

## BUDJ BIM TOUR

It was my privilege, along with other interested parties from the Victorian Reconciliation movement - among them PPCfR members David Collis, Gavin Edgar and Helen Bennett, to attend the joint RecVic/ANTaR Budj Bim Tour and Regional Forum on the weekend of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> April. Proceedings commenced with a beautiful Welcome to Country on the Lake Condah Mission property, by Gunditjmara Elder, Aunty Eileen Alberts along with a smoking ceremony performed by our Gunditjmara guide, Denis Rose.

Each participant was invited to throw a sprig of cherry ballart, a native hemiparasitic shrub, onto the fire and cleanse themselves in the smoke. The group then followed Denis in a convoy of vehicles to three properties owned and managed, by the Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation (registered Native Title Body Corporate).



*Denis Rose, Gavin and Sylvia Edgar.*

The first property Denis took us to was the Tyrendarra Indigenous Protected Area (IPA), a site comprising the volcanic fallout of the eruption of Budj Bim (Mt Eccles) up to 30,000 years ago and the sophisticated transformation of that landscape by the Gunditjmara people. They created a year round food source from aquaculture by constructing an enormous series of channels and holding ponds to farm and trap mostly migratory eels travelling from the sea up Darlot Creek.

This aquaculture is believed to date back 7,000 – 9,000 years ago. There is also evidence of eels being smoked in the hollows of burned out trees, where traces of eel fat have been found and it is believed that smoked eel was traded with other First Nations people in what is now Victoria and parts of South Australia.

Remnants of this sophisticated form of seafood farming and trade, along with traces of permanent stone housing, in the formation of villages, all constructed facing away from the biting Southern Ocean winds were shown and explained by Denis Rose. This evidence disproves the myth that all Australian First Peoples were nomadic. Some of this site is accessible by walking tracks and boardwalks.

The Darlot creek at the entrance to the property was surprisingly deep and fast flowing after a long dry summer.

The next property our convoy visited was Kurtonitj, comprising 353 hectares of rocky country and wetlands, also hosting remnants of aquaculture and permanent stone housing. There is also a modest homestead on the property which provided accommodation for some of our group over the weekend. Abundant wildlife on this property includes kangaroo and wallaby.

We followed Denis in convoy, through the back of Kurtonitj to Lake Condah, comprising 1,700 ha, where we walked through marshy, rocky ground to the Muldoon's aquaculture system, believed to be the oldest in the world. This beautiful landscape has an extensive lava flow and remnants of the stone channels and holding ponds constructed using the abundant volcanic rocks in the area are still evident.

Our last stop was at the remnants of the old Lake Condah Mission Settlement, which closed in 1919. Denis told some stories to give us a picture of what life had been like for people living on the Mission. Denis told us that at one stage his grandmother lived in a tent on the mission, in sharp contrast to the stone houses and substantial (white) Caretaker's Residence, not far away.

Denis guided us back to the meeting area on the Mission property which has a large communal hall with a lovely open fire place and kitchen. This central hub has a collection of huts which provided overnight accommodation for some of our group, along with an outdoor fire pit which was used for the smoking ceremony at the start of our journey. Denis concluded his generous time with us (by now well and truly dark), to deliver a brief presentation on the Glenelg Aboriginal Partnership.

The Traditional owners continue to make improvements to this National Heritage landscape, including re-vegetation projects, protection and conservation of flora and fauna, management of pests such as rabbits, improving accessibility and continuing to discover some of the secrets still hidden under the vegetation. They also hope to restore some of the landscape back to how it was prior to occupation when significant drainage works to support emerging grazing and agriculture ended the enormous scale of this ancient aquaculture by freeing the water from the extensive channels and holding ponds. Experts including engineers and archaeologists have confirmed the significance of the Budj Bim Heritage area. Moves are being made to have the area declared a World Heritage site, to restore and protect for future generations.

If you are interested in knowing more about the Gunditjmarra people and the Budj Bim Cultural Landscape, there are excellent resources on the Gunditj Mirring website, [www.gunditjmirring.com](http://www.gunditjmirring.com).  
*Sylvia Edgar, PPCfR member.*

**Update:** There is a growing air of confidence the Budj Bim Cultural Landscape will receive Federal Government support for possible World Heritage listing. Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation land manager Denis Rose said his confidence had been strengthened after hosting a visit from five Department of Environment staff to Tyrendarra and Lake Condah in late April. Two representatives from Aboriginal Affairs Victoria were part of the entourage.