

Aboriginal stone arrangements

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



Rearranged cobbles to form pits (in foreground)

What are stone arrangements?

'Stone arrangement' is a term used to describe any feature in the landscape which has been created through the deliberate placement or arrangement of stones by Aboriginal people. Typically, these stone arrangements can be further classified by their form as walls, paths, pits, cairns, alignments, fish traps and seal hides. In Tasmania, the most common stone arrangement forms recorded are pits (depressions) and cairns (heaps, piles or mounds). Little is known about the construction method or uses of stone arrangements, but it is likely that they represent a very broad range of functions. These may have included spiritual and ceremonial uses as well as practical functions such as hides for hunting seals or place markers.

Characteristics of stone arrangements

Stone arrangements come in different shapes and sizes, depending on their form and function. They are created through either the addition or subtraction of stones available in the immediate environment. Fish traps, for example, tend to be made of low, loosely piled walls approximately 50-100 centimetres high. Some fish traps incorporate natural features (such as rock outcrops) into their design. By comparison, pits can range from circular to oval or even 'U' shaped features. Their dimensions vary from as shallow as 20 centimetres to over 70 centimetres deep, and some of the largest are over four metres in diameter. The average rock size noted in pits ranges from 15-25 centimetres.

Summary:

- Aboriginal stone arrangements are rare and culturally significant.
- Any purposeful rearrangement (through the removal or addition of stones) is considered a stone arrangement.
- Stone arrangements can take the form of:
 - walls;
 - paths;
 - pits and cairns;
 - alignments;
 - fish traps;
 - seal hides.
- Other than fish traps and seal hides, the specific uses and meanings of Tasmania's stone arrangements are unknown but may include:
 - ceremonial places;
 - mythological representations;
 - boundary or resource markers;
 - directions;
 - burial sites.



A low rock wall extending through the tidal shallows functioning as a fish trap when the tide recedes

Where are stone arrangements found?

Recorded stone arrangements in Tasmania are largely located on raised pebble beaches, one to four metres above sea level. There are examples on the west and north east coasts, as well as several small islands in the south east. Records from 1908, show cairns located on a farm near Ross, which indicates they may have been widespread throughout Tasmania however, their presence may simply be due to the fact that these areas are less likely to have been developed since European arrival. Fish traps are found only in coastal environments. While no fish traps have been formally recorded within inland waterways, a number have been found along the north west coast, extending up to 90 metres from the shoreline. The north west coast is thought to be a more favourable location for these sites due to a tidal range of around two metres.

How to identify Aboriginal stone arrangements

Stone arrangements are difficult to identify as they are not always obvious within the landscape and are easily duplicated. There are many historic accounts regarding the creation or modification of stone arrangements by non-Aboriginal people, including sealers, farmers and children throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. One way of assessing

an Aboriginal stone arrangement is its association with other Aboriginal site types, such as a midden or stone artefacts. The context of the stone arrangement is also important, for example, whether it is near a current or historic settlement or in a readily accessible location. Another way to determine if a stone arrangement is Aboriginal is to assess whether the size and mass of the stones make it possible to have been created by hand, and whether the function of the arrangement is obvious.

Why are stone arrangements important?

The rarity of stone arrangements within Tasmania makes them extremely valuable to the Aboriginal people and our understanding of the past. More research is required to give us a greater understanding of Aboriginal stone arrangements. Stone arrangements are particularly vulnerable to storm damage, animal and human interference. Given their fragile nature, it is important that any further impact to these sites is prevented.

Aboriginal stone arrangements are protected

Aboriginal stone arrangements 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 stone arrangement 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: aboriginal@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.

Lineal stone arrangement



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