SOME ABORIGINAL WALKING TRACKS AND CAMP SITES IN THE DOUGLAS SHIRE, NORTH QUEENSLAND

C. R. MCCRACKEN

Mossman, North Queensland

INTRODUCTION

The Douglas Shire is a small coastal shire in the wet tropics of North Queensland, lying between Buchan Point in the south and Bloomfield in the north (Figure 1). It is dominated by steep rainforest-covered mountains with a narrow coastal strip, rising from sea level to 1370m in only 6km. Annual rainfall varies from 1000mm in the south to 3750mm in the north. It is a very well watered district with four main rivers and several good creeks, all of which are very fast-flowing. Before clearing began, two-thirds of the Shire was under heavy tropical rainforest, the other third was timbered grassland (eucalypt and wattle) with some melaleuca and mangrove swamps. There are also beaches, sand ridges, mangrove-lined rivers and creeks, and some salt pans.

My interest in Aboriginal walking tracks in this region began in the 1920's, when I was a young lad. We lived on a farm on the banks of the South Mossman River where we often met local Aborigines, the men all carrying their spears wherever they went. Sometimes there were strangers with them who said they came from Kuranda, Bloomfield, Daintree or other distant places. There were no direct roads to these places that we knew of and we learnt that they used their own walking tracks.

As a pig hunter around cane farms, I often saw such tracks in the rainforest and at times used them for access to cleared land. As a bush walker I also recognised and used these tracks. The more I saw and learned of the tracks and the campsites along them, the more I wanted to know. I recognised that they were a part of our history that was fast being lost in the clearing of land for agriculture, roads, power and overhead telephone lines. Consequently, over the years I have mapped more than 500km of these tracks (see Figure 2) and have come to realise that I have only scratched the surface.

The tracks were used by Aborigines in the daily gathering of food. They led along streams to good fishing places, to campsites, to places where water and firewood could be obtained, and to different areas for the hunting of special animals and seafood. They also went to places where spear-sticks grew in rich sheltered areas on the edges of rainforest, or where there were special fruit and nut trees that were gathered once a year. The tracks were also used as travelling routes for social gatherings or meetings of the tribes.

To keep these tracks open, people broke any young growing plant at hip-height, not completely off, but rather cracking it and leaving it at an angle about 90°. As very few rainforest trees sucker, it took years for a young tree to heal and begin to grow upright, so they grew with a characteristic bend in them. Such trees are still to be seen today. Fallen vines and lawyer cane were hammered between two stones to be cut.

