

INTERPRETING TRADITIONAL CULTURE

AS LAND MANAGEMENT

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With the ever increasing concern about the correct management of our national estate and in particular national and State parks, it seems appropriate that the management of these areas must now look more closely at the management techniques that were in use long before European settlement took place in Australia.

Good management of national and State parks does not happen easily. In fact it is a very difficult juggling act considering all the factors that have to be included in any well prepared management plan. Over the past years values and opinions have steadily been changing. Government and the general public alike are now accepting aboriginal culture as an important pan of Australia's heritage

Within most national, State and regional parks there can be found evidence of aboriginal occupation or involvement this evidence comes in many forms, such as scarred trees, art sites, stone artefact quarries, campsites and burial grounds. Considering the importance of these areas and the ever increasing interest towards them by the public, it is becoming evident that planners and management alike have to take a serious look at their strategies in the design and management of national, State and regional parks.

To enable a broader view of management of these areas, all staff involved with parks and land management need to be educated about past practices and involvement by the traditional owners. A major part of this education would have to be the understanding of Aboriginal movement between the different areas and the Aboriginal seasons.

ABORIGINAL SEASONS OF THE NORTH-EAST REGION

For too long there has been a misconception about Aboriginal people as being nomadic, wandering over the landscape scraping a meagre existence. By understanding the seasons within the northeast we can start to see a defined organised way of life amongst the Aboriginal people who found that life could become more meaningful and the land could provide plenty for their needs. These seasons of the northeast region dictated and governed Aboriginal movements, but when a closer look at this movement is taken. It is realised that there is an organised land management program being implemented.

Aboriginal logic is really the difference between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal values. One of the many conflicts between these two groups during the early part of European settlement was the Aboriginal concept of fire farming. The burning of selected areas during autumn was seen as necessary by Aboriginals to reduce the fuel and regenerate the areas for the next season. This type of land management could possible have been a source of conflict between early settlers and Aboriginal people, in that the settlers

required the grasses to carry their stock over the winter months. Thus a possibility of conflict of values and views came to the forefront. Two hundred years later those conflicts, in one form or another, still exist.

'Walkabout' is a word that I don't care much for, to me it conjures up pictures of people wandering aimlessly about without reason. But Aboriginals never did a lot without reason. In fact everything had a good reason behind it. The movement of people across the landscape was dictated by the seasons within their region. Coutts (1981) discussed the relationship of Aboriginal movements to the seasons for the coastal, central western plains and Riverina regions of Victoria. However he did not discuss the northeast region. This region is important as Aboriginal tribes lived here quite well but their seasonal movements are not well documented. Only fragmented references from personal diaries of early settlers give a slight idea of what really happened. From speaking to several members of the Waradjeri community in Albury and by way of personal knowledge and experience of the northeast area. I have postulated in this chapter a relationship between Aboriginal movement and the seasons for the northeast region of Victoria.

Unlike some of the northern Aboriginal lands where they have up to five and sometimes six seasons in the one year. The northeast region provided four seasons and each one was excellent in its provision of food, shelter and coexistence with their neighbours. The Aboriginal seasonal names used below are taken from Stanbridge (1861).

To understand these seasons and the logic behind the movement over the land by Aboriginals, the spring season would be a good time to start.

Spring: 'Gna-Ileu' Sept/Oct/Nov

Spring time for the northeast Aboriginals started in October, and these people would move into the open plains areas. This was the time when all the waterholes were full, gullies were flowing with little creeks and the vegetation suitable for eating and medicine was abundant.

There was a feast to be had from the bird life that was breeding along the wetlands and creeks. This diet would have been supplemented by an abundance of vegetables and fruits that they found in that area.

Early spring saw the river flats along the Murray flooded due to the snow-melt and spring rains in the catchment areas. Conditions for living along the river flat were less favourable at that time than those on the open plains area so people would have understandably utilised the land to its fullest potential ([Figure 22.1](#)).

Summer "Cotchi" Jan/Feb/March

By the beginning of December Aboriginal people had moved in from the plains to the river flats. As the flooding had finished and the land was drying up quickly, both in the river

flats and the plains area From my observations of the plains area the natural availability of food resources, both meat and vegetables, would have sustained an increase in the numbers of people during that time. However, as the younger animals and birds left their habitats. easy food resources would have depleted and so would the vegetables and fruits. Hence the food resources on the plains were exploited enough and now there was another new food supply waiting along the river ([Figure 22.2](#)).

