

## 2. The Indigenous Community in Victoria



### 2.1 Values in relation to 'country'

We are the inheritors of this land, it was left to us by the Great Ones.

The land is our Mother. Our mothers at home help nurture us and so the earth does with us. The most valuable heritage we've got is Mother Earth. It helps us live, because if you didn't have a piece of earth you wouldn't have anything to grow on.

I believe that the first thing in being Aboriginal is that the land belongs to us and we belong to the land. That's what the difference is between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Non-Aboriginal people know where home is, but that's their domestic home, their house. Our home is our territory where our people roamed and lived and survived. That land to us, as everybody knows, is our Mother. If everybody would think of it the same way, it would be their Mother too.

The land is ours because our people were born there. The blood of our people was spilt there and that distinguishes it as our place. Their spirits are still there with us and they're watching us all the time.

Our people have still got a strong relationship with the land. The affiliation between the land and our people is tied in such a way that we never, ever leave it, no matter where we go.

People never own the land, the land owns us.

When I go home to Lake Condah, I know that this land is my life, this land is me and I am the land. So it is with all our people.

Excerpt from *Lady of the Lake: Aunty Iris's Story*. 1997

In the context of this research and sustainable natural resource management on Aboriginal lands, it is important to understand that generally, Aboriginal people do not make any distinction between the natural and cultural values of environmental resources. Aboriginal people conceive land and water as the source and focus of all life, and the key to cultural, spiritual, social and economic survival.

To Aboriginal people, natural and cultural values of country are interwoven so that looking after the land, waters, plants and animals means looking after culture; and looking after culture means looking after the land, waters, plants and animals. The practical importance of the interweaving of nature and culture is that many places and features of cultural importance to Aboriginal people also have significant natural heritage values; and equally, many places which have natural heritage values also have cultural importance to Aboriginal people.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> SAMLISA Steering Committee. Sustainable resource management: Strategy for Aboriginal managed lands in South Australia. Aboriginal Lands Trust, Adelaide, 2000.

Aboriginal people's relationship to country is based on a long tradition of ownership, custodianship, utilisation and cultural significance. Within traditional Aboriginal society men and women have particular roles and responsibilities in the process of 'caring for country' which are largely determined by their relationships to others and to particular places on the landscape. They have a deep and historic understanding of their environments and strategies for environment protection. Indigenous Victorians' knowledge and relationships with the land are still very strong, even in areas where they were they have been historically dispossessed.

Non-Indigenous people typically interpret 'manage' and 'management' as actions and processes through which resources, institutions, services, and people are organised for purposes such as efficient production. There are strong implications that, in management, people are in control and that they dominate both the process itself and its outcomes. However, Indigenous people can mean something very different when they talk of 'managing country'. Rather than seeing themselves as in control of country, Indigenous people are likely to regard themselves as negotiating with country - interpreting and responding to the signals that country is making. This is a much more evenly balanced relationship, in which people and country play reciprocal and interdependent parts.<sup>3</sup>

'Caring for country' is a common Aboriginal phrase for the process that non-Aboriginal people have tended to simplify with the term 'land management'.

An important part of 'caring for country' is being able to access country, travelling to renew contact with sites and to see and use the resources that are available. The activities involved in 'caring for country' revolve around being on their (traditional) country, observing its responses to seasons, maintaining an intimate knowledge of its resources and significance in terms of Dreaming. Such activity is seen as an integral part of living and a responsibility which is inherited through Aboriginal lore and ceremonial obligations, and through their social role in the community. It embraces all traditional owners. There are a number of aspects of 'caring for country' and they are not necessarily viewed as separate activities; they include cultural (sacred) site management, lore and ceremony, burning practices, hunting and fishing practices, natural farming practices, respect, storytelling and education.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Working on Country – Baker, Davies and Young eds. p xxii.

