

NGUNNAWAL Country

Canberra is Ngunnawal country. The Ngunnawal are the Indigenous people of this region and its first inhabitants. The neighbouring people are the Gundungurra to the north, the Ngarigo to the south, the Yuin on the coast, and the Wiradjuri inland. It is a harsh climate and difficult country for hunter-gatherer people. To live here required great knowledge of the environment, skilful custodianship of it and close cooperation.

People normally moved in small family groups but there were, on occasion, big gatherings of a thousand or more people at a time, coming together to make use of resources which were seasonally abundant (most famously the Bogong moth and the Yam Daisy). Important ceremonies were held, art was painted in rock shelters, marriages were arranged, goods were traded, important news was shared and old friends met again.

In summer, people visited the high country where the Bogong moth, in millions or billions, could be found hiding in rocky crevices to survive the warmer weather. The moths were rich in stored fats and oils and were enthusiastically eaten (some say the taste resembles peanut butter). The moths were shaken and teased out from under rocky overhangs into nets and then roasted on a fire. Some were smoked and stored as cakes for use in more difficult times. At other times, the lowland resources of plants, like Yam Daisies, and the freshwater resources of creeks and lakes could be harvested. In the harshness of winter, fur cloaks were worn for warmth and people would gravitate to the coast to share resources with the others there. Others moved further inland.

Indigenous people have been living here for at least 20 000 years, perhaps from the time when the extreme cold of the last Ice Age eased. The hunter-gatherer lifestyle continued to be practised into the early nineteenth century, until the arrival of Europeans with their sheep flocks and cattle herds. The arrival of introduced diseases, like smallpox and measles, quickly affected Aboriginal numbers.

Introduced animals with hard hooves and big appetites rapidly reduced the abundance of plants like Yam Daisies, damaged water holes and creeks, and the essential food resources there. Graziers may also have restricted Aboriginal movement, and movement was essential in this region. Despite this, thousands of people continued to gather in the Snowy Mountains in Bogong season and, in 1826, some 1 000 people gathered at Lake George to protest the behaviour of shepherds.

Aboriginal people adapted to the arrival of Europeans by taking jobs as stockmen, and proved their knowledge and skill could be applied to introduced stock. However, government policies and the pressures of this new occupation created severe social pressures on the Ngunnawal community and neighbouring Indigenous peoples.

The Ngunnawal people have always remained in the area, and in recent years they have become more visible in the general community, and increasingly involved in affairs at the local and national level.

David Horton

Further Reading

- D.R. Horton, *The Pure State of Nature*, Allen & Unwin, 2000

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