About this time an annual event took place on the river near Albury. Mungabarreena, now a picturesque picnic reserve on a bend in the Murray River, upstream from Albury, provided the setting for an annual gathering of several tribes from the northeast region and over the river in New South Wales. These gatherings are remembered by members of the local Aboriginal community.

Although the Mungabarreena Reserve is located on the New South Wales side of the river and in Waradjeri territory, most of the tribes that came here were from the Victorian side. These tribes were the Kwat Kwat, west of Wodonga and along the Victorian side of the river; the Duburoa, south of Wodonga and almost to Wangaratta. Then there was the Yiatmathong, who occupied the Kiewa and Mitta Mitta valleys. On the north side of the river around Old Tallangatta there was a sub-tribe of the Waradjeri called the Dharra Dhana (Dora-Dora). They came down and joined with the Waradjei at Mungabarreena (tribal names and locations as in Tindale 1974).

The reason for this unusually large gathering of tribes was the Bogong Moth Feast on the high plains in the alps (Flood 1980:39). At times there were large numbers of Aboriginals gathered at Mungabarreena for about a week, which wasn't long because the food resources would have been depleted very quickly.

Many ceremonies would have taken place, initiations, marriages, trading, settling of disputes, renewing alliances and friendships. When this was over one last ceremony had to take place before the trek to the alps and the Bogong Moth Feast would begin. This ceremony was receiving of permission to travel over someone else's territory.

As mentioned, the Yiatmathong controlled the Kiewa and Mitta Mitta Valleys, they also had control of the Alpine region on the Victorian side. Their southern most boundary extended to Hotham and ran along the highest ridge line of the Alps in an east-west direction. Because Mt Bogong fell within the Yiatmathong territory, permission had to be gained from them by the other tribes participating in the summer feast. Once this was done, the tribes would spend summer in the cooler climate of the mountains feasting on the protein rich Bogong moth.

By the end of February and early March it was starting to get cold in the high plains, so the people were making their way down to the lowlands and the river flats. As they were leaving, people set fire to many of the areas over the high plains and burned the dry grasses to ensure regeneration in the following year. Because of this practice it could clearly be seen that the open grass lands which the early settlers saw as an ideal resource for their cattle was in fact the result of Aboriginal involvement with fire farming over thousands of years.

Autumn: “Weeitt” April/May/June

Having arrived on the river by late March from the high plains, they would have found the Murray almost a string of waterholes and very low. Again the food supply was ensured because of the dry period over summer most of the birds and animals were congregating along the permanent waterways. Fish, turtles and crustaceans would also be easy meals for the hunters/gatherers Autumn period along the Murray River is generally, even today, pleasant ([Figure 22.3](#)).

During this time Aboriginal people may have made trips out into the plains and burned selected areas, reducing the fuel and ensuing regeneration for the following season. I believe another reason for the grass reduction may have been to force a portion of the animal population into the foot hills This action would have ensured that there would be a food supply nearby for the winter period.

Winter: “Myer” July/August/September

Movement from one area to another was usually signalled by a change in the weather This signal between autumn and winter was most likely the second heavy rainfall toward the end of autumn this meant that there would be a reliable supply of water in the foothills The first heavy rain would have filled some of the water pockets but not enough to make the small creeks run, but the second heavy rain would have filled the remaining water pockets and then overflow them to become creeks, thereby ensuring a reliable water supply for the people.

The foothills provided not only food but also ideal natural shelters in amongst rock outcrops. Add the tree cover of the area and it became a very warm winter retreat area ([Figure 22.4](#)).

Food was not a problem as grass reduction on the plains area ensured that the animals would not be very far away. Winter growth in vegetables and herbs and edible plants was also ensured.

Springtime was the beginning of a new season of hunting and moving and the arrival of spring saw the people again moving into the plains area and becoming a part of the environmental cycle that was unbroken for thousands of years before European settlement.

CONCLUSION

One of the main reasons why the land provided a surplus of food for Aboriginal people was due to the management practices that they used, in particular, fire farming. Aboriginal movement over the land during the seasons also had a decided effect on what

the land would provide. Their short periods of occupation in areas ensured that their impact on the environment was minimal.

Today these exact practices cannot be followed to the letter, but the Aboriginal pattern of seasonal movement and fire farming should be studied and understood to the fullest extent in both environmental and ecological aspects. This knowledge should then be seriously considered in all planning and management of national, State and regional parks.

