Aboriginal hut depressions

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

Hut depression

What are Aboriginal hut depressions?

Hut depressions are large circular hollows that have been dug into the top of small hills, sand dunes or shell middens. These depressions are all that remains today of Aboriginal huts - large beehive-shaped structures (composed of wood and bark) that could accommodate between six and fourteen people. The unique beehive shape was specifically designed to withstand the harsh weather conditions of Tasmania's coastal environments, particularly along the west coast where they are more commonly found. According to early European observers, these beehive structures were composed of a number of wooden structural supports (possibly tea tree) that had been steamed in a fire and bent, then driven into the ground. There is some evidence that large whale ribs were occasionally utilised as structural supports. The structural posts were overlaid with bark, leaving a small opening of about 60 centimetres as an entryway. Inside the hut, a depression was dug into the floor to accommodate a campfire. Historical accounts mention that the interior walls of the huts sometimes featured painted motifs. Over time the wooden components of these structures have disappeared, leaving behind the concave depressions.

Where are hut depressions found?

Hut depressions are predominantly found within 500 metres of coastal and estuarine environments, in close proximity to coastal food resources (such as rocky outcrops containing edible species of shellfish, seal colonies and marsupial hunting grounds). Hut depressions are typically situated on

Identifying an Aboriginal hut depression site:

Aboriginal hut depressions are commonly identified by the following features:

- the central depression is large, pronounced and circular in shape;
- fragments of various edible shellfish and mollusc species (such as abalone, mussels, oysters, limpets, warreners and whelks) are visible both within and surrounding the depression;
- ash and charcoal are present, particularly within the central depression;
- bone fragments of various species of birds, marsupials, seals and possibly even whales might be visible within and surrounding the depression;
- stone artefacts may also be found throughout the feature.

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Stylised reconstruction of the interior of a hut depression painted by Peter Gouldthorpe

elevated, well-draining soils close to fresh water sources (such as lagoons, swamps, creeks and rivers) and may occur in villages or concentrations of as many as ten huts.

Why are hut depressions important?

Hut depressions are important archaeological and Aboriginal cultural heritage sites and provide a valuable source of information. Scientific analysis of the shell, bone and stone tools found within hut depressions helps researchers to reconstruct past environments and understand Aboriginal occupation and land use patterns through time. The method of hut construction provides an opportunity to explore regional differences in shelter design. In some instances, estimations can be made about the size of the group that occupied the hut or village, how long they occupied the region and whether it was a regular campsite or the product of a single event. Analysis of food remains that are found within and surrounding the depressions can provide valuable information about past Aboriginal dietary habits.

Hut depressions are rare and important to the Aboriginal community. They are considered to have a high cultural value because they show that Aboriginal people were the first, and very effective, architects and builders on lutruwita/Tasmania and that, much like today, communal groups, like family, kin or clan groups, were very important to Aboriginal people which is evident in the clusters of hut depressions. Hut depressions are considered to be important archaeological sites based on their rarity.

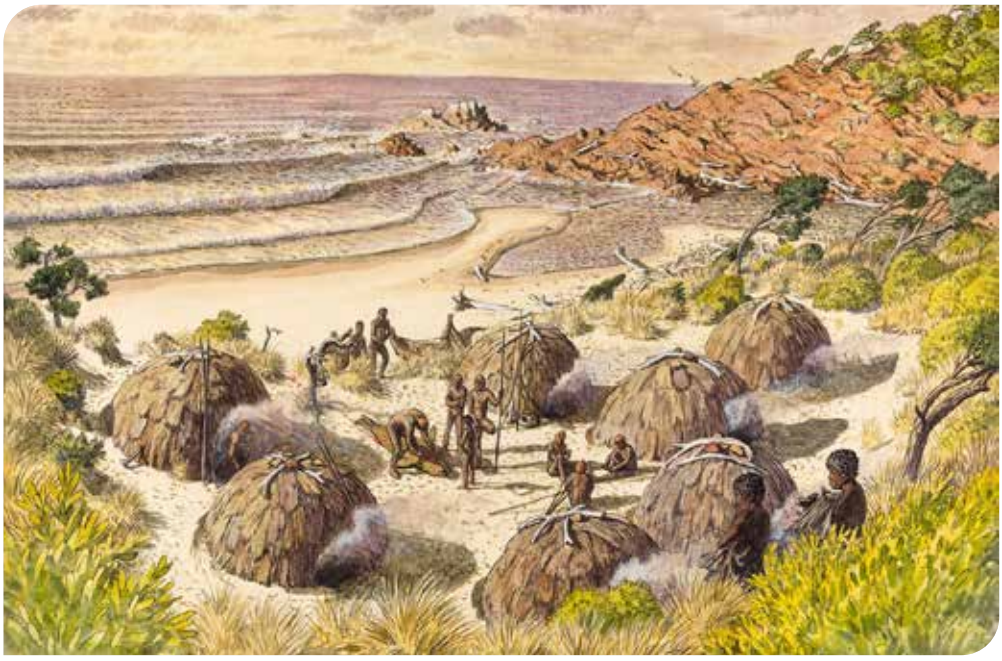
Aboriginal hut depressions are protected

Aboriginal hut depressions 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 hut depression has been discovered during your activity, do not interfere with the site.

Report the location and provide images of the site by using the **Report a Site** tool at: **www.aboriginalheritageregister.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.



Stylised reconstruction of a hut village painted by Peter Gouldthorpe

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