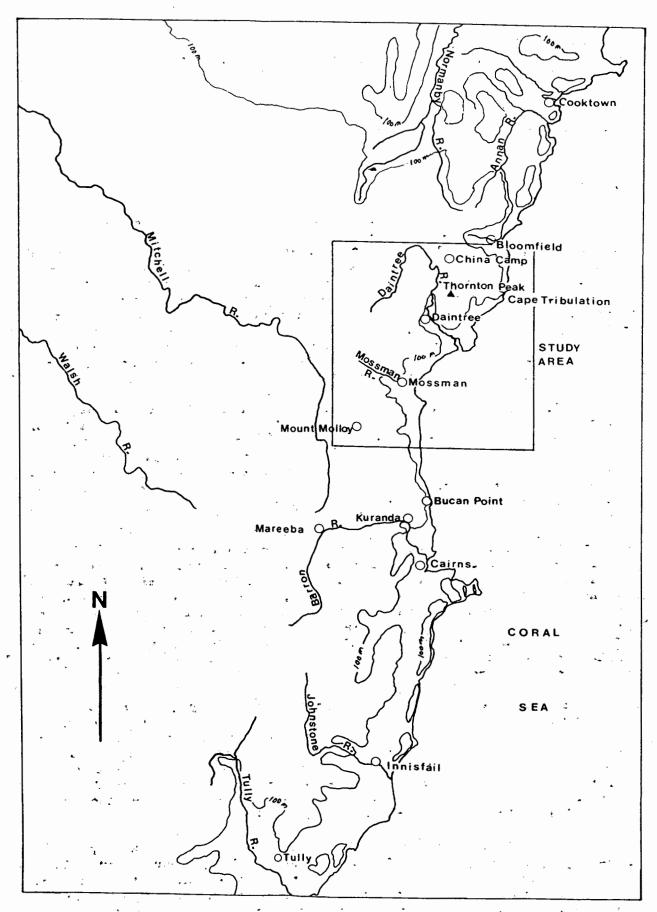


Figure 1. Location map of the Mossman District, Douglas Shire, North Queensland

FINDING AND MAPPING THE TRACKS

Some tracks are easy to walk along as they are now maintained as roads. My father, who came to the district in 1905, told me that some native walking tracks were used by cattle men to move stock and that these were also easy to follow. Across the Daintree River, some tracks were used by early settlers to get to their properties from the sea or river. These took a lot of finding and following in places, especially where land had been cleared. In some of these areas, trees had regrown since the early settlers deserted their farms. In untouched rainforest the task was easier. As I had worked or hunted all over the shire, I knew it backwards and had seen or walked on some part of many a track. Thus, I always had a starting or finishing point.

Wild pigs and cassowaries use the tracks; thus one can waste time following a pig road that goes into a gully feeding place. From experience I have found a number of ways of recognising Aboriginal walking tracks and distinguishing them from animal tracks as follows.

- 1. The presence of discarded artifacts such as stone axes, nut-cracking stones and hammers.
- 2. The presence of trees that have an unusual shape at hip-height, which means they had been cracked to keep the track open.
- 3. Stony parts of an Aboriginal track will be avoided by animals, which will find a less stony side track.
- 4. With little knobs in the terrain, people will go over the top but will stick to the centre so that they can see both sides. An animal will go around the side, usually the lee or western side, into the saddle.
- 5. At streams, people generally used crossing stones. Pigs and cassowaries crossed where there were fewer stones.
- 6. Wild pigs make a cutting with their cloven hooves when going into gullies or creeks.
- 7. On man-made tracks, a very slight depression, about 30cm wide in the line of travel, shows in some places; these are easier to see in the wet season.

At times I have lost a track, but my experience and knowledge of where it was going usually helped me find it again. During some 60 years and thousands of hours and kilometres of walking, I have walked on parts of tracks several times in the process of relocating them.

Two of the tracks are like highways going north-south, with a lot of cross-tracks connecting them. The Western Highway travelled in rainforest, keeping to the foothills of the main ranges. The Eastern Highway was near the sea shore where about half the track went through timbered grassland and where people camped on the sand ridges and beach fronts.

The remainder of this paper describes the route of some of these tracks in detail, together with other relevant information such as the location of campsites and archaeological remains, the resources used in different localities and some details of their use. Figure 2 provides a

rough guide to the location of the tracks and campsites, but the routes are best followed using topographic maps of the district, either the 1:100,000 (Rumula 7964 and Mossman 7965) or the 1:50,000 series (Rumula 7964-I, Thornton Peak: 7965-I, Mossman 7965-II, Adeline Creek 7965-IV). A large scale topographical map locating the tracks has been deposited with the Heritage Section, Department of Environment and Conservation, Brisbane.

THE WESTERN HIGHWAY

The Western Highway went from Bloomfield through China Camp and Daintree to Mossman, then up the range to the Mitchell and upper Barron River areas (Figures 1 and 2). The only open wooded grasslands are at either end of this track. The rest of it travelled through heavy rainforest. There are two routes from China Camp to Daintree (Figure 2). The western one was a dry weather track and went by Gold Hill then followed the Daintree River with several crossings, all flood-prone. Later it became a stock route and now is part of the National Horse Trail from Cooktown to Melbourne. The other route came by the McDowall Range and the western side of Thornton Peak. This was a wet-weather track. It became a miner's pack track, and in 1964 the electricity power line to Cooktown was put on it. It is now called the CREB access track (Cairns Regional Electricity Board). Both tracks join up near the last farm on the upper Daintree River.

From this track, farm Track No.1 (Figure 2) goes west over a range through rainforest that has three long narrow strips of eucalypt and wattle trees along it. Keeping to the ridges between two creeks, the track climbs to 550m before dropping down into the headwaters of the Daintree River, an area known as The Valley. No.1 track has been used to move cattle along since the 1950's. I have walked this track three times. It has been badly eroded by cattle and is not a good track to walk on. There were several stone axes and nut-cracking stones with their hammers along it. Nut-cracking stones are fairly flat and about 30-45cm square by about 8cm thick. Generally they are found at the foot of the Johnstone River Almond tree (Elaeocarpus bancroftii), or at camp sites or resting places. The stones have several holes worn in them from cracking open the nuts to get at the kernels. These taste like almonds and were used by early settlers in cakes.