For this knowledge to be included in planning and management strategies, a program should be developed whereby all planners and management and ranger staff are encouraged to participate in the learning process of Aboriginal culture and land management practices, within their own regions.

I believe that by promoting this type of program it will allow better communication between all groups involved in land management and it might also be the answer to improving liaison and relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups with vested interest in parks at all levels.

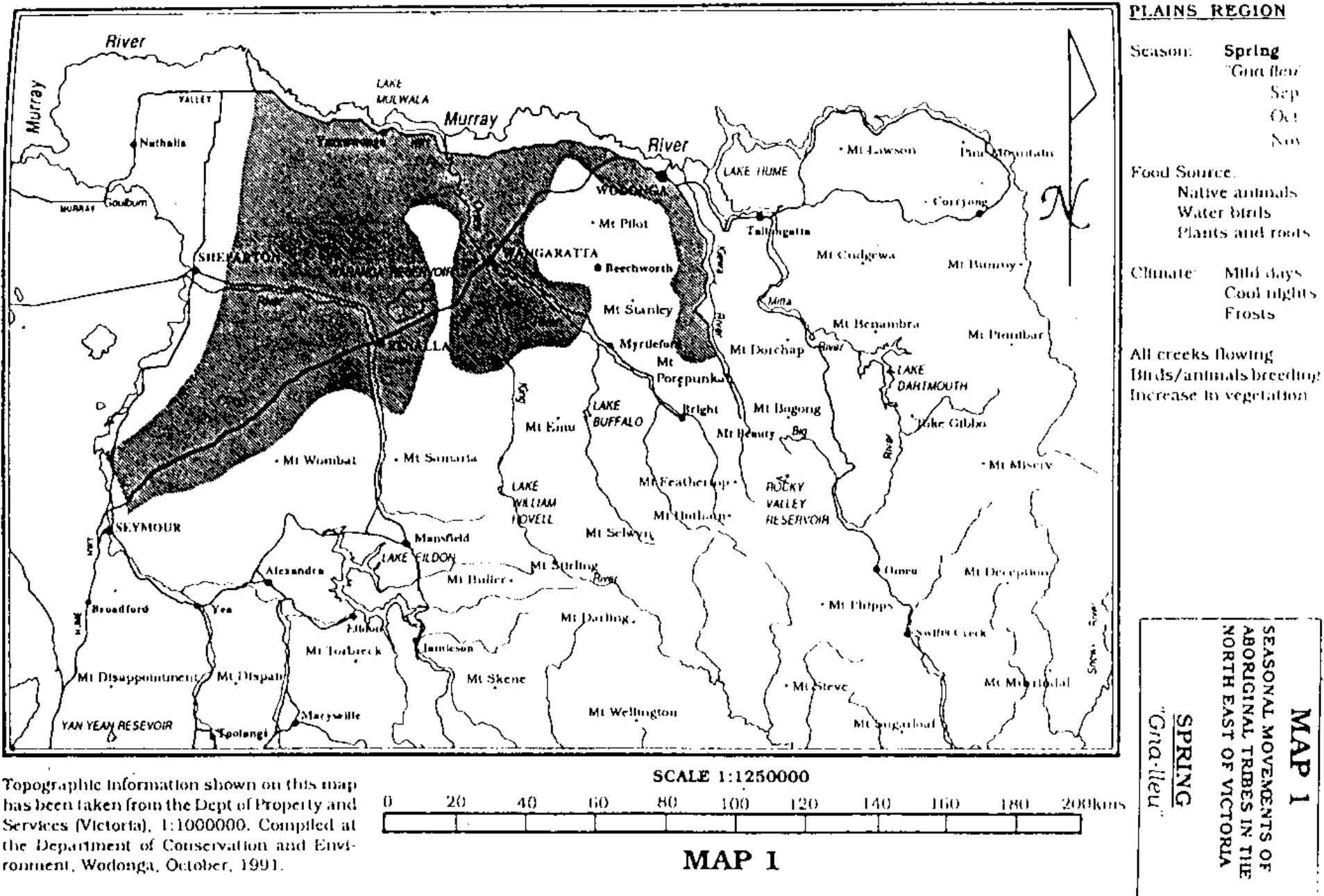
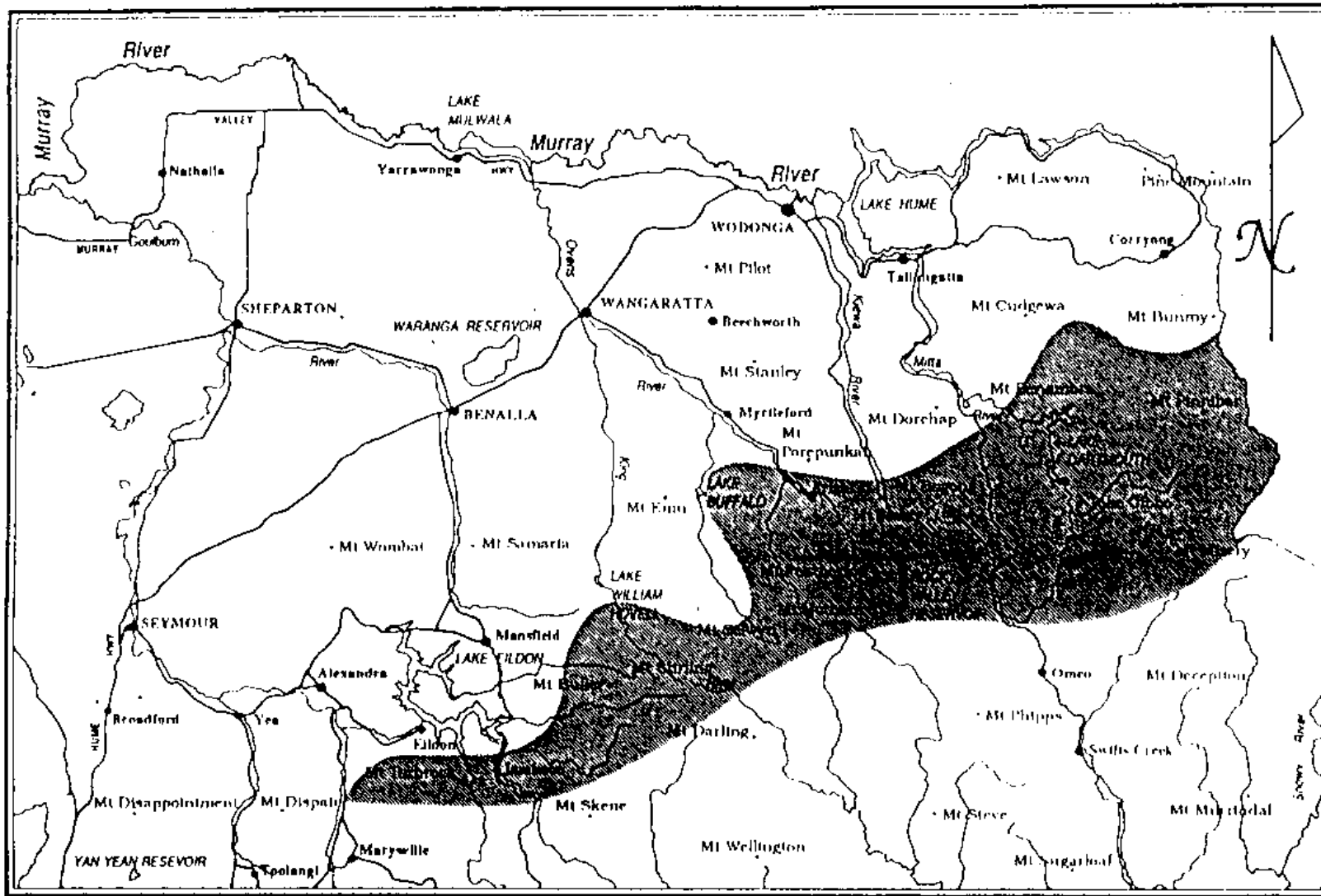


