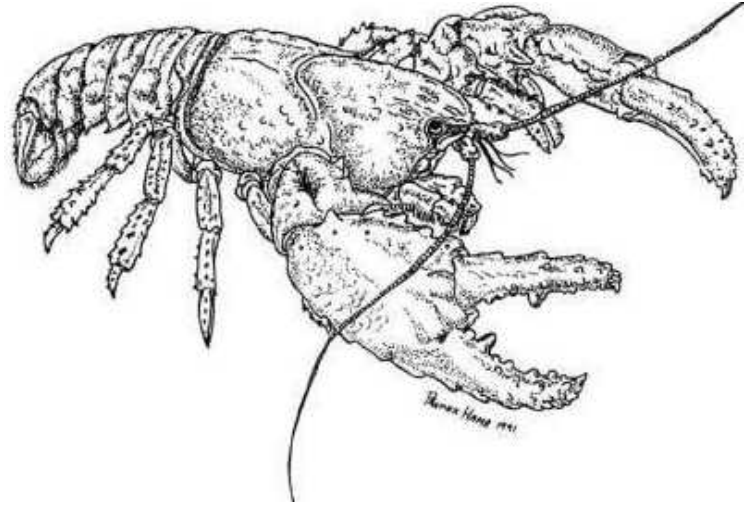


Disjunct Naturalists

WEBSITE OF THE CENTRAL NORTH FIELD NATURALISTS



Budj Bim

by **John Campbell**



Lake Condah



water channel

In November 2001 I was lucky enough to tag along with a group of South Australian Museum staff being shown significant Gunditjamara sites by Daryl Rose, from the Winda Mara Aboriginal Corporation at Heywood in southwestern Victoria. Starting in Nelson on the Victoria South Australia border we visited shell middens; a canoe tree; wetlands where various plants were farmed for roots and tubers and puung'ort grass was collected for making nets; the old Condah Mission which was established in 1868; and Lake Condah (Tae Rak), where stone channels and weirs once supported the aquaculture which in large part was responsible for permanent human settlement.

Since then, I've returned to walk and camp near the lake and in the adjacent Budj Bim - Mount Eccles National Park many times. The Condah 'lake' of 2001, which held almost no water because it was drained in the 1950s, has since filled following a 2010 weir-building project and some reasonable rainfall in recent years. The following links provide information on this development.



stone circle

lakecondah.com
windamarah.com
waterengineeringaustralia.com.au

As elsewhere in Australia, settler-colonialists had turned natural waterways into drains, ripped out vegetation for pasture, and imported weeds, rabbits, etc. Until a few years ago, cattle still trampled significant sites and had reportedly destroyed reed beds. But no more, as the weir project is just one part of a bigger project. It is still too early to say how the revitalised lake may affect the Condah habitat. It will probably be many decades before substantial change occurs. However the listing of 10000 hectares of this area as the Budj Bim National Heritage Landscape in 2004 was recognition of its great importance and has given impetus to further work on rehabilitation.

The history of the land and the people, as well as the potential of both now that Europeans are loosening their grip on it, is well documented in *The people of Budj Bim*, by the Gunditjamara people with Gib Wettenhall, Em PRESS Publishing, 2010. The book is subtitled 'Engineers of aquaculture, builders of stone house settlements and warriors defending country', indicating the range of topics it covers. Clearly all topics are inter-related so far as life experience is concerned, but the aquaculture component may be the one of most interest to CNFN members.

The book begins with description of the volcanic eruptions that commenced c. 27000 BP which formed Mt Eccles. Myriads of stony rises and depressions were created when the lava solidified. These widely distributed basalt stones were then used for housing and aquacultural structures, which have been the subject of quite a few archaeological studies since the 1970s. Communities of indigenous people were able to reside permanently here due to the reliability of food. Recent research indicates that eel and fish traps in the region may be among the oldest known such traps in the world, at c. 6600 BP. [Science Direct](#)

The book's final chapter emphasises 'the inseparable link between the cultural and natural values in the Budj Bim landscape that were crucial to it gaining national heritage listing.' My interest in Budj Bim is a result initially of being a bushwalker who has great regard for natural values; I've also wanted to explore the land to find what I can of remaining stone structures. These arouse a feeling about the country that I can't explain. I should point out that I've not seen many that I'd be confident as describing as definitely being pre-contact. Only a few, and there are several reasons for my uncertainty. First, it can be quite difficult to negotiate the stony rises and troughs, along with vegetation of various densities and prickliness. Second, the presence of some relatively recent European-built stone structures in various states of collapse. Ann Clark has closely studied this in her article 'Romancing the stones: the cultural construction of an archaeological landscape in the western district of Victoria', *Archaeology in Oceania*, 29/1, April 1994.

If I could widen the scope of this briefly, can I say that I do believe that most of the problems which beset the contemporary world can only be satisfactorily resolved from an ecological position; 'one which finds the bases for a new ethics and politics in the natural limits we face as finite, vulnerable creatures in a natural world, the very beauty of which speaks to its larger independence

from human domination.' (Matthew Sharpe, Bringing them the plague: Camus at 100, *Arena Magazine*, 127, Dec2013 – Jan 2014). Studies of indigenous practices suggest that this ecological position was a given during the pre-invasion period. So perhaps we can learn something if we try to find out more about how and why this was so.

Indigenous management of the land is certainly returning to Budj Bim. It can't be known yet whether traditional aquaculture will have any significant role in the future but it is a possibility. What is happening is that revegetation projects are in place, fences are being built, and baiting of pest animals and weed control are also underway, all in long neglected areas. The Gunditjmarra are welcoming others onto their land to show them what can be done. Teaching respect for country.

In *The people of Budj Bim*, Gib Wettenhall writes: 'Gunditjmarra man Daryl Rose finds the sight of leaden winter skies and pouring rain exhilarating.' What a novel response to a natural thing that typically annoys or depresses us! Yes, more water going into the lake has to be a joyful thing.

As an interesting aside to this story, one of the locations chosen to illustrate Bill Gammage's thesis about the use of fire by indigenous people pre-1778 in his book *The biggest estate on earth: how aborigines made Australia* is Mt Eccles. An 1865 painting of the inactive crater by Eugene von Guerard is shown in both books. A contemporary visitor to this spot sees a well-vegetated landscape: [GoWildImages](#) not a 'park-like' food resource created by judicious use of controlled burning: Image at [mywdfamilies](#)

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