KARRI THICKETS, BEFORE SETTLEMENT

by

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In his recent article "Plant Succession and Past and Present Burning in the Karri Forest" (1), P. Christensen states "The reports of early explorers and settlers seems to indicate that the karri forest had an open understory at the time of settlement". H.D. Evans made similar claims in "Pioneering in the Karri", (2). I have read the journals, diaries and some letters of several explorers of the karri region and in none of them are such claims made. In fact, the opposite is usually the case. There is certainly a widely held belief amongst people of the South-West that the karri had an open understory before Europeans arrived in the region, and it is generally held that the reason for this was that the natives burnt the bush as often as it would burn. I am convinced that these beliefs stem from inaccurate folk law rather than from fact.

From the writings of early explorers, officials and settlers the following points concerning the karri forest and the Aborigines of the area would seem to emerge:-

1. Dense thickets were widespread throughout the karri forest; though perhaps not so dense as is now the case.

2. The Aborigines appear to have had a dislike for the karri thickets and avoided them.

3. It would appear that all but a few of the Aborigines may have been absent from the karri region in the summer months when the karri would burn freely.

4. The Aboriginal population of the region was an extremely small one.

5. The karri forest was most certainly not burnt as often as it would hold a fire.

Examination of early writings provides evidence to support each of these five points.

1. Dense thickets were widespread throughout the karri forest though perhaps not so dense as is now the case.

The first explorer to travel through the karri forest seems to have been Captain J. Bannister who in 1831 led the first overland party from Perth to King George's Sound. As the party neared Albany the navigator, a Mr. Smythe, thought that they were too far East and altered course in a South-Westerly direction. This course took them across the Frankland River in the vicinity of Mt. Mitchell onto the coast near Cape Chatham. They experienced considerable difficulty in forcing their way through the thickets both in the karri forest and in the surrounding jarrah country. Bannister (3) described the thickets as being so dense that they could make their way only by cutting a road with their hatchets. On one day they made only three miles and later Bannister was to write that they could make only 7 or 8 miles in two days "though we toiled the whole day". The following extracts from his journal and reports give further proof of the existence of extensive and dense thickets between Mt. Mitchell and Cape Chatham".....for 3 miles an almost impassable wood of mahogany and underwood."
".....and a great quantity of underwood."
".....very difficult to force our way through the bush".
".....the country thickly wooded and much encumbered with underwood for 5½ miles.
".....underwood and scrub above our heads, almost impossible to pass,.....".
"The underwood 15' or 20' high; to break this was impossible in many places, our only remedy was to make a road,....."
".....and as usual when we found the blue gums of any size an almost impenetrable thicket.....".
"After John Galway and I had made a path through the thick underwood with great labour for nearly 9 miles, he returned for Mr. Smythe and as soon as he was able we proceeded through the same kind of country for three miles....".
"The land appears to be a good brown soil but it is so encumbered with fallen trees and underwood that we could scarcely judge".

In 1841 William Nairn Clarke (4) made an expedition in a whale boat to Nornalup Inlet and Broke Inlet and explored the lower reaches of the Deep and Frankland Rivers, making short excursions on foot into the surrounding forests. Clarke has left some very detailed descriptions of the country and like Bannister he found much of it covered in dense high thickets. He wrote in one instance of an "absolute thicket of wattles about 25 feet high" and in another describes how his party found their way back to the boat "through tangled thickets high above our heads with no other guide than the compass".

In April 1845 A.C. Gregory (5) attempted to trace the Gordon and Frankland rivers down to Nonalup Inlet but between Mt. Frankland and Nornalup he lost two days trying to follow the winding river through "almost impenetrable thickets" and was forced to abandon the attempt and be satisfied with having discovered that the Gordon and Frankland were one river.

