RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Barmah-Millewa midden fish study

Barmah-Millewa midden fish study (2010-2012)

Funding: Living Murray Program of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority.

Investigators/researchers:
Dr Paul Humphries and the Yorta Yorta Nation

Description: Australia's lowland river systems are centres of biological diversity and productivity, but are also sites of major development of land and water resources. Many of them have become highly degraded since European settlement and the abundance, diversity and range of freshwater fish have declined as a result. While much effort has gone into trying to manage and conserve native fish and other wildlife in our inland rivers, we have little idea of what we should be managing for or what we should be restoring rivers to, since records prior to the major disturbance are usually nonexistent.

This collaborative study is the first of an anticipated much larger program that will describe the composition and condition of River Murray fish assemblages in pre-European times and establish benchmarks upon which future restoration can be based. This work will include a description of the significance of fish as food for Indigenous people. One of the project's principal aims is to engage the local Aboriginal community in the study.

This project aims to: establish a reference collection of fish bones, scales and otoliths (ear bones) for identification of fish remains; excavate one or more middens in the Barmah-Millewa district; extract fish and other faunal remains; and determine the composition, size and age of the fish that were eaten by the local people at known dates up to about 5000 years ago.

Outputs

Expected outcomes include conference presentations at national conferences, journal articles in national and international journals, a fish bone and otolith reference collection and preliminary recommendations for future research in this area and assessment of the utility of the approach taken.

Outcomes

This study will show if a zooarchaeological approach and determination of the exploitation, abundance and composition of fish in Aboriginal middens in pre-European times can inform restoration goals of natural resource management agencies. Depending on the abundance and composition of fish remains in middens, this study will make a significant contribution to providing benchmarks for restoration activities in the Murray Valley.

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