

Red Gum: Genesis of an exhibition

Penny Algar

Those of us who love Australia often seem to love the least spectacular things about it... We smile with the utmost pleasure at the sight of a gnarled old Red Gum, exclaiming 'What a perfect specimen!' though it leans almost to the ground and has a huge crown that is no perfect dome, worn at the craziest angle!

– *Edna Walling*

Many of us know Red Gum as the sleepers under our railway lines, the salvaged material from wharves, bridges, telegraph poles and ships' masts, or – regrettably – the contents of plastic bags labelled 'Red Gum Firewood'. Hopefully, we also have fond memories of lovely old remnant Red Gums along the roadside or in a paddock, which have been spared from clearing logging or road-making.

Elliot and Jones's *Encyclopaedia of Australian Plants* describes the River Red Gum or Murray Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) in some detail, including its height, trunk width, bark, canopy form, buds, flowers, capsule shape and so on. But what does this really tell us about its character

I don't want to anthropomorphise plants, but it seems to me that critical information is missing. In the case of a beautiful old remnant River Red Gum, what do we know about its pre-colonial history; about the association of traditional owners of the land with that tree and that species? Should this cultural information even be shared with non-Indigenous Australians?

What do we know about the complex interrelationships of this species, which is often host to symbiotic and parasitic plants as well as to a great variety of fauna? What are the different-shaped scars on some trees? Are they made by a human hand? What is the origin of charcoal in the hollow bases of old Red Gums? Have people cooked, slept or given birth here? How long has this tree been alive?

Can we read these trees and see history through them? The use of fire and heat in the preparation or manufacture of food, medicine and implements is extremely important in Aboriginal culture, and many plants and plant parts were treated with heat or fire for this purpose. Can we look at a Red Gum and see what it might tell us about the past?

Is our lack of information just carelessness or disinterest, or is it a continuation of a colonial mindset that seeks to conceal, discredit or ignore the belief systems of Aboriginal peoples who have lived here for at least 65,000 years?²

Despite asking more questions than any of us can possibly answer, the exhibition *Red Gum* will I hope, be seen as a positive and truthful, if at times uncomfortable, reflection on how we Australians as a people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, can work together to conserve and enhance our remarkable flora, especially as we enter uncharted waters with respect to climate change.

Lorraine Connelly-Northey, a Waradgerie (Wiradjuri), Wongaibong (Wongibong) woman, is a highly respected artist whose work is central to this exhibition. Lorraine grew up in Swan Hill and has spent her life teaching herself about Australian flora – the plants used by Aboriginal people in the Riverine and Mallee regions – and about the local ecology and waterways, especially the Murray River. She has conducted her own seed collection and propagation experiments with plants from these regions.

I first had the privilege of meeting Lorraine in 2008,³ and we have maintained a friendship ever since. The Australian flora has been an ongoing topic of conversation between us. Preference for a European plant palette dominates our urban and rural townscapes. I find this disturbing and disappointing.

The lack of knowledge by many Australians about even our most common endemic plant species, such as their names and identifying characteristics, is concerning. Imagine if children in kindergartens grew up with this knowledge and awareness. What fun! That this doesn't happen seems to me to be culturally insensitive and disrespectful to our place. With the appropriate cultural permissions, imagine if we knew not only the common names of plants, but their Aboriginal names as well.

There is a perfect alignment between the resourcefulness and inventiveness expressed in Lorraine's sculptural works and the way in which Aboriginal people have continued to survive on the driest continent in the world. Lorraine sources most of the materials for her works from old abandoned rubbish sites. The climatic extremes that characterise much of our continent mean that tin, wire and other discarded materials are patinaed, rusted and weathered naturally over long periods of time. Rubbish dumps are usually located on the outskirts of towns on land that is considered marginal for farming but where, ironically, endemic flora often survive.

The process of making her artworks is physically demanding. Yet, the sensitivity with which Lorraine manipulates materials, which in their raw state appear unyielding and rigid, results in sculpture that is both poetic and expressive, conveying stories of displacement and oppression.

As Lorraine explains, the River Red Gum has a powerful place in Aboriginal culture.

'To the Aboriginal people the presence of the River Red Gum indicates the availability of fresh water – and lots of it, in the wet season when the rains bring floods for the Gums to have their annual drink. Sadly the control of river

flows by weirs and locks for irrigation, logging and recreation may potentially threaten the survival of this species.'

Lorraine and I are both ardent admirers of the extraordinary work of ethnobotanist Dr Beth Gott. Lorraine describes Beth as one of her mentors:

'Gott's marvellous work in linking science (botany) and Indigenous Australian culture has led to a greater understanding of the intricate and long history of the relationships between plants and people in this country. These include the use of plant material for food, medicine, fibre, tools and implements and resins and gums.'