Track No.1 passed close to a spring whose waters and clay had medical and healing powers. This interesting fact was told to me by Peter Fischer. Peter and his father Dick Fischer are Aboriginal, and very good friends of mine. Dick is in his nineties and Peter is about seventy years old. We had lots of talks and Peter walked on Tracks 1 and 2 with me.

The next western track, No.2 (Figure 2), goes to the same valley on the upper Daintree. It starts about 4 km downstream from No.1, near where Aborigines gathered edible stones in the 'dry' river, an overflow of the main river. These stones were of different colours, purple, pink, brown, yellow and white. They were soft and flaky, and were either eaten on the site or were taken back to camp to eat. The first part of Track No.2 was used by bullock teams to haul timber out at the turn of the century. Later, the entire track was used to move cattle to and from The Valley. I walked this track once with Peter Fischer, who had been reared on the property where the track starts. He had helped to muster cattle in the Valley and to move stock. This interesting trip

was to find a painting site. We completed a circle and returned by Track No.1. The paintings were near some falls, and Peter said his people used the track past the paintings as a route to the Mitchell River (Figure 1).

Peter pointed out old side tracks that went off Track No.2. This whole track was very good to walk along and plain to see, although it had not been used by cattlemen for 30 years and few people had walked along it since then. There are three narrow belts of eucalypt and wattle along this track, all near water and following the ridge along. Our dinner stop was in a saddle just beyond one of the eucalypt strips. Peter got water from a creek nearby. I said it was an eerie or spooky place. Peter pointed to a tree which had a fig growing on it with roots coming to the ground and said:

"Two natives were walking along this track when they met a tribal enemy. He speared one and chased the other whom he could not catch. The wounded man ran and climbed up the tree where he was found and speared to death."

I later questioned Peter's father (when he was 86 years old) about the spearing. It had not happened in his lifetime, but was told around the camp fires when he was young; so, the spearing must have happened over 100 years ago.

At another place, Track No.2 went through some boulders where no animal could walk. The surface of the boulders was rough, but smooth where each foot was placed. How many feet had trodden those boulders to make them so smooth?

The Western Highway continues south from the start of Track No.2, along the Daintree to its junction with Stewart Creek. From here people detoured to gather edible clay which was carried away to be eaten later. Dick and Peter told me that both clay and stones were eaten only when other food was in short supply.

The Western Highway followed Stewart Creek upstream and went onto the Bamboo Creek/Barrett Creek Plateau. The power line was put along this part of the Western Highway to Daintree in 1950. Track No.3 (Figure 2) branched east on the plateau, down to Bamboo Creek, crossed this creek to go over the Dagmar Range and reached the beach now called Wonga. Dick Fischer told me that Wonga was a meeting place for the tribes. I had found several campsites in an area about 2km long by 1km wide, and had wondered why there were so many. It was an ideal place to camp, with plenty of freshwater springs, a lagoon, melaleuca and palms to build shelters, sand to sleep on, and a nearby reef exposed at lowwater from which to gather food. This meeting place was also on the Eastern Highway and must have been much used. The Western Highway left Bamboo Creek/Barrett Creek plateau for Whyanbeel Valley which has several good creeks for spearing fish and hunting. Next it went over a low range to Saltwater Creek with a camp site on sandy loam and edible clay close by. This site is now a sugar cane paddock.

Track No.4 (Figure 2) went eastwards from Saltwater Creek to a large tidal swamp with lots of reeds. Mangroves surrounded a low ridge with the mouth of Saltwater Creek nearby and a beach, now called Newell. In the 1930's I chased wild horses in the area, and ducks and geese were plentiful on the swamp. Now it is drained, the sand ridge cleared and all under sugar cane.

