

Aboriginal Middens

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



Aboriginal coastal midden

What are Aboriginal middens?

Aboriginal shell middens are distinct concentrations of shell that contain evidence of past Aboriginal hunting, gathering and food processing activities within a particular area. These middens consist primarily of concentrations of discarded shell and bone, botanical remains, ash and charcoal. Aboriginal midden material may appear on the ground surface as sparse scatters or concentrations of broken shell, and are often associated with dark, ashy soil including charcoal. Middens 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. Midden sites can range in size from small, discrete scatters to extensive deposits that run along a coastline for hundreds of metres.

The discarded shell 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.

Where are middens found?

Aboriginal middens are one of the most prevalent site types found in Tasmania and are typically found in coastal environments and areas where rivers enter the sea. A number of smaller midden sites have been found inland along major river systems and wetlands. Coastal middens are predominantly found on elevated ground, such as within coastal dune systems in close proximity to headlands and rocky outcrops from which shellfish and molluscs were collected.

How to identify an Aboriginal midden:

Aboriginal middens are commonly identified by the following features:

- the dominant presence of specific edible mature shellfish and mollusc species such as abalone, mussel, oyster, limpet, warreners and whelks
- ash and charcoal
- bones of various species of bird, marsupial, and seal
- artefacts made from stone, bone and shell

Artefacts and animal bone are not always immediately visible on middens, however the presence of a combination of edible shellfish species and the remains of campfires (charcoal and ash) are key indicators of a midden site.



Aboriginal midden

Aboriginal midden or deposit?

Concentrations of shell washed to shore by natural processes such as strong tides or storms can sometimes create mounds of shell that appear similar to an Aboriginal midden. These natural deposits are usually found at the high tide mark, and predominantly contain smaller shellfish species.

You may be able to distinguish a natural shell deposit from an Aboriginal midden by asking yourself the following questions:

- Is there a dominant presence of edible shell species?
- If the material in a dune is exposed, can you see distinct layers of shell mixed with ash and charcoal?
- Can you see any stone artefacts or bone?

If you have answered yes to any of these questions, it is potentially an Aboriginal midden.

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 (shell, bone, stone tools) 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 of occupation, 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 utilized

in gathering and processing food, seasonal trends of species exploitation, and also how humans adapted to environmental changes.

Aboriginal middens are protected

Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural material or sites 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 midden 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/forms and forward to aboriginal@heritage.tas.gov.au. AHT will provide further advice in accordance with the Act.

Aboriginal midden (eroded dune)



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Tasmanian Government