The wonderful publication *Koorie Plants, Koorie People*, written by Nelly Zola and Beth Gott, includes information about a suite of plants found growing in close proximity to River Red Gums in the Riverine area. The preparation of any edible or medicinal plant material requires cultural knowledge prior to use

The following is a list of just a few of these plants:

'Eumong' (*Acacia stenophylla*): A medium sized tree with long pendulous leaves and seedpods; these could be steamed whole and eaten as greens or once dried and seeds removed, ground into flour; the addition of water makes a paste which is cooked to make a seedcake.

'Old Man Weed' (*Centipeda cunninghamii*): A small herb growing on the floodplain; a very important medicinal plant.

'Cumbungi', incorrectly known as 'Bulrush' (*Typha sp.*): According to Gott, the most important plant food in the Murray–Darling system. It is a tall reed that grows profusely along the water's edge; the plant produces edible rhizomes; the macerated fibre is used to manufacture string.

'Nardoo' (*Marsilea drummondii*): Found in flooded areas, such as billabongs. Attractive leaf structure; looks a little like a large four leaf clover; edible spore cases are collected after water recedes; heated, ground, and made into a paste in a bush bowl by adding water; puddled onto the side of the fire for cooking

Plant these plants in your gardens. Get to know them. It's important.

Recently, I had the opportunity to walk along a remote section of a wide, seasonally dry creek in Northern Victoria with a local Landcare group. About halfway along the trek, many of us experienced an indescribable but overwhelming sense of being in a very special place. This particular section of creek was marked by a series of widely spaced ancient River Red Gums, with enormous above ground sections of tree roots, almost as wide as their trunks. I saw one scar tree, along with two ring trees⁴. Lying near the base of one of the Red Gums I noticed what looked like a plant fossil in bas relief across the surface of one of the larger smooth blue black coloured stones. Photos were sent in the days following to staff at Museum Victoria who identified it as a

trace fossil.⁵ The plant-like pattern was in fact an imprint of the burrowing trails of a Chondrite worm. Its age; Early Devonian, or roughly 400 million years old.

Acclaimed furniture designer, Damien Wright will present works for the exhibition made from ancient Red Gum timber that has been buried beneath the ground for thousands of years. The material is sourced from a site not far from Wangaratta. Wright restores the water-soaked, blackened but preserved timber, revealing surface markings made by insects and other organisms. Damien's furniture pieces are delicate and highly refined. They challenge the traditional perception of Red Gum furniture as bulky and heavy. Revealing the individual character of each piece of timber is important. Wood is not inert; it is very much alive.

Wangaratta Art Gallery is a very appropriate place to host the exhibition *Red Gum*, sitting as it does at the junction of two major rivers, the Ovens and the King. I thank Wangaratta Art Gallery's Director and Curator, Simone Nolan, for so enthusiastically embracing the exhibition concept.

I would also like to thank Lorraine Connelly-Northey for her wisdom, friendship and generosity. This exhibition has come about as the result of many conversations between us. Lorraine has taught me a lot. The Australian landscape is a cultural one and this must be embraced by all of us.

There is much work to be done to save the remaining old River Red Gums to ensure the ongoing regeneration of the species. I know that great work is being undertaken across Northern Victoria, but a lot more needs to be done in other parts of Victoria and across Australia. We need to encourage collaborations between landowners, traditional custodians, scientists, conservationists and artists.

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Notes

1. Edna Walling (Garden Designer), *The Australian Roadside*, Melbourne Oxford University Press, 1952, p. 18.
2. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2017-07-20/aboriginal-shelter-pushes-human-history-back-to-65,000-years/8719314>
3. I met Lorraine in 2008 when she exhibited the work *Murray River Cloak* at the Counihan Gallery in Brunswick in the exhibition *Embodied Energy*. I was co-curator together with Edwina Bartlem
4. <http://koorihistory.com/modified-trees-scar-trees/>
"Ring trees are those that have been modified early in their growth, either by placing a stone or another object in a partial split of a sapling's trunk, or by

binding a branch to another section of the tree. They are believed to have been used to mark the boundary between one nation and another. The trees are most commonly associated with clans and nations found along the Murray River, but are also found in many other areas in Southeastern Australia”.

5. Email communication between Carole Hammond and Museum Victoria.

References

Colloff, Matthew J., *Flooded Forest and Desert Creek: Ecology and History of the River Red Gum*, Collingwood, Vic, CSIRO, 2014.

Elliot, Roger and David L. Jones, *Encyclopaedia of Australian Plants Suitable for Cultivation, Volume 4*, Melbourne, Sydney, Auckland, Lothian Publishing Company, 1986.

Zola, Nelly and Beth Gott, *Koorie Plants, Koorie People: Traditional Aboriginal Food, Fibre and Healing Plants of Victoria*, text copyright 1992, Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne, printed by Globe Press, 1992.