







A traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal Diet

A traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal diet was drawn from marine and non-marine environments, alpine and rain forests, as well as wet and dry forests. Food resources varied according to environments and seasons and people had sophisticated practices when hunting and gathering resources. The following article explores what the Tasmanian Aboriginal diet included, how it was resourced and some of the sources of evidence.




CROSS CURRICULUM PRIORITIES

-  Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures
-  Sustainability

CONTENT AREAS

-  Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS)
-  Design and Technology
-  English
-  Science

GENERAL CAPABILITIES

-  Intercultural Understanding
-  Critical and Creative Thinking
-  Ethical Understanding

KEY CONCEPT

Diet: Food or drink considered in terms of its qualities, composition, and its effects on health. The food eaten, as a particular person or group and the food or feed habitually eaten or provided.

Dictionary.com 2018

SUPPORTING CONCEPTS

- › historical records
- › archaeological records

GUIDING QUESTION

What did a traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal diet consist of; how was it resourced; and what are the sources that provide evidence of this?

This printed material is **to be used with Foods – a Living Cultures multimedia curriculum resource** that can be found at www.theorb.tas.gov.au

The Living Cultures Foods resource and this supplementary printed material have been designed to foster culturally responsive practice when learning about Tasmanian Aboriginal Histories and Cultures.

Introduction

Tasmanian Aboriginal people were hunter-gatherers, meaning that they caught and collected their food by hunting animals and gathering plants. With sophisticated and detailed knowledge of the environment, they knew how to best utilise the natural resources available to them. In Tasmania, with such diverse landscapes and expansive coastline, this resulted in an extremely rich and varied diet, higher in protein and vitamin C, than on the mainland of Australia.

Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania, 2018

Plant foods

Historical records tell us that fruits, roots, seeds and sap were all part of the Tasmanian Aboriginal diet. George Augustus Robinson, in a number of journal entries made during the so-called Friendly Mission (1829 – 1834), describes many of the plants that people ate and the names given to them.

Discovered a variety of berries which the natives eat, among which were the native currant, of white colour and pleasant flavour, and called *pur.rar* by the Brune natives, *teet.ter.nar* by those of the north and *poon.ner* by the eastern natives; as well as a small red berry called *bore.rar* by the southern natives. There was also the pigface, called *wen.dar* by the natives of the south and *try.nu.ler* by those of the north; and a native plum, called

ay.lue.ber.ry by the southern natives. They also eat the large pods of the native willow.

8 February 1830

Robinson cited in Plomley 2008: 147

It was during our walk this morning that I observed the native woman of the Big River tribe to dig out of the ground the native potato, called *lar.bun.er*.

9 December, 1831

Robinson cited in Plomley 2008: 579



Carobrotus Rossii, also known as native pigface | Image: Tim Rudman

An important year round food source was the native pigface. The leaves of the pigface are edible and have a mildly salty flavour and following flowering it bears sweet red fruit. This plant is still widely used by Tasmanian

Aboriginal people today for stings, bites, wounds, and food just as it has been for hundreds of generations.

Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania, 2018

The grasstree is another versatile plant for Tasmanian Aboriginal people; the leaves, nectar, root and stem of the plant are all edible. Grasstree seeds were collected and ground into flour to make damper and the flowers were soaked in fresh water to make a drink.

Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania, 2018



Xanthorrhoea Australis, also known as the grasstree. | Tim Rudman

Other early historical accounts note a unique seasonal food collected in the highlands – the cider gum.

The natives obtained from the cider-trees of the Lakes (*Eucalypts resinifera*) a slightly saccharine liquor, resembling treacle. At the proper season they ground holes in the tree from which the sweet juice flowed plentifully. It was collected in a hole at the bottom near the root of the tree. These holes were kept

covered over with a flat stone, apparently for the purpose of preventing birds and animals coming to drink it ... When allowed to remain any length of time, it ferments and settles into a [coarse] kind of wine or cider, rather intoxicating if drunk to excess.

