

Aborigines in the Valley 5000 B.C.

RECENT excavations in the Hunter Valley have pushed back the date of human occupation of the area to at least 5000 B.C.

Carbon dating of charcoal dug from a rock shelter at Ulan, on the extreme western edge of the Valley, has revealed the wood was burned on an aboriginal fire about 7000 years ago.

The site is one of several in the Valley excavated by Mr. David Moore, Curator of Anthropology at the Australian Museum, Sydney.

Mr. Moore has spent several years excavating the history of aborigines in the Hunter Valley, and trying to establish whether there was any link-up between the aborigines of the coastal-valleys and those roaming the inland plains.

So far he has no evidence to either prove or disprove this theory.

He has, however, discovered a lot about the pre-history of the Valley, a subject which was previously almost completely obscure.

One of the sites excavated by Mr. Moore and his team is a series of rock shelters in a huge conglomerate rock on the side of a hill overlooking the river at Sandy Hollow.

Diggings at the entrance to the eastern tunnel uncovered tool flakes, bones, charcoal

and some chipping tools. Carbon dating of the charcoal showed the earliest occupation took place about 1300 years ago.

The Ulan discovery, made by Mr. Moore after the Sandy Hollow diggings, pushed back the date of human occupation in the Valley much further than was previously thought.

Another important find was at Singleton, where river bank erosion uncovered a virtual stone-age factory.

There were no signs of human occupation, but thousands of discarded cores and flakes of jasper and chert. The area is one where the aborigines manufactured their stone tools from the abundant raw material lying around.

MR. MOORE'S most recent diggings have been at Milbrodale, a tiny village near Bulga. Sandstone rocks have been hollowed out by the winds and several show signs of aboriginal occupation.

Charcoal has been sent off for carbon-dating, but the results will not be available for months yet.

Generally these prehistoric aboriginal camps are most unspectacular, yielding only a few stone chips, some bones and tiny pieces of charcoal; precious little with

which to reconstruct the nomadic life of 7000 years ago.

But Milbrodale is significant in that one of the shelters contains examples of aboriginal art, rare in the Valley. On an overhang are stencilled hand signs, boomerangs, and a 6ft. high male figure, all outlined in red or white ochre.

Interpretation of the figure is unclear, and it has been loosely labelled as a "cult hero," but it does point to Milbrodale being an important area for further investigation of aboriginal pre-history.

Further information is contained in the latest is-

By ALAN FARRELLY

sue of "Hunter Natural History," a journal of natural history published quarterly by the Newcastle Flora and Fauna Protection Society.

Priced at 30 cents, it is edited by Mr. K. McDonald, of the science department at Newcastle Teachers' College. It is most readable, and in its coverage of aspects of the natural history of the Hunter region is aimed at the general public rather than at the level of a specialised "professional" journal of which there seem to be too many already.

The May issue contains an article by Mr. Frank Meaney, of Wallsend, a lecturer at Newcastle Teach-

ers' College, giving more details about aboriginal pre-history of the Hunter Valley.

As Mr. Meaney points out, the long-established theory of aboriginal occupation of Australia presupposes the arrival of aborigines in Australia about 20,000 years ago.

It is argued that the first humans came across the Torres Strait into northern Australia about 20,000 years ago, and spread slowly southwards, arriving on the eastern coast of N.S.W. about 7000 or 8000 years ago.

"This tidy theory was given a severe jolt a few

months ago when it was reported that archaeological work had uncovered a site at Burril Lake on the south coast of N.S.W., which had shown evidence of aboriginal occupation at least 20,000 years ago," Mr. Meaney said.

"The shock wave generated by this announcement has not yet subsided. The new information has some far-reaching implications for those who have been working on the theory of a slow, measured penetration of the eastern coastal regions from the north-west."

The theory that the aboriginal entry into Australia must be put back much

further than 20,000 years is also supported by the recent discovery of strange rock carvings in North-west Tasmania, which are at least 10,000 years old and could be 20,000 years.

Mr. Moore's work will be watched with interest. In the meantime, he hopes that people will let him know of possible occupation sites before the onrush of urbanisation destroys them.

Another interesting article in the Journal is one by J. W. Rowland which takes a gloomy look at the reduction in native animal populations in the Hunter Valley.

It concludes that several species have been completely exterminated from the Valley, and the numbers of many others have at least been halved.

Most Australian animals have arrived at a fine adjustment with their environment, and the drastic altering of the countryside with the coming of European settlement has caused widespread changes in native fauna and flora.

In N.S.W. alone, about 42 per cent. of the total number of marsupial species are now thought to be extinct, or so rare that they are seldom seen.

When Lieutenant Shortland discovered the Hunter River in 1797, most of the Valley was wooded, with only about 6 per cent. grassed.

Now 48 per cent. is grass-

land, 46 per cent. forest, and 4 per cent. sown land, with the remaining 2 per cent. taken up by water and barren areas.

With the reduction of covering savannah or woodland environments, many of the original fauna have disappeared.

EMUS and red kangaroos are no longer found in the Valley; the pigmy marsupial mouse and the fat-tailed marsupial mouse have been exterminated; the whip-tail wallaby and the koala have been greatly reduced in numbers, and even exterminated in some areas.

The rapid advance of dairying this century has accelerated the process of forest retreat, and the numbers of native species may have been halved, or even worse.

Isolated areas of woodland reduce potential breeding opportunities and increase possibilities of predation.

The article says only a detailed field survey could reveal the Valley's native mammal reserve. Too little was known to come close to budgeting the overall loss through 150 years of European settlement, though certainly it was great.

Even the establishment of many faunal sanctuaries might be too little too late to arrest the tragic, irreversible loss.