‘Have a look at this’. Les Hiddins, the Bush Tucker Man

June 2025

> Once you look *into* the forest and not just *at it* there’s tucker everywhere.[1]

In July 1988 the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (the ABC) screened something quite new in Australian television. n Australian television. Starting with a montage of a man in a khaki shirt, blue green trousers, boots and a hat that was cleft in the middle, picking leaves off bushes, tearing open a mollusc, improvising a bush washing machine with a flour drum and jam tin, leaping from one rock to the other, scrambling up solitary crags, driving a khaki four wheel drive, all in bush settings. He was Les Hiddins and the show was the *Bush Tucker Man*.

Hiddins was a soldier in the Army aviation section. ‘I found myself in the left-hand seat of a helicopter flying all around northern Australia and Arnhem Land … When you go to these very remote areas, you've got to ask yourself the question, 'how would I get on if something happened and I had to survive here?' So, I started doing it as a hobby.’[2]

His ’hobby’ was noticed by the Army and In 1987 Hiddins was awarded a Defence Fellowship to James Cook University to study northern Australian ethno-botany.

> The Department of Defence, particularly the Army, have got an interest in this sort of thing, because if we have soldiers out here in the paddock they need to know it …It’s my job to catalogue and analyse all the bush tucker resources around these areas and there’s an awful lot that we don’t know about .[3]

Samples of bush tucker were collected and back at camp details of each is written on cards – common name, botanic name, where found, and a description. Pieces of the bush food are placed in narrow phials and sent to the Defence Nutrition Laboratory in Tasmania to see how nutritious bush tacker was compared with everyday food items.

A third feature of the program was infotainment – the cross between information and entertainment - shot after shot of the landscape and weather,[4] where to take a break when travelling, how to set up a camp for overnight or longer stays. and brief histories.

There were three Series of the program, two of seven episodes and one of eight episodes. Here I only use material from Series 1[5] and 2[6]. Season 3[7] was a look at explorers and had little about bush foods.[8]

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[1] Hiddins Les, Rainforest

[2] Baczkowski Halina and Levy, Anna, The Bush Tucker Man is back and he's bringing the outback to your smartphone. Landline, A.B.C. Net, 3 August 2019

[3] Arnhem Land

[4] Superbly filmed by Helen Barrow, Marc Spicer, Paul Turne, Lauren McManus

[5] Series 1, 1988, Eight Episodes: Arnhem Land, The Wet in Port Keats, Desert, Prince Regent Gorge, Rain Forest, Coastal, Doomadgee, Arukun

[6] Series 2, 1990, Seven Episodes: Wet Seasons, East To West, Kimberley, Top End, Wildman, Desert, Coastal

[7] Series 3 1996 Seven Episodes: Stories of survival - Ludwig Leichhardt, Robert O’Hara Burke and John Wills, Lasseter (Lewis Harold Bell}), Lieutenant Nixon, Edmund Kennedy and Jacky Jacky, John McDonnel Stuart and – the odd one out - Charles Kingsford Smith aviator.

[8] Hiddins wrote a field guide for native food and several other books. I don’t discuss them here. My interest is in viewing Hiddins in action in his element the bush.

To contextualise Hiddins' work: In1981 Raymond and Jennice Kersh had opened *Edna's Table*, the first high end dining restaurant that used native ingredients though what they could source was very limited; Vic Cherikoff in 1983 was working at the University of Sydney's Human Nutrition Unit collecting native foods and analysing them for their nutrient value; in 1988 Tim Low published *Wild Food Plants of Australia*; in 1989 Tim Low published *Bush Tucker* : also in1989 Denis and Marilyn Ryan established their *Valley of the Mists* Australian native produce farm; in 1989 Vic Cherikoff published *The Bushfood Handbook*; Jean Paul Bruneteau opened *Riberries* his native food restaurant in 1991. Hiddin's project chimed well with these early commercial and research enterprises.

