**Aboriginal Culture**

Research has shown that the area was traditionally known as Gariwerd.

Archaeologists have dated charcoal from Aboriginal campsites in Gariwerd which show that Aboriginals lived in the area at least 5000 years ago. Other evidence of aboriginal occupation includes oven mounds, scatters of stone left over from the manufacture of tools (collected by local aboriginals from quarries all over south-western Victoria), stone quarries and art sites, as well as the beliefs handed down from one generation to the next.

By visiting art sites in Gariwerd, non-aboriginals can discover some of the richness of aboriginal culture. In western Gariwerd, several prominent art sites, including the Cave of Hands, Billimina Shelter and Cave of Ghosts, and Flat Rock in the north, have been developed for visitors and are readily accessible by car.

Rock art is one tradition within the rich diversity of aboriginal art which includes sand painting, body decoration and bark painting. The aboriginal artists of Gariwerd often used a single colour, usually red or white, in their linear style which involved the combination of many strokes. At some sites the artist used a hand to make a print (Flat Rock), or to form the outline of a stencil (Cave of Hands). Many or the art sites were used as springtime camps for small groups; Aboriginals use art to help teach spiritual principles.

During their long occupation of Gariwerd aboriginals undoubtedly witnessed many changes in climate and the seasons, in the availability of water and in the diversity of plant and animal foods such as Boee Wan (native bread) and Churak (water ribbons). Gariwerd was so rich in food resources that aboriginals were able to live very comfortably. Free from the need to spend long hours hunting and gathering, they devoted a great deal of time to religious and other cultural activities, of which the rock art sites are the tangible evidence today.

The most drastic change they witnessed was the arrival of Europeans. This brought fatal diseases, clearing of bushland which had a direct impact on the supply of aboriginal foods, settlement which often led to conflict if not massacres, and the establishment of missions remote from tribal lands - the attrition of their culture. In particular the language was lost, but certain core values have survived, preserving the essential spirit of the aboriginal people. Our understanding of aboriginal life before European settlement is limited to the knowledge gained from descendants through oral history, historical documents and archaeological discoveries.

The aboriginal communities throughout south western Victoria and the Wimmera have recently built the Brambuk Living Cultural Centre, located near Halls Gap. This is a place where the communities share with park visitors the knowledge of their culture, both past and present, through displays, activities, performances, exhibitions and even bush tucker. Brambuk also plays an important role in the preservation and presentation of rock art sites and other cultural sites in and around Gariwerd.