Fleurieu Peninsula Swamps Aboriginal Values
Fleurieu Swamps – before and after European settlement

Healthy remnant swamp ecosystems retain Aboriginal as well as biodiversity values. © Nicole Motteux, 2021

Investigations of fossil pollen and charcoal from Fleurieu Peninsula swamps provide a history of pre and post-European settlement vegetation change. Swamps were initiated in the Holocene during a wet phase – more than 8000 years ago. High rates of peat development and the expansion of swamp species between 7000 and 4500 years ago indicated wet conditions at that time. The swamp became drier in the late Holocene and some peat may have been lost through deflation. Macroscopic charcoal and *Typha* pollen suggested that Aborigines deliberately burned the upland wetlands during the mid to late Holocene. Prior to European settlement climate changes generated community shifts in the terrestrial vegetation. The record revealed a transition from an early Holocene *Eucalyptus* woodland to an *Allocasuarina* wet-heath in the humid mid-Holocene, a community type with no modern analogue in the region (perhaps because of grazing pressure from kangaroos and, after European settlement, rabbits).

The seasonal calendar suggests that Aboriginal people mostly accessed food and materials from the swamps during spring and summer. Records from earlier interviews and memoirs held in the Mount Compass Archives talk of Aboriginal families walking through the Aldinga and Port Willunga areas and then heading inland.

Aboriginal Values Associated with Fleurieu Swamps	Spring	Summer	Autumn	Winter
Food plants				
Wirilda seed (green/immature and dry) seed (*Acacia retinodes* – Swamp Wattle)				
Wattle seed (green/immature and dry) seed (*Acacia pycnantha* – Golden Wattle)				
Wattle gum (*Acacia pycnantha* – Golden Wattle)				
Orchid tubers (several genera, many species) 1/				
Root/rhizome from wetland sedge/rush new growth (*Baumea* spp.)				
Bracken shoots and new rhizome growth (*Pteridium esculentum*)				
Root from Native Yam (*Microseris lanceolata*)				
Sugar lerps from Eucalyptus trees (several species)				
Nectar from Grass Tree flowers (*Xanthorrhoea semiplana*)				
Medicinal plants				
Tea tree for medicine (2 genera, several species) 2/				
Wattle gum [*tunguree*] (*Acacia pycnantha* – Golden Wattle)				
Food animals				
Duck, Swan, Ibis and Swamp Hen eggs				
Pacific Black Duck + Purple Swamp Hen + Black Swan for meat				
Snake-necked Turtle/tortoise				
Water Rat				
Materials				
Rushes, sedges, reeds for weaving and fibre (several genera, many species) 3/				
Reeds for light spear shaft (*Phragmites australis*)				
Thin, straight hardwood for spears and spear tips (*Leptospermum* species) 4/				
Glacial and fluvioglacial, quartzite, cobble stones for sharp-edged tools				
Red and yellow ochre from weathered mantle (Archaean) rocks				
Other values, spirits and mythological creatures				
Fresh, surface water when "Tjilbruke" coastal springs dry up.				
Spaces for meeting around tribal boundaries				
Mulyawonk				
Tjilbruke (fresh water, Glossy Ibis, perhaps also White-faced Blue Heron)				

1/ Orchids found in and around Fleurieu Swamps recorded as being possibly used for edible tubers include species of *Dipodium*, *Diuris*, *Glossodia*, *Microtis*, *Prasophyllum*, *Pterostylis*, and *Thelymitra* [Clarke 2015a; Clarke, 2013; Clarke, 2012].
2/ Around swamps particularly: Prickly Tea Tree (*Leptospermum continentale*), Silky Tea Tree (*L. lanigerum*), and Swamp Honey Myrtle (Melaleuca squamea).
3/ Rushes, sedges and reeds found in and around Fleurieu Swamps recorded as being used for weaving and fibre include species of *Carex*, *Cyperus*, *Eleocharis*, *Gahnia*, *Juncus*, *Lepidosperma*, *Lomandra* and *Schoenus*. [Clarke, 2013; Clarke, 2012; Clarke, 1986; Hemming, 1985b]
4/ In particular Prickly Tea Tree (*Leptospermum continentale*) and Silky Tea Tree (*L. lanigerum*).

In the drier late Holocene, a *Eucalyptus*-dominated woodland returned. The impacts of European settlement are clearly seen in changes in sedimentation rates and in both terrestrial and swamp plants. Sheoaks (*Allocasuarina verticillata*) declined early in the European period and fire tolerant species were promoted, before the almost complete removal of native vegetation through broad scale land clearance and its replacement with non-native pasture species. Changes to the mix of swamp plants were marked through the European phase with wattle (*Acacia* spp.) expanding early in settlement and later being replaced by tea trees (*Leptospermum* spp.) in response to changed fire and regional hydrological regimes.

Degraded swamp ecosystems lose Aboriginal as well as biodiversity values.

Today, most Fleurieu swamps are degraded or have been drained for agriculture. There is a growing interest among private landholders together with the Hills and Fleurieu Landscape Board to manage the swamps to protect and enhance their biodiversity, historical and cultural values. The biodiversity values are well-documented (DEH, 2005; GWLAP, 2016, ALA, 2021) but little is recorded about the Aboriginal values associated with these Swamps. A small-grant project supported by the Hills and Fleurieu Landscape Board and implemented by the Tribal Expertise Facility set out to fill that knowledge gap and start a process of re-learning and information sharing.

Text: John Fargher Images: @nicolemotteuxphotograghy
A full list of references for this Post are available at [link to references]