Bush Tucker

> Once you look *into* the forest and not just *at it* there's tucker everywhere.[9]
>
> You know it's amazing that no matter where you are in the bush you can always find something to help you survive.[10]
>
> Getting bush tucker is never easy. It's hard and dedicated work but it's also efficient and it's got to be. One of the first things I learned from Aboriginals. when you're trying to survive it's critical that you do it in the most effective way.[11]

In each episode of Series 1 and 2 Hiddins shows his prodigious knowledge of bush tucker plants.[12] When he locates one he gives both a common name and or the botanical name.[13] Back at his camp, He describes the features of the plant that can be eaten – foliage, stem, seed, bulb, then samples the item, gives judgment and sometimes describes the taste, suggesting how to cook them and in some instances showing them being cooked at his camp.

For example, he finds a white fruit dropped from a tree into a river, he follows in the direction the water is flowing, finds the tree from which they have dropped and gives an idea about how to use them. He tell us it is a Syzygium - the same species as the more common lillypilly. You can eat them,' he says, 'quite edible, nice tang to them'. Fish eat them as well'.[14] Back at camp he crushes the fruit into a tin container and pours hot water over them. Hot water because they then 'exude the taste out of the berries - they have quite sour lemony kinds of taste so the hot water becomes a sort of lemony drink'.[15] To strain the concoction, he uses a handful of grass laid across the top of a billy. He gives his verdict of the drink - 'beaut'.

Nuts from a *Terminalia grandiflora* are cracked open and give a softer nut like an almond 'which is absolutely marvellous in taste, tremendous stuff, one of my favourites. I reckon if you could cultivate this stuff and put 'em in a packet and sell them at the shop, you'd do pretty well out of them'.[16]

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[9] Rainforest
[10] Rainforest
[11] Arnhem Land
[12] No animals or birds are dealt with in any episode. Insects and fish on the other hand are.
[13] Disappointingly the credits don't include the names of the plants in each episode which would have been handy for someone wanting to follow it up with a view to growing it.
[14] Port Keats/Wadeye
[15] Port Keats/Wadeye
[16] Prince Regent Gorge. It's almost prophetic of the bush food industry.

The Tennis Ball fruit, peeled to expose the orange flesh inside, 'has a really sweet sort of taste, a bit dry but it's really nice like banana'.[17] Or there are bush grapes 'tasting like muscatel'. [18]

He makes a bark coolamon[19]and goes looking for water lily tubers. 'Actually, the water lily is a very versatile bit of stuff because you can eat almost every bit of it. You can eat the seed pods, you can eat the flowers'.[20]

Other bush tucker plants he finds and describes include candle nuts which taste like macadamias[21], bush passionfruit an introduced species but which has now become prolific, bush bananas that taste like raw peas, and the white berry fruit called the bush lolly.

But he warns

> You can't just go picking tucker off any old bush or tree - you've gotta know what you are doing. A lot of the plants are very poisonous an require careful treatment before you eat them. Get it wrong and you'll and up as bush tucker for the ants.[22]

An example of this is the Polynesian arrowroot (Tacca leontopetaloides) of which the fruit can be eaten but not the root until it is prepared by boiling or baking.

But bush tucker is not only plants. Freshwater prawns can be boiled up for a 'good feed for breakfast'. [23] The mangrove worm is not a worm at all. 'It's a mollusc that bores its way through wood. It's been the ruin of many an old wooden ship'. But there's one way of getting back at him'.[24] Hiddins and Johnny Tchula, a Wadeye man who has been a long-standing source of bush tucker knowledge for Hiddins, swallow them whole.

Siddens goes on a witchety grub hunt ('that gourmet of bushfood') with women from Lajamanu. With digging sticks, they dig the ground among the roots of an *Acacia camppiola*, 'the witchetty bush as it's always called'. When the grubs are found they can be eaten fresh or cooked over hot coals. When cooked 'they taste a little like scrambled eggs'.[25]

Nuts from a *Terminalia grandiflora* are cracked open to show inside a softer nut like an almond 'which is absolutely marvellous in taste, tremendous stuff, one of my favourites. I reckon if you could cultivate this stuff and put 'em in a packet and sell them at the shop, you'd do pretty well out of them'.[26]

Not all of the bush tucker plants get good reports. Bush coffee he says is made from roasted and ground Brachychiton seeds, but having tasted it he is going back to tea.

