



Boort's significant Indigenous history on a global scale

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ABC Regional News
12 February 2016

The largest collection of scar trees in the world including sacred artefacts comes from the small town of Boort in central Victoria with many pushing for a cultural centre to be built in the town.

There are more than 2,000 scar trees around Lake Boort.

"The most scar trees in the world made with stone tools," local historian Paul Haw said.

"I have never found anything that comes near it.

"Some of the scars were done before Captain Cook arrived."

Mr Haw said the trees were crucial to the local Dja Dja Wurrung people who lived in the wetland area known for its red gum forest, and used the bark in "all facets of their lives".

They were used to build canoes, shelters, shields, for grinding seeds into flour, for burials, for drying possum skins and for art works.

Three sacred bark artefacts are currently at the centre of negotiations between the Dja Dja Wurrung people and the British Museum having been taken from Boort in the 1850s and sold to the museum by pastoralist John Hunter Kerr.

Dja Dja Wurrung's Yung Balug clan elder Gary Murray wants them returned to the place they belong.

"It's a bit like, say, taking the Queens crown jewels out of London and exhibiting them in Boort - it doesn't fit spiritually, culturally - anyway you look at it," Mr Haw told ABC Central Victoria's Breakfast program.

"It's inappropriate for them to be in London when they belong to Boort."

A previous attempt at trying to reclaim the artefacts through the Federal Court in 2004 was unsuccessful.

Australia's first knighted Aboriginal descendant from Boort

Boort was one of the last areas in Victoria to be settled by white people in 1843 according to Mr Haw.

He said a large number of Indigenous people lived in the area based on the 3,000 cooking mounds found within a 20-kilometre radius to Boort.

Many from the local Yung Balug clan were documented through photographs taken by Scottish-born Kerr who owned the property Fernyhurst in Boort. Mr Haw said they were some of the first photographs to be taken of Indigenous people in Australia.

One of the iconic photos thought to be taken by Kerr features eight members of the Yung Balug family and an ancestor of Gary Murray.

Likely you or Kitty was the great-grandmother of Sir Pastor Douglas Nichols, who was Mr Murray's grandfather, the first Aboriginal person to be knighted; he also served as Governor of South Australia in the late 1970s.

"He probably achieved more than any other white man and yet he was an Aboriginal chap who descended from Boort," Mr Haw said.

Despite the significance of Boort's Aboriginal history Mr Haw was astounded the small town had not made its mark like other places throughout the country known for their Indigenous history.

"That's one mystery that I can't understand," he said.

Garage used to house artefacts

Mr Haw has spent his whole life in Boort and has been made an honorary caretaker of the Dja Dja Wurrung people.

Co-author of *Footprints Across the Loddon Plains - A Shared History*, he is also a collector of Aboriginal artefacts he is safekeeping in his garage.

Most of the 500kg of artefacts he inherited from his father's farm on the Loddon River and the rest has been added to by friends.

The collection contains many stones including ones used to sharpen yam sticks, stones used for grinding seeds, throwing stones and about 40 prized greenstone axes which Mr Haw said were traded all over the Riverina area and throughout Victoria and took about 100 hours to sharpen and shape.

"I don't regard them as my axes, they belong to the Dja Dja Wurrung and the Boort community, they must be put where everyone can enjoy them," he said.

"They must go in a keeping place."

Mr Murray would also like to see a cultural centre built at Boort that would display many items including the three sacred bark artefacts. To him they are not just historical items but spiritual objects.

"That's our connection to the Boort area," he said.

"[The Yung Balug clan's] DNA is all over them, their spirituality is all over them, and that's also our connection to them - it's better than a family tree."

He said the bark artefacts had hardly been displayed in nearly 170 years and he said it was important to educate the public about their significance.

"I think its colonialism, racism, and discrimination and all those evil things that we fight now, that grew out of all that - whilst that's the history it's bad history."

"I think we've got to correct it - the best way to correct it is for the British Museum to be more flexible in returning cultural material to not just our Yung Balug clan but to all groups around the world."