

Nukunu – the people of the Southern Flinders Ranges – Melrose Meandering with Dr Jared Thomas

Twenty-five club members, including 6 new members gathered on 6th April at Merriton to start our four- day expedition. Here we saw the spring on the Broughton River – still surprisingly flowing despite a dry summer.

Nukunu men Dr Jared Thomas, the William and Margaret Geary Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts and Material Culture at the South Australian Museum, and his uncle Kym Thomas were there to open our eyes to a view of their country. They generously welcomed us to their stories and culture.

Aptly, we proceeded to Crystal Brook for lunch. More water highlights followed: the creek at Melrose and also the brewery – being elegantly restored as a tourist facility. Beer making previously used a large portion of the creek water. We saw massive river red gums below Mount Remarkable and known as the “Shelter Trees” being the shelters that the Nukunu people built within them. Goyder’s Line and his memorial were nearby adjacent to the Mysterious “Cheese Tree”. At the well-organised Melrose Museum we were told the story of how early European settlers ignored Goyder’s science. Jared and Kym are working with the museum and the community to improve the representation of the Nukunu and their way of life.

We climbed down the 248 steps to dramatic Alligator Gorge, sampled some local fruits such as native cherry (nida) and learned of other food sources used by aboriginal peoples, who ate well in this harsh but abundant land.

We heard the Eagle story reflecting the shape of Devil’s Peak and some of us walked part way up the Peak and also The Dutchman’s Stern. Thanks to Modris Ozolins for a brief history of the optimistic but troubled settlement of the railway town of Quorn.

We ended our tour at Port Germein with its 1.5km wooden jetty, built for wheat transport. Anita Nedosyko, a marine biologist working with The Nature Conservancy, explained the importance of mangroves as fish nurseries and the need for healthy flows of fresh water from aquifers and rivers like the Broughton, where we had started. The abundance of marine life was used to the Nukunu advantage over thousands of years.

Anita described how pollution and rising temperatures at Port Pirie and Port Germein have caused sea-creature and sea-grass deaths - with resulting fishing restrictions and bans. She is working on a project to trial artificial oyster reefs around the State: the original shell reefs were fished out within a few decades of European settlement and then mined for their calcium carbonate.

Superb organisation and information from Acting President Tim Tolley, very ably assisted by Jen Tolley ensured that everyone was in the right place at the right time, well fed and bolstered with coffee. Thanks to Under the Mount for brilliant breakfasts, for generous dinners at the Northern Star Hotel and the Mount Remarkable Hotel and tasty lunches from cafes at Crystal Brook, Quorn and at the Melrose museum which included exceptional quondong (kurti) tarts. Thanks to everyone for their friendliness and many interesting conversations.

Tim Tolley expedition leader and Cathy Cox a wonderful wordsmith. 6-9th April 2021