was named after the hot north wind. He said that the word for this was Mallee, because that was where the hot north wind came from. This made immediate sense to me as a kid, because I knew that in summertime we would often have red rain from all the Mallee dust in the air. We sometimes still do have 'red rain'.

As already indicated, Aboriginal seasons were however not simply defined by the prevailing weather at a particular time of year. They were also defined by what you have to do at that time. When you think about it, the tasks associated with the hot north wind season are obvious and logical.

In tribal times all births were planned to occur in September and October in order to be in tune with nature. By the start of the hot north wind season these babies would only be between two and four months old, so the logical place to be in hot weather was by a river.

Also, October is the wettest month of the year in Melbourne and the Yarra used to regularly flood. This annual October flooding only stopped when the Upper Yarra Dam was built in 1956. So it also stopped the annual practice of kids making rafts in the winter to punt around the flooded river flats in October.

In tribal times these October floods would cause damage to the fish traps all along the river. The obvious time to do annual maintenance on these fish traps was when the river was at its lowest flow. This of course which was during the hottest time of the year. So this is why the two month period from the summer solstice was the 'Hot North Wind and Fix the Fishtraps Season'.

There were many places along the Yarra in Manningham where families congregated particularly at this time of the year. They fixed the fishtraps whilst enjoying the lifestyle in the shade by the river. The riverfront at the Warrandyte Township is just one example of this. The fact that settlers observed middens, piles of freshwater mussel shells, in this location is testament enough by itself.

These fishtraps were built on the natural geological structures in the rapids of the rivers and were often over a metre in height. Many settlers observed and marvelled at these structures and the following is a quote from John Batman when he sailed up Hovell's Creek at Geelong in May 1835.

'We saw several places on going up, which the natives had made with stones across the creek, to take the fish. The walls were built of stones about four feet high and well planned out. Two or three of these places following each other down the stream with gates to them.'

These fishtrap walls were of course obliterated by floods within a couple of years of colonisation and dispossession. So at an unconscious level, for most Australians it was like they were never there. However if you take an opportunity to walk down the Warrandyte Township riverfront, just say between the bridge and Forbes Street, you will see the geological structures across the river I am talking about.

It takes no imagination at all to immediately see where the fishtraps Batman was talking about would have been. It will be like you have had laser surgery to correct a lifelong vision impairment.