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HERITAGE TREES AND LAND MANAGEMENT

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LAND managers and farmers in Victoria and New South Wales can often claim with great pride that they have an Aboriginal 'canoe tree' on their property. A 'canoe tree' is usually a eucalypt from which the indigenous people of south-eastern Australia would make a simple floating canoe. This water craft consisted of a long curved portion of the outer trunk of the tree. Such trees are a significant part of the local heritage because they are not only the surviving remnants of a native flora, but are also a relic of past indigenous uses of that flora. In contrast, in rural and rangeland Western Australia, it is human actions of a more recent nature that are sometimes recorded on trees.

Beefwood blazed by Gregory in 1861

A jarrah, wandoo or karri tree blazed with numbers or initials is familiar to anyone who walks or rides through the forest. These trees were marked by forestry workers in the twentieth century and the late nineteenth century, and still provide valuable reference points for forest visitors. Explorers and surveyors would often scar a tree trunk with an axe to record a campsite or water source. Any reference numbers or letters on the tree would be recorded in the explorer's journal and on a map, so people following those first surveyors would have a human-made point of reference in addition to natural landscape features. Other marks on trees included metal plates and nails.

A cairn on John Forrest Drive, near Hopetoun, marks the spot where a blazed Christmas tree *Nuytsia floribunda* was found. The tree was scarred by John Forrest on his 1870 expedition to South Australia, along the Great Australian Bight. The tree was chopped down, perhaps by souvenir hunters, and the local people erected the cairn in its place. Blazing a tree trunk to mark a campsite was a regular practice of Forrest, who, on the 1874 expedition from Geraldton to the South Australian and Northern Territory borders marked numerous 'white gum trees'. Although many of these scarred trees have

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not survived owing to the ravages of fire, termites and sheer old age, some relics still exist. For example, a river gum *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* on Manfred Station in the Murchison was identified as a John Forrest tree by the Geraldton Historical Society in 1974. The original blaze marked the site of camp 17 with 'F17'. A commemorative plaque was left on the blaze, but over the years both blaze and plaque have almost been concealed by re-growing wood, as these eucalypts are quick to 'bleed' and heal their 'wounds'. Therefore, every so often, it has been necessary to cut out the regrowth. The tree is cared for by the managers of the station.

Two other river gums bearing plaques to show heritage can be found on the Milly Milly-Byro Road, just over the Murchison River. One of the trees commemorates Forrest's camp 18, and the other tree reminds travellers of the 28th camp of the drover E.T. Hooley in 1866. Neither tree is the original, as these have not been found – perhaps lost as firewood or as building timber or to ever-hungry termites.

In contrast, a group of beefwood trees in the Pilbara, blazed by F.T. Gregory's North-west Australian Exploring Expedition in 1861, has lasted without mishap. The beefwood *Grevillea striata* is a long-lived tree owing to its resistance to termites and tolerance of fire. This species can grow up to 15m high in the Gascoyne and Pilbara regions, and has a grey bark with creamy coloured flowers. The common name is derived from the colour of the heartwood, which looks like raw beef. Despite the length of the blazes – axe blows 1metre long and up to 30cm wide - the trees appear healthy. The wood has regrown around the edges of the blazes, for only a couple of centimetres at the most, but some of the axe marks remain clear and sharp. Although all trees thicken with growth and age, they don't grow up from their base, so the axe marks are the same height - a metre off the ground - exactly where the explorers swung their axes. The height of the trees today suggests that they have not grown much taller since 1861, which we would expect from these typical, hardy, arid zone species, which are characteristically slow growing. Gregory noted that 'we marked several trees on the north side of the gorge close to a pool' in his journal, and recorded the number of the camp on his map. He made no comment about carved initials or a date, and there are no traces of numbers or letters on the blazes. The men of the North-west Australian Exploring Expedition must have recognised the beefwood as a hardy tree, because they ignored the River Gums down by the pool.

If you have a blazed or marked tree on your property, or know of a tree in your locality, try to find out about its origins, as it may have heritage value. The Western Australian Heritage Council and your local Shire's heritage officer could assist with providing historical and cultural background. Equally, they would appreciate your information. Do identify the species of tree, because knowing something about the species, its characteristics and its susceptibility to termites, disease or fire, will guide you in protecting the tree. It is equally important to be aware of the threat posed to such heritage trees by souvenir hunters. Sad to say, some trees in the rangelands have had the entire blaze removed, so heritage tree management is also a matter of people management.

Marked wandoo in the forest near York.

People who work in remote areas do not blaze trees today for navigational purposes, thanks to the satellite GPS (Global Positioning System) and soft plastic tape. However, whilst the coloured tape might prevent an injury to a tree, it doesn't have the mystique of a mark made long ago.

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