NOTICE OF GENERAL MEETING

The 4th General Meeting of the Society for 1985 will be held in

THE CONSERVATION CENTRE, 120 WAKEFIELD STREET, ADELAIDE

on

MONDAY 24th JUNE AT 8.00 PM.

AGENDA

1. Apologies:

2. Minutes of the previous General Meeting:
   Minutes of the General Meeting held at the Conservation Centre,
   Monday 27th May 1985, having been circulated in this Journal, to
   be confirmed.

3. New Members:
   The following new member has joined the Society since the last
   meeting :-
   Mr. Lawrence DAY

4. Papers and Journals:
   Papers and journals received from other societies and organisations
   will be tabled at this meeting.

5. Business:

6. Speaker:
   Mr Philip Jones, Curator of Australian Ethnology at the South
   Australian Museum will address the Society. The subject of
   his address will be his recent visits to museums in Western
   Europe.

7. Supper will be served.

R.Allison
Hon. Secretary
c/o 213 Greenhill Road
EASTWOOD SA 5063

SUBSCRIPTIONS. If a red cross has appeared on your envelope it means
somehow you have overlooked sending your subscription for 1985.
An Aboriginal Fish Trap from Lake Condah, Victoria.

Steven Hemming, S.A. Museum.

Background

Lake Condah is approximately 40 kilometres north-east of Portland in the western District of Victoria. Immediately to the north of the lake is Condah Swamp and it drains through the lake into Darlot's Creek. Prior to the impact of drainage schemes the area flooded at least twice a year (Coutts, Frank and Hughes, 1978:6). Today Lake Condah is seldom recognizable as a lake and has recently been described as "an area of land subject to periodic inundation rather than as a lake" (ibid).

The area around Lake Condah was a major campsite for the local Aboriginal groups in the days before European settlement. A wide range of food sources were readily available throughout the year making the area a very attractive camping spot for large numbers of people for long periods. Near Lake Condah, archaeologists have found the remains of a village comprising 140 stone structures, which may have been occupied by as many as 700 people (Flood, 1983:207)

One of the food sources that was particularly sought after at Lake Condah was the eel (Anguilla australis accidentalis) (ibid, 204) A complex system of stone walls, canals and traps was built to manipulate the regular flood waters and catch large numbers of fish such as eels (Coutts, Frank and Hughes, 1978). The map (Fig. 1) drawn by the surveyor Alex Ingram in 1883, shows the layout of one system of fish traps at Lake Condah. Spring was probably the season when most eels were caught (ibid, 25). This was the time of year when they migrated back upstream and the level of the lake was still high enough for the stone traps to function. The stone traps were designed to direct the flow of water through apertures in their walls. It was into these openings that the basketry fish traps were often placed (Plate 1).

The Fishing Complex at Lake Condah.

Coutts, Frank and Hughes describe in detail the fishing complex at Lake Condah in their article, Aboriginal Engineers of the Western District, Victoria (1978). They identify three main archaeological features as comprising the complex: stone races, canals, traps and stone walls (ibid, 12) Stone races were constructed of broken basalt blocks, up to 50 metres long, 75 metres high and approximately 1 metre wide. Canals were usually the same width as the races and were approximately 1 metre deep and as long as 300 metres. Traps were made of stone and built across the canals and races. Each trap had at least one aperture and it was into these that basketry fish traps such as (Plate 1) were often placed. These complexes of canals, races and traps were positioned in such a way as to take maximum advantage of the flow of water in the Lake Condah area. From autumn until late spring the water level would have been high enough to enable the traps to be used (ibid, 8). As well as eels a variety of fish were obtained (ibid, 13).
An Aboriginal Fish Trap from Lake Condah, Victoria.

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Fig. 1 Map of Fishery at Lake Condah, Victoria. Mr. Alex Ingram, licensed surveyor of Hamilton, Victoria, drew this map in January 1883. (In collection of S.A. Museum, Anthropology Archives, AA298 Acc No. 156)

Plate 1 A basketry, fish trap from Lake Condah, Victoria. (A6431, S.A. Museum Collection)
A6431 in the South Australian Museum's Aboriginal Ethnology collection is described in the Museum's Anthropology Register as a large fish trap from Lake Condah, Western District of Victoria. It was purchased by the Museum from A.S. Kenyon of the Victorian Department of Agriculture, in August 1910. Kenyon contacted the Museum by letter and indicated that for a pound he could arrange for a basketry "eel" trap to be made by an Aboriginal at the Lake Condah Mission. The mission was started in 1867 (Massola, 1970: 97). Kenyon obtained the trap, which appears to have taken only a few days to make, and forwarded it along with Ingram's map of the Fishery (Fig. 2) and a description of the functioning of the Fishery" taken from notes made by Ingram. Kenyon published the description and a simplified version of the map in the Victorian Historical Magazine (vol. 11, November 1912, pg. 109-110). The following is the description of the "Fishery" at Lake Condah as sent to the Museum by A.S. Kenyon:

