

Food Animals

Fleurieu Swamps are rich habitat for birds, reptiles, rodents, fish and yabbies. The nests of larger birds such as ducks, swans, ibis and swamp hens yielded eggs in late spring and early summer. In addition, some birds such as Pacific Black Duck, Purple Swamp Hen, Black Swan were used for meat. Swamps also provided habitat for snake-necked turtles and water rats, which were also used for meat.



Other Values

When the coastal areas dried out in summer and fresh, surface water from the **Tjilbruke** coastal springs dried up, the inland swamps and Finniss River provided secure fresh water. The middle of Fleurieu Peninsula, where the swamps formed with secure fresh water are at the boundary of several language groups and so was a space for meeting, trading and sharing. Access to secure water, as well as abundant birdlife and plant foods provided a safe and peasant meeting place particularly in drought years such as during an El Niño event.

Next steps

Caring for Fleurieu Swamps will be strengthened if Aboriginal people re-learn knowledge to contribute cultural and spiritual practices that support biodiversity conservation for the benefit of future generations, landholders and all Australians. A fundamental pillar emphasised by Mark Koolmatrie is the importance of learning quality knowledge to preserve Fleurieu Swamps.

It was agreed by everyone at project field days that the Aboriginal Knowledge and Values for Fleurieu Swamp Species project is an important first step to recover knowledge and stories for all Australians, and future generations of Aboriginal people. This information creates an opportunity to reunite people and to relearn stories of plants and animals, of connections to land, and dreaming stories.

"Of course, we are in a different time, before it is lost completely. The door is open now," said Mark Koolmatrie.

It is time-critical, as the Elders at the field day still hold some of the stories and understand their value. If they are not passed on now it will be too late.



ABORIGINAL KNOWLEDGE AND VALUES IN FLEURIEU SWAMPS

Aboriginal people want to contribute to caring for the land and water of their ancestors. They are walking forward together to relearn, share and action traditional knowledge and values for the restoration and conservation of Fleurieu Swamps.

Fleurieu Peninsula Swamps are water-dependent ecosystems that support diverse plant and animal life. The swamps are some of the most biodiverse and productive habitats on earth and important to the survival of many rare and endangered species. Although the scientific values of Fleurieu Swamps are well researched, little is known about the Aboriginal knowledge and values of the swamps.

The **Hills and Fleurieu Landscape Board** supported a project to enable Warki, Ramindjeri and Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal people to re-engage with Fleurieu Swamps and their near surrounds, share their knowledge and values linked to those landscapes, share information from less accessible published records and provide resources that can be shared with landholders managing swamps.

The project was also designed to start a process of re-learning and sharing Aboriginal knowledge and values to encourage more people to restore and conserve Fleurieu Swamps. The project was implemented by Kula-Tind-Jeri between spring 2020 and winter 2021.



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This project is supported by the **Hills and Fleurieu Landscape Board**'s Grassroots Grants Program, and is funded by the landscape levy.

All photos by **Nicole Motteux** and **Paul Stokes** except animal images courtesy **Conservation Council SA**. Project managed by Kula-Tind-Jeri and led by Warki/Ramindjeri Elder **Mark Koolmatrie**. kula-tind-geri.com

Literature review, writing and botanical inputs from **John Fargher**.

Field days conducted at the **Yundi Nature Conservancy**

Special thanks for peer review and specialist advice from **Dr Philip A. Clarke**, Ethnobotanist and Anthropologist.



It is better to know a little bit that is correct than a lot that is incorrect. It is easy to grasp information that is incorrect. What is important here is learning it slowly and getting it right.

Mark Koolmatrie – project leader, Kula-Tind-Jeri

Spirits and mythological creatures

There are a number of stories that Aboriginal peoples use to explain how the Fleurieu Swamps and surrounding lands were formed and how it should be managed. Lessons learned from project research emphasise the importance of overlapping environmental, cultural and spiritual values for Aboriginal people.

