

A Day on the Beach

In the early morning light the first bright red streaks of sunlight rose above the sea mist created by strong seas churning and rolling, thrashing the shore. The light revealed one of the many beaches along the far south of the eastern NSW shores.

White cliffs cascaded into the high rising seas and waves broke against the numerous rocks nestled at their edge. This caused the heavy sea mist to rise to the tops of the cliffs. From there they crept steadily through the large trees and dense forest.

Along the wide beach the heavy waves crashed onto the sandy shore bringing with them huge pieces of seaweed, torn from the depths of the sea, to lie in great heaps on the shore. Seagulls screamed and cried out as they flew over the pieces of dead fish, crabs and sea urchins swirling in the water as it rolled onto the shore. The cold southerly wind blew the dry sand so that it rose like sprays of water along the beach that seemed to go on forever.

High above the mist a great sea eagle glided through the air searching for his first meal of the day. He rose high to the top of the cliffs, his loud screeching call mingling with the sound of the wind. From high above he could see the beach, where the sea rolled into the lake surrounded by thick forest, swamps and white sands. Further back the river curved into the forest and beyond to the mountains. The eagle's wings flapped and then stopped; the bird floated in the air in the strong winds. The cold winter was almost over but the harsh southerly winds still blew as if they would never end.

Just behind from the beach the morning light revealed the first stirrings as the men left the camp to hunt. They were going to the rich grassy flats up river to find the big mob of kangaroos and they

Walkun

had a long day's travel ahead. The women and children left the camp soon after. They headed for the beach carrying their babies and net bags, coolaman and digging sticks. The sticks, which had many uses, were made from strong wood hardened in the fire.

The children went with the women and were taught early in life how to hunt and collect food, catching small animals, lizards and birds, and having lots of fun doing it. They hunted as they walked along. As they reached the beach the women fished in the high tide. Their lines were made from plant fibre. To produce good strong string the fibre had to be freed from the plant tissue by being heated, soaked and beaten or sometimes chewed. The two-ply string was made by rolling the fibre along the thigh. Fish hooks were made from shell including walkun shell.

As they reached the rocks some of the women found the spots where they wanted to fish while others started to search for other foods around the rocks, collecting shellfish like mussels and pippies, found in the sand at the edge of the water. They searched by twisting their feet in the wet sand. The pippies rose to the top of the sand and were big and plentiful.

Crabs were collected by the children with lots of squealing and laughter going on. The fishing women were doing well, catching goppers, parrot fish and leather jackets and a good assortment of rock fish. They were good at fishing and happy with their catch. As they'd done well with the fishing they decided to have a feed. They gathered wood and made a fire near the rocks. As the flames died down they put their fish on the coals as well as the assortment of other seafood, crabs and small octopus that the children had caught. They all sat around, had a feast and then settled down while some dozed in the warm sun. When the children went for a swim and the babies slept the women talked and laughed, happy and content in this beautiful place.

The time moved on and the sea settled. As the tide went out the women started to move. They had to keep gathering food for the evening meal, while the men would soon be back at the camp with what they'd caught during the day. Collecting their digging sticks, the women went to look for walkun, a favourite food that could only be gathered at low tide. Walkun are a big broad shellfish, a type of snail, which live in deep crevices and have to be prised off the rocks, which is what the women did with their digging sticks. At times they



Children gathering food from the shoreline (drawing by Steven Thomas)

would feel for the walkun with their feet and then dive down and prise them off the rocks, but most times they were so plentiful they could just walk around at low tide and get large walkun. Even the children could get them this way. They only ever took what they needed to eat for the evening meal.

By early afternoon the women and children arrived back at the camp, having collected plenty of fish, shellfish, yams and vegetable food for the day. They gathered wood and rekindled the fires for cooking. Water was needed and it was collected in wooden containers that were taken to the spring and filled. Sometime later the men returned. On this day they had kangaroos and started to prepare them for cooking and sharing with the clan. Nobody went hungry in an Aboriginal camp; whatever was left over, the dingoes ate.

This time there was food for all, but at times the men would come back to camp empty-handed, for although there was plenty of game in the area it was sometimes difficult to catch. At these times members of the clan would live on what the women and children were able to gather. Fish, shellfish and vegetables are a much more reliable food source than the game and more often than not it would be the women who were the major providers.

Kangaroos were hunted in all areas, more often in the heat of the midday sun when they were drowsy and more easily caught. They were the largest animal hunted and were of great significance to the

Walkun

way of life of all traditional Aboriginal groups. They were a major source of meat, their bones were useful in making many implements and their skin was made into water carriers, rugs, cloaks, and babies were wrapped in or laid on the fur side of the skin. Strips of kangaroo fur were worn around the women's waist as a type of skirt or girdle.

As the food was being cooked the men went to their area, like a workshop, where they mended their hunting implements and equipment. For instance, replacing a barb on a spear. This was made then placed on the spear shaft, tied with kangaroo sinew and stuck with a gum made from the grass tree. Other things that needed to be fixed or made, like carving out a bowl for one of the women or preparing an animal hide were done at this time.

Soon the food was ready and everyone gathered around to eat and enjoy. There was much talking and laughter; these were happy times. Yarns were told about the day; funny yarns. Once the children were full they ran off to play. The boys often played games where they practised their throwing skills, or toy spears were thrown at rolling targets, like fur rolled up and tied into a ball. They imitated the men with their hunting skills. The girls played string games and with stick dolls rolled in fur and decorated. They spent a lot of time with the older women, learning how to make baskets and bags.

The children were loved and protected and were taught at an early age about their culture and life. The elders of the tribe were looked after as they were important people who made the final decisions as to what happened in the clan. The elders knew all the laws and customs and they were treated with great respect.

As the children ran and played the men and women gathered into a group and different people got up to talk. There were screams of laughter as the story was told with the storyteller doing all the actions; telling stories about what happened that day. It was a good day and everyone was contented and happy.