

'Time to embrace history of country': Bruce Pascoe and the first dancing *grass harvest in 200 years*

Writer's farm in East Gippsland, Victoria, is producing native grains for flour and bread using traditional Aboriginal techniques

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On the hill above Bruce Pascoe's farm near Mallacoota in Victoria's East Gippsland, there's a sea of mandadyan nalluk. Translated from Yuin, the language of the country, it means "dancing grass".

Pascoe and his small team of coworkers have never done a harvest like this before. There's so much grass that both sheds are full, and Pascoe says they are "racing against the clock to refine our methods so we can extract the seed and make the flour. We have got to get this done in two or three weeks before the seed completely drops." The team had a ceremony for the the beginning of the harvest because they think it's the first time in 200 years that mandadyan nalluk has been harvested for food.

"And some of these people are descended from those who would have done the last harvest," Pascoe says. "That's what this farm is all about – trying to make sure that Aboriginal people are part of the resurgence in these grains, rather than being on the periphery and being dispossessed again."

They had intended to harvest a different, more promising crop of kangaroo grass but it was destroyed by the summer's catastrophic bushfires. As a CFA volunteer, Pascoe spent weeks on the fire and recovery efforts. His sheds burned down but his house survived.

"It was terrible. Terrible. All the days merged into one. Here it went for five or six weeks. The days were indistinguishable. Everyone was just racing around, trying to fight a fire here, fight a fire there, save a house here, save a house there. It just went on

and on and on. The people of Mallacoota have done it really tough. [They] are just recovering, and will still be recovering in a decade.”

The sheds, rebuilt after the fires, are full of harvested grass. Extracting seeds has been elaborate, experimental and "a lot of grunt work".

"We've been working flat out now for about eight or nine days and we do something new every time." Today they are extracting seed using smoke and heat on a series of threshing tables. Some of the things work and some of them don't. We just have to be really patient. The old people had 120,000 years to get this process right, so if we have some failures in the first eight days, you've got to put it in perspective.”

"The emotional toll of reviving this knowledge is in understanding how much has been lost. While there's grief, there's also triumph.

"It's very easy to despair. So we try not to use words like 'lost'. We try to use words like 'found' and 'recovered'. And that's what I'm looking at. I'm looking at recovery." As he battled the fires, Pascoe was under increasingly vitriolic attack over his 2014 book *Dark Emu*, which used historical sources, including the journals of explorers, to show that Aboriginal people engaged in complex agriculture and were not just hunter-gatherers.

The personal attacks, largely driven by the Herald Sun columnist Andrew Bolt and a prominent Aboriginal businesswoman, Josephine Cashman, escalated. Cashman asked the Australian federal police to investigate allegations that Pascoe had received financial benefit from claiming to be Aboriginal. The AFP said Pascoe's Aboriginality "was not relevant in determining whether a commonwealth offence had been committed, as such there was no need to undertake these inquiries". Then the provenance of a letter Bolt and Cashman relied on to denounce Pascoe was called into question by NITV. Cashman was removed from the senior advisory body to the minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt.

Pascoe had little to say publicly at the time and withdrew from some scheduled appearances. But he says book sales went up and he could afford to hire four young people to work with him.

“When Andrew Bolt attacked me a lot of Australians took it as a personal attack on them, because a lot of people have read Dark Emu,” he says. “The same people, booksellers have been telling me, bought 10 copies as Christmas presents.

“Sales boomed around that time so I was making money, and all of that money is going into wages. And wages then go back into Eden [across the NSW border] and they’re spent on the children, at shops where the shopkeepers are battling their guts out to stay alive, so I feel a lot of good has come out.”

But Pascoe says it was “the worst, worst time of my life”.

“It was hard for me, that period,” he says. “I’m not trying to downplay it. I’m not trying to say I’m this resilient character because I’m not. But I was totally supported by Aboriginal community. Not every Aboriginal person, obviously, because people tell me that social media was rife with other opinions. But basically the elders stuck by me firm, and some of them came down here, some of them stopped me in the street, to tell me to keep doing what I was doing.” Pascoe says he took solace from the number of Australians “who want their children to learn a better history, a more true history”.

“It’s a wave that is washing over these dinosaurs,” he says. “There’s an extinction event happening, and the dinosaur, of course, is never aware of his demise.” Pascoe’s team has been able to work right through the coronavirus: “We just carry on. This is a very isolated farm and we’re isolated on it, so it’s pretty good.”

This week they milled some of the mandadyan nalluk seed into flour and baked a loaf of bread. “It’s beautiful bread. It’s a really dark, rye-like flour. Incredibly dark, incredibly aromatic, but also very tasty,” Pascoe says, and it’s not like anything he has smelled before.

He gets seven or eight requests a day from bakers and restaurateurs to supply seed or flour, which they will do when they get the milling right.

He also wants to show local farmers that letting these plants grow is worth the effort.

“In future years it’ll be commonplace because we can grow these grasses on degraded land. I think there are a lot of farmers on marginal land now. They want some consistency, and they want reduced costs. Perennial grain is a way to do that.”



Pascoe slices the loaf of bread made from the mandadyan nalluk flour.

The dancing grass is only one of several perennials the team is working with, including kangaroo grass, warrigal greens, samphires and water ribbons.

“We cooked with murnong the other day in a recipe we hadn’t tried before and it was sensational,” Pascoe says. “Water ribbon tubers are absolutely delicious. We found a plant, we still don’t know what it is, which came back after the fires, a lovely little onion type thing, absolutely sensational.

“There’s nothing new about it at all, but we ignored it. We turned our back on anything of Aboriginal provenance, such was our sensitivity to the history of the country.

“It’s time to embrace the history of the country, and with that we will be able to embrace its food.”