

## Teachers' Notes

### *Bittangabee Tribe: An Aboriginal story from coastal New South Wales*

All efforts have been made to ensure the accuracy of this material. If you believe something to be in error please contact Aboriginal Studies Press ([asp@aiatsis.gov.au](mailto:asp@aiatsis.gov.au)).

## INTRODUCTION

*Bittangabee Tribe* tells the story of a family living on the coast of south-east Australia who travel to the Australian Alps in the summer to meet with other tribes and feast on Bogong moths. At the end of the season they travel back to their coastal home in time for the lobster season. It was written by Aboriginal students at the Eden campus of the Bega College of Technical and Further Education, using their traditional knowledge of the area and their culture.

*Bittangabee Tribe* is an excellent jumping off point for studies into aspects of traditional Indigenous life, pre-colonisation. Its simplicity makes it an ideal text for study in the early and primary years, while the references to traditional life give it potential to be studied in later years as an introduction to issues such as:

- Indigenous trading and trade routes
- Aboriginal lifestyle pre-colonisation
- bush tucker
- traditional language and boundary divisions
- Indigenous seasons.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

These notes do not provide prescriptive teaching ideas. Rather they provide the historical basis for the text so that teachers can see the value of having a text such as *Bittangabee Tribe* in the school library to teach all students about Aboriginal culture. Some of the resources used in these notes are written by non-Indigenous people. Where possible, teachers are advised to use resources from those who know the culture best – the relevant Indigenous people. Teachers are encouraged to contact cultural resource centres or local Indigenous community members to obtain information about the aspects of Indigenous culture that they wish to teach. A useful resource for the teaching of *Bittangabee Tribe* is the Aboriginal Culture Centre Monaroo Bobberrer Gudu (heartwood@activ8.net.au).

*Bittangabee Tribe* can be used to teach almost any age group, from the early years right up to senior secondary students. It will fit into almost any Aboriginal Studies, SOSE or history curriculum.

## INDIGENOUS TRADE ROUTES

*Bittangabee Tribe* is based around important aspects of traditional Aboriginal life, particularly seasonal hunting and trading.

A central part of Aboriginal peoples' culture has been their living as hunter-gatherers, and trading and exchanging goods with neighbouring groups. This has gone on for thousands of years. Despite evidence of this movement and trade, history books haven't reflected this aspect of Aboriginal life. There were trading routes that traversed the continent. Goods were traded with neighbours, but could end up many many kilometers away when on-traded.

Thus, if a community lacked the resources they needed (ochre, tools, materials for ceremonial objects) they could trade with groups from other areas.

Examples are ochre which was mined at Parachilna (western edge of the Flinders Ranges in South Australia) which went north into central Queensland.

Pituri comes from the desert plant *Duboisia hopwoodii*. It contains high levels of nicotine and Aboriginal people maintained social controls over its supply and demand. It was collected in western Queensland and traded far away into South Australia.

These goods, important for ceremonies, served as a currency, or form of payment, for other items.

Trading with other groups allowed communities to respect the rights and cultural differences of others. It fostered good relationships between neighbouring groups and could act to help settle disputes.

Trading route maps differ from each other, depending on what was being traded. For example, some who travelled a distance were the southern Torres Strait Islanders who traded with Aboriginal people of Cape York to obtain spears, spear throwers and ochre.

Adapted from:

Griffin, T and M McCaskill 1986, 'Aboriginal Occupation', *Atlas of South Australia*, South Australian Government Printing Division, South Australia.

Indigenous Australia, *Aboriginal Trade Routes*, viewed 9 June 2009, <<http://www.indigenoustrade.com.au/culture/trade-routes.html>>.

Pascoe, B and AIATSIS 2008, *The Little Red Yellow Black Book: An introduction to Indigenous Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.

## INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Communication and trade prior to colonisation were not restricted to the Australian continent. Indigenous Australians, people living on Cape York and Arnhem Land and in the Torres Strait Islands in particular, traded resources and knowledge with both people from Papua and Pacific Islands like Rotumans, Samoans, New Hebrideans (Vanuatu) and Lifuans (Noumea).

In the north of Australia, Macassan seafarers from the island of Sulawesi, in what is now Indonesia, made annual journeys to collect sea-slugs, also known as trepang or bêche-de-mer. They traded goods like metal knives, cloth and tobacco. From Papua Torres Strait Islanders traded their pearl shell, cone shell and turtle shell and stone to obtain canoe hulls to which they added their double outriggers which let them engage in long-distance trading.

