

Protecting Aboriginal Heritage after floods

Some of the most significant Aboriginal heritage sites in Australia are located along the River Murray.

Aboriginal heritage is a finite cultural resource. Where an Aboriginal site is damaged, it often cannot be repaired or replaced.

Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation (AAR) is aware that the rising and receding flood water may impact upon hundreds of sites of cultural significance. These may include:

- Burial sites
- Archaeological sites
- Culturally modified (or scarred) trees
- Locations such as rock shelters that display rock art (engravings or paintings).

What to do if you find Aboriginal heritage

Potential human remains

If you find anything that looks like human skeletal remains, do not touch or disturb them.

Call the police on 131 444.

If safe to do so, protect and secure the area until police can attend.

All human remains must be properly assessed by police. This is to eliminate the risk of contaminating what might later be declared as a crime scene. The police will determine whether they are Aboriginal ancestral remains.

Aboriginal sites or objects

If you discover an Aboriginal site or object, you must stop any activity around it.

Leave everything in place and **contact AAR:**

- Phone: (08) 8226 8900
- Email: aar.conservation@sa.gov.au including the location and photographs.

The importance of Aboriginal heritage

Aboriginal heritage is a finite cultural resource. Where an Aboriginal site is damaged, it often cannot be repaired or replaced.

Aboriginal heritage:

- connects Aboriginal people to their ancestors, culture, traditions and Country
- cannot be replaced
- provides information about how Aboriginal people used, and continue to use, the environment and landscape
- can be used as an educational tool both for Aboriginal people and the wider community

The protection of heritage forms part of Aboriginal people's traditional obligations to care for Country.

Legal considerations

All Aboriginal heritage is protected by the South Australian *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988*.

Members of the public should not collect, souvenir, clean or dig up anything they suspect is a heritage site, **even** if they think it is under threat. Unless a person has authorisation from the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, they cannot disturb, damage or interfere with Aboriginal sites, objects or remains.

There are penalties for breaching the Act, with fines of up to \$10,000 for individuals (or imprisonment for 6 months) and \$50,000 for a company

Preserving heritage

To help protect and preserve Aboriginal remains:

- Secure or bunt off the area around a site (if it is safe to do so).
- Leave any artefacts or objects in place.
- Take photographs showing the suspected heritage – you can use your phone to do this. Try to take a close-up and one of the wider area. If it is something small, include a pen or coin for scale.
- Record the location (the street address or map coordinates).

Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation will contact the relevant Traditional Owners and work to manage the discovery.

What does Aboriginal heritage look like?

Aboriginal heritage in South Australia takes many forms and includes artefacts made of wood, bone and stone, surface scatters, culturally modified (scarred) trees, campsites, quarries, stone arrangements, shell middens, ancestral burials, rock art, and historical places.

Heritage sites can also be specific areas, like those used for ceremonies and storylines that interact with particular landscape elements of the River Murray.

Learn more about what to look out for:

[Stone artefacts](#)

[Campsites, surface scatters and hearths](#)

[Stone middens](#)

[Rock art](#)

[Culturally modified trees \(also called scar trees\)](#)

Stone artefacts

Aboriginal people traditionally produced objects from a variety of materials including stone, wood, shells, bone, animal skins and plant material.

Most of these materials deteriorate quite quickly, except for stone. That is why most surviving objects from thousands of years ago and those most commonly found today, are artefacts made from stone.

Stones were made into knives or tools used for woodworking, cutting and scraping. They could be hammers, anvils and axes or could be used for sewing or piercing, as well as grinding plants and seeds for making things like damper.

Stone artefacts may:

- Have sharp edges
- Be a stone type often different to the natural rock in the area
- Be made from quartz, quartzite, silcrete, chert or silica rich stone.

Examples





Campsites, surface scatters and hearths

Campsites and surface artefact scatters are the physical remains of Aboriginal people's past living activities. These sites usually contain stone artefacts, charcoal, animal bone. Shell and ochre may also be present.

No two sites look exactly the same.

Aboriginal campsites were most frequently located near a reliable source of fresh water, so are often found on or near the River Murray. They may be exposed by erosion or a disturbance has exposed an older land surface, and are likely to be seen after the flood water recedes.

Keep an eye out for: scatters and concentrations of stone, shell, bone, charcoal or ash.

Take care when working in: eroding areas such as slopes and cuts into the ground surface, the riverbank and places that look like a good place to camp.

Examples



Shell middens

A shell midden is an accumulation of shell produced from people cooking, eating, collecting, and then disposing of, food over a long period of time, forming thin layers or patches of shell.

The size of the midden indicates the length of time that each deposit has to accumulate, and larger middens can represent the remains of many, many meals that have occurred over thousands of years.

