



Indigenous Culture in the Upper Murray

Trees and Shelter Questions

For thousands of years, our Indigenous people had to use the landscapes around them for food, water, shelter and to make fire. Today, we build houses and units to live in. This is where we eat, sleep and store our possessions. Aboriginal people needed trees to provide this for them.

1. What did the Aboriginal people on the Upper Murray mainly use these hollows in the base of ancient gum trees for?

2. What was another use of these trees that Talea mentioned?

3. These ancient gum trees were important for other reasons, one of which the Aboriginal people were very much dependant on. Can you think what this might be?

Extension Question

4. Did these ancient gum trees also have a spiritual significance for the Aboriginal people?



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Trees and Shelter Answers

1. Shelter and protection from the elements such as rain, frosts, snow and biting winds.
2. Talea mentioned that they were also used as a repository (keeping place) for many of their tools and other implements when they left one area to move to another. Aboriginal people were careful not to exhaust the food resources and fuel (fire wood) in any individual location and because of this tended to be nomadic, moving from one traditional camping site to another over the course of a year or many years. Therefore, they could not be overburdened with possessions. One early settler recorded in his memoirs how he found a beautifully crafted waterbird net in one of these keeping places, as finely made as any fisherman or net maker in Europe could produce. He left it there out of respect.
3. These ancient gum trees were the home of the possum, very much a staple food of the Aboriginal people. As these gums aged they developed many hollows and cavities where branches and even parts of the main trunk gave way. These were ideal homes for the possum. Possum was not only important as a food but also for blanket making and cord making from the possum hair and sinews taken from their tail. The tail sinew had many other uses, for example, to stitch the skins together or help fix an axe head to a shaft or handle. The tail of the brush-tail possum's tail was often used for decorative belts.
4. Yes, they were highly significant. Many of these trees were thought to hold spirit ancestors. When the early settlers entered traditional country they cut these trees down for fence posts, rails and shelters. This greatly distressed Aboriginal people. Also, in the Upper Murray and elsewhere, these ancient gums acted as burial places for their kin. The bodies of the deceased, once reduced to a skeleton through the action of insects and natural decomposition, were carefully separated into individual bones and wrapped, along with prized weapons or tools of the deceased, in their possum skin blanket. The blanket was then tied up to secure the contents after which the bundle was then placed in a hollow branch or trunk of these trees, thereby increasing their significance.

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