

Using shovel pit survey to explore Aboriginal resilience on Wadjemup / Rottnest Island, Western Australia

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One island, many histories

Wadjemup (Rottnest Island) is culturally and historically important for Whadjuk Noongar and many other Aboriginal peoples of Western Australia. Not only is it a spiritual place, visited for millennia by Aboriginal people before sea levels rose, Wadjemup was used by colonial authorities to imprison some 3700 Aboriginal people from across WA, from 1838 to 1931.

Survey aims

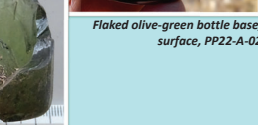
In 2023, Rottnest Island Authority (RIA) asked Whadjuk Aboriginal Corporation and Dortch Cuthbert to undertake archaeological shovel pit surveys (SPS), and Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) investigations, in potential development areas. The aim was to confirm the nature and extent of known archaeological sites (PP22-A-01, PP22-A-02 and SM22-A-01) and identify any new archaeological sites. We also aimed to assess site significance, considering the known ethnographic values of these sites; the colonial context of island use, incarceration and resilience; and historical records of artefact production for hunting, fishing and other purposes by Aboriginal people during prescribed times away from prison grounds.

Previous surveys

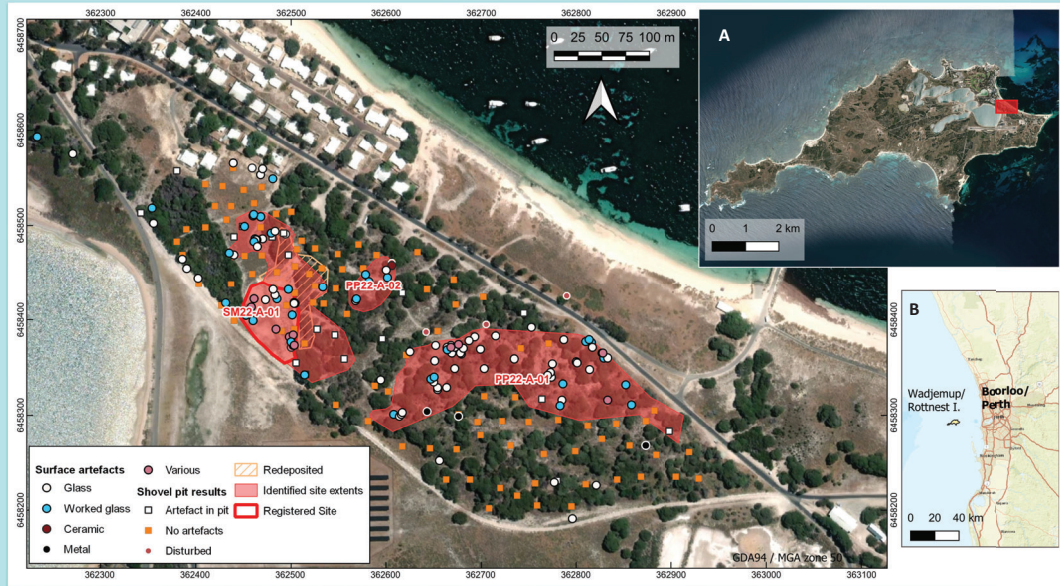
The survey area, located approximately 700 m south-east of the historic prison, contains evidence of colonial-period quarrying and rubbish dumping. The three sites recorded here contain bottle glass fragments that have been worked by Aboriginal prisoners to make tools (Archae-aus 2022, 2023), adding to c.20 other archaeological sites on Wadjemup that feature worked glass artefacts (Paterson et al. 2021, Dortch et al. 2023).



Flaked olive-green bottle base excavated from SM22-A-01



Flaked olive-green bottle base, surface, PP22-A-02



Map of the SPS results. Inset maps show (A) location of study area on Wadjemup and (B) regional context.

Shovel pit survey

Whadjuk, Dortch Cuthbert and RIA representatives completed three SPS trips between April and June 2023, excavating and sieving 120 50 x 50 cm pits, and used Ground Penetrating Radar to examine the ground under stone structures to see if they marked burials (they did not).

We considered glass objects to be 'worked glass' if they showed clear signs of intentional flaking, such as multiple negative flake scars in regular sequence. Randomly broken glass was not counted as 'worked glass', even though such pieces were sometimes associated with worked glass.

Based on diagnostic features, the age of surface historic material was identified as c.1880-1920s. SPS recovered historic glass in 19 pits, including two worked items. The distribution of historic glass in shovel pits and at the surface suggested revised site boundaries for SM22-A-01 and PP22-A-01. SPS also showed how 20th century sediment redeposition has concealed parts of the prison-era sites.



Aboriginal men gathered under trees at Wadjemup c. 1895. State Library of Western Australia, 33868/13.

Seeking seclusion

The surveys suggest variations between the three sites in the survey area – and between other glass artefact sites on Wadjemup. We suggest that Aboriginal people worked some glass in the colonial dump site (SM22-A-01) but also carried glass to nearby areas (PP22-A-01 and PP22-A-02) mapped as 'wattle scrub' in the 1890s. The dump site contains many different historic materials with some worked glass (<0.02% of all glass fragments), whereas the 'satellite' sites comprise mostly glass fragments, of which 12% or higher are worked.

Unlike other Wadjemup sites from the same period (1880-1920s), the three sites contain no Kimberley points or pressure-flaked debris. This difference may reflect cultural affiliations of the people making the artefacts, potentially related to culturally distinct modes of glass bottle reduction at different sites (cf. Harrison 2000). More research is required, but spatial separation of culturally distinct artefact production modes is consistent with the notion that Aboriginal people incarcerated on Wadjemup spent precious moments of free time in secluded places with culturally affiliated people.



Whadjuk Noongar representatives Tina Hayden and Greg Ugle sifting excavated sediment

Whadjuk Aboriginal Corporation

ROTTNEST ISLAND AUTHORITY

Dortch Cuthbert HERITAGE FUTURES

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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SNAPPY GUM HERITAGE SERVICES

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