

Aboriginal middens

lutruwita is the Country of Tasmanian Aboriginal people and we all have a responsibility to protect Aboriginal cultural heritage.



Aboriginal coastal midden

What are Aboriginal middens?

Aboriginal middens are distinct concentrations of shell, bone, botanical remains, ash and charcoal - evidence of past Aboriginal hunting, gathering and food processing activities within a particular area. The discarded shells and other materials may be the remains of a single meal or the result of repeated use of a particular location over thousands of years. Midden sites can range in size from small, discrete scatters to extensive deposits that run along a coastline for hundreds of metres. They are often associated with dark, ashy soil and can also be visible in eroded or collapsed sections of dunes where they may appear as a dark, ashy band with layers of shell throughout.

Where are middens found?

Middens are one of the most prevalent Aboriginal cultural heritage site types found in Tasmania. They are typically found on elevated ground within coastal environments and areas where rivers enter the sea, and near headlands and rocky outcrops from which shellfish and molluscs could be collected. Other smaller midden sites have been found inland along major river systems and wetlands.

Aboriginal midden or deposit?

Concentrations of shells washed ashore by natural processes (such as strong tides or storms) can sometimes create mounds of shells that appear similar to an Aboriginal midden. These natural deposits are usually found at

Identifying an Aboriginal midden:

Aboriginal middens are commonly identified by the following features:

- the dominant presence of the remains of specific edible shellfish and mollusc species, such as abalone, mussels, oysters, limpets, warreners and whelks;
- ash and charcoal;
- the bones of various birds, marsupials and seals;
- artefacts made from stone, bone and shell.

Artefacts and animal bones are not always immediately visible on middens, however the presence of a combination of the above features are key indicators of a midden site.



Aboriginal midden

the high tide mark and predominantly contain smaller shellfish species. In order to distinguish a natural shell deposit from an Aboriginal midden it is important to consider:

- whether there is a dominant presence of the remains of edible shellfish species;
- whether distinct layers of shell mixed with ash and charcoal can be seen in an exposed dune;
- whether any stone artefacts or bones can also be seen.

Why are Aboriginal middens important?

The study of middens provides important information regarding past Aboriginal lifeways within a particular region. Scientific analysis of the materials found within middens helps researchers to reconstruct past environments and to understand Aboriginal occupation and land use patterns through time. In some instances, estimations can be made about the size of the group that used the site, how long they occupied the region and whether it was a regular campsite or the product of a single event. Charcoal samples may be tested to determine the age of each layer, and pollen samples may provide insight into past vegetation within the region.

Middens are a valuable archaeological resource, not only for what they reveal about Aboriginal dietary habits but also the technology that was utilised in gathering and processing food, seasonal trends in natural resource use and how humans adapted to environmental changes.

Aboriginal middens are protected

Aboriginal middens are defined as relics under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1975* and are therefore protected. 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. If you suspect that an Aboriginal midden has been discovered during your activity, do not interfere with the site.

Report the location and provide images of the site by using the Aboriginal Heritage Site Reporting Form at:

www.aboriginalheritage.tas.gov.au

Forms can be forwarded to:

aboriginalheritage@dpac.tas.gov.au

Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania staff will provide further advice in accordance with the legislation.

Please help to preserve Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural heritage sites by reporting their presence to Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania.

Aboriginal midden (eroded dune)



Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania
Community Partnerships and Priorities
Department of Premier and Cabinet
GPO Box 123 Hobart TAS 7001

Telephone: **1300 487 045**

email: **aboriginalheritage@dpac.tas.gov.au**

www.aboriginalheritage.tas.gov.au

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