But bush tucker is not just plants. 'The waterways' up here', Siddens says,' are a terrific source of food, and at different times of year there's barramundi, salmon, bream, there's turtle and ducks

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[17] Wet Season
[18] Port Keats/Wadeye
[19] A wooden raised sided dish
[20] Kimberley
[21] Which Hiddins notes is the only bush food being exported at the time.
[22] Prince Regent Gorge. Hiddins is not above making jokes like this, which is part of his attraction.
[23] Arnhem Land
[24] Port Keats/Wadeye
[25] Port Keats/Wadeye
[26] Prince Regent Gorge

and geese'. They also have yabbies and river mussels. The mangroves that border the banks have mangrove crabs. The locals 'throw these little fellas on the fire, just as they are. They're a great meal'.[27] He is shown how to stun fish in a river with the crushed bark of the Emu Apple tree. He shows how to make yabbie traps using a hollow log and a piece of meat – but when he comes to check the trap the yabbie is long gone, the piece of meat perhaps held by its front legs.

Insects also are found, described and eaten. He joins with women from Papunya to find honey or sugar bag ants – so named for the bulbous posterior carrying honey by some of them. This can be nipped off with human teeth and Hiddins does just that. 'For the women of Papunya,' Hiddins says,' the honey ant has special significance. It's a sacred part of their dreaming, their tradition.' [28]

Green ants nest among *terminalia*. Aboriginal people open the nest pull out the larva from inside the nest and chew them. 'You can bite off the abdomen and eat it - it has a sharp lemon-lime taste.'[29]

He finds an abandoned hawk hide made from flat stones interleaved in a semicircle with a roof of grasses and a smoky fire outside only built in a limited part of Country. 'Aboriginal people used to use an old pigeon or dead bird on the end of a stick poked through the roof as decoy'. [30] When a hawk lands on the roof they would be pulled inside. Hiddins uses a handkerchief as the decoy but fails to attract any hawks.

His presentation of all this is infectious. His constant phrases are 'Have a look at this' or he has 'something I wanna show you', both said with a touch of a pupil at 'show and tell' in class. The viewer watches while he chews on something – a berry, the inside of the stem of a screwpine, the bulb of a water lily – waiting for his verdict. Either it's going to be 'the best bush tucker' or it's going to be 'not too bad – a bit starchy'. There is no credit for a scriptwriter so all the dialogue must be his words delivered with a very Australian twang, and much taking off and putting back of that cleft topped hat.

Hiddins brings a lightness to the material. He is not above making a joke.

Nutrition and health

Analyses of the bush tucker Siddens forwarded to the laboratory found many of them to be richer in vitamins, trace elements and proteins than the food usually eaten in the home. 'For example, the billy-goat plum which you can find up here in the winter months is the richest source of vitamins in the world'.[31] A terminalia had a vitamin profile the same as ten oranges.

The energy value of native honey was found to be more than honey sold commercially. 'As a survival resort it's got a lot going for it. Because it's so easily obtained. Something you should look for if you have to survive'.[32] He finds a hive in a hollow log and another under a rock. The native bee is stingless as he demonstrates taking chunks of a hive and eating it.

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[27] Arnhem Land
[28] Desert
[29] Prince Regent Gorge
[30] East to West
[31] Arnhem Land
[32] Kimberley

He recounts Aboriginal bush medicine from 'back in the days before we had cupboards full of aspirin and that sort of thing.'[33] The roots of the Frognuts tree were boiled and sipped to cure coughs. The cocoons in hairy caterpillar nests were separated and laid on skin burns. The root system of the native grape has a sap that Aboriginal people put over a death adder bite. Boiled cabbage palm's leaves are good for sore throats.

While he is enthusiastic about the health benefits of bush tucker as proved in the laboratory he is less so about bush medicine claims.

Water

Survival, he says depends on finding water.

> The body in this heat can lose up to four litres a day through perspiration and it's gotta be replaced or you're in trouble. The best water to drink is this clear stuff that literally falls from the sky (into rivers, waterfalls, billabongs, and other catchments).[34]

He shows more permanent indicators of water. Rock engravings - some one big circle, others with concentric circles – are he says an Aboriginal sign common in desert country which signifies there is a water source nearby. The little rock fig grows on an escarpment and often indicates a water source. Finches flock to bushes around water sources.

