

# Discovery of Aboriginal Sites and Objects

**An owner or occupier of private land, or an employee or agent of such an owner or occupier, who discovers an Aboriginal site or object on that land, must report the discovery to the Premier, as the Minister responsible for Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation. If human remains are discovered, stop works immediately, contact the SA Police and see [Discovery of Aboriginal Ancestral Remains](#).**

## Potential Aboriginal sites

Any land, developed or undeveloped, may contain Aboriginal sites and/or objects of significance to Aboriginal archaeology, anthropology, tradition and history. These sites and objects may relate to Aboriginal spiritual beliefs and ceremonial activities, living patterns and burials and the use of environmental resources such as water, animals, plants and stone. Sites may be obvious or subtle features in the landscape or may be completely hidden beneath the ground's surface. Some sites may have very little material evidence left but remain known in the oral histories of Aboriginal people.

Certain landscape features are more likely to be Aboriginal sites and/or contain evidence of Aboriginal occupation. These certain landscape features therefore pose a higher risk for the discovery of Aboriginal sites and objects. Unusual landscape features, for example, distinctive hills, rocky outcrops, rock holes or trees, often have cultural significance. Examples of some landscape features and the types of Aboriginal sites that they are often associated with are:

- Clay pans, lakes, rivers and estuaries may contain stone artefact scatters, shell middens, rock art, campsites and stone arrangements. These landscape features may also be considered cultural sites by Aboriginal people.
- Rocky outcrops may contain quarries, rock art, rock holes, stone arrangements, ceremonial sites and stone artefact scatters. These landscape features may also be considered cultural sites by Aboriginal people.
- Dunes and sand hills may include stone artefact scatters, campsites and burials. These landscape features may also be considered cultural sites by Aboriginal people.
- Craters and sink holes are often cultural sites.
- Areas in close proximity to the coast may include campsites, stone artefact scatters, shell middens and burials.
- Areas within close proximity to creeks, rivers, watercourses, lakes, waterholes, rock holes, wells and springs, whether permanent, seasonal or ephemeral, may also contain campsites, stone artefact scatters, burials and other signs of Aboriginal occupation, especially in arid zones.
- Areas which have been less developed, such as parks, open land or road verges, may still contain artefact scatters or subsurface archaeological material such as burials and earth ovens.
- Places bearing Aboriginal names, or place names which are English translations of Aboriginal names or indications of Aboriginal interaction with the landscape (including words such as 'Black' or 'Spear') may indicate previous Aboriginal connection to that location and may have significance to Aboriginal people.

Damaging, disturbing or interfering with Aboriginal sites and objects without the authorisation of the Premier, as the Minister responsible for Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation, is an offence under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988* (the Act). Disturbing Aboriginal sites may also cause distress and offence to Aboriginal people. In addition, the cultural and archaeological value of a site may be diminished if it is damaged, disturbed or interfered with.

## Contact

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Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation

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## Discovery plan

In areas where there is a high risk that ground disturbing works may encounter subsurface Aboriginal sites or objects, proponents can work with the local Aboriginal organisation to develop a discovery plan before works commence. A discovery plan may specify:

- Aboriginal contact persons for any discoveries of Aboriginal sites or objects;
- A preferred archaeologist/anthropologist to be contacted in the event of a discovery;
- a preferred approach for the in-situ preservation of any Aboriginal sites or objects discovered; and
- arrangements for reporting a discovery to the Minister.

A discovery plan may form part of a cultural heritage management plan or an agreement between the proponent and the local Aboriginal organisation(s). A discovery plan cannot provide authorisation for the damage, disturbance or interference with an Aboriginal site or object. Authorisation from the Minister is required if sites are to be excavated or interfered with or objects removed.

## Reporting the discovery of an Aboriginal site or object

If an Aboriginal site or object is discovered during ground disturbing works, the proponent should ensure that works cease immediately in the vicinity of the discovery. Care should be taken not to further disturb or damage the site or object.

Notification of the discovery of the site or object (and remains) is required pursuant section 20 of the Act, and can be made to the Premier through the Aboriginal Heritage Team at the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation (DPC-AAR).

When reporting the discovery of a site or object, the following information should be provided:

- Location of the site or object – preferably through the use of a GPS in northings and eastings, or indicated on a map
- Description of the site or object
- Approximate dimensions of the site
- Description of how to get to the site
- Your name and contact details
- Name and contact details of the person who discovered the site
- The circumstances surrounding the discovery
- Photographs of the site or object

## Managing a discovery area

Once work has stopped and the discovery reported, the proponent should consider whether continuing the works will result in damage or disturbance to, or interference with the Aboriginal site or object.

If an authorisation under section 23 has been already been granted in relation to the project area, the proponent should comply with any conditions related to discovery that the Minister has set as part of that authorisation.

If an authorisation is not in place and the discovered site cannot be avoided, the proponent will require an authorisation from the Premier, as the Minister responsible for Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation, under section 23 of the Act before continuing with the works. See [How to Apply under Section 23 of the Act](#) and the [Section 23 Application Form](#).

When a site is first discovered, its extent is often unknown. Inadvertently exposing an object or part of a site may only uncover a small portion of what may be a much larger Aboriginal site. If further excavation is planned to uncover the full extent of the Aboriginal site or any objects, an authorisation from the Minister under section 21 of the Act is required. See [Permission to Excavate under Section 21 of the Act](#) and the [Section 21-23-29 Application Form](#).

Sites can be recorded using DPC-AAR site card templates. For more information about recording sites, see [Recording Archaeological Sites](#), [Recording Cultural Sites](#) and [Recording Song Lines](#).