



# ABORIGINAL CULTURAL HERITAGE

## NATIVE GRASSLAND AND GRASSY WOODLANDS

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### SUMMARY

- Aboriginal cultural heritage of the VVP includes tangible and intangible values
- The VVP has been home to Aboriginal people for at least 30,000 years
- People lived in highly complex societies, spoke a variety of languages and held cultural responsibilities to sustain their inherited 'clan' lands
- Occupation of the VVP by settlers was rapid and often violent
- People of the VVP have maintained strong connections to their traditional lands to this day
- Sound land management helps to preserve Aboriginal cultural heritage for all Australians

### WHAT IS ABORIGINAL CULTURAL HERITAGE?

The landscapes of the VVP speak of the lives of at least 1,500 generations of Aboriginal people. Every corner of this region has places where Aboriginal people lived, passed on cultural traditions and established complex societies and economies.

There are many different kinds of Aboriginal cultural heritage values associated with the landscapes of the VVP including tangible values such as burial sites, artefact scatters, shell middens, stone structures and scarred trees and more. These physical reminders reveal the connection that Aboriginal people have had to this landscape over the numerous generations.

In addition to this there are the intangible attributes that are passed across generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations, such as songs, artistic expressions, travel and trade routes and other cultural practices and customs. Particular places, plant or animal species or natural phenomena, also hold important cultural, economic and spiritual significance.

With the permanent arrival of Europeans to this part of Victoria in the 1830s, the nature of Aboriginal occupation and use of the land changed dramatically and important new cultural heritage sites developed.

Places where the first contacts between Europeans and Aboriginal people occurred, massacre sites, missions, protectorate stations, properties where people worked and in more recent times, places associated with Aboriginal land justice and rights movements have also become crucial to the Aboriginal cultural heritage of the VVP region.

This knowledge, tradition and heritage, in all of its forms, is now a fundamental part of Aboriginal life and cultural identity. It is also immensely important to our sense of national identity and in understanding the endurance and diversity of humanity, both in Australia and across the globe.

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### PRE-CONTACT HISTORY OF THE VVP

Both Aboriginal tradition and science agree that Victoria's VVP region has been peopled for at least 30,000 years. Over this time, major climatic fluctuations fundamentally changed sea levels, river systems and biodiversity, and some of the 400 volcanoes that created the VVP landscape were still active.

Aboriginal people witnessed these climatic and geological changes over numerous generations, adapting their lifeways to the continually evolving landscapes. These enormous changes were incorporated into creation stories and oral traditions, often explaining how the entire VVP landscape was shaped by the actions of Ancestor Beings.

In pre-colonial times, the people of the VVP lived in extended family groups or 'clans' and inherited discreet parcels of land through their grandparents. They spoke a variety of languages and dialects and lived in highly complex societies involving systems of trade, episodes of conflict and intricate kinship relationships. These societies were enriched by songs, stories and ceremonial practices. People held intimate knowledge of their land, not just in an environmental sense, but had important cultural responsibilities to renew and sustain their country.

Life on the VVP tended to focus on rivers, creeks, lakes and permanent swamps, but the grassy plains and hills also hosted important quarry sites, food resources and cultural and ceremonial places.

The lakes and swamps teemed with eels, fish and waterfowl that were speared, trapped and netted, and in riverine and woodland habitats possums were caught for their meat, but also their pelts which were then crafted into elaborately-designed cloaks. On the plains, hunters killed larger game species, whilst women and children systematically dug *murnong* (Yam Daisy tubers) and collected a wide array of other plant and animal foods as they went.

Every part of the country was utilised as family groups along rivers, hill tops, valleys and across the plains. At certain times of the year, large gatherings of people would occur at places celebrated for eels, game and other resources.

### HISTORY OF SETTLEMENT AND CHANGES TO THE VVP

Following John Batman's controversial treaty with Kulin leaders in June of 1835 and the explorer Thomas Mitchell's reports of fertile pasture in western Victoria, waves of squatters soon came to occupy the VVP. Coming from every direction, they rapidly annexed the most fertile areas of the traditional lands of each language/cultural group.

Settlement in many parts of the VVP was met with fierce resistance as clans were driven off their lands and denied access to hunting grounds and important sites. Grassland habitats were swiftly altered as European livestock diminished traditional food and water resources, wetlands were drained and some areas were converted to crops. Drought in the early years of settlement further exacerbated these changes and the people of the VVP were starving.

Chief Protector Robinson summarised the sentiment of Djab Wurrung people in 1841, 'It was hungry black fellow who took sheep. Long time ago, they had plenty kangaroo, parum-pun, tuerercom (roots eaten by the natives); and then they were not hungry and did not take sheep. Kangaroo all gone, jumbuc (sheep) eat the roots.'

Occupation was often violent and cruel. Along with the effects of poor nutrition and disease, the people of the VVP were reduced to less than a third of their original numbers within 10 years of settlement. 'Considerable mortality' continued over ensuing decades as diminished family groups camped on stations or the fringes of settlements, and were moved onto reserves and mission stations. In spite of this, people have maintained strong connections to their traditional lands to this day.

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*Develop a plan outlining the aims of the restoration project, the issues to consider, and how, when and where the works will be done.*

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ABOVE: Various Scar Trees and Aboriginal artefacts

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### WHAT TYPES OF CULTURAL HERITAGE WOULD WE EXPECT TO FIND IN THE GRASSLANDS, GRASSY WOODLANDS AND WETLANDS ON THE VVP?

Both tangible and intangible cultural heritage can be found across the VVP. Tangible archaeological evidence, most commonly scatters of stone and other artefacts, will very often be found close to water sources, though short-term occupation sites can also be found on the plains and volcanic rises. Also, often occurring on floodplains and close to major rivers and lakes will be 'scarred trees'.