<sup>4</sup> Land management issues – B. Rose 1995

## 2.2 History - dispossession and impact

Indigenous people are the original custodians of Victoria who have lived on and looked after the land for at least 50,000 years, or a few thousand generations. Through this period, Victoria's Indigenous people developed complex traditional cultures. Over thirty different dialect or sub-language groups (formerly called tribes) spoke about ten separate languages. Each dialect group contained half a dozen or more clans. They developed a rapport with their lands and water that goes to the core of their existence and identity. Laws and customs reflect this holistic relationship between the people and their environment. Language, family and trade determined traditional territories.<sup>5</sup>

When first contact with Europeans occurred, a large number of tribal groups lived and cared for the country we now know as Victoria. The precise boundaries of tribal group territories are not known. Many maps have been produced by historians and explorers of the boundaries of the Aboriginal tribal groups of Victoria. None of them are correct, for many reasons that history can explain. Hence there is not an accurate map of where each Victorian Aboriginal tribal groups' boundaries lay. Native title determination is seeking to record agreed-upon boundaries (this is discussed further in Section 3).

Each territory was occupied by several inter-related family groups who shared a common language. Complex rituals and protocols governed the relationships between groups living in adjacent tribal territories. Except in times of environmental stress (such as drought) or when groups were invited into other tribal territories, the occupants of each territory were expected to live, hunt and forage within their own tribal boundaries. Resources not available within those boundaries were obtained by ceremonial trade exchanges with Aboriginal people elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

Since 1788, thousands of Aboriginal people have been killed, died from introduced diseases, or have been dispossessed of and removed from their traditional lands.

Colonisation by European settlers and pastoralists of Aboriginal lands in Victoria during the 19<sup>th</sup> century resulted in numerous conflicts, reduction in the availability of food and other resources, and the introduction of new diseases which killed hundreds of people. Conflict over land resulted in deaths of both Aboriginal people and European settlers, and in some cases led to the massacre of Aboriginal men, women and children. Writing of the Victorian frontier, Christie characterized the conflict in these terms:

Pastoralism.....required huge stretches of land, the same land that was at the heart of Aboriginal society. The squatters' sheep and cattle ate up the pastures on which native game fed, and demolished the yams and mirr-n'yong roots which traditionally served as a staple in the Aboriginal diet....Around Melbourne and in rapidly settled areas, eeling spots, rivers, traditional camping places and sacred sites were fenced off and the Aborigines forbidden entry.

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<sup>5</sup> Aboriginal People in the Environment, AAV, 1996

<sup>6</sup> Aboriginal People in the Environment, AAV, 1996

In the interior, waterholes that had previously provided fish, duck and eels were spoiled by sheep or closely guarded by hut keepers. Aboriginal campsites, chosen for the availability of water and seasonal food supplies, were taken over by squatters, who were attracted to them by the same advantages.... Wherever the white man went, the native game was eaten out by sheep or shot for sport. Deprived of their former food sources, the Aborigines either starved ... or obtained food in some way or other from the whites.<sup>7</sup>

Within a period of 42 years from the date of the British settlers' arrivals in Gippsland in 1839, the Aboriginal people of Gippsland had all but been wiped out. In 1877, a Royal Commission indicated there were only 140 still alive out of the original 1,500 or so.<sup>8</sup> The total population figure for Victoria also fell from an estimated 11,500 to 806 during the period 1834-1886.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, Aboriginal people found it difficult to maintain their way of life, and in many places were forcibly evicted from their lands. Aboriginal people were forced to become part of the new colonial economy finding work as stock-hands and domestic servants, however, they were excluded from the wealth of Victoria's growing economy and suffered for decades under policies that resulted in cultural, economic and social isolation. Many Aboriginal people were forced onto missions, government stations and reserves where they were forbidden to practice their language and culture.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, government policies further displaced Aboriginal people from their land and culture. Children were forcibly separated from their families and Aboriginal people were required to assimilate into wider Australian society.

