



Minutes of Evidence Curriculum & TRP

Topic 1: *Aboriginal society and culture in the Port Phillip District and how European settlement impacted upon it.*

Theme(s): Ownership; tradition; community; identity

Victorian Curriculum link:

Causes of population movements and settlement patterns during this period and the significant changes to the way of life of groups of people ([VCHHK130](#))

Key social, cultural, economic, and political features of one society at the start of the period ([VCHHK133](#))

Intended and unintended causes and effects of contact and extension of settlement of European power(s), including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples ([VCHHK134](#))

If the above hyperlinks do not work in PDF – visit the curriculum via:

<http://tinyurl.com/j85w2pg>

Part 2: How people made a living

The material needs of Aboriginal people across the Port Phillip District were fulfilled by hunting and gathering. This economic model is a very efficient means of acquiring both food and other materials; in most circumstances hunter-gatherers worked on average about five hours each day (Sahlins 1974). Regular movement within clan estates was an essential part of the strategy, allowing people to be where they needed to be – to take advantage of the seasonal availability of resources, but also to fulfill religious obligations (Stanner 2010).

The changing seasons played a large role in determining where, within their estates, people would be at any given time of year. The estate of each and every clan contained areas of both high and low country, each of which would be visited at some time of the year. During the warmer seasons people spent their time in the lower, more open parts of their estates, along the river flats or on the open plains. As temperatures declined, and the weather deteriorated, they moved into the uplands where they could readily find shelter (Smyth 1876). In the Kulin world people recognized seven seasons (Museum Victoria); the beginning of each season was linked to natural changes in the local environment, such as the first appearance of a particular animal for the year, or the flowering of a local plant.

As a means of acquiring food and material, hunting and gathering was based on relatively small groups. For day-to-day purposes, clan members operated in small family-based units, referred to as bands. A single clan could number in the hundreds, which was too large a group to be practical for most day-to-day purposes. Local bands would comprise 15 to 20 individuals, generally of one or two families, plus visitors (Presland 2010).

At the beginning of each day men and women would generally leave the camp in different directions, the men to go hunting whatever larger animals might be in the area, such as kangaroos or wallabies, possums, and emu. The women spent their time in digging up the tubers and the roots of plants and gathering fruits from trees and bushes. They also tracked and captured any small animals, such as lizards and snakes that crossed their path. At the end of the day's work, back in camp, it was the women's gathering that provided the bulk of the band's food (Kohen 1995; Maddock 1974).

In a number of regions of the Port Phillip District there were resources of particular importance to the local clans and complex strategies were developed to manage them. In a couple of places in the western district, these strategies included diverting a stream flowing off Mount William in the Grampians (now also known as Gariwerd) into a maze of artificial channels that covered an area of about six hectares; and at Toolondo near Horsham

the digging of four kilometres of channels in order to connect two wetland areas (Lourandos 1997). In both cases these works were aimed at maximising the ability of people to capture eels from the water, as they migrated downstream to the sea.

There were almost 300 plants whose roots or tubers were eaten by Aborigines in the Port Phillip District. Among the more important of these plants were species of wildflowers, including lilies, orchids, and the Yam Daisy. In grasslands and open woodlands, Aboriginal people managed and tended to these resources, principally through the use of fire. At regular intervals of three to five years, fire was applied to areas within their estate, as part of the practice of caring for their country (Gott 2005). This was an activity that involved the whole band: specific men would do the firing, according to who had responsibility for ritual practice in that area; women would come in after the burning, digging out the tubers from the burnt plants. This digging served to aerate the soil, it mixed the ash into the soil's layer of organic matter, and it thinned out the surrounding vegetation. The net result of all this activity was that when the foraging bands returned to the area they could expect an increased 'crop' of tubers, providing a ready source of foodstuffs (Gott 1983, 2005; Presland 2010).