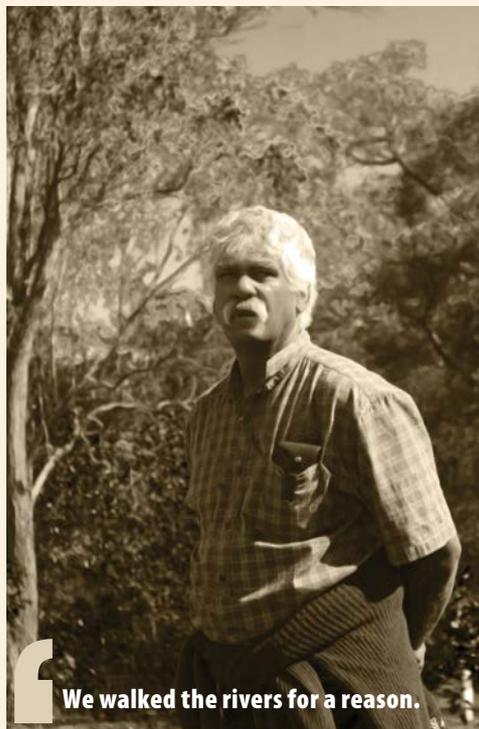


A RIVER JOURNEY

A story of seasonality, sustainability and connectivity. A walk along a stretch of our Mary River, as told by Uncle Eugene Bargo.



We walked the rivers for a reason.

And when walking the river, it was different each time, each 'season', each change. We didn't have 'Calendar Seasons' to know when the mullet was running.

Our calendar was, say, that tree, and the journey to that tree, or that food source—a journey to a particular destination. That was our calendar, and all things were interwoven. One runs into another, the edges are blurred. You become smart by taking these journeys. And you had to be smart to survive.

One day we'd be looking for barramundi, our main objective. We knew that it was 12 km along the river—a long journey by foot—and those foods we saw on that barra journey, would one day become the major journey in themselves.

You walk along, all the while looking at every other thing. The cicada—why is he singing now? How does that tie in with today's story? What are the sounds, the silences? What's flowering? What's not?

On any walkabout from here to there, if there were 20 of us, then 5 of us would collect this, 4 of us collect that, all along the way, by the time we got to the area to catch the barra, which is the big thing, we had all the right foods, all the things we collected along the way, all in season.

'Bush foods' were not really about complex combinations. We never really had condiments and garnishes and cordials. Or jams and pastes. We didn't have that eye candy, but we had plenty, plenty enough for our stomach. These days a little wattle seed or Davidson plum jam won't fill you, you can't be sustained on that, but our bush tucker did—it sustained us.



One thing we carried was blue quondong seeds, with the fruit dried on. It created saliva, so we didn't dehydrate, especially in the dry season with all the water gone.

You get to know these things, not because you set out to know them, but because you watch the old people.

All knowledge is given by the elders, not from a book, and not from taking a journey by yourself.



To start a journey without a map is treacherous. Our maps were the elders. And the wisdom that came along the journey as well.

We'd never harvest all. We didn't clear the food sources. It's about country. How country fits your needs, how you fit the country. The river defines country.

The plants along the journey gave us life. A lot of the greens were 'munged' on as you walked along: splash weed, warrigal greens, saltbush and pigface. Water and pepper grapes, wild currants, wild passionfruit. All at different points along the river, some up near the freshwater, some near the brackish parts, some down nearer the ocean mouth, the saline.

We'd see saw-leafed garnier: we'd pick this all day. Water ribbons: they had nut-sized tubers on them, beautiful in the coals roasted, or raw. Water lilies: some have a bad taste, you have to know which ones. There were peanut trees, around the edge of the rain forest pockets near the river. There were lomandras, sedges, the cutty grass, the red seeds were collected. In places there were even geebung, boronias, dianellas (but only eat a few). And there were the 'dog-balls,' they tasted like dates!

We'd come across whalebone, and all sorts of lilly-pillies, if they're flowering now, we'd know when the fruit would be ripe and when the journey for that fruit would be, at a later date. Round lime, fingerlime, native tamarind. Fingerlime was used for vitamin C, found around ceremony business, where cutting and scarring took place, to help heal. There are lots of medicinal plants: it wasn't all about food, also medicines.

Burdekin plums were all here in this region, and a favourite. We would bury the seed in the sand, and it became sweet and soft, just brilliant. There were native hibiscus, 14 varieties, some of the flowers were eaten, along with the stamen. The root we dug up, pounded and roasted. String from hibiscus was traded all along the coast, it's the best rope, pretty amazing stuff.

All along the river after rain, you have the fungus, all colours, all sorts. There are big yellow ones, big red ones with white spots, purple ones, ones that glow in the dark. A small amount are poisonous, but the rest are edible, you have to know what you're doing.

And we did.

When we go on the journey, we observe what others are munging out on, so what they mung out on, we mung out on too.

Wattles—witjuti grubs were there to cut out of the wattle wood, beautiful, a real treat. Wattle seed's as bitter as anything, the tannin can be strong, so it was roasted out. Lots of bauple nuts—roasted by the open fire was my favourite.



There were sandpaper figs, Moreton Bay figs, cluster figs—some better than others. There were large and small strangler figs, some big yellow, big red, some bland, but good fibre and vitamins, each had its place, each a part of the journey. The cluster fig had the worm inside it.