Bunce 1857: 47



Sap on a cider gum at Miena Tasmania. | Image: Eve Lazarus of the Derwent Catchment Project

The Miena Cider Gum of Tasmania is listed as critically endangered under the Commonwealth threatened species legislation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › How did Aboriginal people know what they could eat without being poisoned?
- › What does this tell us about Aboriginal people's scientific ability?
- › What would Aboriginal people have needed to know to harvest the cider gum juice?

Bird and animal foods

A large variety of birds and animals were eaten by Aboriginal people. Larger marsupials such as Bennett's wallabies and Forester kangaroos were a common food source, as were possums. Other animals eaten included wombat, bandicoot, bettong, echidna, and potoroos. Many of these animals were cooked whole on open fires or coals. Birds [and their eggs] eaten included mutton birds, emu, swans, ducks, crows and penguins.

Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania, 2018

Van Dieman's Cassowary is a Tasmanian species of emu that could be found across the island until the mid-1800s.



It was smaller than its larger mainland relative, but probably just as inquisitive. Aboriginal women gathered emu eggs. Aboriginal men trapped and hunted these flightless birds with spears. They probably also tricked the nosy creatures with bunches of feathers tied onto sticks. Once close enough to a concealed hunter, a noose was slipped around the emu's neck. One emu made a good-sized meal.

Early settlers, too, feasted on the bird - so much so that the Tasmanian emu has been eaten into extinction. The Tasmanian emu is extinct. Exactly when this happened we cannot say for sure because its larger mainland cousin was introduced onto the island by early European settlers.

Southern Midlands Council, 2018

Mutton birds (also known as Short-tailed shearwaters) were an important food source collected by the Tasmanian Aboriginal people for at least the last 8000 years. As well as eating the meat, the oil in the birds is well known for its health benefits because it has a high proportion of omega-3 fatty acids. The omega-3 content is so high that if a person drank 1 gram of oil each day they would more than double their normal daily intake.

Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania, 2018

Mutton birds continue to be an important food source for Tasmanian Aboriginal people today.



Young birder on Big Dog Island | Image: Matthew Newton, RUMMIN Productions

The hunting skills of both men and women are documented in many early historical records.

One of their modes of hunting the kangaroo is generally as successful as it is ingenious. Having discovered a spot to which they know a number of these animals resort, they make a fire around it, taking care to leave two or three openings by which they may endeavour to escape; they then station themselves at these places, and on the animals attempting to pass, they spear them with such dexterity, that few are ever permitted to escape.

Holman 1834: 405-406

There were particular ways to prepare most food. Possums were skinned using a sharpened stone before being placed on the hot coals to roast. Kangaroos and wallabies were sometimes skinned, but usually the fur was singed first over the fire and then rubbed off the body. The intestines were removed and hot coals placed in the body of the cavity so the meat cooked evenly while it was roasting over the fire.

Birds such as emus, crows, ducks and penguins, were plucked after the feathers had been singed in the fire. The wings or flippers were removed, the body opened up and the meat cooked on each side over the coals. Penguins were often soaked for many days in salt water before they were cooked. This preserved and tenderised them.

Department of Education and Arts Tasmania 1989: 12

Since wallabies, like kangaroos and other macropods, are very lean, it was thought people regularly split open the long bones to access the nutritious marrow. This is one way they could avoid potentially fatal protein poisoning - a rare type of malnutrition caused by an absence of fat in the diet.

Jillian Garvey in *The Conversation*, 2017

The climbing of the lofty smooth-trunked gum trees, by the women to obtain opossums, which lodge in the hollows of decayed branches, is one of the most remarkable feats I ever witnessed.

Backhouse 1843: 172

Their senses of seeing and hearing are particularly acute...

