

Changing Perspectives in Australian Archaeology, Part X

“There is likewise a nut...”¹

A Comparative Ethnobotany of Aboriginal Processing Methods and Consumption of Australian *Bowenia*, *Cycas*, *Lepidozamia* and *Macrozamia* species

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ABSTRACT. As a result of research throughout tropical Australia, much is known concerning the various techniques Australian Aboriginal peoples used to remove toxins from *Cycas* seeds prior to consumption. However, comparatively little is known about the methods used to process *Macrozamia* seeds and if they are regionally or genus specific. This paper describes the methods used to process different *Macrozamia* species, as recorded in Aboriginal and historical accounts throughout the eastern, central and southwestern parts of Australia. A comparative ethnobotany of the processing methods and food uses of the four genera of cycad found in Australia: *Bowenia*, *Cycas*, *Lepidozamia* and *Macrozamia*, is then presented. This review confirms that although there are many similarities in processing techniques and uses between these genera, there are also important differences, including variations in processing methods partly related to water availability, regional differences in the parts of the plants which were consumed, and contexts of use between different areas of Australia.

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Despite their inherent toxicity when fresh, cycad seeds have been recorded as a food resource in many parts of the world, and various methods have been used to detoxify them prior to consumption (Theiret, 1958; Whiting, 1963; Whitelock, 2002). Following an extensive review of Australian ethnobotanical sources compiled within the last 200 years, and observations made during fieldwork in Arnhem Land, Beck (1992: 135–136, fig. 2–4, 141) classified the traditional methods used to process *Cycas* spp. seeds in Australia as (1) brief leaching in water, (2) prolonged leaching in water, and (3) ageing (Table 1). Beck (1992: 133, 141) proposed that these different techniques had pros and cons in relation to

seed availability, storability, taste and convenience. Fresh seeds were only available for a few months at the end of the dry season, in contrast to aged seeds, which were available at all times. The limited seasonal availability of fresh seeds could be extended for several months via prolonged leaching and storage in still water. Seeds that had undergone extended leaching, ageing or were baked into loaves could be stored, while seeds leached only briefly perished quickly. According to Beck, prolonged leaching was the most energy-efficient method, while making loaves of bread was the most energy-consuming method, although these were portable and kept well.

¹ from Hunter’s (1793: 478–479) *An Historical Journal of the Transactions at Port Jackson and Norfolk Island*. London: John Stockdale.