Songs, dances and esoteric objects and knowledge (such as magical spells) were also carried and exchanged along these trade routes.

Adapted from:

Donaldson, M 1996, 'The End of Time? Aboriginal Temporality and the British Invasion of Australia', *Time and Society*, Issue 5, Vol 2, pp.187–207.

Flood, J 2006, *The Original Australians*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW.

## TRADE ROUTES AND FEASTS

In some places, it was the plentiful supplies of food in particular seasons, like the Bogong moths in *Bittangabee Tribe*, that allowed people to congregate, both to feast and trade. Some of the other best-known of these trading events were associated with the migrations of eels in Victoria, the fish at Brewarrina in New South Wales and the ripening of bunya nuts in Queensland.

Adapted from:

Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, *Australian Heritage Database, Places for Decision*, viewed 9 June 2009

<http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/ahc/national-assessments/australian-alps/pubs/australian-alps.rtf>.

## THE HISTORY BEHIND BITTANGABEE TRIBE

The people in *Bittangabee Tribe* are believed to be based on the ancestors of the Yuin people of the south coast of NSW. Yuin land reaches up, and just inland from the coast from Cape Howe near the New South Wales/Victoria border to the Shoalhaven River in New South Wales (Egloff, Peterson and Wesson, 2005).



Australian National University, Living Knowledge, Koori Coast.

[http://livingknowledge.anu.edu.au/learningsites/kooricoast/05\\_map.htm](http://livingknowledge.anu.edu.au/learningsites/kooricoast/05_map.htm)



This map shows the route from the far south coast to the moth caves in the mountains; referred to as the Bundian way.

[http://www.netspped.com.au/seforests/bundian\\_way.htm](http://www.netspped.com.au/seforests/bundian_way.htm).

Like the *Bittangabee Tribe*, the Yuin people had (and still have) strong social, cultural, spiritual and economic connections to the sea (Australian National University, Living Knowledge), which provided an abundant supply of food all year round. Shellfish such as pippis, limpets, mussels and oysters were collected from the rocks, while a variety of fish were caught with spears and lines. Diving for abalone, lobster, crabs and turtle also provided an additional source of food (Barnett and Ceccarelli, 2007 and Cruse et al.)

All along the coast, the people shared knowledge of the sea, and traditional stories of marine animal ancestors, such as whales, sharks, dolphins and different species of fish, which provided spiritual connections to offshore waters (Australian National University, Living Knowledge, Barnett and Ceccarelli, 2007).

An important aspect of Yuin life (and of many other southern area Indigenous tribes) (Slattery 1998) was the annual journey to the Australian Alps for the Bogong moth feasts.

People approached the mountains through the river valleys from Gippsland, the upper Murray, the inland plains of the Murrumbidgee, the Monaro and the coast, to hunt Bogong moths and participate in social and economic ceremonies (Slattery 1998).

Each November, Bogong moths migrate in enormous numbers from Queensland to the Alps where they escape the heat of summer by nestling in crevices and caves (ABC Science Online). The large size and quantities of moths, and the fact that they were easy to catch by hand and with nets, made them the most reliable summer food source in the Australian highlands (Herbison-Evans and Crossley).

The exact location of the Bittangabee tribe's Bogong feast is not specified. Moth hunting took place throughout the Australian Alps from the Tinderry Range near Canberra to Mount Bulla in the far west of the Victorian Alps (Department of Environment and Climate Change NSW (b)). It is possible that the area is what is now known as Namadgi National Park, but it could also be the Snowy Mountains south of Namadgi or the Bogong High Plains in Victoria (Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts). Archaeological work done in the Namadgi and Kosciuszko (Snowy Mountains) areas reveals evidence Aboriginal use of the area (Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (b), Department of Environment and Climate Change NSW).

Not only is Namadgi a major Bogong site but evidence of large-scale Indigenous occupation can be seen in the presence of rock art, occupation and ceremonial sites. There is also archaeological and anecdotal evidence (ACT Commissioner for the Environment). Occupation sites include rock shelters and open campsites ranging in size from a few metres to a hectare (National Parks Association of the ACT). The sites also suggest valleys were used for occupation and movement corridors, and that Bogong moths in summer were obtained on the western mountain peaks (National Parks Association of the ACT).

Contemporary accounts describe the gathering of several tribes to form groups of 500 to 700 people at the base of the Alps (Slattery 1998). Many ceremonies would have taken place, as well as marriages, the settling of disputes, the renewing alliances and trade. This trading included the exchange of highly prized types of stone or ochre and possum-skin rugs. When this was over, one last ceremony took place before the trek to the Alps and the Bogong moth feast began. Permission was always sought to travel over someone else's country as the Australian Alps were (and still are) the traditional land of numerous inland tribes (Slattery 1998, Kneebone, Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (a)).

