

EEL HARVEST AND INTERCLAN BUSINESS SEASON

Beginning in mid-February each year and lasting about four weeks, eel harvest season was a most important time. People travelled from distant inland areas to the coastal rivers to participate, so it was also an opportune time to conduct inter-clan business. This included justice issues, dispute resolution, marriage planning, and deciding on the burning-off schedule that began in mid-April.

Summer Solstice effectively begins the Aboriginal year on December 22nd so the Eel Harvest and Inter-clan Business Season occupied the third lunar month, from February 16th to March 13th. The flowering of casuarinas and late summer storms effectively marked the end of this eel harvest and inter-clan business period in mid-March.

Eel harvest takes place when mature ten to thirty year old eels begin migrating downstream in southern rivers. They make their way to the ocean and swim all the way to the Great Barrier Reef to spawn. Being much smaller than female eels, male eels cannot swim as fast, so their migration starts two weeks earlier.

Male eels were not hunted, but their migration is the sign to send messages out to gather in two weeks when the female migration will begin. Each female eel lays about two million eggs so not many have to make it through. However all the males are required to fertilize the eggs so are not hunted. After hatching the small glass eels migrate all the way back down the east coast to the coastal rivers.

With the impending arrival of guests from other clans, the local hosts ensured that other foods were abundantly available. Kangaroo stocks from the nearby firestick maintained paddocks and possum stocks from the nearby woodland copses were culled. The carcasses were then stored in smoke houses to be ready for the arrival of guests. Grass seeds to make damper were also harvested and stored in kangaroo skin bags ready for use by guests. Stocks of freshwater mussels were also stored in damp earth pits.

All along southern rivers such as the Yarra, Aboriginal aquaculture engineering such as eel and fish traps abounded, but many of these works were invisible to European eyes. In a previous article I talked about how Aboriginal people for aeons, principally through fire, had carefully managed the environment. Many of the colonists commented that the whole country: *'Looked like an English Gentleman's Estate'*, but mistakenly believed that this was the 'natural' state of affairs.

Sometimes though, the engineering works were so obvious that they had to be acknowledged. For instance when John Batman arrived in Port Phillip from Tasmania in May 1835 and explored what is now known as Hovell's Creek, he noted the fish traps in his diary. *'The walls were built of stones about four feet high, and well done and well planned out.'* Mostly however, Aboriginal technology was so blended into the environment it just wasn't seen.

Take the riverfront area of the Warrandyte township for instance. This was originally a three hundred metre long Woiwurung aquaculture area. The locations of fish traps, eel traps, freshwater mussel farms and yabby farms is still today quite apparent, if you actually know what you are looking at.

If you stand on the Warrandyte Bridge and look east upriver, you will see rock formations across the river marking the start of the rapids area. This was where the eel traps operated during the eel migration period in late February and early March. The natural rock formations were enhanced by placing stones to channel the eels into races where they were either caught in woven eel traps. The children had great fun catching by hand and beaching any eels that escaped the traps.

The area underneath the bridge was also where the Aboriginal travel route (Songline) crossed the river and continued along the ridgeline to Kangaroo Ground.

Now looking west from the bridge, the rapids area you see was often adjacent to freshwater mussel farms. Mussels were a staple part of the Aboriginal diet, and before the Spring floods the mussels were collected in their hundreds. They were then taken to places above the flood line and stored in earthen pits for later use. Once the soil is on top of them, the mussels go into suspended animation and stay fresh in these 'refrigerators' for up to two years. There is clear evidence that these mussel farms were indeed along this stretch of the river in Warrandyte, because middens (high piles of shells) were observed there by early settlers.

Near Forbes Street is another rapids area and Songline crossing, followed by some deep-water areas. These deep areas were maintained as breeding ponds for blackfish and yabbies, as well as sheltering areas for eels. During summer a lot of duck-diving would be undertaken by Aboriginal people in these deep areas to remove any rocks that have been swept into them by the October floods.