

Before 1788

Throwing Sticks

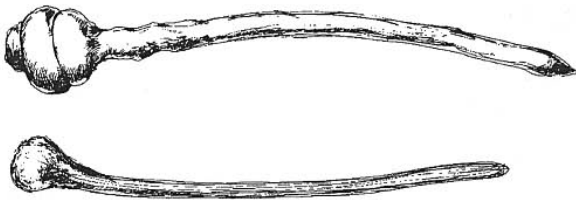
Throwing sticks were widely used by Aboriginal people. They were an extremely effective hunting tool.

Today, most people think of the “boomerang” when referring to throwing sticks.

Not all throwing sticks were designed to return. The main aim of the throwing stick was to kill or stun prey for food.

Throwing sticks, which were taken out by the men on hunting trips, were also used as digging tools, fire starters (when rubbed on soft wood) and scraping tools. In this way, the men would not have to carry too many implements.

In some ceremonies, the sticks were used (and still are today) to clap together.



Spear

The simplest form of spear consisted of a shaft of hard wood with a sharp point at one end. This point was hardened by heat from a fire and the shaft was also straightened by heating first then manipulating with hands.

More sophisticated spears had “blades” at the end. These spears had the advantage of being sharper (therefore more likely to penetrate an animal's hide) and some were barbed so that they would not fall out of an injured animal. This would mean that an injured animal would eventually fall from sustained damage by the spear's barbed blade.

Blades were made of stone, hardened wood and carved bone.

The blades were usually attached with string made from either hair, sinew or fur.

Pronged spears were used for hunting fish.

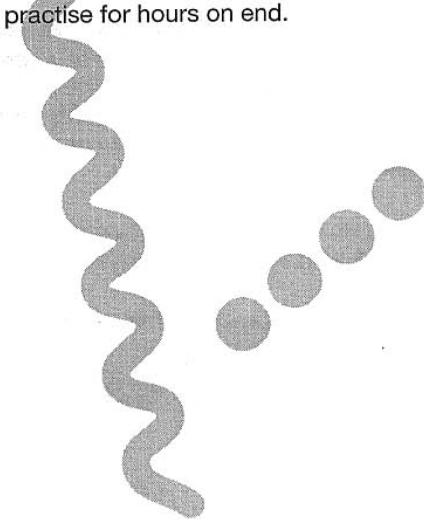


Boomerang

The name came from the Turuwal people who lived around the South Sydney region. “Boomerang” is an English version of the Turuwal name for the throwing stick. Other Aboriginal names for curved throwing sticks are birgan, barragadan & wonguin.¹

The curved nature of the throwing stick allowed it to “return” if the hunter missed.

The aerodynamic design of a curved throwing stick is quite sophisticated and takes a great deal of crafting to create. Depending on the angle of the curve, the stick behaves differently in the air. These varying characteristics were applied to different prey. It takes a great deal of experience to throw a returning hunting stick effectively and the boys of Aboriginal groups would practise for hours on end.



1. From Australia, J Stanton, The University of WA Press, 1989

Digging Sticks, Baskets & Dishes

These were the implements used by the women of the group in their important role of gathering food.

Women usually hunted for small animals, shellfish, insects and grubs as well as searched and dug for fruit, root vegetables and berries or nuts where appropriate.

Diets consisted of a mixture of food gathered and hunted by the men and the women and varied according to where the group lived and what season it was.

The women used digging sticks to find roots and grubs as well as dig out small animals from hiding places.

They used woven baskets to carry the food they gathered or shellfish and dishes made from bark to bring water or food.

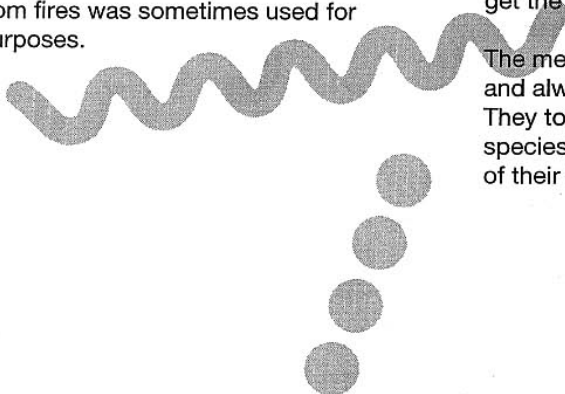


Fire

Fire was started by using friction, hard wood rubbed against soft wood, flint against flint. It is an extremely difficult and tricky task to start fire with friction and most groups on the move had one man who carried around a fire stick (smouldering lump of wood) which was used to start the next fire.

During a more permanent stay at a camp the fire was kept alive for cooking and heating in winter.