He shows how to get fresh water by digging in the sandy banks of a river lined with casuarinas. At Yuendumu, Hiddins goes looking for water with elder Darcy Djamby Djinba following the tracks of birds, insects, and animals and they find it beneath a small overhang again having to dig through sand to get the water flowing. At Doomadgee he shows a small water well with a stone lid on a rocky outcrop.

Given the subject matter and its role in survival he adopts a more serious tone when talking about water as per the quote above. But even here there is scope for something light hearted as he wraps a large sheet of plastic around a gum tree to successfully catch moisture from its respiration.

Aboriginal Knowledge

Hiddins often credits his knowledge to Aboriginal individuals or groups.

> The knowledge I have been able to pick up from people like Johnny (Tchula) makes me confident that you can survive and even enjoy the conditions out here for quite a long time.[35]

> Aboriginal people have taught me a lot. I think they are pretty generous with their knowledge. And I'm grateful for that. And now I see the bush with its full potential in a very different way. In Aboriginal society it's the women who do the large majority of the food gathering – the men are the hunters. So, it's the women I'm indebted too for my knowledge about bush tacker.[36]

That being said at no point in the episodes when he accompanies women on a search for honey ants or witchety grubs does he tell us their names as he does the men who are his informants at other times. The communities he visits are named in the end credits.[37]

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[33] Prince Regent Gorge
[34] Port Keats/Wadeye
[35] Port Keats/Wadeye
[36] Desert
[37] Lockhart River, Yuendumu, Papunya, Harts Range, Lajamanu, the people of Arnhem Land

He demonstrates three of the ways he gathers information.

In some episodes he meets up with a former informant and goes on a walk with him as he does with Darcy Djamby Djinba.

He takes some former residents to the now decrepit Lockhart Aboriginal Mission and talks with them about their experiences. He also talks with women he has gone witchetty grub hunting.

At Doomadgee he has community individuals sit in a circle. He then unfolds a map of the area as it has so far been mapped. He shows them that the map is two sided. On one side is a map like others generally showing the location of towns, communities, significant natural features – rivers, mountains and such. On the other side he shows how the survival information is placed – pictures of bush tucker material each with a commentary. He tells them he is here to ask for their assistance in adding to the map. Sadly, we don't see the process in action.[38]

Sometimes Hiddins makes statements that are at odds with what viewers are seeing.

> Once we cross over there (Arnhem land) I'm leaving my civilisation behind.[39]

The Aboriginal people he meets at Wadeye, Papunya, Lajamanu show much the same civilization as Hiddins.

> The knowledge that Aboriginals had about this land is fading away.[40]

Clearly it is not given how much knowledge the Aboriginal people with whom he speaks show. At one stage he says: 'Today the descendants (of a group resident a Port Keats now called Wadeye) still hold onto that knowledge of bush food and medicine. They're the people I rely on'.[41]

> This is the real country of the Dreamtime. A place that is ruled by the sun, wind and rain certainly not by us.[42]

This is incorrect. 'The Dreamtime is the period in which life was created according to Aboriginal culture. Dreaming is the word used to explain how life came to be; it is the stories and beliefs behind creation.'[43]

Interestingly and inexplicably there are no Indigenous individuals or communities in Series 2 and 3.

Concluding remarks

Les Hiddin's *Bush Tucker Man* series did two things. Firstly it introduced viewers to a range of bush foods at a time when the bushfood industry was just beginning. Hiddins had a wide knowledge of bush foods learned from Aboriginal individuals and communities and his own

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[38] These maps were called 'snack maps' by the troops. Unfortunately, I was unable to locate one these.
[39] Arnhem Land
[40] Desert
[41] Port Keats/ Wadeye
[42] Prince Regent Gorge
[43] 'What is the Dreamtime and the Dreaming.'. Aboriginal Contemporary www.aboriginalcontemporary.com.au

experience. Over the course of the series Hiddins shows bush foods in a number of settings – coastal, desert, rainforest - conveying to viewers regional differences in bush food and their seasonality . Viewers also were shown methods of cooking some of the bush tucker. Secondly he passed on knowledge to the viewer of how to survive in these settings. The series contributed to new maps for the military of an area on the reverse side of which were photographs and descriptions of the bush tucker in that area and its uses.

The first series was so popular that a second and third series were made.

I wrote this article on Gadigal Country. I pay my respect to elders past and present. Always was always will be Aboriginal land.