

Duboisia hopwoodii

PITURI is a shrub. It is native to central Australia.

It is also known as Camel poison, Duboisia (English, Swedish), and Pitchery.

Warning – pituri has hallucinogenic properties and can cause death if taken to excess.

Hopwoodii commemorates an Australian settler, Henry Hopwood (1813-1869), who established Echuca, a town north of Melbourne on the Murray River. Transported to Tasmania from Liverpool in 1834 for receiving stolen silk, he was made a police constable and convicted for womanising, then in 1846 received a conditional pardon. Moving to the mainland and the future site of Echuca on the Murray River, he built an hotel in 1854 and bought a punt to trade on the River. In 1855 he became a postmaster, and opened a bakery, butchery, boiling-down works and iron store and the following two years saw his pontoon bridges crossing first the Murray River and then the Campaspe River. He then built a brick store and established a school, vineyard and newsletter and in 1859 another hotel. His active involvement in Echuca continued until about 1864 and he is said to have collected plants along the Murray River. Five years after retirement he died from typhoid.

Australian Aborigines in central Australia chewed the leaves and twigs (which were collected when the plant was in bloom and then roasted) as a stimulant to allay hunger and maintain energy in arduous circumstances. [Since the relatively recent appearance of Europeans in the central region, local tribes also began to smoke pituri.] Its significance in their way of life is partially reflected in the fact that the centuries old trails which wound their way through the parched scrubland of the Continent's central interior acquired the name 'pituri roads'.

When Europeans first explored the Australian outback they were offered pituri. This was shared with the donor and was a recognized sign of Aborigine friendship – and perhaps an indication of the Australian Aborigine respect for the plant. It is certainly believed to have been instrumental in saving some European lives including that of the Irish-born Australian, John King (1838-1872). He was the only survivor of the ill-fated Burke and Wills four-man expedition. They set out from Melbourne in 1860 and were the first white men to cross the Continent from south to north. Sadly on their return journey three of them died of starvation – and a wasted John King was found by the search party six months later. The pituri he had been fortunate enough to share with local Aborigines probably accompanied food as well and must have contributed to saving his life.

Aborigines also used pituri for hunting and fishing (the fish were stunned with the drug). By putting the leaves in an emu's known water-hole they stupefied the poor bird when he drank and made him far easier to catch. Not only were other animals caught this way as well but water-holes had eventually to be viewed as lethal by the early explorers and travellers who unwittingly slaked their thirst at them. One explorer in 1874 is even believed to have tried to warn his peers of the innocent-looking death traps.

As mescal buttons (*Lophophora williamsii*) were bartered among the Americas Indian tribes so also did Aboriginal groups spread the highly respected pituri leaves – as the plant was rarely to be found growing near where they lived.