

MEDIA RELEASE



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Aboriginal community recreates hunter-gatherer culture to solve food shortage

A Victorian Aboriginal community has returned to traditional hunter-gatherer methods to solve food shortages and improve healthy eating.

Victoria University has been working with the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative in Geelong to reignite passion for traditional cooking methods, improve access to healthy foods and help close the health gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

The project, funded by VicHealth, has led to the development of an Aboriginal television cooking series planned to be aired on community TV, the publication of a specialised cookbook and the distribution of children's plates depicting healthy food portions.

The 5000-strong Wathaurong Aboriginal community, which spreads from near Anglesea to south of Ballarat, is also developing a food bank and holding regular social cooking events.

Recent Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show the average Indigenous household income is \$460 a week, compared to \$740 for non-Indigenous families.

VU Senior Research Fellow Dr Karen Adams said the rise in the cost of healthy foods had put pressure on Aboriginal families, with many running out of food before their next pay. Encouraging the development of community gardens, food shares and the hunting and gathering of traditional foods was vital to healthy eating and food security in the community, she said.

"There has been a real focus on how you can recreate your culture in a modern colonised world. It's about increasing people's knowledge by planting native foods in community gardens and demonstrating cooking methods that include fish in clay wraps and paperbark, kangaroo, native spinach, native mint and even witchetty grubs.

"All of this reinforces cooking as cultural, healthy, social and fun. We want to move away from diets high in sugar and salt content."

As part of the project, community members were asked to take part in a "photo-voice" project, in which they took photographs of where they bought food, how they cooked it and who they ate with. This documentation was used to discuss healthy eating issues, address community concerns and mobilise people for change.

Wathaurong community project coordinator Jodie Ryshka said the cooking events were fuelling greater interest in meal preparation among Aboriginal people.

"The kids are really motivating their parents to buy and cook healthy foods, which is a great sign for the future," Ms Ryshka said.

"They are noticing that their parents are getting involved in healthy cooking and food, and they ask 'what did you cook for tea at Wathaurong today?'"

CEO of VicHealth, Todd Harper, said Dr Adams' work was commissioned in light of research that showed 15 per cent of Victorian Aboriginal people had run out of food and couldn't afford to buy more in the past 12 months.

"Food security is a real problem for many Victorians, but Indigenous people are at more risk of not being able to access the healthy, nutritious food essential for good health. Dr Adams' research has cleverly provided this community with an idea that is culturally sensitive and fun, and importantly, works. We hope to see many more initiatives like this one in the near future."

Project partners are the Heart Foundation, Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and Deakin University.

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