

The Way We Were

THE WAGYL - REALITY IN THE MYTH?

Nyoongar people believe that the landscape of the south-west of WA was shaped by the Wagyl, a Dreamtime serpent of truly heroic proportions. He altered the landscape as he moved across it, forming the hills, rivers and lakes. You can hear about the role of the Wagyl in Noel Nannup's CD "The Carers of Everything" obtainable from the Swan Catchment Centre. Other Aboriginal language groups also have giant serpent myths, like the rainbow serpent Bremurer of the Ord River, so evocatively illustrated by Elizabeth Durack in the children's book "The Way of the Whirlwind".

But why a giant serpent? Did one ever exist? Did the earliest humans to arrive on this continent

actually encounter one? The answer is probably, yes, and very awesome it must have been too.

At Riversleigh in Queensland is the most wonderful collection of fossils about 20 million years old. The countryside was a tropical rainforest, with a lot more water around than there is now. Some of the bones are from giant pythons. One of these snakes was 7 metres long and 20 cm wide – pace it out, to get an idea! It has been named *Montypythonoides riversleighensis* (yes, truly!). There's another big python in the east too, called *Wanambi naracoortensis*. This one was 'only' 6 metres long. Similar fossils have been found in WA.

They must have been fearsome predators, lurking in ambush to

catch and coil around their prey. Either would easily have dealt with an unwary human. Equally, they were possibly rather slow-moving, especially after a large meal, and could be dealt with by a determined band of human hunters. Apparently snake is quite good eating, and there'd be enough tucker on one of these to keep a family going for a week.

But did they survive to encounter humans? There's no fossil evidence of these snakes' remains alongside human ones (unlike Diprotodons, hippo-sized wombats, whose bones have been found scarred by stone butchering knives). But there must have been *something* to come down to us today as these Dreamtime stories!