When we ate just the fig, it was good. But if it had the worm in it, it was perfect! Like bacon and eggs, one complements the other.

The puree in the gut of the grub was the puree of the fruit.

Bottle trees were scattered about, many varieties seeded, the roots were eaten, roasted or raw, and were great for rope. Tea tree and paperbark—they're big sponges that sift out the water.

In the wallum, the wattles, banksia, leptospermum, we knew all about them, all about the flowers and the trees, so we knew about the bees.



We'd see the little native bee, koota, but we might not rob on that day, we never took honey because it was there, we would only take it when it was ripe, when the hive was full, fat.

We'd observe and know then when to come back for that journey destination. Little grey bees, black ones, ones that make bitter honey, ones that make sweet honey, ones that make sour honey.



So much change and interaction as you walk along. You have to know what's in front, what's behind, what's up in the hills, as you walk the Mary River.

That way you don't need to carry food, dead food, loading you down. The river and the plants and the animals change – but they all provide. And it's not just about observing. It's about teaching. All the kids along the river never went near the river, there were stories that kept the kids away from unattended river visits. They would go to the river only when they grew to know it.

In different places, there were koalas, wallabies, echidna and platypus. Goannas and water dragons: grey and white further up the river, yellow and black closer to the ocean. We ate them, but only when they were fat. We knew when they were fat, it wasn't a guess, we knew because this was flowering, or that happened there, and this would be known by the water dragon people.

Reptile nests were a part of the river journey. We would take no more than half of the eggs. That would keep the population down, keeping things in balance. If we were to live on the river, we must coexist. Other travellers would observe a particular nest has been raided, and leave it alone, finding another nest. If the turtle nest was that day's journey destination, there would be a couple of turtle people along, they would have the say on how many eggs were taken, and who takes what.

Everything was looked after. When you understand this, everything has the power to reproduce, and continue on. The yams, the fruit, as we ate them, we would break off pieces, break off stems, put them back in, scatter them as we go. And fruit, the fruit seeds were replanted as we travelled.

We'd see lungfish, big cod. In the fresh water you get the tasty mussels. We'd catch yabbies and crays. Blue claws. Shrimp. After the big storms in the summer months, the yabbies, they walk overland, thousands of them, big ones. Waiting for them at the end would be the barra, they love freshwater yabbies for lunch.

It's important that they get their feed too. So we might take 20 of those yabbies, that's all.

The barra need to be happy too.

* Shirley Ampetyane collecting sugarbag after cutting into a hollow tree that housed a stingless bee nest near Barrow Creek, Northern Territory, 2015. IMAGE ALAN YEN

Continuing on our river journey, we'd come across where the mangroves start to grow.

Here we'd find milk worms (we'd break up old logs and mangroves to find them). They're not really a worm, more like an oyster, in a shell, which can be eaten raw. Once we get to the mangroves, we get all the 'shiftworkers'—the brown mud oysters—they were a favourite of mine as well. And mudskippers, the funny ones, they were eaten too.

In the brackish water there'll be stingray and bull sharks. The mullet will be thicker, jumping a lot because there are predators. As you get further towards the ocean, they become more prolific, you'll be hunting them in their holes. You'll know they're home, because the water will be blue, in the face of the hole. It's the same for the yabbies: that water has been filtered, and they release the clean blue water in front of the hole.

In the brackish water, we'd also find some mud crab (they park up in brackish water to fatten up). If it's real brown or purple and real full, it's real good tucker. There would be 50 mud crabs in a little area. Remember, things were plentiful, because people weren't so greedy. But we would take full ones, just 10 of them, 3 for me and my family, 3 for Aunty and Grandma and Grandad, and a couple over here for our sisters and a few for our friends. But leave the rest. Sometimes, we'd shake the eggs off a female, strip her and let her go – it depends on what time of season, and on reading the other signs. Oh man, eat the roe on damper. It's a total shot of protein! As you get further down the river, and the crabs are more blue, that's what you call a floater. It might be a big crab, but it's just shed its shell, and empty. We read the signs.

Down the river we'd catch mackerel, and rub saltbush all over the baked fish. We loved the shrimp—caught in wicker baskets. And mullet. Knowing when the mullet is skittish, jumping, or when the perch come to the top, is knowing the weather is coming, big rains.



When my bird—the Peaceful dove—starts to sing, we as Barra People, we will hear it, and we know the barra are asleep, in a taupa, like a hibernation.

Not like a bear, which goes to sleep for a month. Instead of sleeping, the barra just lays still, it won't go out looking for its food, it only feasts on what comes right by it. When the barra is sleeping like that, in late July, the Peaceful dove starts to bring up its song.

But a month later, when the Peaceful dove starts bowing to his wife, we know that we go to the river then. We know the barra eyes will be looking up, coming out of their winter taupa, starting to roll over.

We know not to hunt the barra until they roll over. There might be 200 barra in that water hole, the hole we have reached now on our journey.

And when they roll over, well, it's like a strobe light, *flash flash flash*, the sun bounces off them.

What a sight!

Article taken from the book
Living by the Season
by Glenbo Craig and Lesa Bell



Eugene Bargo is a proud Goreng Kabi, and a Barramundi and Black Snake Man.

His property near Kilkivan is the country where his great grannie grew up and he learned about the country through his father's teaching.