Figure 22.1 Seasonal movements of Aboriginal tribes in the northeast of Victoria. Spring 'Gna-llu'.



ALPINE REGION

Season: Summer
"CATCHI"
Jan
Feb
Mar

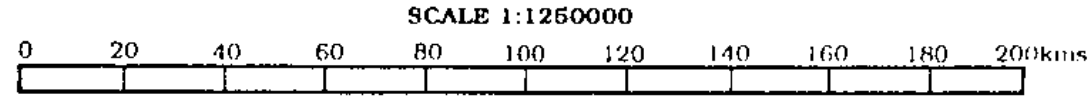
Food Source:
Bogong Moth
Native herbs and
Vegetables

Climate: Warm days
Cool nights

Bogong moths provided
a high protein diet and
the high plains provided
relief from the heat of
summer on the plains

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Topographic information shown on this map has been taken from the Dept of Property and Services (Victoria), 1:1000000. Compiled at the Department of Conservation and Environment, Wodonga, October, 1991.



MAP 2

MAP 2
SEASONAL MOVEMENTS OF
ABORIGINAL TRIBES IN THE
NORTH EAST OF VICTORIA
SUMMER
"CATCHI"

Figure 22.2 Seasonal movements of Aboriginal tribes in the northeast of Victoria Summer 'CATCHI'

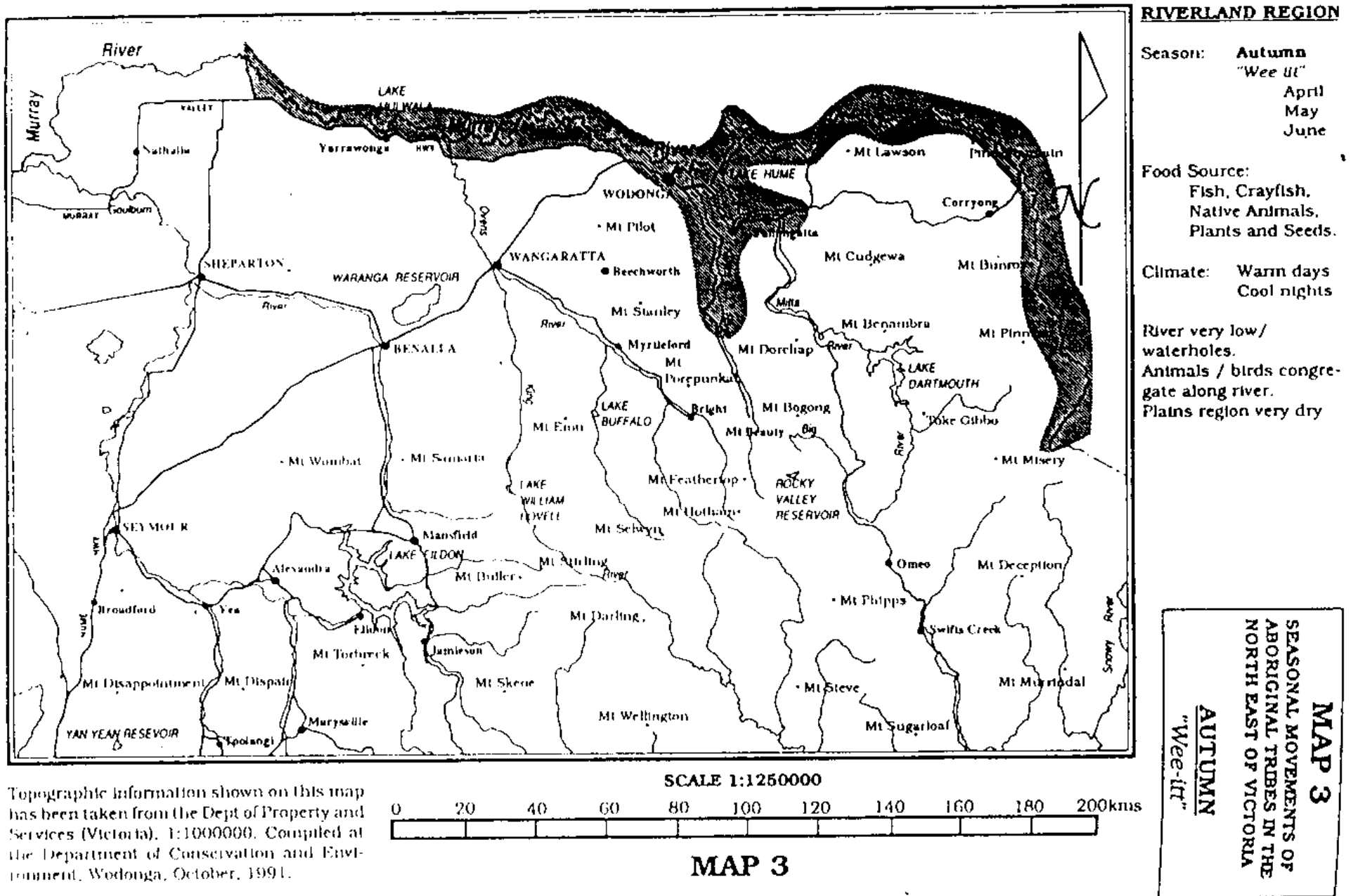


Figure 22.3 Seasonal movements of Aboriginal tribes in the northeast of Victoria. Autumn 'Wee-itt'.

