Mallanbool Reserve

...'Pool with reeds'

Glen Eira City Council

'Women's business'

Kulin clans living in the Mallanbool Reserve area utilised most, if not all, the the indigenous plants found thereabouts. Unfortunately, many of these species are now locally extinct. Plants were predominantly 'women's business', the role of the bagurrk. The bagurrk collected as much as 80 per cent of the family food in the form of plants, small mammals, grubs or shellfish. Kulin used plants for all facets of their lives. Besides being a staple food, source plants offered medicines, fibres, utensils and resins. Plants also held prominence within Aboriginal religious life, ceremony and magic. These rituals are greatly underestimated and even less understood.

Traditionally the bagurrk would take their bubup (young children) with them on their gathering expeditions. By working in groups they could also instruct not only girls within the group, but new wives from other regions. Their intimate knowledge of growth requirements and seasonal variation in availability of foods enabled the Kulin to move through the landscape and sustain themselves through the seasons, taking full advantage of all that the land wished to supply.

Land management

Kulin women did not cultivate the land in the way of western farmers, but worked with the land and harvested natural crops. While much of the food was eaten as it was collected, some required varying levels of preparation whether it be via soaking, grinding or cooking. Again, many of these valuable lessons were passed on through the Elders. In this way they obtained a diet rich in fibre, mirco-nutrients and minerals with a low fat content.

This is not to say that the Kulin did not manage the land to obtain a better yield. They utilised the rejuvenating qualities of burning the bush. Methodical controlled fires encouraged young succulent growth and heavier flowering in the specific sites burned. The ash from the burn provided nutrients to the soil. Burning kept the land open, reducing wild fires and making hunting much more efficient — 'value-adding' if you like. Keeping the land open was essential for the health of the vast and diverse range of unique indigenous animals.

Even as the bagurrk collected their food they were improving the soils. This they did with their ubiquitous digging sticks or kannan. The kannan were fire-hardened and strong. By using their kannan to lift out roots and tubers they opened the soil allowing for better growth. Traditionally, part of the plant was always left behind to ensure prosperity for future generations of both plants and people. Just as men used their intimate knowledge of the land to track and hunt mammals and birds, women were able to locate buried tubers long after leaves and flowers were absent.

The effects of European settlement

Myrnong (Microsenis lanceolata) or yam daisy was a principal food for the Kulin and would have grown around Mallanbool Reserve. The story of its disappearance from the area mirrors the fate of Kulin lands, economies and culture. Heavy grazing and soil compaction by cattle and sheep, followed closely by the flood of rabbits, spelled doom for the Myrnong. After having been the staple crop for an entire population of people for hundreds of generations it disappeared quickly from farmed lands. Some colonial farmers witnessed its local demise in just one season of stock grazing. A conservative 1851 estimate recorded over 6.6 million sheep on traditional Kulin lands.

Today the Myrnong is considered rare in many old habitats. But consider the reality that after only six to eight generations of European contact, up to 99 per cent of Victoria's lowland grass ecosystems are severely degraded or cease to exist. A sobering thought, considering the ancestral custodianship by untold generations of Kulin.

'We are here, we are part of this place'
The region now known as Melbourne is the ancestral lands of the Boonerwurung and Woiwurung (Wurundjeri) people of the Kulin nation.

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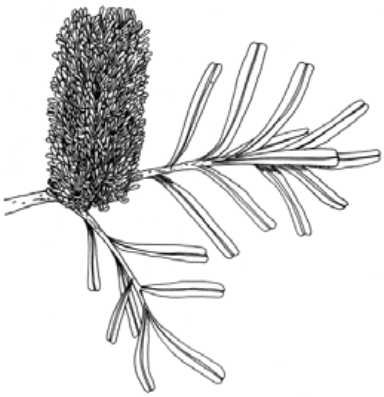
Dianella revoluta
Spreading Flax-lily

Lomandra longifolia
Spiny-headed Mat-rush



Banksia marginata
Silver Banksia

Melaleuca spp.
Paperbarks

Dianella revoluta
Spreading Flax-lily
Murmbal : L. Hindmarsh

The Kulin split the leaves of this plant along their length for use as ties. The name flax-lily is a reflection of the strong fibrous nature of the leaves.

The flowers and fruit of this lovely plant are eyecatching and while the berries of many of the Dianella species are poisonous, this particular species is not and the fruit were eaten. The brilliantly coloured fruit was also used as a blue dye by the Kulin.

Dianella revoluta is widespread so it would be a very familiar plant to the itinerant Kulin tribes.

Lomandra longifolia
Spiny-headed Mat-rush
Karawun : Kulin

Spiny-headed Mat-rush is a widely distributed, tussock forming plant, especially common in moist areas.

The bagurrk (Aboriginal women) were responsible for collecting the strappy leaves for use in weaving. By splitting the rushes and then beating and soaking them, the foliage was made pliable and suitable for weaving. Sometimes the leaves were scraped to reveal the strong fibres within.

Many different woven products could be formed including arrabines or eel traps. Eels provided an important food source for Koories, especially during their migrations to and from the sea. By blocking creeks with boulders or rushes, eels could be directed into traps located on the creek floor. Once trapped, the eels were either killed by biting the back of their necks or stored in water for later use. Migration of eels would also signal the opportunity for ngargee, the communal gatherings.

These rushes were also used to produce baskets, mats, strong bags and nets, these being dragged along stream beds to catch fish.

Banksia marginata
Silver Banksia
Woorike : Kulin

Nectar and honey were a treasured part of the traditional Kulin diet. By soaking the flowers in water in wooden vessels called tarnuks, the Banksia nectar was released with the resulting fluid providing a sweet drink. The dry flower cones became strainers for fresh water prior to drinking. Wherever Banksia flowered walert or possums and other small animals would not be far away, adding opportune protein to the harvest.

There are 75 species of Banksia, all native to Australia, with over 80 per cent native to Western Australia. Banksia marginata is notable for the silver underside to its leaves and is widely distributed throughout Victoria, except in dry areas.

Melaleuca spp.
Paperbarks
Bunu : L. Hindmarsh

Melaleucas consist of about 215 species — 210 of which are native to Australia. Their wide distribution has assured their extensive use by Aborigines throughout the continent. The Kulin particularly valued the thick papery bark, source of the Melaleucas common name 'paperbark'.

This bark was stripped from trees by Koories to provide a wrap for young babies. It offered not only softness but also good insulation against cold. Similarly, sheets of bark provided a canvas for painting. The close suckering growth of many Melaleucas produced long straight stems used to provide hard wooden spears and digging sticks. Thicker lengths provided clubs.

The production of tea-tree oil from the foliage of melaleuca has become an industry. Aboriginal use of these plants recognised the value of these oils. Crushed young Melaleuca leaves were inhaled to relieve coughs,