In May 1852 Gregory (6) was again exploring in the karri country this time journeying down the Donnelly River to its mouth along the coast to Broke Inlet and then North-east and north to the upper Warren. On this journey he was obliged to leave the valley of the Donnelly River because of the steepness of the country and the "almost impenetrable thickets". From the mouth of the Donnelly he attempted to examine the country eastwards but found it "impassable" and was compelled to follow the coastal sand hills. After crossing a bare tract of drift sand nearly 40 square miles in area (the Yeagerup Dunes) he reached the Warren about three miles from its mouth. Six miles up-stream from the mouth of the river he again encountered dense thickets. Here he met a native who gave a most unfavourable account of the country to the north east, so he continued parallel with the coast through swampy plains covered with high scrub with patches of "blue gum and mahogany forest with dense thickets". Near the Gardiner River he described the land as being "bad and scrubby". Travelling north east from Broke Inlet he passed through "hilly country timbered with mahogany and blue gum with coarse scrub and thickets of underwood interspersed by open streaks of black peaty land full of springs and covered with high scrub" until reaching a small river he believed was a branch of the Warren.

Alfred Hillman (7) explored along the coast between Albany and Nonalup Inlet in July 1833. He does not appear to have entered the main karri forest but he did pass through some very dense thickets near Parrys Inlet while traversing a patch of karri bush there.

Conclusion

From the writings of these explorers it cannot be disputed that dense thickets were widespread throughout the karri forest before the first European Settlers arrived in the area in the late 1850's and early 1860's.

2. The Aborigines appear to have had a dislike for the karri thickets and avoided them.

The country north east of the mouth of the Warren (i.e., west and south of the present township of Pemberton) is the heart of the karri forest and it is obvious that the native Gregory met near the mouth of the river had a poor opinion of the region. He was able to convince Gregory that it was better to travel along the coast than to venture inland there.

In 1829 a Dr. Wilson (8) explored north-westward from King George Sound, and near Mt. Lindsay he met a native who was known to his own native guide "Mokare". When this man heard that Wilsons' party intended travelling westward and then to return to Albany along the coast he advised them not to as travelling was very bad in that direction. He invited the whitemen to accompany him eastward where the best land was and where the rest of his people would be waiting for him.

On a second expedition to Nornalup in May 1842 Clarke (9) met a party, or as he described it "a tribe" of 13 aborigines on a creek running into the Frankland. He found them most friendly and they offered to conduct him to a district "far away where there was chaylup (i.e. grass) plenty, and no trees".

Conclusion

It would seem therefore then that the natives preferred the open grass land and held a very poor opinion of the scrubby karri country. This view is further strengthened by the fact that all reported encounters between explorers and natives mentioned here, occurred between the forest and the coast, with the possible exception of Clarke's meeting with the group of thirteen. Hillman also met a small party of natives on the coast near Warren Inlet and Lieutenant Preston (10) who in April 1831 while travelling along the coast in a whale boat from Albany to Point D'Entrecasteaux called in at Nornalup Inlet where he met some natives and though he did not say how many, it seems it was not a large party. He met another native near Point D'Entrecasteaux from where he also saw several fires along the coast. Bannister saw three native men near the mouth of the Frankland River and a family of three a few miles further along the coast; but the three explorers who travelled within the karri, Bannister, Clarke (twice) and Gregory (twice) met no natives there at all, neither did they mention seeing any native camp sites or any other sign of them within the forest. When Clarke met the 13 he was returning overland from Irwin Inlet to where he had moored his boats on the Frankland River. This meeting could have occurred within the karri forest perhaps, but it seems likely that it also took place along the coastal plain.

3. It would appear that all but a few of the Aborigines may have been absent from the karri region in the summer months when the karri would burn freely.

There are several early accounts which state that in summer the natives from the inland, along with coastal natives, spent the summer months on some of the estuaries along the west coast and round King George Sound. Hammond (11) gives a detailed account of this in "Winjans People" and Nind (12), a surgeon at Albany in the first years of the settlement there, gives a very detailed account of this occurrence at that place.