Colonisation, dispossession and removal has had well-documented profound social, economic and cultural impacts on Aboriginal people. European settlement across Australia had different impacts in different places. In Victoria, and other parts of south-eastern Australia where climate and topography was much more suited to British adaptation and in particular the introduction of agriculture, the dispossession of land from Aboriginal people was comprehensive. Not only were Aboriginal people forcibly moved off their lands but they were deprived of their food and clothing sources, stopped from practising traditional hunting and burning. Colonists introduced animal and plant species which directly competed with native flora and fauna, and farming practices that involved massive land clearing and destruction of native animals and vegetation often used by Aboriginal people for food, clothing, artefacts and other materials. This also interfered with traditional Aboriginal trade networks.

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<sup>7</sup> Christie, M.F. *Aborigines in Colonial Victoria, 1835-1886*, Uni Press, Sydney, 1979

<sup>8</sup> Royal Commission on Aborigines, 1877

<sup>9</sup> Christie, M.F. *Aborigines in Colonial Victoria, 1835-1886*, Uni Press, Sydney, 1979

At a social level, traditional people looked after the land they lived on. Particular clans laid claim to specific tracts of land or resources. The relationship between the clans and their land was complex and was linked to their economy and spiritual beliefs. White settlers did not understand these complex relationships. All they saw was small groups of Aboriginal people moving around large areas of rich but uncultivated land, so they set about taking over the land and removing the people and their rights, and destroying Aboriginal culture and social organisation.

Access to land is considered fundamental to future wellbeing. Despite the massive dispossession in Victoria, Aboriginal people survived and continue to maintain strong links with particular areas of land and the core elements of their spiritual association with the land, which is inherently associated with an assertion of being Aboriginal. Management of land, water and their resources also remain an integral part of contemporary Aboriginal culture. Many Aboriginal people are working hard to reclaim aspects of their past, preserve and protect their cultural heritage and to secure a future that acknowledges the complex and continuing relationship between Aboriginal people and the environment.

It is worth highlighting that the specific story of colonisation in Victoria has had profound implications for contemporary relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Not only are Indigenous knowledge systems and associations with land more disrupted than elsewhere in Australia, but non-Indigenous perceptions of an 'Aboriginal presence' in Victoria are constructed in very limited ways. In particular, there are still commonly held assumptions among many non-Indigenous Victorians that 'there are no Aboriginal traditional owners in Victoria' or, that if there are, 'they don't have any land, so they don't need to be involved in planning processes' or, 'there are so few in this area, they don't really count'. While these perceptions are slowly changing, planning and NRM management in Victoria has been (and is) profoundly influenced by this set of assumptions, in particular the tendency to render Indigenous relationships to land invisible.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, there are important ethical, political and legal reasons why planners and land managers in Victoria must engage with Indigenous relationships to land and aspirations regarding land and water management.

## 2.3 Population profile

Today the Victorian Aboriginal Community is made up of a number of distinct communities across the state based on location, language and cultural groups, and extended family networks.

Around 26 local community organisations are based in regional Victoria and six in key metropolitan areas where there are significant residential populations of Indigenous people. These community organisations are legally incorporated bodies under Commonwealth legislation. They are not necessarily bodies that represent the population, but have legal obligations for particular services e.g. cultural heritage. They are not necessarily communities with which all Victorian Aboriginal people identify for a range of

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<sup>10</sup> Porter, L. Spaces of Inclusion? Indigenous knowledge and aspirations about land management, Melbourne, 2002

reasons, and they are not based on traditional country. They are communities in the sense of an organisation and not living places. They do however have an important role in the Victorian Aboriginal community but they are one component of a complex make-up.

