

FOOD FORAGING

(PART 2 “FORAGING & FOOD PREPARATION”)

Part 1 “Food Resources” summarised the available fauna and flora, this final section briefly explains the techniques used to obtain the protein and carbohydrates contained within them by hunting, gathering and processing for consumption.

FORAGING

The role of male and female was generally clearly defined but both participated in economic duties, with the women being the reliable backbone of their society. The males carried out hunting activities of larger fauna especially kangaroo, wallaby and wombat but seasonal migrations from the coast into the lowlands during spring and autumn could see all participating in group hunts of the two former macropods. Likewise, although women mainly climbed trees in pursuit of possum the men awaited below to dispatch the animal when thrown out of its nest.

Hunting by men was often one of a fortuitous meeting a quarry and resulted in a lack of success having to return to camp empty handed, but not to worry, the ever-reliable women filled the void with smaller fauna, possum and edible flora. They also, when on the coast, provided molluscs either gathered at low tide from rock outcrops or dived for more valuable sublittoral species including crayfish.

It would seem that both sexes hunted birds, the women having baskets collected eggs in quantity. The obtaining of emu eggs is unclear but could have been by both or at least the men may have protected the gathering women?

Of importance was who hunted seal? It is known in some detail that women also carried out this dangerous pursuit, but some evidence includes men – perhaps both.

It is clearly obvious from ethnographic evidence that it was women who were the main breadwinners, the “brave-warriors” not only played a subordinate role in the economy but allowed their women-folk to endanger their wellbeing and lived by having them climb trees, grab furious possums, dive in shark infested waters and laboriously carry everything all while looking after the family and making artefacts – indeed it is said that the first thing a maturing male must do is obtain a wife, less he starve! However, it should be stressed that an ancient functioning culture should not be judged by us!

Economically men only had to supply two average wallaby a day to feed his family of suggested five and that means only feeding on the choice pieces. Under the same conditions a single wombat or half a kangaroo. With the wife’s contribution including flora starvation was not an issue.

Considering the Palaeo-Tasmanians relied on the most basic of material culture it proves how little humans need to survive, in this case over 40,000 years (plus

25,000 on mainland Australia and another 135,000 plus outside the area). The culture utilised a simple relatively short spear/javelin, throwing stick/clubs, fortuitous pebbles as further missiles, flaked stone all unhafted weapons. Women carried on the coast a short pointed/spatula to piece crayfish or dislodge molluscs. Basket and firesticks were essential, especially the latter that were never allowed to go out. The belief that they, men and women, could not make fire is doubted but it made great sense to keep a flame going because the weather conditions and environment proved most hostile in attempts to create a flame.

The necessity of fire-sticking (farming) probably reached its zenith in our period but really started to show its significance at c.3,000 BP. Archaeological evidence shows that the El Nino permitted conditions suitable for control of forests creating thoroughfares and clearings to attract larger macropod and emu to a lesser extent, to graze. This also was the beginning of venturing to offshore islands, some coasts becoming occupied for shorter periods. About Rocky Cape, seal became significant, some 80% of the diet, while the inland was opened up.

About this time fine stone quarrying and trade in them increased in the west while in the east, with penetration into the Midlands at c.5,000, an impulse later saw apparently a progression up into the Central Highlands that by 2,000 BP was complete.

Evidence exists especially on the west coast and north inland of simple grass tie trips, spear/stake traps for impaling use in macropod hunting as well as bird hides, other techniques were using floats or swimming to grab birds by the legs. With seal suggestions include using a covering to creep up on them before dispatching with a club. Waddies and stones were particularly successful in downing birds.

With large macropods especially, it seems because of their numbers wallabies were group hunted by corralling along a cleared grassland into a bottle neck vegetation and/or a water area for killing. Pursuing by male hunters until exhausting their prey is being researched as a technique.

Mention must be made about known tidal stone wall fish-traps, especially so on the north coast. At Rocky Cape/Sisters Creek proof of consuming scale fish from c.8,000 to 3,500 BP exists coming from excavations but practically nothing elsewhere. Since we are looking at post 2,000 BP the evidence is out of our scope with no proof of Aboriginal constructions, but there is of European, post 1803!

FOOD, PREPARATION

Most cooking was a simple form of broiling, that is roasting on a bare open fire of coals, rocks etc. Washed first or having hair singed off the meal was basically half cooked. Sometimes a "hot plate" flat large stone was used as a grill. Animals, it varied in type, had an incision in the belly with entrails removed, but not wasted instead cooked in part separately. Meat pieces dipped into the wood ash as a sort of replacement condiment. Some suggestion, perhaps learnt from sealers, was the use of spits and skewers. Mention of seeing ovens could have been funeral pyres?

Flora was eaten raw, but some tubers cooked. Spring saw succulent new growth, summer, maturing, fruits in autumn but had variations depending on species.

Seafood was broiled but lightly. The act of decomposition actually causes whale blubber and meat to self-cook so was consumed during the process. Large portions of meats or baskets of molluscs were transported but only relatively short distances to the next camp, perhaps a kilometre or so at the most.

Studies of diet show that protein and carbohydrates were both well catered and compared favourably with our nourishments.

All in all, due to its longevity, and evidence of a healthy population, the culture of the Tasmanian Aborigines was highly successful although of a basic technology.