

FOOD FORAGING

(PART 1 FOOD RESOURCES (2,000 > BP))

The Tasmanian Aborigines occupied their island home for at least 40,000 years but it is only the last 2,000 years that is considered here and only mainland Tasmania and offshore islands.

A relatively rich area of food, the island can be nearly equally divided into halves, west and east. Mountainous wild and mainly shielded lowlands with rainforest and heath exist in the west while the east is dry sclerophyll taxa. Incredibly rich coasts exist all around the state's perimeter and as can be expected the open west is a furious one, the east sheltered.

All this territory from c.1,300 meters to coast is foraged over by the most important macropod, the medium sized (c.80cm, 15-11kg) "Bennetts" or "Red-Necked Wallaby" (*Macropus rufogriseus*) a gorgeous friendly "roo". A quick breeder it is numerous and roams an area of between 5 to 20 hectares. Its importance to the Aborigines is evident from colonial observations and even more so in archaeological excavations.

In the far inland south west from c.40,000 to 13,000 BP (27,000 years) it was all but the only fauna hunted providing not only food including all important bone marrow but skins for warming cloaks. It ranks as number one and the only time it lacked this importance was when it was deficient in an area such as in the upper Forth River Valley, when the smaller pademelon filled the void.

In the east Tasmania's only kangaroo shared the domain with the wallaby but lacked the same numbers, a megafauna, (45kg and over), it had down-sized back about 40,000 years ago. The east was also rich in possum especially brushtail and ranked high in popularity by Aborigines. The next was the wombat who had also down-sized from a megafauna. Its occupation was often in the same area as the wallaby.

Some twelve or more marsupials were exploited. Small rodents, if available, were eagerly dug out of nests by women for late supper delights.

Some species were only purely fortuitous like monotremes, echidna and platypus as well as reptiles. It was said that a west coast band ate snakes while in their thickly vegetated homeland. Carnivores, possibly due to small populations and specie numbers as well as difficulties in hunting were not of any significance.

Other species were favoured as "treats", birds, ant eggs, some flora fruits especially the juicy sap of the cider gum that in the summery period could ferment creating a slight intoxicating brew. The eating of body lice may have been a "treat" at night rest?

Most of these "delights" were seasonal, the most important being marshland bird eggs, swan especially and littoral penguin eggs. The mutton bird is sighted as of

extreme importance. It was and still is so for those Eastern Straitsmen in post-colonial days, however, research suggests its main importance was in the far north west corner only.

The littoral zone was important but its annual exploitation was limited, although it varied from place to place. The coast generally was seasonal, that is a winter semi lay-up, in the east a nomadic progression along the coast, the west, especially south west semi-nomadic. Again I emphasise it varied from area to area.

When in season seal was immensely favoured by all, especially the pups and dangerous journeys to distant offshore southern islands were eagerly ventured to, often fatally. Stranded whales, even it is suggested dolphins, although not common were greedily exploited by those hearing about them far away.

Another exploited it seems for cultural mystic beliefs, not it seems for food, were species of stingrays, the liver being removed seemingly for ritual purposes.

Flora was exploited, mainly seasonally, and some thoughts are that because of the meat diet any edible flora was important and its use underestimated. True there are many plants, ferns, roots, stems, fruits, that could contribute to the diet but they are small quantities, limited in area and lack high contribution factors in other ways. Data is limited.

Already we have seen the island had a seasonal foraging complexity that varied from people to people, but a very rough timetable can be suggested - highlands in the summery period, lowlands spring and autumn with winters on coasts and offshore islands only in summer. The winter saw living off coastal hinterland fauna wallaby, wombat and possum as well as littoral resources, molluscs of intertidal species and diving for sub-littoral crayfish, crab and abalone as well as warrener and whelk, a most dangerous enterprise.

The end of an El Nino, drier, cooler conditions at c.2,000 BP gave way to a wetter environment which gave the last days of Aboriginal supremacy a period of well-established abundance in excess of the past.