Shell middens are also mostly found along river banks and flood plains or near swamps and lakes, and human burial sites and cooking mounds are typically found on the edges of lakes and rivers.

A range of Aboriginal stone structures can also be found in the region. Stone arrangements (for example those at Mt Rothwell/Wurdi youang and Lake Bolac) have a presumed ceremonial/ritual purpose although little is known about them today. A variety of stone traps made by Aboriginal people of the VVP to catch both fish and migrating eels can also be found across the region.

The most famous of these being the Lake Condah and Toolondo fish trap complexes. Finally, semi-circular stone arrangements and the foundations of small dwellings (which have been found in 'village'-like clusters in some locales) occur in the Mt Eccles and Mt Napier lava flow areas and the Corangamite region,

both on the 'stony rises' landform and the more open plains. Sadly, many stone structures were deliberately destroyed in the early contact period.

Beyond this mostly archaeological material, the VVP is also home to plant and animal species, places and practices important to Aboriginal cultural heritage. Plants and animals, for example, continue to hold spiritual or ceremonial significance to people and these are often associated with particular sites and landscape features.

The landscape itself was shaped by the creation deeds of Ancestor Beings and there are many plants and animals that have particular significance as totem species or represent moieties. These species also had and continue to have value as sources of food, medicine and artistic expression.

Cultural traditions such as songs, creation stories, ceremonial practices, oral histories, artworks and performances are all closely tied to sites across the region. Historical sites, that may or may not contain archaeological remains, such as foundations of mission buildings or places where massacres occurred are equally important.

These places hold considerable cultural heritage value as reminders of the time since European occupation.

### HOW DO WE PROTECT CULTURAL HERITAGE?

One of the ways you can look after the cultural heritage on your property is to research Aboriginal occupation in your region.

Find out about Traditional Owners' ongoing connection with your property by engaging with the relevant Representative Aboriginal Party (RAP) Groups, look out for heritage sites in likely locations and be aware of how the landscape underscores intangible heritage.

Many Aboriginal places have survived decades of agriculture and other land use/development but need on-going protection. Sound land management, including ecosystem and species maintenance and protection, will help preserve Aboriginal cultural heritage sites and places.

If you find Aboriginal cultural heritage sites on your property this should be celebrated, not feared.

It is against the law to disturb or destroy an Aboriginal place. If you are planning to undertake a 'high impact activity' on your land you will require a Cultural Heritage Management Plan (CHMP). You may also require a CHMP for any proposed use/development of your land that falls within an area of 'cultural heritage sensitivity', unless the area has already been subject to significant ground disturbance.

You can use Aboriginal Victoria's online maps and tools to determine if you will require a CHMP. If you find an Aboriginal cultural heritage place or object on your land you are required to report it to Aboriginal Victoria under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*.

As a landholder, you can also enter into a voluntary Cultural Heritage Agreement with a relevant RAP to work together to manage and protect Aboriginal cultural heritage places and/or objects on your property.



ABOVE: Kurtonitj stone house

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### DEFINITIONS

#### VVP Language/cultural groups

Bun Wurrung, Dja Dja Wurrung, Woi Wurrung, Watha Wurrung, Djab Wurrung, Djargurd Wurrung, Gulidjan, Keeraywoorrong, Kee Woorrong, Wirngilgnad Dhalinanong, Dhauurd Wurrung, Peek Woorrong, Koornkopanoot, Wooloo Woorrong.

#### Moiety

One of two social groupings that people belonged to, represented by either the ancestors Bunjil (eaglehawk) or Waa (crow) in the east, and Grugidj (white cockatoo) or Gabadj (black cockatoo) in the west.

#### Artefact scatter Scarred tree

Large trees where bark was removed for canoes, shields and shelters; the scar usually having rounded or pointed ends and possible axe marks in the sapwood.

#### Midden

Accumulations of shell produced by Aboriginal people collecting, cooking and eating freshwater shellfish, often also containing charcoal, burnt earth, animal bones and stone tools.

#### Stone arrangement

Stones placed in straight, curving or circular lines or shapes and either standing, or set in piles, and usually measuring many metres across.

#### Fish/eel traps

Straight or v-shaped lines of stones placed across narrow sections of rivers and creeks, or inland fishtrap complexes comprising connected systems of stone races, canals and traps.

#### Semi-circular stone arrangement

Semi-circular low stone walls 2-4m across which formed the foundations of stone-based huts, wind-breaks or hunting hides.

#### High impact activity

Anything that results in significant ground disturbance by machinery in the course of grading, excavating, digging, dredging or deep ripping, but not including ploughing (to a depth of 60cm).

#### Areas of cultural heritage sensitivity

Registered Aboriginal cultural heritage sites as well as landforms considered likely to contain Aboriginal cultural heritage.



ABOVE: Scar Tree

### FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

Aboriginal Victoria's Aboriginal cultural heritage mini-poster series:

[www.vic.gov.au/aboriginalvictoria/heritage/aboriginal-cultural-heritage-of-victoria/aboriginal-places-objects-and-land-management.html](http://www.vic.gov.au/aboriginalvictoria/heritage/aboriginal-cultural-heritage-of-victoria/aboriginal-places-objects-and-land-management.html)

Aboriginal Victoria's online map of Cultural Heritage Sensitivity and Aboriginal Heritage Planning Tool:

[www.vic.gov.au/aboriginalvictoria/heritage/planning-and-heritage-management-processes/planning-and-development-of-land.html](http://www.vic.gov.au/aboriginalvictoria/heritage/planning-and-heritage-management-processes/planning-and-development-of-land.html)

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