Hammond claimed that in the summer months, natives from all over the south-west travelled to meeting places on the estuaries near Mandurah and that they were joined there by tribes from the east and north. They lived mainly on fish. At this time old scores were settled, new laws made and the necessary ceremonies were held. Nind states that the coastal natives went inland in the winter and began to return to the coast in September and October and that by about Christmas they began firing the country, and then they gathered in great numbers on the coast around King George Sound.

Most explorers along the coast between the Murray River and the Vasse encountered natives in varying numbers at all seasons of the year, but especially in the summer months when groups of 100 or more were frequently encountered. The same seems to be true of King George's Sound. And yet Bannister met only six near Nornalup Inlet in January, Clarke did not meet or see any at all on Broke or Nornalup Inlets in February and March and neither did Gregory see any on Broke Inlet in May.

Surely if there had been a native population in the hinterland of these two inlets such people would have followed the same practice as the natives of the west coast and King George Sound and lived on the abundance of fish to be had from the inlets in the summer and autumn months and therefore would have been present in fairly large numbers at the time those explorers were in the area.

Possibly another indication of the lack of Aboriginal use of the karri forest is that the explorers made no mention of seeing or using any man-made foot pads there. Other explorers made use of such pads whenever they were able and, Bannister too, followed one into Albany towards the end of his journey. Such pathways would have made travelling through the karri thickets so much easier and had there been any it is almost certain one or more of the explorers would have mentioned them.

My grandfather, who was born at Nannup in 1879 and lived there all his life, often told me of the "Blackfellow" travelling up from the south and camping for a while on the bank of the Blackwood at Nannup on their way through to the Busselton District. He referred to them as the "Donnelly River Mob". According to him, as they travelled they burnt out the thickets to hunt quokka, and the smoke from these fires could be seen for several days before the natives reached Nannup. When they were leaving Nannup it would take them about half a day to clear the camp. The first group would leave early in the morning and the stragglers would not get away until about midday. This suggests that these were comparatively large migrations, and not just the usual family group travelling about in the usual manner within their normal tribal country.

H.D. Evans (2) has written that in 1912 the remnants of the Warren people were moved to Busselton. All this may imply some connection between the Warren-Donnelly group, or groups, and the Busselton District. If this was so it is likely that during the summer months these people travelled to the estuaries around the Vasse to meet their kinsmen and to participate in the necessary ceremonies etc., as Hammond has described. It is possible too, that the few natives seen around Broke and Nornalup belonged to this group and if so, this may explain the absence of natives from the southern estuaries in the summer months.

4. "<u>The Aboriginal population of the karri region was a very small one</u>"

There is ample evidence in what has already been discussed here that the population of the area was a very small one. The largest number of natives mentioned by any explorer is 13, whereas in the Perth, Mandurah, Kojonup and Bunbury areas parties of 60 to 100 were met by explorers and meetings with smaller groups occurred far more frequently than was the case around the karri country and the adjoining coastal strip.

Early attempts to take a census of the Aboriginal population were confined to limited areas but in the 1857 census an attempt was made to count all natives in contact with settlers. This census (15) showed that there were 3,597 natives in touch with settlements from around New Norcia to the South Coast east of Albany. As the first settlers had only recently arrived in the karri region (Deeside 1852 and Lake Muir 1856) it is unlikely that an accurate count was obtained in that locality. However, as the karri appears to have been about the most sparsely populated parts of the south west and the census showed only 828 natives in the Perth-Swan and South West districts, it is evident that the population of this area was a very small one.

Meachem (13) has written "There were never many aboriginals in the karri, (no more than 100 has been suggested)". I have found nothing in early writings that contradicts that statement. My grandfather's account of the departure of the natives from Nannup may give the impression of a very large number but a group of from say, 50 to 100, leaving in small family groups could fit this description.

5. "<u>The karri was not burnt as often as it would hold a fire</u>".

