

Aboriginal Rockshelters

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



Aboriginal rockshelter (cave)

What are Aboriginal rockshelters?

An Aboriginal rockshelter is a cave, overhang or rock arch that contains evidence of use and occupation by Aboriginal people. Cultural material can be visible on the ground such as artefacts and archaeological features such as rock markings or subsurface archaeological deposits can be present. Subsurface excavation can provide information on how Aboriginal people lived in the past. While some rockshelters may not contain any visible surface evidence of human occupation, they may contain accumulated sediment beyond the entrance, including buried archaeological material.

Rockshelters were places of refuge from the weather, for short or long periods of habitation, and as places for performing ceremonies or making stone tools. Rockshelters may be

found throughout Tasmania, usually in areas of limestone, dolerite and sandstone. Limestone rockshelter sites in Tasmania's southwest are important to the Aboriginal community and are of particular interest to archaeologists due to the unique conditions in this region. Floor deposits within limestone rockshelters are often covered by a thin layer of limestone deposited during the natural erosion of the shelter roof and walls. When the rockshelter is unoccupied for a long period of time this limestone deposit builds and hardens to form a "cap" that seals and protects the underlying floor from wind or water erosion.

Identifying Aboriginal rockshelters

When considering if a rockshelter may contain subsurface evidence of Aboriginal occupation, archaeologists use these key criteria:

- probable depth of the floor deposit and potential archaeological deposits (based on a visual examination)
- whether the rockshelter would be considered suitable for shelter for long or short periods
- degree of protection from the elements
- useable floor space and natural light
- proximity to drinkable water and food resources

An accessible, reasonably level, north facing, dry rockshelter in close proximity to seasonal or permanent water would be suitable for longer-term occupation.



Aboriginal rockshelter (overhang)

valuable information about understanding past environments, environmental changes and dietary behaviours of Tasmania's original inhabitants.

The examination of material from rockshelters increases our understanding of past Aboriginal occupation and even the nature of the

surrounding environment. The dating of charcoal from hearths provides an understanding of the nature of occupation within a rockshelter over time. Analysis of animal bones can identify diets and what species of animals Aboriginal people hunted. Organic materials can inform understanding of the past environments in which Aboriginal people lived. Among the most remarkable Aboriginal rockshelter sites in Tasmania are those located within the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA). Considered to have high cultural value to Tasmanian Aboriginal people, they represent important physical evidence of Aboriginal occupation in the area for the past 35,000 years. They indicate Aboriginal habitation of the TWWHA was the most southern human occupation at this time. Recording and excavation within a number of these sites has uncovered extremely well preserved deposits and artefactual materials. This has increased understanding of past environments and the use and modification of the landscape by Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal rockshelters 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 rockshelter 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.

Preserve Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural sites by reporting their presence to Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania.

Aboriginal rockshelter (arch)



How are rockshelters recorded?

The recording and excavation of rockshelters provides the opportunity to study past Aboriginal life. This study can be undertaken through archaeological recording and, if appropriate and following Aboriginal community consultation, a program of excavation. While recording documents, surface artefacts and features, archaeological excavation involves the careful exposure of sediment that has built up on rockshelter floors. This build up is caused by natural processes such as wind, and the natural erosion of the rock formation in which the rockshelter is located. Over time, this sediment builds up like a layer cake. When carefully exposed through archaeological excavation, these layers form a vertical timeline stretching back hundreds and even thousands of years showing evidence of human activity. These episodes of human activity are indicated by varying bands of sediment containing artefactual materials, archaeological features or organic materials. Archaeological materials and features can include charcoal, ash, artefacts, animal bones or hearths (fireplaces). Under ideal environmental conditions, organic materials such as microscopic pollen, plant material and shells can also be discovered.

Aboriginal rockshelters are important

Rockshelter sites are significant to the Aboriginal community. They are also significant globally as they hold

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Tasmanian Government