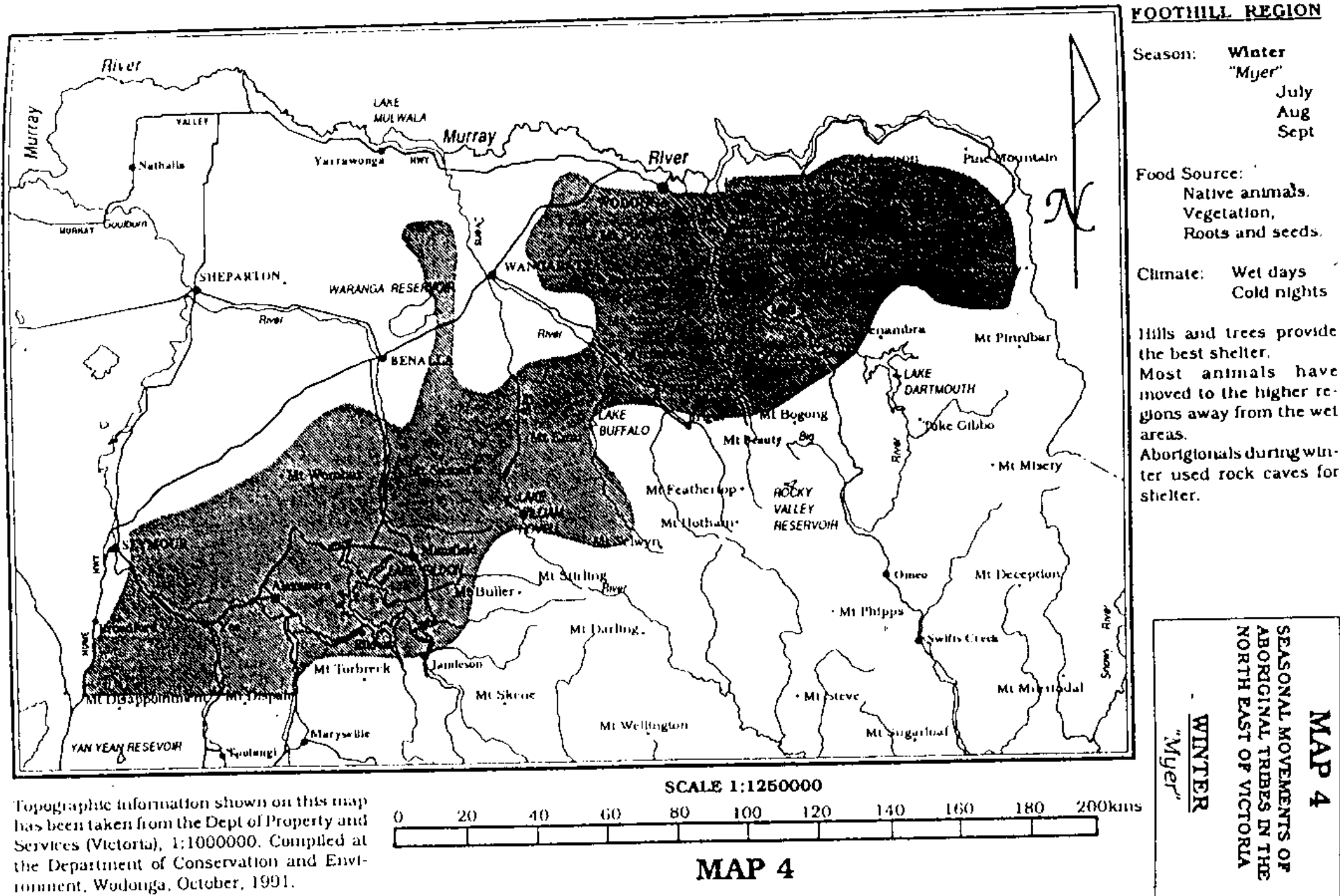


Figure 22.4 Seasonal movements of Aboriginal tribes in the northeast of Victoria, Winter 'Myer'.