

Bush Foods

Fact Sheet



Tropical Almond, *Terminalia catappa*. Image: QM, Jeff Wright.

Introduction

The geographical variation in Australia, from arid zones to lush rainforests, provides a diverse array of species of plant and animal life. Indigenous people of Australia traveled within their own traditional homelands sourcing seasonal foods from an extensive range of plants and animals. While these traditional practices were more common before European invasion, many groups still use bush food in their diet or for medicinal purposes.

Use of Resources

The knowledge of edible plants and animals has been passed down through generations, although in many cases this information has been lost due to changes in lifestyle and the movement of people from their traditional lands. Being keepers of the land, Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders have a cultural responsibility to respect and maintain their country. In many areas this responsibility is now shared with representatives from the Department of Natural Resources, who continue to work with traditional owners.

Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders never hunt and gather unnecessarily, collecting food for the group rather than for the individual. Plants and animals are an important element of culture, and there is little wastage. For example, if a kangaroo is killed, the meat is eaten, the fur used for coats and body adornments, sinew used as string, and the bones, teeth and claws used for ceremonial items, tools and body adornments.

Types of Food

A traditional diet depends on a person's spiritual relationship with the plants and animals of their country. Indigenous people are often forbidden to eat their totem (an animal or natural phenomenon which is the token or emblem of a group), or under cultural law may require another person to prepare it for them. Some foods are not to be eaten during particular seasons or ceremonial periods, and some foods are set aside only for certain members of the group to eat. For example, the liver or other internal organs of any animal may be set aside for the Elders or a special guest to eat.

Bush foods can be generally divided into 5 different categories:

Category	Examples
Salt Water	Crocodile, Sea turtle, Fish, Dugong, Sting ray, Crustaceans
Land Animals	Wallaby, kangaroo and other marsupials, Snake and goanna, Honey ants and other insects, Grubs
Fresh water	Turtle, Fish, Crocodile, Eels, Crustaceans
Land Plants	Fruits and berries – e.g. lilly pilli, lime, Nuts and seeds – e.g. bunya nut, macadamia nut, wattle seed, Grasses and leaves
Birds	Emu, Bush turkey, Quails



Spearing a crocodile. Image: QM, Edward Ryko, 1916.

Preparation of Food

Different foods have different ways of being prepared and consumed. Some foods are strictly to be prepared by men and others by women. In some ceremonies certain group members eat separately from the rest of the group.

There are many ways to prepare bush food, depending on the resources available. Common methods used by indigenous people to prepare traditional food are:

Method Used	Food Type
Grinding	Nuts, seeds
Roasting	Seafood and red meats
Boiling	Vegetables, meat stews
Steaming	Vegetables
Rinsing / Soaking	Poisonous foods, animals before cooking



The macrozamia (*Macrozamia moorei*) is poisonous and must be washed and roasted before eating. Image: QM, Gary Cranitch.

Queensland Bush Foods

Moreton Bay Chestnut or Black Bean

Castanospermum australe

The seeds of this tree are toxic, but can be eaten after much processing. The seeds are cracked and soaked in water, ground into meal, and made into cakes, which are roasted. Washing in water removes some of the soluble toxins, while roasting destroys other toxins.



The Moreton Bay Chestnut tree and seedpods. Image: QM.

Bunya Pine *Araucaria bidwillii*

The nuts of these tall pine trees were part of a very important social gathering in the mountains of south-east Queensland. Every three years groups would travel great distances to participate in bunya nut feasts, and particular trees were owned by particular groups. The seeds or nuts were eaten raw when unripe, or roasted when ripe. The seeds were also ground into flour and made into cakes.



Bunya Trees, their nuts and the marks of footholds cut in the trunk by Aboriginal axes. Image: QM.

Macadamia Nut *Macadamia integrifolia* and *Macadamia tetraphylla*

These tasty nuts are found on small to medium sized trees that grow in rainforests of southeast Queensland and northeast New South Wales. They are uncommon trees in the wild but a mature tree can bear up to 100 kilograms of nuts in a good season. Macadamia nuts add essential oils to a bush food diet and they are now popular worldwide.

Honey *Austroplebeia* spp. and *Trigona* spp.

Wild honey (sometimes called sugarbag) is found by searching for tiny flying bees or the small particles they drop at the base of trees under their nests. The tree is then climbed with the aid of a vine or notches cut into the trunk. Once the nest is broken open and the honeycomb taken out, the nest may be wiped with a bark cloth for extra honey. This cloth can later be soaked in water and shared amongst a group.



Macadamia nuts. Image: QM.



Aboriginal man climbing a tree using vines. Image: QM, Axel Poignant, 1950.

Fish from Moreton Bay

Most fish are caught using the familiar methods of nets or spears. Aboriginal people on Stradbroke and Moreton Islands often worked together with dolphins to catch mullet and sometimes tailor. In the winter months, when a shoal was spotted, hunters would splash in the shallow water and the dolphins would appear driving the shoal towards them. The Aboriginal men would form a semicircle of nets and spears, and then hunters and dolphins could catch large numbers of the fish as they were herded into the shallow water.



Fisherman with spear. Image: QM, Allan Easton, 1975.

Eugaries or Pipsis *Plebidonax deltoides*

Eugaries are a major part of the traditional diet of Aboriginal people along the eastern coast and off-shore islands of Australia. Women (and sometimes men) would gather on beaches with string bags to dig for these molluscs. They can be eaten raw or put on the fire where they cook in their own juices and can then be easily opened. Many other shellfish such as oysters were also eaten.



Darwin Moodanathi opening oysters on the beach. Image: QM, Richard Robins.

Further Information

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