The smoke from fires was sometimes used for ceremonial purposes.



Fire Stick Farming

Many groups deliberately lit fires for a variety of reasons. The principle of these was to promote new growth for the next season. These fires were lit at the end of summer. The ash from the fire was an excellent fertiliser for new shoots and seedlings, creating a rich environment for animals to graze in.

Fire was also used to clear areas thick with undergrowth and dead wood to reduce the likelihood of bushfires.

Grinding Stones

These were used by the women to grind seeds or grains into flour. The flour was then used to make flat bread baked over the coals. As grinding stones were very large and heavy, they were left behind when the group moved on.

Hunting

The skills of the hunter were absolutely essential to the survival of his family and to his group.

Hunters used a variety of techniques:

Sneaking up on animals in the open, often using bushes, fallen trees or shade to hide behind.

Disguises such as bushes or feathers.

Lures, such as feathers to attract the attention of some curious animals.

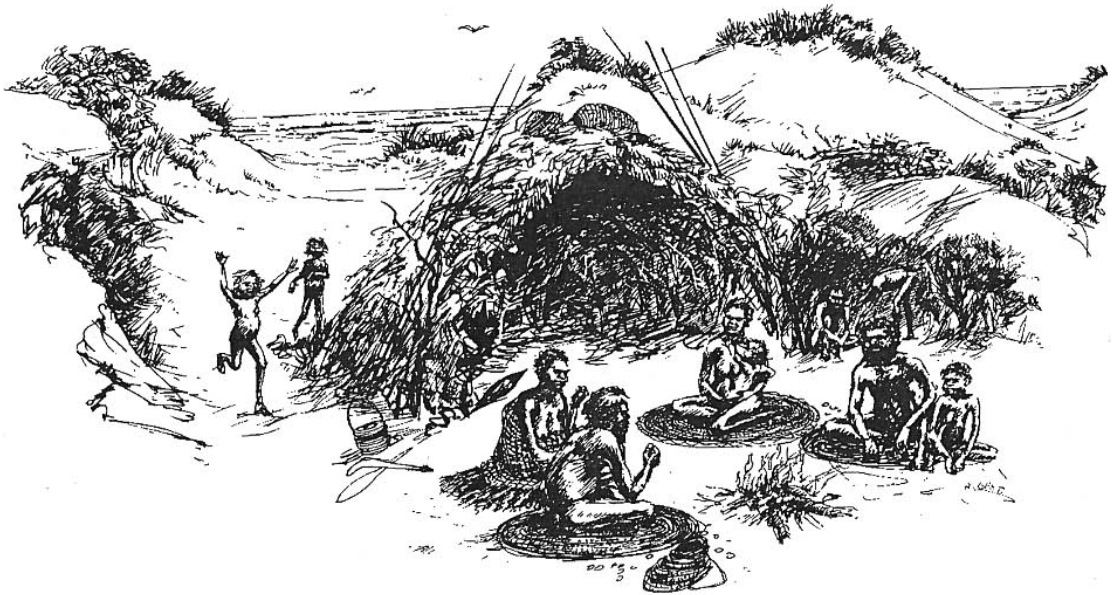
Immobility - hunters whose prey were fish had to stand absolutely still, often for hours in order to wait for a likely catch.

Men went hunting in groups.

They worked together and if one man missed with a spear or hunting stick another would more than likely get the prey.

The men would only hunt in their own homeland area and always hunted according to the season. They took great care not to over-hunt a particular species of animal or bird, ensuring the maintenance of their food supply.

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Seasonal Trails

People moved about their homeland according to the seasons. This seasonal movement has erroneously been referred to as "Walkabout", implying aimless wandering. It was anything but aimless. The Kurna people (around Adelaide) for instance would spend summer near the coast; around the swamps and lagoons of the Adelaide plains where it was cooler and water was abundant. In winter they would move up to the foothills that surround Adelaide to shelter in caves or trees and hunt the animals that inhabited the hills.

In the times when it was possible to accumulate food surpluses and food was abundant, large and relatively fixed gatherings were possible and ceremonial rituals and social activities could take place. When there was less food available or other seasonable factors made it necessary or desirable, the groups/clans became more dispersed. ²

Society

It is estimated that groups would spend about 3 hours each day gathering food. This was especially so when food and water supplies were abundant. The rest of the day was taken up with social, spiritual, ritual or educational gatherings and celebrations.

Everything was done for the group. Be it survival or spiritual. The happiness of an individual depended completely on the collective happiness of the group.

2. The Kurna Seasonal Trail Excursion - Teacher's Handbook, ASTRU, Aboriginal Community College, 1985
