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## DEEP PAST COULD HOLD CLUES FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Simplistic labelling of Aboriginal People as ‘hunter-gatherers’ or ‘agriculturalists’ hides the diversity of food systems developed by Indigenous Australians prior to European colonisation, according to a paper published this month in the journal *Archaeology of food and foodways*.

Dja Dja Wurrung Group CEO Rodney Carter is a co-author on the paper, which suggests that a more nuanced understanding of the way Aboriginal People procured food in the deep past could provide direction for a more sustainable food future.

“Aboriginal People sustained life over many millennia, through phases of extreme environmental change. Knowing more about how they did that could benefit us today in terms of food certainty and food security,” Mr Carter said.

“For years, the mainstream view was that Aboriginal Peoples supported themselves through foraging, prior to colonisation. The subtext is they foraged from an untouched ‘wilderness’, rather than an actively managed landscape.

“But recent research has – contentiously – challenged this notion, suggesting Indigenous Australians developed agricultural systems long before colonisation.

“People think of ‘farming’ as rows of crops, or animals in paddocks and barns. But among different civilisations, there are many techniques for producing food that don’t look like this.

“There is ample evidence that Aboriginal People actively modified the landscape to produce food and encourage growth of particular food sources. Whether that’s using fire, collecting and dispersing grains or fruits, or building fish traps.

“That might not look like farming in a modern sense, but it could be described as cultivation or gardening of the environment.

“In the paper, we argue that labels like ‘hunter-gatherer’ or ‘agriculturalist’ are colonist attempts to describe and define Aboriginal People within a Euro-centric point of view.

“Perhaps these simplistic ways of describing the lives of Aboriginal People in the deep past limit our thinking about possibilities in the present and future.

“Modern-day Dja Dja Wurrung People are busting out of that narrow view. We choose to define who we are. [We are farmers](#) – investigating new sustainable agricultural practices that incorporate traditional Aboriginal knowledge, Indigenous species, and Western science.

“We’re making some exciting progress that has the potential to improve food security and food certainty, as well as heal Country.

“We are also gardeners of the environment: we’ve developed a [Forest Gardening Strategy](#). **Galk-galk Dhelkunya** (‘to care for/to heal, many trees’) which is a

contemporary approach to caring for Country that is deeply rooted in traditional knowledge and practice,” Mr Carter said.

The paper, titled ‘[Transdisciplinary approaches to understanding past Australian Aboriginal foodways](#)’ (Westaway, et al) asserts that Australia is in a profound phase of reflection about itself as a nation and a place, following a series of extreme weather events, a global pandemic and, most recently, the failed referendum to recognise Aboriginal People in the Australian Constitution.

It suggests that Australia has also been undergoing a comprehensive revision of how it views its deep past – arguing that research should incorporate a range of disciplines to improve the quality, accuracy and relevance of our understanding.

Asserting that important insights can be gained from collaborating with Aboriginal People, the authors call for researchers to draw on knowledge systems from within and beyond academia.

“A good mark of scholarly practice is when it can inspire future research that supports a more sustainable future and helps address global challenges such as food futures and the threats of climate change,” the paper says.

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