Full Citation Details:
Why did this happen, this terrible extinction, this loss of large creatures from the Australian dominion? Some say it was Man with his efficient tools, his rapacious hunger and his multiplicative rules; but others blame the climate which they say changed overnight, leaving the creatures in an inextricable plight.

But you ask me about the extinct kangaroo. All I can say is that I wish I knew why it is gone and what did it do to deserve to be expelled from God's wondrous zoo.

Don Grayson

(Certain poetic liberties have been taken with the palaeontological record)

A NOTE ON THE FAUNA FROM DEVON DOWNS SHELTER

M. Smith

The Devon Downs rock shelter, on the lower Murray in South Australia, was the first archaeological site to be systematically excavated in Australia (Hale and Tindale 1930). The deposit spans the last 5000 years of Australian prehistory. Between November 1976 and July 1977 I re-examined the excavated material from this shelter and this work is described in detail in my BA thesis (Smith 1977). The greater part of my time was spent studying the faunal assemblage and the results of this part of my work are summarised below.

Some 38 vertebrate species, represented by 261 animals, are present in this assemblage. In addition 10 species of freshwater invertebrates were identified. The excavated area is about 8% of the total area of the site.

This material is likely to have accumulated by the actions of predators rather than by natural mortality or catastrophe. Most of the remains, with the possible exception of the rats and some of the lizards, are the food remains of a single predator, man. The carnivores, thylacine, Tasmanian devil, tiger cat and dingo frequented
the immediate vicinity of the shelter and are included in the faunal assemblage but they appear not to have been responsible for the accumulation of bones at this site.

The most important species in terms of meat weight are the grey kangaroo, *Macropus fuliginosus* and the Murray cod, *Maccullochella peeli*. Because the meats of different animals vary in their calorific or energy values it can be misleading to deal only with meat weight estimates when working out the relative importance of the various species. This is particularly so with shellmeat which is a relatively low energy meat (Thomas and Cordon 1970). In this assemblage, mammals make up about 60% of the energy (expressed in man/days) while fish provide 15% and shellfish 8%. The total amount of meat and energy estimated from the faunal remains is relatively low considering that this site was used for 5000 years.

The immediate local environment would have provided the habitat requirements for all the species exploited from the rock shelter. The eroded scarp south of the site provides access for terrestrial species to the river flats adjacent to Devon Downs. All the riverine species could have come from the main river channel immediately in front of the shelter.

Considering the location of Devon Downs on the banks of the Murray, it is curious that riverine species account for so little of the meat and energy at this site, especially since the ethnography for the area contains many passages describing the exploitation of abundant river foods such as fish, shellfish and crustaceans (Eyre 1845). If the relative importance of the various species is representative of the site as a whole then this emphasis may be explained by occupation in winter, a time when the necessity of diving, swimming or wading in unpleasantly cold water to collect such foods may well have discouraged their exploitation. In spring and summer the annual flood of the Murray inundates the river flats adjacent to the shelter leaving it at the end of a long narrow cul-de-sac with shallow flood waters on one side and a 30 m high cliff on the other. One would need to invoke very strong cultural preference for terrestrial species if occupation of the shelter during spring or summer is to be suggested. The presence of emu egg shell and of gastroliths of the yabby, *Cherax destructor*, in the deposit also suggests use of the site in winter. It is interesting to speculate that the ethnography and the archaeological evidence from this area are depicting different aspects of the same subsistence cycle.
Estimated amount of meat and energy represented by the faunal remains from Trench C - Devon Downs Shelter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Meat wt kg</th>
<th>% total meat wt</th>
<th>Energy man/days</th>
<th>% total energy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mammals</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>383</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reptiles</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4.8</td>
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<td>Birds</td>
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<td>Fish</td>
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<td>14.1</td>
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<td>Shellfish (incl. crayfish)</td>
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<td>19.8</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>883</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


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