Each family group has their own **Ngartji** including species such as the swamp wattle, long-neck turtle, black swan, eagle and wild dog. Warki/Ramindjeri Elders Nita McAdam and Colin Koolmatrie, who grew up in the Coorong, shared a story of a water spirit known as Mulyawonk. This story teaches children water safety and respect for the fishes of the rivers, lakes and swamps.

The creation of water points and springs around the Fleurieu coast is explained by **Tjilbruke**, a story that is pivotal to the creation stories of the Kurna people, and is shared with neighbouring language groups including the Ngarrindjeri clans. When the glossy ibis is seen on a swamp it reminds us of the end of Tjilbruke's quest and of Aboriginal laws, the links between coastal and inland water, and the importance of not breaking the law.

Another myth concerning the creation of fire and its control ends with **Croom** the Musk Duck Ancestor shaking his wings to shed the water that settled as swamps and lakes. Larger water bodies around swamps often have musk duck in spring – reminding us of this story.

***Ngartjis** are indicators of the health of the lands and waters.
To care for **Ngartji** is to care for country.*

Indigenous knowledge combines cultural and spiritual beliefs, social norms, and customary practices that value plants, animals and natural phenomena

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For Aboriginal peoples, water spirits and mythical creatures are just as much part of swamp biodiversity as plants and animals. To integrate these different values, Aboriginal people use their **Ngartji**. This is more than a close friend, it's something that is very close to you and your wellbeing.

Food Plants

Charcoal and pollen studies suggest that Aborigines deliberately burned Fleurieu Swamps during between 4000 and 8000 years ago. Fleurieu Swamps support a large range of reeds, rushes and sedges that provide food, especially in spring and early summer. The roots or rhizomes were dug, washed and eaten fresh or roasted in a fire. Bulrush was a particularly important food plant for Aborigines. Many species of native orchids growing in and around Fleurieu Swamps have an edible tuber that is fresh in spring and easily dug up with a stick. Now these plants are endangered and fully protected.

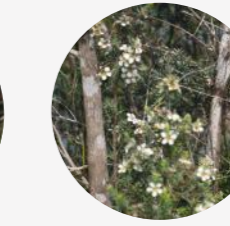
Other food plants used by Aborigines and found in and around Fleurieu Swamps are wattle trees. Wattle trees, particularly Swamp Wattle (Wirilda) and Golden Wattle, were used for edible gum and seeds, both green and dry. Early records describe Aboriginal people roasting wattle gum in the fire before eating it, often with meat as we might use bread today.



Medicinal Plants

Plants feature prominently in Aboriginal remedies chiefly used to relieve symptoms such as fever, congestion, headache, skin sores, tired or swollen aching limbs and digestive problems. Aboriginal people moved seasonally through different habitat zones in the landscape, which meant that it was necessary for them to possess knowledge of a broad range of remedies and plant seasonality. Analysis of the historical records shows plants were important sources of medicines, although the exact species involved is generally poorly recorded.

In and around the Fleurieu Swamps important medicinal plants included the leaves of tea trees for inhalants and rubs; and gum as a chewed digestive from golden and swamp wattle trees. Swamp herbs used for medicinal purposes included native pennyroyal, slender mint and common reed.



Materials

Early European settlers described Aboriginal people making string from the rushes and sedges that grew in Fleurieu Swamps and soaks. They said Aborigines first split the rushes, extracted the pithy centre, and then plait this material into string and ropes for "fishing lines and other things". They also separated the pith into smaller sections and plaited these together to make long ropes, which were used to tie up their belongings when moving from place to place.

The dry, straight stems of the Common Reed were used as a light spear shaft while the thin, straight hardwood of tea trees, especially Silky Tea Tree around swamps, were used for spears and spear tips.

Glacial and fluvio-glacial, quartzite, cobble stones are recorded as having been used as sharp-edged tools. The smooth pebbles, often associated with Fleurieu Swamps which mostly follow ancient glacial and fluvio-glacial valleys, were split to make a sharp edge for use in a wide range of purposes