As in *Bittangabee Tribe*, it seems to have been the men's role to visit the high peaks and gather the moths in 'nets' made of fibre from the *Pimelea* shrub or Kurrajong tree. The moths were then carried down to camps on the lower slopes where the women cooked the moths in hot ash or on flat rocks heated by hot fires of dry grass and leaves. Alternatively, they were ground into a paste and baked into flat cakes (Collis 1998). While the men were hunting moths the women, like Mina and Kiah, stayed at the base camp and gathered other food. Rock-art sites at Namadgi show other foods that include 'fish, birds and their eggs, platypus, tortoises and lizards, possums, and goannas, as well as larger game – kangaroo and emus. Vegetables included native cherries, currants and raspberries, roasted tubers of orchids, lilies and yam daisies, and seeds of grasses' (Slattery 1998).

ABC Science Online, Scribbly Gum, Bogongs Migrating South, viewed 4 June 2009

< <http://www.abc.net.au/science/scribblygum/november2002/>>.

ACT Commissioner for the Environment, *Managing fire regimes – the ACT*, viewed 4 June 2009

<[http://www.environmentcommissioner.act.gov.au/soe/2000\\_act\\_report/indicators/fire/managingfireregimes/namadgi](http://www.environmentcommissioner.act.gov.au/soe/2000_act_report/indicators/fire/managingfireregimes/namadgi)>.

Australian National University, Living Knowledge, viewed 6 June 2009

<[http://livingknowledge.anu.edu.au/learningsites/kooricoast/05\\_map.htm](http://livingknowledge.anu.edu.au/learningsites/kooricoast/05_map.htm)>.



Barnett, B and D Ceccarelli 2007, *As Far as the Eye Can See: Indigenous interests in the East Marine Planning Region*, Report produced by C&R Consulting for the Department of the Environment and Water Resources, Canberra.

Collis, B 1998, *Snowy – the Making of Modern Australia*, Tabletop Press, Canberra.

Department of Environment and Climate Change NSW, *Currango Historic Precinct, Conservation Management & Interpretation Plan, July 2003*, viewed 4 June 2009

<<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/parks/cmipDraftKosciuszkoCurrango07Vol2part2.pdf>>.

Cruse, B, S Norman & L Stewart, 2005, *Mutton Fish: The surviving culture of Aboriginal people and abalone on the south coast of New South Wales*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.

Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, *Australian Heritage Database, Places for Decision*, viewed 9 June 2009

<<http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/ahc/national-assessments/australian-alps/pubs/australian-alps.rtf>>.

Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, *Australian Alps National Parks*, viewed 6 June 2006

<[www.australianalps.environment.gov.au/parks/brindabella.html](http://www.australianalps.environment.gov.au/parks/brindabella.html)>.

Donaldson M, 1996, 'The End of Time? Aboriginal Temporality and the British Invasion of Australia', *Time and Society*, Issue 5, vol 2, pp. 187–207.

Egloff B, N Peterson and S Wesson 2005, *Biamanga and Gulaga: Aboriginal cultural association with the Biamanga and Gulaga National Parks*, Office of the Registrar, Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983, Surrey Hills, NSW.

Flood J, 2006, *The Original Australians*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW.

Griffin T and M McCaskill, 1986, 'Aboriginal Occupation', *Atlas of South Australia*, South Australian Government Printing Division, South Australia.

Herbison-Evans, D and S Crossley, *Agrotis infusa* (Boisduval, 1832) viewed 6 June 2009 <<http://www-staff.it.uts.edu.au/~don/larvae/noct/infusa.html>>.

Indigenous Australia, Aboriginal Trade Routes, viewed 9 June 2009 <<http://www.indigenoustrade.info/culture/trade-routes.html>>.

Kneebone, E., n.d., *Interpreting Traditional Culture as Land Management*, viewed 4 June 2009 <[http://www.stirling.au.com/educ/traditional\\_culture.pdf](http://www.stirling.au.com/educ/traditional_culture.pdf)>.

National Parks Association of the ACT, Caring for Namadgi Together, viewed 6 June 2009 <<http://www.npaact.org.au/res/File/Caring%20for%20Namadgi%20Together%20June%202002.doc>>.

Slattery, D 1998, *The Australian Alps: Kosciuszko, Alpine and Namadgi National Parks*, UNSW Press, Sydney.