Land and People
AGRICULTURAL AND SETTLEMENT CHANGE IN VAN DIEMEN’S LAND, 1803-1835

BACKGROUND

Tasmania has been inhabited for approximately 35,000 years by the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. They formed nine different nations across the island, each with its own language, traditions, and building and farming techniques. They formed much of the landscape we know today.

By the late 1700s Europeans were starting to explore, and sealers established bases around the coastline. In 1803 the British arrived to permanently claim the island for their King and set up a new colony on ‘Van Diemen’s Land’. By 1804 they decided on the current site of Hobart to form the administrative centre. By 1806 the settlement of Launceston had also been established.

Initially the population was made up largely of soldiers and convicts, plus a few free settlers. For the first twenty years most were given small grants of land (enough to live off) with the expectation they would ‘improve’ them – build, farm, use them to become self-sufficient. By the mid-1820s government policy changed and it was considered more efficient to have large acreages. Many small plots were sold and absorbed into large estates and a wave of free settlers arrived to establish themselves in the growing colony. By 1830 people were complaining that all the good land had been taken, but the colony was prospering and exporting products to the world.

At the same time conflict with the local Aboriginal groups was increasing as the settlers pushed across the land. By 1835 the ‘Black War’ had been fought and ‘won’ by the British, and the remaining Aboriginal people were pushed into remote and small areas where their story only became more bleak.

PURPOSE

To trace and visualise the development of a colony by placing traditionally disparate elements into one study:

Aboriginal hunting grounds, European land transactions, government instructions, and agricultural perceptions and intentions.

GOALS

* Apply systematic analysis to data in both a local and regional context.
* Create a timeline of European occupation from 1803 - 1835.
* Attempt to identify Aboriginal hunting grounds and their common indicators.
* Follow the distribution of European stock, land and people across VDL.
* Study the transition from a subsistence to an export-based economy
* Develop ‘visual indicators’ for future analysis of landscape.

REFERENCES

Land District Chart and Aerial Map: http://maps.tas.gov.au/list/map/app/list/map
’Salt Pan Plains, Van Diemen’s Land’ by Joseph Lyceott (1824):
Muster and convenwng information from the Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office

OBSERVATIONS

* Small groups of individuals bought and sold land to each other, to consolidate scattered properties into large estates.
* Boundaries of small grants are still visible in roads and fence lines today, suggesting more survived than is thought.
* Recorded sites of conflict can often be identified.

NEXT STEPS

* Map the annual land sales and grants out by county across the island using Geographic Information Systems (GIS).
* Analyse the patterns of land ownership in specific regions.
* Look at the environmental conditions of high and low value land
* Locate hot spots of conflict.