

Kabi Kabi Peoples shell midden project at Bribie Island in southeast Queensland

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A pioneering community-based strategy for documenting and safeguarding culturally significant Kabi Kabi Peoples shell middens in southeast Queensland, is presented in this study. Working in collaboration with Kabi Kabi First Nation Applicant, Mr. Kerry Jones, and Michael Strong of Turnstone Archaeology, the research addresses the alarming threats facing these ancient sites from erosion, trampling, visitation, and infrastructure development. Historically, comprehensive



midden mapping had not been conducted directly with Traditional Owners in the region before 2021. By actively involving the Aboriginal community in this initiative, 22 previously undocumented middens were identified on Bribie Island and along the Pumicestone Passage, revealing a wealth of knowledge about the past. The shell middens not only hold cultural heritage value but also provide invaluable insights into climate change, coastal morphology, land-use practices, trade, and the utilisation of marine resources by

the Kabi Kabi People. Additionally, intriguing stone arrangements, including a fish trap, were discovered, potentially offering the earliest evidence of Aboriginal oyster cultivation. However, the research also shed light on the pressing need for immediate action to protect these sites. Climate change, rising sea levels, and human interference pose the greatest threats to their survival. Shockingly, over half of the 63 recorded middens (Stockton 1979) have already suffered significant erosion, mainly due to king tides and storm surges. By acknowledging the urgency of the situation and engaging in proactive identification and safeguarding measures, we can ensure the survival of these time capsules of ancient coastal life and heritage. Preserving the shell middens is crucial for their cultural significance and the broader understanding of traditional Kabi Kabi Country and Peoples. This research serves as a call to action for the archaeological community and stakeholders to work hand in hand with Traditional Owners to secure these invaluable sites for the benefit of present and future generations.

Kabi Kabi project: "Hidden Midden Messages" 2018 to 2022



From 2018 to 2020, this endeavour, titled "Hidden Midden Messages," has been made possible by the Queensland Government's Department of Environment and Science, Looking after Country Grant Program.

Our recent fieldwork survey covered eight targeted areas in southeast Queensland over the course of ten days. The results are nothing short of remarkable, with a total of 59 midden sites uncovered. What's particularly exciting is that 36 of these are entirely new discoveries, some of them colossal, stretching up to 250 meters in length and over a metre in height.

Let's delve into some standout findings:

In Bell's Creek, we identified eight midden sites, seven of which were previously unknown and not recorded on the database administered by the Cultural Heritage Unit with the Department of Seniors, Disability Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships (DSDSATSP). We also uncovered evidence of Kabi Kabi Peoples farming of oysters. Similarly, at Bullock Creek, we found eight midden sites, including seven new ones, and stumbled upon a new scarred tree. Gallagher Point revealed seven midden sites, with four new ones and a newly identified stone arrangement. Tripcony's, a site with historical significance dating back to the 1890s, showcased 13 midden sites, three of them new, along with evidence of Aboriginal oyster farming and new stone arrangements.

Moving on to Lime Pocket, we discovered three midden sites, two of which were previously undocumented. Mission Point offered insights into five midden sites, with seven already recorded with DSDSATSP. Poverty Creek unveiled eight midden sites, two of them new, and an additional scarred tree. Finally, at The Narrows, we located seven midden sites, one of which is new and features intact mounds over a metre deep.

Acknowledgments are due to the invaluable assistance provided by the Queensland Government's Parks and Wildlife Rangers. Their support included escorting the team to remote sites near The Skids. Additionally, Turnstone Archaeology issued a Prior Learning Cultural Heritage certificate to all participants, a testament to the fieldwork standards upheld during the project.



These sites, rich repositories of history, reveal a treasure trove of artefacts, including grinding stones and axes, nestled within the landscapes of Bribie Island and Bells Creek. A standout discovery within these cultural havens is the prevalence of choppers or stones specifically used to grind the tuber of the Bungwall fern (*Blechnum indicum*), a vital component of the traditional diet. This finding underscores the intricate relationship between the Kabi Kabi communities and the land, offering a glimpse into the culinary practices that sustained them for centuries.

Delving further into the temporal dimension, these sites unveil their ancient roots, reaching back an awe-inspiring 3000 years. The stone tools and artefacts discovered, intriguingly, hail from rock types or geologies distinct from the local area, indicating that they were sourced from considerable distances away on the mainland. This aspect adds a layer of complexity to the narrative, highlighting the intricate networks and mobility of the Kabi Kabi ancestors in their resource utilisation.



One site stands out—a shell midden site graced by the presence of a venerable Tuckeroo tree (*Cupaniopsis anacardioides*). This ancient arboreal sentinel, still standing tall, is believed to have provided shade for countless generations of Kabi Kabi ancestors. The connection to this sacred space transcends time, evoking a vivid sense of the past as imaginations weave tales of gatherings beneath its branches. The sheer abundance of oyster and shellfish remains within these middens paints a vivid picture of a bygone era characterised by unparalleled biodiversity and abundance. It's a testament to the intricate ecological balance that once thrived along the Pumicestone Passage before colonisation. This period of pre-colonial biodiversity, glimpsed through the lens of archaeology, amplifies the importance of environmental stewardship and cultural preservation.



Notably, the project garnered international recognition, being featured in a major paper on oyster reefs within the Pumicestone Passage and published in the United Kingdom (Thurstan et al. 2020).



Kabi Kabi People working with Michael Strong, offer insights from the survey of a northern shell midden site, suggesting potential discoveries further south, near the Big Swamp and freshwater waterholes. There is interest in exploring vegetation boundaries, mapping species for cultural resource significance, and predicting the presence of occupation sites, earth ovens, grinding stones, and Bungwall tuber preparation and processing equipment

near waterholes.

The Kabi Kabi People in this project also collaborate with Healthy Land and Water, in mapping GPS locations of mature trees from previous surveys, and considering a vegetation inventory, for both the thicker woodland with rainforest species on the east and the more open country on the west.

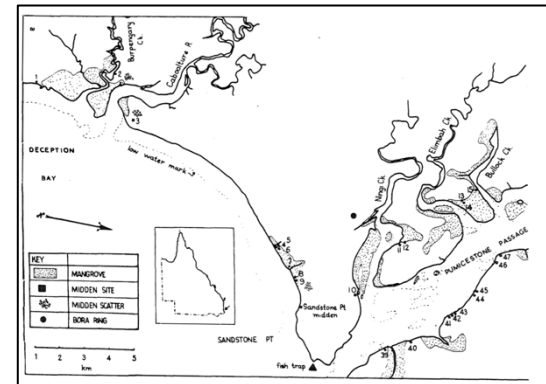


Figure 1 - map of Kabi Kabi Country study sites around Bribie Island and Pumicestone Passage in southeast Queensland [taken from Stockton (1979:99)]

References

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