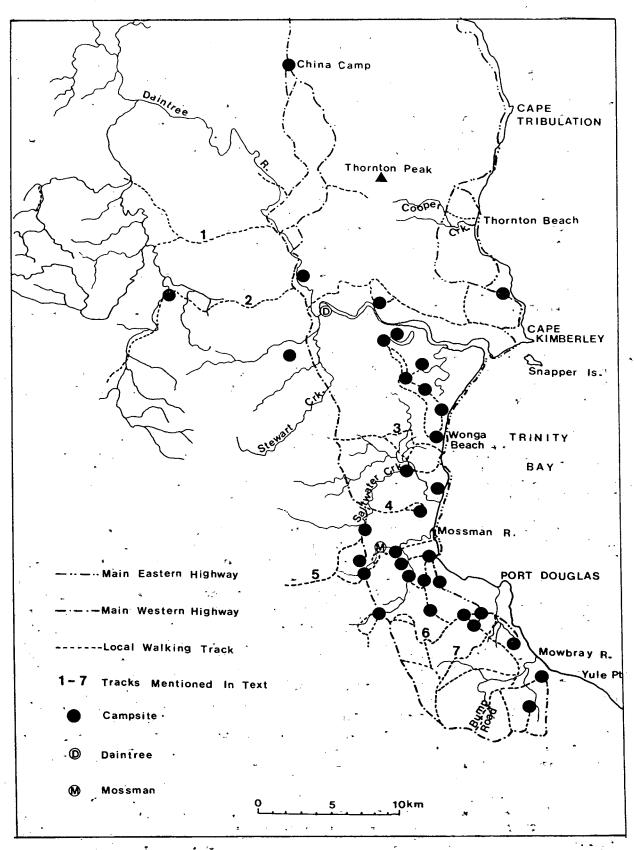


Figure 2. Some Aboriginal walking tracks and camping sites, Douglas Shire, North Queensland.

The Western Highway left the camp on Saltwater Creek to go over a small range to the Mossman Valley where there are campsites on coarse sandy loams on the North and South Mossman Rivers. I have worked on farms where the camps had been. There the soil was black with ash and charcoal even though the land had been under sugar cane from 30 to 70 years. Stone artefacts are still being found, even though stones are picked up every four years when the land is ploughed in preparation for cane planting.

Along Track No.5 (Figure 2), in the Mossman Gorge area of the North Mossman River, there are several rock shelters and two painting sites which are very weathered. Two of the rock shelters have shells of mangrove mussels (Polymesoda coaxans) in them, while one has a nut cracking stone that forms part of the shelter floor. This is the only one I have seen in a shelter.

From the North Mossman, the Western Highway continued over a low saddle to a camp site on the South Mossman. This site must have been popular as it was still being used in the 1920's. I was informed that people from other areas used to visit there. These visitors could have been some of the people I had met lower down the river when I was a child. Crossing the South Mossman, the track went up a ridge. This ridge was under sugar cane in 1905 when my father was working here. At that time all cane was grown on the hillsides, not on flat lands. Later this ridge became a horse track from Mt. Molloy to Mossman, then later still in the 1950's, a telephone line. The highway reached the top of this long spur and levelled out at Devil Devil Creek. Two side tracks, Track No.6 and Track No.7 (Figure 2), went east to the coast.

I find Track No.6 extremely interesting as it goes past a large nut-cracking site of over 350 holes. The stone floor of this gully is in rainforest. There is a rock basin on the same rock with a small stream flowing right under the basin. Apparently it was used to wash some kind of food to get rid of the poisons. A lot of zamia trees (Cycas media) still grow on an eucalypt ridge nearby.

Track No.6 continued east down a ridge to Cassowary Creek Valley to another camp site. Cassowary Creek Valley was noted for its large and different types of fig trees. Peter informed me that many kinds of fig trees were used by his people. One, called Creek Fig as it grew near water, was used to make string. Another large fig tree was used to make a kind of cloth. They cut out a piece of bark from the tree, soaked it in water for two days, then pounded it with a stick to break off the woody parts. This left a fibrous type of cloth. Other fig trees were used as fire-sticks to start fires. Leaves of another type were used as sand paper; its common name is Sandpaper Fig. Cassowary Valley would have been a rich hunting ground as turkeys, cassowaries and flying foxes (bats) all feed on the figs. The valley's stone was also good material for stone tools. An old quarry apparently existed there as, in the 1950's, lots of partly-made stone axes were found when the Shire Council obtained its materials there.

As Track No.6 climbed east out of Cassowary Valley, it crossed over a low range of rainforest to come to open wooded grassland and the sea. It passed a freshwater spring in the hills which has an old shell midden heap nearby. Next it came to flat land with a lagoon. The track went past the lagoon, crossed the Eastern Highway and came into a mangrovelined creek with salt pans containing mussels and fish.

The other track from Devil Devil Creek, Track No.7, wound through about 3km of rainforest on top of a range, before it dropped down a ridge of open forest and grassland to reach similar mangroves, creek, salt pans and the sea. There, a huge shell midden near fresh water was located just out of the mangroves and salt pans where salt was gathered. This locality is now a prawn farm. The Eastern Highway also crosses Track No.7 and here the largest midden I have ever seen in the shire once existed. Bulldozers have since flattened it for cane growing. Since it has been under cane I have checked the site many times and have always found stone tools.

