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ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD WORK IN SOUTH-WESTERN VICTORIA
1974/1975

The Problem

Most of our models of Australian Aboriginal societies are based on studies in either tropical or arid environments. As a contrast to these I have chosen to examine the human ecology of Aboriginal societies that existed in the well-watered regions of south-eastern Australia. The study area chosen was the Western District of south-western Victoria. The research design includes the examination of two bodies of data, ethnographic and archaeological, viewed in relation to the region's ecology. Attention has been placed on the construction of models of subsistence and settlement.

Research Strategy

Field work has now been directed towards two main aims:

a) the association of inland Aboriginal fishing activities with large scale water controls in the form of excavated drainage systems. Research has concentrated on the Toolondo area.

b) coastal economies. Research has concentrated on two areas, Cape Otway and Bridgewater.

Field Work in 1974/1975

(Initial surveys were carried out mainly in the coastal region between the Portland area and Cape Otway in 1973.)

1. Toolondo: An extensive Aboriginal fishtrap had been reported and described from this area by Massola (Massola 1962). We attempted to verify this description and to check on the site's association with Aborigines. The survey significantly altered Massola's original description. The site consisted of a large excavated man-made drain originally running c.1.4 km and connecting two pond-like swamps located south-west of the village of Toolondo. The drain is still preserved in two sections, the largest extending for c.400 metres with the main channel 4 metres wide and 1 metre deep. The local landowner, descendant of the original European landowners, attests to the site's Aboriginal origin. The description of the site conforms closely to ethnographic examples of similar drainage systems, and provides us with a unique opportunity to study the ecology of such systems.

2. Seal Point (Cape Otway): The site is an extensive shell midden located on the cliffs above a rich inter-tidal platform, and covers an area of approximately 400 by 40 metres. The site consisted of a deposit of over 1 metre
in depth and rich in faunal remains and stone and bone artefacts. The chief faunal factor is seal followed by shell fish, fish, land mammal (mainly the smaller species), bird and crayfish. A series of 7 to 9 circular depressions had been dug into the midden. We sectioned one of these. They conform to ethnographic descriptions of Aboriginal house pits into which huts were constructed. The site provides an excellent opportunity for studying the human ecology of the area.

3. Bridgewater Caves: Excavations were carried out in two caves. The deposit in the northern cave proved to be badly disturbed and we concentrated on the southern cave. Here more than 1 metre of undisturbed deposit was excavated. The limestone matrix provided excellent preservation of faunal and vegetation remains. Rich lenses of ashy midden material were excavated. The flaked stone assemblage showed many parallels with Seal Point but also dissimilarities which perhaps can be explained in part by the two sites' differing activity patterns. Bridgewater is oriented towards the exploitation of land mammals whereas Seal Point is chiefly concerned with marine exploitation. Dates have not been received yet for either site and excavations will be extended here and at Toolondo in the coming summer of 1975/1976.

Reference


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