Some of the middens in the Riverland have been dated to 29,000 years ago.

Evidence of burning, the presence of charcoal or ash and a variety of other animal bones can indicate Aboriginal diet over the life of the midden. The charcoal can also be used to provide dating of the accumulated deposit.

Keep an eye out for:

- Presence of mature edible shell species (freshwater and river mussel, mud oyster)
- Ash or charcoal within shell accumulation
- Shells are often in a layer of soil or sand that is unusually dark, or even black
- Various animal and fish bones, often with evidence of burning
- Artefacts made from bone, shell or stone

Take care when working in: riverbanks, eroding slopes

Examples





Rock art

Rock art on the River Murray is often found in rock shelters and is engraved, but can also include paintings, drawings and stencils on cliff faces, rock outcrops, boulders and the walls and ceilings of caves.

Rock art is one of the oldest material forms of human expression with a variety of imagery created as a reflection of the land and environment for cultural and ceremonial reasons, and to mark territory or places of importance.

Keep an eye out for:

- drilled holes, lines, animal tracks, some animal motifs
- engravings or red or white painting

Take care when working in: shelters, rocky areas and surfaces.

Do not touch the surface of any art or attempt to clean it as this can permanently damage or destroy the art.

Examples



Culturally modified trees (sometimes called scar trees)

Culturally modified trees are found all over South Australia, generally wherever there are mature native species, especially river red gum, black box and stringybark. They often occur along major rivers, around lakes and on flood plains.

A culturally modified tree is an old growth native tree where a panel of bark has been deliberately removed by Aboriginal people for use as shelter materials, watercraft (canoes), containers or other artefacts.

Trees are also deliberately 'scarred' as markers or identifying elements in the landscape, for artefact manufacture, collection of food or to insert notches to assist in climbing the tree.

Natural or Cultural?

Trees can be scarred by a number of natural processes including bushfire, branch tear, insect rot or damage, birds, or other forms of miscellaneous damage.

It is often difficult to determine if a scar is of natural or cultural origin. Some key indicators are:

- Is the scar uniform in shape?
- Does the age of the tree indicate that cultural activity may have occurred? (e.g. 150+ years old).
- Does the scar extend to the base of the tree?
- Does the scar have sufficient regrowth to have resulted from cultural practices?
- Does the tree have other scars?

If the tree is associated with other trauma, the scar extends to the base of the tree or the age of the tree is too juvenile to be cultural, then the scar has most likely resulted from natural processes.

Keep an eye out for:

- Dry face – dead, exposed timber that forms the scar surface.
- Overgrowth – scar tissue that forms along the sides of the dry face.
- Curved bark removal scars (e.g. circular, oval or elongated)
- Bark slab (sheet) removal scars (e.g. rectangular or square)
- Toe holds (e.g. series of small incisions)
- Resource extraction holes (e.g. smoke and access holes to catch game).

Take care when working in: areas with remnant native vegetation and along the riverbank

Examples



Managing Aboriginal heritage on your property

You can contact the Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation to find out if there are any registered or reported sites on your property.

Requesting a search of the central archives

AAR administers the central archives, which contain the Register of Aboriginal Sites and Objects. The central archives hold records for over 8,000 sites, objects and remains across South Australia. This information comprises site cards, photographs, videos, maps, spatial data, reports and oral histories.

The results of a central archives search will identify any records for Aboriginal heritage held for a search area. The results letter will also provide contact details for Aboriginal parties that have interest in the area.

The central archives are not an exhaustive record of all Aboriginal heritage sites and objects in the state. Consulting with Traditional Owners is always strongly recommended.

Make a request

Information about Aboriginal heritage can be extremely sensitive. The information held within the central archives is confidential and subject to legislative and cultural restrictions.

For this reason, information contained in the central archives is not publicly available and you must make a search request application to AAR.

Requests can be made through Taa wika: <https://taawika.sa.gov.au/public/home>

You can also contact DPC-AAR.HeritageSites1@sa.gov.au

Talk to local Aboriginal people

A good way of managing heritage is to be in touch with local Aboriginal people who know the sites on your property.

AAR can provide you with contact details for your local Aboriginal heritage organisation and you can discuss the sites on your property with its members.

Remember, if you find a site:

	<p>Do not disturb the site, objects or remains in any way</p>
	<p>Do not collect anything from the site</p>
	<p>Do not touch engraved or painted art (this can wear it off)</p>
	<p>Do not attempt to move or clean up any site or objects</p>
	<p>Do contact the Heritage Team at Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation</p> <p>Phone: 8226 8900 Email: aar.conservation@sa.gov.au</p>