The Victorian Indigenous population of 25,078 (2001 census) is approximately 0.6% of the total Victorian population and 6.1% of the total Australian Indigenous population.

|                                       | <b>Males</b> | <b>Females</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|
| Victorian Indigenous Population       | 12,367       | 12,711         | 25,078       |
| Victorian Population                  | 2,279,061    | 2,365,889      | 4,397,599    |
| Indigenous % of Victorian Population  | 0.5%         | 0.5%           | 0.6%         |
| Australian Indigenous Population      | 201,988      | 208,015        | 410,003      |
| % of Australian Indigenous Population | 6.1%         | 6.1%           | 6.1%         |

(Source: Census of Population and Housing, 2001)

Over half (52.1%) of Victoria's Indigenous people live outside the Melbourne metropolitan area, in regional Victoria, in comparison with 27.7% of the non-Indigenous population.<sup>11</sup> This pattern strongly reflects Indigenous Victorian's connection with traditional lands.

The Goulburn Statistical Division with 11.3% of Victoria's Indigenous population has the largest percentage of Indigenous residents outside Melbourne with 58.5% of these people living within the City of Greater Shepparton. The Mallee Statistical Division has 8.3% of Victoria's Indigenous population with 51% of these people living in Mildura Rural City. These Divisions are followed by Barwon Statistical Division with 5.9%, 73.7% of which live in Greater Geelong City and East Gippsland with 5.3%, 76% of which live in the East Gippsland Shire.

47.9% of Victoria's Indigenous population is in the Statistical Division of Melbourne. 13% of these reside within Northern Middle Melbourne, a further 10.5% in Western Melbourne and another 8.5% in South Eastern Outer Melbourne.

| <b>Local Govt Area</b> | <b>Total Population</b> | <b>Indigenous Population</b> | <b>Percentage of LGA population</b> | <b>Percentage of Victorian Indigenous Population</b> |
|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| Melbourne              | 3,181,781               | 12,015                       | 0.4                                 | 47.9   |
| Goulburn               | 176,000                 | 2,832                        | 1.6                                 | 11.3   |
| Mallee                 | 82,254                  | 2,098                        | 2.5                                 | 8.3  |
| Barwon                 | 231,275                 | 1,498                        | 0.5                                 | 5.9  |
| East Gippsland         | 72,672                  | 1,321                        | 1.8                                 | 5.3  |

<sup>11</sup> The Victorian Government Indigenous Affairs Report, 2002.

|                   |           |        |     |      |
|-------------------|-----------|--------|-----|------|
| Gippsland         | 143,181   | 1,275  | 0.9 | 5.0  |
| Loddon            | 151,395   | 1,192  | 0.8 | 4.8  |
| Central Highlands | 129,387   | 1,037  | 0.8 | 4.1  |
| Western District  | 91,837    | 793    | 0.9 | 3.2  |
| Ovens/Murray      | 90,060    | 620    | 0.7 | 2.5  |
| Wimmera           | 47,089    | 395    | 0.8 | 1.6  |
| Off Shore areas   | 668       | 3      | 0.9 | 0.01 |
| Total             | 4,397,599 | 25,078 | 0.6 |      |

(Source: Census of Population and Housing, 2001)

Indigenous Victorians present a considerably younger age structure than the non-Indigenous population, with 57% under the age of 25 years compared with 34.1% of the total Victorian population. 39.8% of Indigenous Victorians are between the ages of 25 and 64 years compared with 53% of the total Victorian population. 2.9% of Indigenous Victorians are over the age of 65 years compared with 12.6% of the total Victorian population. The difference in age structure between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Victorians is a reflection of a number of factors including higher fertility rates (influenced by physical, biological, socio-economic and cultural factors), higher mortality, a lower life expectancy and reduced wellbeing.

There is a younger age structure within the Indigenous population and numbers are increasing. This younger age profile of Victorian Indigenous people has significant policy implications in a number of respects, for example:

- there is a mismatch between needs within Victoria's mainstream population (which are increasingly associated with an ageing population) and the needs of a predominantly young Indigenous population (socially and economically);
- the transfer of cultural and traditional knowledge between older and young Indigenous people becomes more critical;
- more young Indigenous people should be assisted and encouraged to undertake formal NRM education and training
- access to labour markets and business opportunities must be improved for young Indigenous people.