Davies 1846: 413



Sketch by George Augustus Robinson – Three people carrying long spears and kangaroos. | Image: ©Trustees of the British Museum



A wild native taking a kangaroo | Benjamin Duterrau, 1836

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › How might Aboriginal people have known that they needed a balanced diet?
- › What does this tell us about their understanding of their body and its condition?
- › What does this tell us about Aboriginal people's knowledge and use of their environment?

Seafoods

Seafood was a significant part of the diet of many Tasmanian Aboriginal groups. Within coastal areas seals, crayfish and shellfish were plentiful. To access seasonally abundant foods which were available on offshore islands, such as mutton birds and seals, ocean-going canoes were constructed from bark or reeds. Shellfish including abalone, mussels, oysters, and limpet could be collected on-shore or by diving. Some early colonial records indicate that Aboriginal women dived for shellfish. They filled their grass baskets with enough food for their family or tribe gathered on the

shore. The shellfish was cooked on a campfire before the fish was eaten and the shells left at the site.

Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania, 2018

The females are in general very adept swimmers and are enabled to procure a surprising quantity of shellfish upon the single immersion in the water. The most remarkable shellfish is called *Haliotis* or ear-shell (mutton-fish), which forms a very substantial food for the natives, and though of a strong rancid taste is relished by many Europeans. They are

found adhering to rocks considerably below the surface of the water and are procured by diving. This task devolves upon the women who plunge into the deep with a basket of their own manufacture (made of plaited grass with surprising neatness and ingenuity), which they invariably fill ere they rise again. This basket is slung over the left shoulder so as to

hang by the side under the left arm; a chisel stick is held in the right hand or between the teeth. The women are trained from childhood to swim and dive, so that when grown up the water becomes their own element.

28 September 1829

Robinson cited on Plomley 2008: 87



Tasmanian Aboriginal women diving for shellfish | Collection: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

Other evidence of past Aboriginal hunting, gathering and food processing activities are shell middens, located in many low lying coastal areas.

Some of the shell middens in Tasmania are among the largest in the world. They indicate the many generations of people and the thousands of meals eaten in these places.

These middens consist primarily of concentrations of discarded shell and bone, botanical remains, ash and charcoal.

Aboriginal midden material may appear on the ground surface as sparse scatters

or concentrations of broken shell, and are often associated with dark, ashy soil including charcoal. Middens can also be visible in eroded or collapsed sections of dunes where they may appear as a dark, ashy band with layers of shell throughout.

Midden sites can range in size from small shallow discrete scatters to extensive deposits that run along a coastline for hundreds of metres. The discarded shell and other materials may be the remains of a single meal, or the result of repeated use of a particular location over thousands of years.

Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania, 2018



A shell midden on the West Coast of Tasmania | Image: Sharnie Everett

Seals were also an important resource for Aboriginal people, and it was the women who hunted, caught and killed them. As traditional custodians of the sea, their great skill in the water was described in many early historical records.

[The women] went to the water's edge and wet themselves all over their heads and bodies, which operation they said would keep the seals from smelling them as they walked along the rocks...The women all walked into the water in couples, and swam to three rocks about fifty yards from the shore. There were about nine or ten seals upon each rock, lying apparently asleep. Two women went to each rock with their clubs in hand, crept closely up to a seal each, and lay down with the clubs alongside. Some of the seals lifted their heads up to inspect their new visitors and smell them. The seals scratched themselves and lay

down again. The women went through the same motions as the seal, holding up their left elbow and scratching themselves with their left hand, taking and keeping the club firm in their right ready for the attack... After they had lain upon the rocks for nearly an hour, the sea occasionally washing over them...all of a sudden, the women rose up on their seats, their clubs lifted up at arm's length, each struck a seal on the nose and killed him; in an instant they all jumped up as if by magic and killed one more each.

Kelly cited in Roth 2009: 103

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What would the Aboriginal women need to know and be able to do to hunt the seals?
- › How would the women have gained this skill and knowledge?
- › What reasons can you think of for it being the women who hunted the seals?

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