

Aboriginal rockshelters

lutruwita is the Country of Tasmanian Aboriginal people and we all have a responsibility to protect Aboriginal cultural 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. Rockshelters were used to provide refuge from the weather, for short or long periods of habitation. They were also places for performing ceremonies or making stone tools. Archaeological features can be present (such as rock markings or subsurface archaeological deposits) and cultural material can sometimes be visible on the ground (such as artefacts). While some rockshelters may not contain any visible surface evidence of human occupation, they may contain accumulated sediment beyond the entrance that includes buried archaeological material.

Rockshelters are important to the Aboriginal community and may be found throughout Tasmania, usually in areas of limestone, dolerite and sandstone. Limestone rockshelter sites in Tasmania's southwest are of particular interest to archaeologists, due to the unique conditions in this region. Floor deposits within the 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 up 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:

- the probable depth of the floor deposit (based on a visual examination) and potential for archaeological deposits;
- whether the rockshelter would have been considered suitable for shelter for long or short periods;
- the 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)

How are rockshelters recorded?

The recording and excavation of rockshelters provides the opportunity to study past Aboriginal life and can be undertaken (if appropriate) following consultation with the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. The recording of rockshelters involves documenting any surface artefacts and features within the formation. Occasionally archaeological assessment might involve excavation. This entails carefully exposing the accumulated sediments on the rockshelter floor which have built up like a layer cake over time. These layers, indicated by varying bands of sediment, form a vertical timeline showing episodes of human activity stretching back hundreds and even thousands of years. Archaeological materials discovered can include charcoal, ash, artefacts, animal bones, shells or hearths (fireplaces). Under ideal environmental conditions, organic materials (such as microscopic pollen particles and plant material) can also be found.

Why are Aboriginal rockshelters important?

Rockshelter sites are significant to the Tasmanian Aboriginal people and are considered to have a high cultural value. Examination of material from rockshelters increases our understanding of

past Aboriginal occupation. They are also significant globally as they hold valuable information regarding past environments, environmental changes and the dietary behaviours of Tasmania's original inhabitants. The dating of charcoal from hearths provides an understanding of the nature of occupation within a rockshelter over time. Analysis of organic material and animal bones can help identify past diets and what food resources were being targeted. Among the most remarkable Aboriginal rockshelter sites in Tasmania are those located within the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA). These represent important physical evidence of Aboriginal occupation in the area for the past 35,000 years and indicate this 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.

Aboriginal rockshelters are protected

Aboriginal rockshelters 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 rockshelter 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

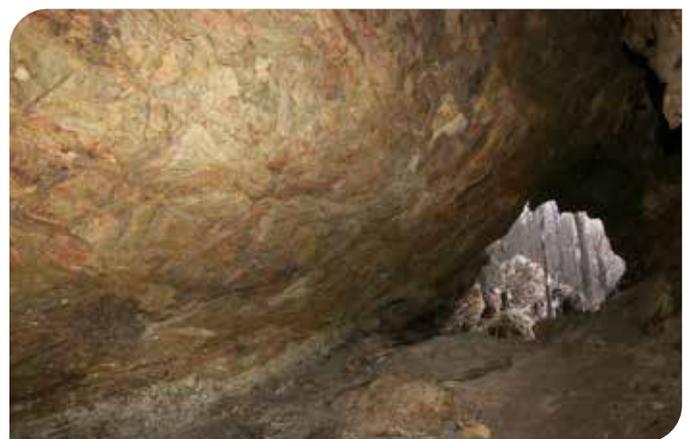
Forms can be forwarded to:

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 rockshelter (arch)



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