The descriptions of dense undergrowth given by Bannister, Clarke and Gregory are proof enough that the karri was not burnt as often as it would hold a fire and if it is accepted that the evidence presented here is proof that the natives were absent from the karri in the hottest summer months, then this is a further strong argument against such belief. If such absence occurred in the January-March period this would roughly co-incidewith the present prohibited burning season and as Meachem (13) has shown there is a "frequent impossibility of burning during the limited period available in Spring and Autumn. A mean of 18 days in Spring (up to January 15th) and ten days in Autumn, (after March 15th) an average total of 28 days, (range from 15 to 40 days) is available for controlled burning in the karri region". Obviously then, if the natives' absence extended into the Autumn period after mid-March the number of burning days would have been reduced even further. It is likely then that in some

years none of the forest was burnt at all, but in years of hot dry Autumns extensive and severe fires would have occurred.

None of the explorers mentioned refer to burnt bush in the karri forest though reference to recently burnt bush and the effects of fire on the country occur frequently in many accounts of exploration in the south west.

There can be no doubt that fires did occur in the karri forest, caused by lightning strikes or native fires from outside the region travelling into the karri and, no doubt, by the natives themselves when they were present in the areas in suitable seasons. Churchill (15) has shown that fires severe enough to truncate the peat, occurred in the area over 5,000 years ago. However, at the time of contact the forest was not burnt as often as it would burn.

What then of the popular belief that the karri had an open understorey and that the natives burnt the forest as often as it would burn? Is this belief completely wrong? Probably not. It seems very likely that this description of the karri may have been accurate of some parts of the karri, especially some years after first settlement.

As European settlement expanded the Aborigines found their traditional camping places and ceremonial sites occupied by white men, much of the land cleared, vegetable foods destroyed, game shot out or scared off and made timid by dogs and guns. Grass and herbage, on which much of the game lived, was eaten out by the white man's stock. In some cases the natives were driven by force from their own land.

Introduced diseases decimated their number time and again, tribal law broke down and the people became dispirited and disorganized. Hammond, describing this phase of aboriginal life, said that they then stopped travelling about the country and settled themselves in small groups on the outskirts of towns and around properties on what had been their traditional tribal land.

During this phase they would have continued at first to live mainly by hunting but gradually becoming more and more dependent on the white settlers. It seems likely that while they continued to hunt they would have fired the bush and as they now covered a smaller area and remained in that area constantly the bush is likely to have been burnt as often as it would hold fire. No doubt it would then have been possible to ride for miles through these sections of the karri.

The children and grandchildren of the first settlers may have grown up in this period and when later they became the "old-timers" so often quoted as the authority for the open understory, regularly burnt theory, that is how they would have remembered it.

Even as late as the 1920's surveyors and other bush workers reported widespread dense thickets in the karri and it seems likely the burnt open country was confined to the vicinity of properties and stock routes where the settlers themselves continued to keep the bush burnt even after the natives had died out.

Nevertheless the first settlers are certain to have found sections of the karri free of undergrowth though this situation may have been only temporary and due to recent fires. Bannister observed that where the undergrowth was not exceedingly thick good grass and herbage abounded; and Evans (2) says that Brockman was attracted to the Warren by the abundance of grass and absence of poison plants.

This last point is very interesting because, according to Evans, Brockman first settled six miles lower down the Warren than where the present historic homestead stands. This is close to the coastal edge of the karri and very near the place where, nine years earlier, Gregory turned back after encountering high dense thickets and having heard the native's report of the country further inland. It is possible that this

area had been recently burnt when Brockman first saw it so that there was then a good growth of grass and low herbage. Gregory described the Warren between the coast and the karri as having good grassy though narrow flats and it may have been this that attracted Brockman. It is interesting to note that Brockman later moved deeper into the karri. Could this have been because as a result of his burning the country around this new selection became good grass land, free of thickets?

Considering that dense thickets were prevalent in the karri, it does seem reasonable to assume that periodic severe fires were natural to this forest before the coming of Europeans. I would not attempt to guess how frequently - or infrequently - such fires did occur but it seems certain that fierce fires must have been part of the karri environment.

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The C.S.O. papers and the originals of the "Diaries of Exploration" are held in the Battye Library, Perth, and I wish to thank the Chief Librarian, Mr. Sharr, for permission to use this material.