Recent archaeological surveys on Middle Park Station, northwest Queensland

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Abstract

This preliminary report describes the initial results from an archaeological survey conducted in the foothills of the Gregory Ranges on Middle Park Station in inland northwest Queensland. Nearly 130 Aboriginal sites were located during the survey, which was carried out as a collaborative project between an archaeologist (LW) and members of the Woolgar Valley Aboriginal Corporation (DS and HS). Sites were dominated by rockshelters containing stenciled art, although open artefact scatters, grinding surfaces, axe grinding grooves and quarries were also present. This project has enabled the Woolgar Valley Aboriginal Corporation to begin compiling a detailed inventory of sites in their traditional country, thereby allowing a better understanding of their cultural heritage and addressing various research oriented questions about the nature of Aboriginal occupation in the region.

Introduction

A quick review of Australian archaeology journals reveals that one of the most under-published aspects of the discipline is field-based survey results. Such surveys are the 'bread and butter' of much cultural heritage related work, yet these results often remain somewhat inaccessible in unpublished reports. Furthermore, although many archaeologists working in Australia have moved beyond simply excavating rockshelter sites in the hope of obtaining 'old' dates for occupation, such site specific projects are still undertaken. This comment is not designed to denigrate such studies, but rather to draw attention to the fact that in order to locate such sites for excavation, researchers often invest a great deal of energy in carrying out surveys, the results of which rarely see the light of publication.

During 2001 Wallis began discussions with members of the Woolgar Valley Aboriginal Corporation about the possibility of carrying out archaeological research in their traditional country of northwest Queensland (Fig. 1). After numerous discussions, a two-stage project was developed:

1. To excavate and date previously recorded hearth sites from open contexts near the town of Richmond; and

2. To conduct archaeological surveys on Middle Park Station (a pastoral property located 120 km north of Richmond).

In 2002 an AIATSIS grant was awarded collaboratively to the authors to pursue these aims. This short report presents an overview of the survey results from the Middle Park project in order to prevent this data languishing in yet another unpublished report; results from the hearth investigations are published elsewhere (Wallis et al. in press).

The field area

Middle Park Station is located approximately 120 km north of Richmond and 370 km west of Townsville in the foothills of the Gregory Ranges (Fig. 1). The station is a pastoral property owned by the Woolgar Valley Aboriginal Corporation (purchased through the Indigenous Land Corporation) and over which the Woolgar Native Title Claimant Group also has a Native Title claim.

As with much of northern Queensland (e.g. Loos 1982; Reynolds 1978), the Aboriginal population around Middle Park declined sharply following the arrival of Europeans during the 1860s and immediately thereafter, through a combination of deliberate 'dispersal' (a Native Mounted Police euphemism for murder) and disease. While there are some ethnohistorical accounts of Aboriginal tribes in the broader region, none relate specifically to the study area. Subsequently, it is not entirely clear which tribal group traditionally occupied Middle Park. Given the lack of primary source material relating to the crucial period before the breakdown of 'traditional' Aboriginal life, this issue is unlikely to be easily resolved. The earliest known, and therefore possibly the most reliable source (Rod Hagen, pers. comm.) is Palmer (1882), who indicated Middle Park lay within Ngoun country. However, subsequent authors (e.g. MacGillivray 1886; Roth 1897; Tindale 1974) have tended to identify the area as part of Wanamara territory, while Breen (1981) suggests it was Mbara territory and Wright (1988:16) shows it as part of Mitjamba country. Contemporary Traditional Owners variously identify with these different groups depending on their familial affiliations, and often refer to themselves as the 'Woolgar mob', a geographically-based name which avoids the charged question of tribal affinity.

Climate

Climatically the study area lies within the tropical semi-arid zone, characterised by a short wet season (from December to March) and a long dry season. Average rainfall is only about 400 mm/year and droughts are common. Temperatures are high almost all year round, averaging about 30ºC during summer and 17ºC in winter; evaporation is also high, typically exceeding 2000 mm/year.

Geology and geomorphology

The more easterly part of Middle Park is dominated by Einasleigh metamorphics (Gilberton 1:250 000 Geological Series, Sheet SE54-16). This area incorporates the historic Woolgar goldfields which were mined intensively from 1880 to 1910 (Denaro et al. 2001)[3]. Moving northwest on the property takes you into the foothills of the Gregory Range, an extremely rugged upland area. Perry et al. (1964) collectively classify these parts of the property as belonging to the Torwood Land System, dominated by broken

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[3] While a number of sites relating to the historic gold mining activities on Middle Park were visited as a matter of general interest during the 2002 surveys, they were not systematically recorded. A student enrolled at the ANU in Canberra (Vic Taylor) is currently investigating the Middle Park mining sites as part of his doctoral research.

