

# Aboriginal hut depressions

*lutruwita* is the country of Tasmanian Aboriginal people and everyone has a responsibility to protect our heritage.



*Aboriginal hut depression*

## What are Aboriginal hut depressions?

Hut depressions are large circular hollows that have been dug into the top of small hills, dunes or shell middens. These depressions are all that remain today of Aboriginal huts - large beehive shaped structures composed of wood and bark that could accommodate between 6 - 14 people. The unique beehive shape was specifically designed to withstand the harsh weather conditions of Tasmania's coastal environments, particularly along the west coast where they are more commonly found.

According to early European observers, these beehive structures were composed of a number of wooden structural supports (possibly tea tree) that had been steamed and bent by fire, and then driven into the ground. There is some evidence that

large whale ribs were occasionally utilised as structural supports. The structural posts were overlain with bark, leaving room for a small opening about 60 cm in height. Inside the hut, depressions were dug into the living floor to accommodate a campfire. Historical accounts also mention that the interior walls of the huts sometimes featured painted motifs. Over time, the wooden components of these structures have disappeared leaving behind the concave depressions.

## Where are hut depressions found?

Hut depressions are found predominantly in coastal and estuarine environments. In Tasmania, these sites are more commonly found on the west coast. Hut depressions are generally within 500 metres of the coast in close proximity to

## How to identify an Aboriginal hut depression site:

Aboriginal hut depressions are commonly identified by the following features:

- The central depression is large, pronounced and circular in shape;
- Fragments of various edible mature shellfish and mollusc species such as abalone, mussel, oyster, limpet, warreners and whelks, are visible both within and surrounding the depression;
- Ash and charcoal is present, particularly within the central depression;
- Bone fragments of various species of bird, marsupial, seal, and possibly even whale might be visible within and surrounding the depression;
- Stone artefacts may also be found throughout the feature.





coastal food resources, such as rocky outcrops containing various edible species of shellfish, seal colonies, and marsupial hunting grounds. Hut depressions are typically situated on elevated, well-draining soils, close to fresh water sources such as lagoons, swamps, creeks and rivers, and may occur in 'villages' or concentrations of as many as ten huts.

### Why are hut depressions important?

As an archaeological feature predominantly found on the west coast, hut depressions are a valuable source of information for those seeking to understand past Aboriginal occupation of the region. Scientific analysis of the shell, bone and stone tools found within hut depressions help researchers to reconstruct past environments, and to understand Aboriginal occupation and land use patterns through time.

The method of hut construction provides researchers an opportunity to explore regional differences in shelter construction. In some instances, estimations can be made about the size of the group that occupied the hut (sometimes referred to as a 'hearth group'), how long they occupied the region, and whether it was a regular campsite or the product of a single event. Where collections of huts (or villages) are identified, these may provide insight into how many

people occupied the village. Analysis of the food remains found within and surrounding the depressions can provide valuable information about past Aboriginal dietary habits.

As hut depressions are generally found in association with sand dunes and shell middens on the high energy western Tasmanian coastline, they are susceptible to coastal erosion and are

therefore not easily identified. Hut depressions are also considered to be important archaeological sites based on their rarity.

### Aboriginal Hut Depressions are protected

Aboriginal hut depressions are defined as 'relics' and therefore protected under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1975* (the Act). It is an offence to destroy, damage, deface, conceal, remove or otherwise interfere with a relic. It is also an offence not to report the finding of a relic. So if you suspect that an Aboriginal hut depression has been discovered during your activity, do not interfere with the site. Report the site to Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania (AHT). Provide the location of the site and images on the Aboriginal Heritage Site Reporting Form at [www.aboriginalheritage.tas.gov.au/resources](http://www.aboriginalheritage.tas.gov.au/resources) and forward to [aboriginal@heritage.tas.gov.au](mailto:aboriginal@heritage.tas.gov.au). AHT will provide further advice in accordance with the Act.



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