

Dark Emu rebuttal added to school reading list

EXCLUSIVE

By **ANGELICA SNOWDEN**, JOURNALIST

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A critique of Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu* has been included by Victoria's curriculum authority on a resource list for the state's Australian history teachers to use in the classroom.

In the latest challenge to Professor Pascoe's work, a book by anthropologist Peter Sutton and archaeologist Keryn Walshe – which says *Dark Emu* relies on colonial accounts as sources – has been endorsed by the state's curriculum chiefs.

Professor Pascoe says before European conquest, Indigenous Australians engaged in sophisticated agricultural and farming techniques. He contends that precolonial Aboriginal people sometimes lived in houses and villages and employed technology to harvest food.

Professor Sutton and Dr Walshe challenge this, claiming Indigenous Australians were “complex hunter-gatherers”.

Their work, *Farmers or hunter-gatherers? The Dark Emu debate*, was published last year and has been added to a list of optional resources, alongside *Dark Emu*, for teachers and now thousands of year 11 and 12 students across the state to use in the study of Australian history.

Professor Sutton, from the University of Adelaide and the South Australian museum, said if students were being given *Dark Emu* without a critical analysis of the work, they were being “misled”.

“I think that's quite shameful. Let's say the Dalai Lama tells you that two and two makes five. You say, look, with all due respect, your spiritual highness, two and two does not make five,”

he told The Australian.

“So this issue is not really about Bruce ... It’s about whether students are being guided ... in terms of reliable sources of factual information.”

Professor Pascoe’s 2014 work, *Dark Emu Black Seeds: agriculture or accident?*, has been included on the same list since at least 2015 according to a VCAA resource list dated that year.

It argues that the economy and culture of Indigenous Australians before European conquest has been undervalued, and that journals and diaries of explorers revealed “a much more complicated Aboriginal economy than the primitive hunter-gatherer lifestyle we had been told was the simple lot of Australia’s First People.”

Professor Sutton and Dr Walshe “contend that Pascoe is broadly wrong” and say Indigenous Australians were “hunter-gatherers-plus” whose “hunting, fishing and gathering economy was far more complex than might be imagined from the word ‘mere.’”

Dark Emu is listed as an optional resource in two NSW high school subject “sample programs” – they include stage 6 Investigating science and Stage 4 Technology Mandatory – but it is not a prescribed text.

Nor is Professor Sutton’s work.

Queensland and Western Australia recommend neither book as a prescribed or recommended resource.

Professor Sutton, an anthropologist since 1969, said students should have the opportunity to review both pieces of work, not *Dark Emu* alone. “(*Dark Emu* should) either be excluded on the basis that it’s been disproved by the heavy weight of Aboriginal evidence in our expert opinion or you present both that book and its answer and you get the students to compare the pair,” he said.

“I often say to people ‘Don’t read our book first. Go and buy a copy of *Dark Emu*, have a good read, then read ours,’ ”

Professor Pascoe did not respond to a request for comment.

A spokesman from Victoria's Department of Education said books were selected by individual schools to support teachers in delivering the state's curriculum.

"Texts to support the implementation of the Victorian curriculum are determined by individual schools, consistent with advice provided by the Department of Education and Training on the selection of suitable teaching resources," he said.

"Farmers or hunter-gatherers: The Dark Emu debate by Peter Sutton and Keryn Walshe is not on any of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority's prescribed text lists for senior secondary VCE studies. However, the book is on a list of optional resources that teachers may use to explore a range of different interpretations of the past in the study of VCE Australian History Units 3 and 4."

Professor Sutton described his work as a "forensic examination" of Professor Pascoe's, whom he said omitted evidence that did not suit his theory and relied too heavily on the work of European explorers.

Professor Sutton's work is included in the optional reading list for the VCE subject area "from custodianship to the Anthropocene (60,000 BCE-1901)".

A spokeswoman for the national curriculum authority, the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority, said it did not recommend books for students to read.

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