After leaving Devil Devil Creek, the main Western Highway continued for 3km and then, in open forest grassland, split three ways:

- 1. west down the Mitchell River tributaries (not shown);
- 2. straight ahead to Kuranda and the Barron River (not shown);
- 3. east to a dense rainforest ridge and down this ridge on what was to become known as the Bump Road.

This last was a very old trade route and not only for Aborigines. In 1877, the track was cleared for wheeled vehicles and was used by teamsters and coaches to supply mines in the hinterland. The route started its descent on a spur of open forest grassland where the ocean and rainforest of the Mowbray River can be seen. Leaving this spur, the track joined up with the Eastern Highway and the sea. This flat land was open forest grassland with a reef close by. Rocks around Yule Point yielded oysters and both the Mowbray River and Spring Creek gave fish. The Mowbray River is still noted for its mullet spawning runs. The rocks around Yule Point and Spring Creek, being very hard, were a good source of material for tools. Yule Point is the start of the dry end of the Douglas Shire. Rocky headlands stretch from here to Buchan Point with two small streams coming from the mountains. The coastal highway continued through this country of eucalypt and wattle to the Cairns area. I did not map this portion of the track as the Captain Cook Highway follows it closely. Between Yule Point and the Mowbray River, there was a campsite on a sand ridge near a clay waterhole. A couple of wet-season creeks and the mouth of the Mowbray River are nearby. This is-stony with a coral reef coming out of the water at low tide.

THE EASTERN HIGHWAY

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Heading north from this camp, the Eastern Highway travelled along a narrow (2km wide) corridor of open eucalypt grassland between a low range and mangroves till it reached the Mossman River, about 10km away. The Eastern Highway passed over Tracks 6 and 7 coming to the mangroves from over the range. This corridor has several small streams rising in the range to enter the mangroves. Their rainforest-lined banks made a natural fire-break. The country would be burnt piece by piece to catch wallabies. Fire between the two creeks would go to the top of the range where it would meet the rainforest and would go out. Later, another burn would be carried out. To this day you can see the effects of thousands of years of controlled burning. The fires would result in the catching of some wallabies that ran away from them. A new growth of grass followed the fire, so there would be more game to be hunted. Killed wallabies would be hung in a tree that contained green ants. The ants would swarm over the carcass making little balls of the chewed flesh to

leave it rough like sandpaper. The ants also exuded an acid which acted as a mild preservative. Chiefly, the ants kept off the flies until the carcass was needed for food. This practice of hanging meat in trees that contained green ants was done back at camp. If the Aborigines had a good hunt food was left over for another day.

There was a bonus for the Aboriginal hunters when burning grassland around the verges of rainforest. The sound of fire and the smoke alert scrub fowls and scrub turkeys which come out of the rainforest at about 4pm to eat the burnt lizards, frogs, insects etc., and to scratch in the burnt grass. Whether the birds wanted ash or charcoal as part of their diet I do not know, but fire near rainforest never fails to attract these birds and in the more open grassland they were easy prey for the hunters.

The range has lots of native bee hives in the trees, so there was honey (sugar bag) to be got. Camp sites were situated along the foot of the range, no doubt to get away from the sandflies and the mosquitoes. Some camp sites were on the sand ridge near the beach where the Eastern Highway passed.

Where the track crossed the mouth of the Mossman River, the Aborigines crossed at low tide. They always carried their spears when crossing. The route went 2km along the beach at Newell to come to the mouth of Saltwater Creek. Between these two rivers, open wooded grassland extends about 3km inland from the beach to a low range whose western slope is rainforest. This open grassland contained swamps and the old bed of Saltwater Creek was full of lagoons which ran roughly eastwards. Track No.4 from the west met the Eastern Highway at the beach now called Newell. Across Saltwater Creek, the route travelled 1km of beach where a side branch of Track No.3 came around the Dagmar Range through open forest to a freshwater spring just off the beach. The Eastern Highway went north around the rocky headland of Dagmar Range to where Track No.3 met it at Wonga where many camp sites and tribal meeting areas existed. Many artefacts are still to be found there.

