THE MAKING OF THE BUNDANON NAWI

INTRODUCTION

In 2011 a group of artists from Boolarng Nangamai Aboriginal Corporation, Steven Russell, Kelli Ryan, Noel Lonesborough, Kristine Stewart and Phyllis Stewart, together with ethno-botanists and artists Jim Walliss and Diego Bonetto, created a traditional bark canoe (a nawi) at Bundanon.

The canoe was based on information sourced from David Payne, a curator from the Australian National Maritime Museum. Early Colonial records state that a canoe had been created by local Aboriginal people living in the Shoalhaven in six hours. The Bundanon Nawi took eight hours to make from a Stringybark tree found on the Bundanon property. It is the first Aboriginal bark canoe to float on the Shoalhaven river in living memory.

Boolarng Nangamai artists had travelled to Beauval, Saskatchewan in Canada in 2010 to undertake a cultural exchange. There they learned about canoe making and on their return home they were keen to explore their own cultural history utilising their new skills.

Jim Wallis and Diego Bonetto are both artists who are interested in the way humans interact with plants (ethno-botany). They studied the way Aboriginal people of the South Coast have used plants and how plants have influenced their lives. Jim and Diego have undertaken many activities, such as string-making from specific plants found at Bundanon, to rediscover and recreate the original technique. Bark canoe making was a natural progression of their research into the many different uses Aboriginal people have for bark.

Jim and Diego invited the artists from Boolarng Nangamai to join them for Bundanon’s Siteworks event in September 2011 so they could explore canoe making together.

Steven grew up at La Perouse where past generations had used bark canoes on Botany Bay and the Georges River. Noel spent his youth along the Shoalhaven River and his ancestors were involved with the river both before and after colonisation. Phyllis and Kristine, who also grew up along the Shoalhaven River, came as weavers to make string or rope from bark and weave eel and fish traps. Kelli Ryan photo-documented the entire project.

Traditionally Aboriginal women were often the ones who used the canoes for fishing.

In the 1860’s Louisa Atkinson wrote about the Aboriginal people of Burrier and surrounds, in which she records:

“just below the navigable part of the (Shoalhaven) river, where its bed is no longer impeded by pebbles, is a low island covered with Casuarina paludosa. On this, or the neighbouring shore lived two aged women, one Nelly the wife of Jim, a dethroned sovereign, the other her blind companion.............................The women were generally met with on the river, in a canoe formed of a sheet of bark tied together at each end, and appeared to support themselves by fishing.”

Ethnobotany is the study of how a people of a particular culture and region make use of plants local to the area. Ethnobotanists explore how plants are used for such things as shelter, food, medicine, clothing hunting and ceremonies.
A suitable tree was selected – a Blue Leaved Stringybark- *Eucalyptus agglomerate*. The tree was cut at the trunk top and bottom, giving a canoe length of 3.5 metres. The bark was stripped vertically, leaving a strip to maintain a sap flow to the tree’s canopy.
The bark was thinned at both ends.

The bark was heated over a fire and folded at both ends.

The ends were tied with stringy bark rope.
The ends and cracks were sealed with grass tree (Xanthorea) gum, beeswax, paperbark and clay.

Paddles were made from bark.

Clay was used to make a hearth for the fire in the canoe.

Float testing the Nawi at Riversdale.
ABORIGINAL TOOL KIT
While working on this process, the makers became aware of the contrast between the modern tools used such as a tomahawk and an Aboriginal tool kit.

Using this kit and the collective knowledge of the tribal group, accumulated over hundreds of years and without written records, Aboriginal people built watertight bark canoes which could last up to four years of constant use.

Other tools not shown also include: a forked branch as a ladder, pieces of saplings to lever off the bark, a sharpened kangaroo leg bone as an awl to pierce holes in the bark and a water carrier sometimes made from the large sheath of the native Bangalow palm.

Grass Tree Gum, *Xanthorrhoea sp*, is very important to the Aboriginal technology— their “super glue”—used in making fishing and hunting spears, stone axes, woomeras and waterproofing canoes.

Aboriginal people knew that balls of gum formed on grass tree trunks during fires. Fires would have been deliberately used where the special gum producing trees occurred when a supply was needed. In the Shoalhaven area these occur in patches on the Beecroft Peninsula.
Beeswax and paperbark were used for sealing cracks and joints.

Bark fibres. These fibres were carefully pounded from the inner bark of plants such as stringy bark, brown kurrajong and native hibiscus.

These fibres could be twined into rope for binding the ends of canoes, fishing lines, nets and bags. Above is a fishing line made from the bark fibres.

A string mesh carry bag to carry tools made by Steven Russell from Boolarng Nangamai Aboriginal Art & Culture Studio.

The Bundanon Nawi on the Shoalhaven River.