"At the south-western point of Lake Condah, near where it overflows down the valley of Darlot's Creek, along the margin of the rough stony ground until it joins the permanent stream at the Condah Mission Station, is situated one of the largest and most remarkable aboriginal fisheries in the Western District of Victoria. The position has been well chosen as the small bays shown on accompanying plan is the lowest point on the Western side of the lake; owing to the peculiar formation (open trap scoriae) along the eastern, southern and part of the western sides of the lake, the water sinks very rapidly and becomes very low during summer months, but as it receives the drainage of a large extent of country, the water rises very quickly during winter and first overflows into the scoriae at the point named, which has been facilitated to some extent by the channels formed by the aboriginals for trapping eels, trout, &c. These channels have been made by removing loose stones and portions of the more solid rocks, between the ridges and lowest places, also building low wing walls to concentrate the streams, at suitable places are erected stone barricades with timber built in so as to form openings from 1 to 2 feet wide. Behind these openings were secured long bag nets made of strong rushes. The mouths of these nets were from 2 to 3 feet wide secured to a hoop. They were of various lengths, some 10 feet long, the principle portion being 4 or 5 inches in diameter. The smallest ends were made so that the eels, etc., could be easily extracted. There are numerous small fisheries constructed in suitable places in small bays and outlets where the water sinks into the trap scoria down along the margin of the valley of Darlot's Creek. Across the valley at suitable places were erected large barricades constructed with strong forked stakes, horizontal spars, and vertical stakes strengthened with piles of stones. Openings were also left in these.

Many of the aborigines residing at the Mission Station still construct similar barricades for trapping purposes, and large quantities of fish are secured during winter, more particularly since an outlet drain has been made in connexion with the drainage of Condah Swamp."

The basketry trap A6431, which was originally described as an eel trap in Kenyon's first letter to the Museum is 1500 millimetres long. The opening that would have been the entrance for the eels (shown in Plate 1) is 150 millimetres in diameter and the tubular
extension tapers gradually to an eel exit of 100 millimetres. The large, circular section which would have held the trap in place, in the opening in the stone trap, is 500 millimetres in diameter.

Split rushes have been used to make the trap and the technique of manufacture can be described as coiled, bundle, with a simple loop stitch. This style of basketry is also found in the South East of South Australia, although different varieties of rushes are used.

G.A. Robinson described and illustrated "eel pots made of plaited rushes" from the Western District of Victoria in 1841 (Flood, 1983; 206). J. Dawson (1881) also described the use of "funnel-mouthed basket pipes" for catching eels (Davidson 1881:94). Robinson described his "eel pots" as having a willow hoop at the mouth (Coutts, Frank and Hughes, 1978:24). There is no evidence of a stick support in the mouth of the trap A6431. The bundles however, are larger and provide structural support.

Basketry Fish Traps from the South East of South Australia

Rushes were woven into a range of objects by the Aborigines of the South East of South Australia; these included baskets, coffins and clothing. The ethnographies of the area, however, don't seem to mention the use of basketry fish traps. Eyre (1845:253) does mention the use of bag nets in weirs on the Murray River. He does not, however, describe these bag nets.

The South Australian Museum collection does have three examples of basketry fish traps from the South East of South Australia; made in the 1930's by Aborigines as a demonstration of the type of object once in use. They were all collected by Norman B. Tindale and two of them come from the area around Kingston, which has a similar swamplike environment to the Western District of Victoria. They are all basically the same shape and each is constructed from a large round mat joined to form a triangular, conical shape. One end is left open and pushed inwards to make an entrance for the fish. The other end is the closed point of the conical shape. A section on the top of the trap, along the seam, is left open for a hand to be inserted to extract captured fish. As already noted the basketry from this area is a similar style to that used in the Lake Condah trap, although the rushes are a different variety, smaller and not split.

Finally, the fact that basketry was used for fish traps in western Victoria, in close proximity to the South East of South Australia and the fact that several specimens of basketry fish traps were collected by Tindale in the 1930's, which were said to be of the type used in conjunction with weirs and stone traps, does seem to outweigh the absence of specific mentions of basketry fish traps in the ethnographies.

REFERENCES

COUTTS, P.J.F. FRANK, R.K. and HUGHES, P

DAWSON, J


Australian Aborigines (Melbourne, 1881)
Footnote: 1. Letter No. 7452 from A.S.Kenyon to S.A.Museum G.R.G. 19/5, October 27th 1910. 'When setting the net, the small end is closed flat with the hand and a small peg woven through it acting like a skewer. When the trap is full the old custom of the aborigines was to gradually withdraw the skewer or peg, and, as the eel came out they bit the heads and drew them out through with their teeth, one at a time.'

ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA INCORPORATED.

Minutes of the 3rd General Meeting for 1985.

The 3rd General Meeting for 1985 was held in the Conservation Centre, 120 Wakefield Street, Adelaide, on Monday 27th May 1985 at 8.00 pm. In the President's absence Rob Allison presided, 25 members and friends were present.

1. Apologies: Nathalie and Bill Worthley, Joyce Hewitt, Margaret Sando.

2. New Members: The following new members joined the Society since the last meeting: - Mr. G.J.Speed, Ms. Caroline Lawrence, Mr. Barry Craig, and Mr. Stephen Hardie.

3. Minutes of the previous General Meeting: Minutes of the previous General Meeting, held in the Conservation Centre, 120 Wakefield Street, Adelaide, on Monday 22nd April 1985, having been circulated were taken as read and confirmed.

4. Papers and Journals: Papers and journals from other societies and organisations, received since the last meeting, were tabled at this meeting.

5. Speaker:

The speaker for this meeting was Harry Howard, and the subject of his address was:-

"Travels through the Tanami Desert."

Harry's slides and anecdotes provided a very interesting address He has had numerous exciting adventures, visiting many beautiful places.

6. Supper was served and the meeting closed at 10.15 pm.

R. Allison
Hon. Secretary
c/o 213 Greenhill Road
EASTWOOD  SA 5063