North of this popular meeting place the Eastern Highway went through a narrow piece of land containing sand ridges of open forest, between the sea and the tidal south arm of the Daintree River. Between these sand ridges are channels of melaleuca swamps about 50m wide by 6km long. These have semi-permanent water. One of them runs into Helen's Creek. Just back from high water mark on the beach is a native well where I obtained a drink in the 1950's. Helen's Creek only reaches the sea in the rainy season and at very high tides. I have seen large fish going in and out in only 15cm of water here; so this is also a good place for spearing fish. Crocodiles make their nests and lay their eggs along the bank. There is also a shell midden back from the beach at the mouth of Helen's Creek. The mouth of the Daintree'is 1km north of here. It has a narrow channel of deepwater at low tide. I have been told that a log was used in crossing here by people who could not swim.

Once across the Daintree River, it is 2km along the beach to the Aboriginal campsite at Cape Kimberley. Here the Eastern Highway splits, with one track going around the rocky headlands and beaches to a camp site at Cow Bay with its open forest grassland.

The main Eastern Highway went inland from Kimberley Beach. About 2km along the track there is a nice fresh water creek on the edge of a eucalyptus glade in the rainforest. Around the edge of it is a large

stand of tooral trees ($\underline{\text{Eupomatia laurina}}$) that are used for spear sticks. The area is called 'wild banana'.

Further along the track one comes to Doyles Creek; keeping to the eastern side you follow a ridge up to a gap in the Alexandra Range. There is a lookout there now called Tom Mackay's. Here is also an old mango tree that was in the school grounds. Children from both sides of the range used the old walking track to go to school there at the turn of the century.

From the lookout, the track goes north down a ridge, crosses over Hutchinson's Creek and skirts a small granite hill where there is a rock shelter. The track continues north to Dinner Creek, where it turns east to cross Cooper's Creek above tidal waters and so on to the beach now called Thornton Beach. Going around the first headland north one comes to the Bouncing Stones; they bounce when thrown onto a larger rock of the same kind. They are black and very hard and were used as cutting tools. I have found some on a midden on the Daintree River and I have recently seen a stone axe made from a bouncing stone which was found on Snapper Island, southeast of Cape Kimberley. The bouncing stones played a large part in local tribal culture and were known as fertility stones. I have been told that any woman who wanted a baby carried one of the stones with her from one full moon till the next.

Leaving the Bouncing Stones, the track enters Noah's Creek valley, which is small but well watered. There is a long beach on the south side of Noah's Creek, with low swampy ground behind it. The higher scrub-covered land has lots of nut trees (Elaeocarpus bancroftii) with nut-cracking stones at the base of every tree. On the northern side of Noah's Creek there was evidence of an old camp site near the mouth of the creek.

Going north around the headland one enters what is known as Cape Tribulation Valley, which has two good creeks and one small semipermanent stream, all with mangroves at their mouths. The valley has been settled by Europeans for over 60 years. Some artefacts have been found in this valley: axes, nut-cracking stones and a stone knife not made from local stone. I have been told that there are paintings on Cape Tribulation, but have not seen them. North of Cape Tribulation the track follows the beach, and there is an axe-grinding stone and, further along, another grinding stone with a distinct basin in it.

A range with very high mountains runs parallel to the sea between Cape Tribulation and the Bloomfield River. These peaks put their feet in the sea and have valleys of well-watered dense rainforest containing lots of palms. The highway followed headlands and went through areas where there were cassowaries and tree climbing kangaroos, the latter feeding on the berries of native pepper vines which grew in great profusion. Fish and shellfish from rocky headlands and numerous creek mouths added to the food supply. As only a narrow strip of flat land separated the sea and the high mountains, this area could not support a large number of people for any length of time. It was visited regularly for short periods for hunting in the valleys. All camp sites were on the beaches.

As none of the river crossings could be attempted while the rivers were in flood, people travelled inland on tracks to the Western Highway where the rivers divided into several creeks which were easier to cross. There were several tracks linking the two highways. Every stream had

a hunting track along its bank. Parts of these tracks can still be found where land has not been cleared to the water's edge.

Some tracks have disappeared with the clearing for agriculture by the first European settlers. They will never be found or used again. Others were used by settlers, miners and cattlemen, and became roads or routes for telephone and electricity power lines. In the last 10 years the National Horse Trail Riders have taken advantage of some of the tracks and bushwalking clubs also use them. I wonder if they know or care that the tracks they are following were originally made and used by Aborigines?. These tracks were best summed up by one old Aboriginal chap I met who remarked "I just go look at my country".

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