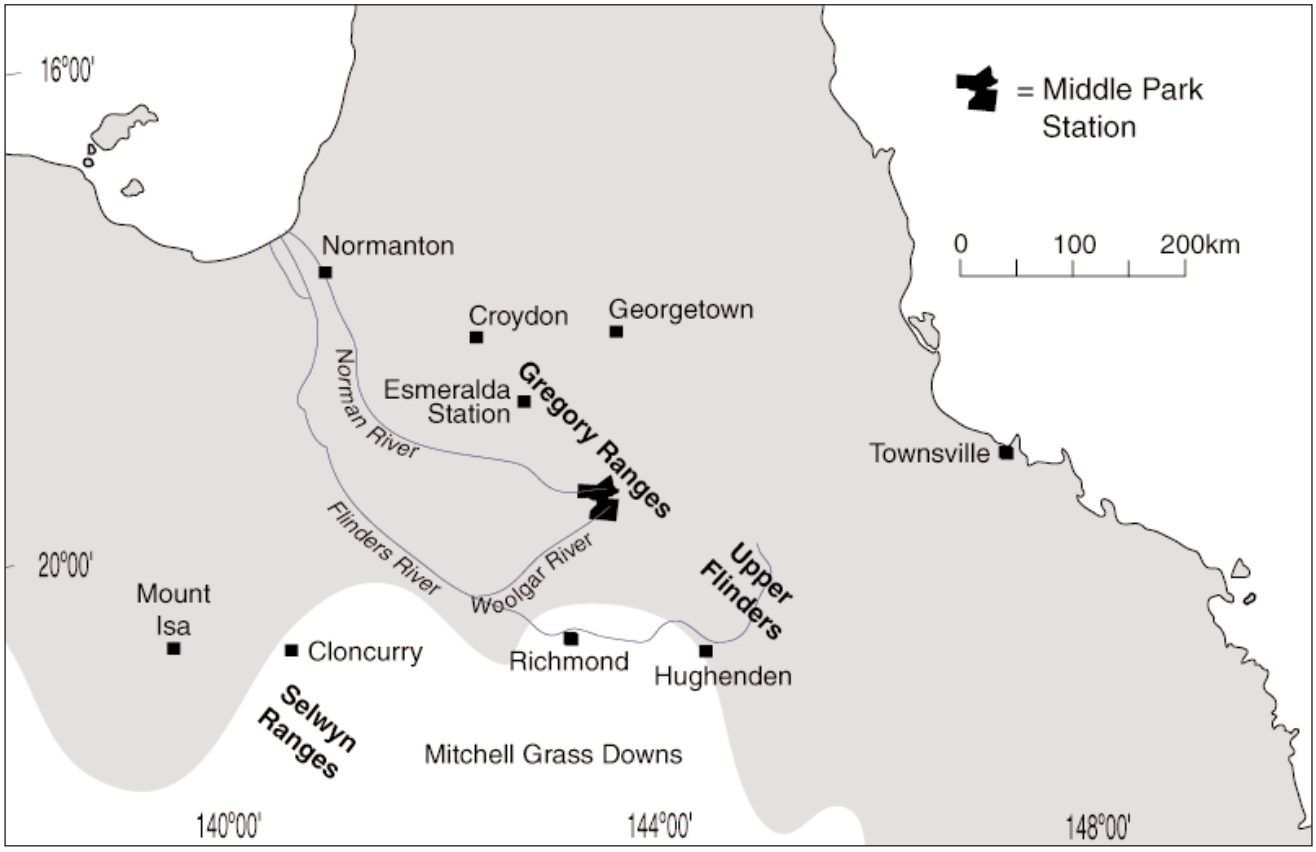

Figure 1 Map showing location of the Middle Park study area and places mentioned in the text.

sandstone tablelands (Fig. 2). In contrast, to the south and west of the property are lower-lying undulating plains with sand and silt outwash deposits, classified by Perry et al. (1964) as belonging to the Strathpark Land System.

Hydrology

There are two main rivers on Middle Park: the Woolgar to the southeast and the Norman to the northwest (Fig. 1). The former has its headwaters in the gold bearing hills of the Torwood Land System, while the latter is flanked along its upper reaches by sandstone outcrops and runs down across the Strathpark plains. In addition, the Woolgar and Norman Rivers are supported by a network of smaller ephemeral streams, creeks and drainage lines. Water flow is typically intermittent owing to the strongly seasonal rainfall pattern, although in the summer months huge volumes of water flow, a phenomenon which often causes localized flooding. In winter water flow is minimal and will sometimes cease entirely, although recent fieldwork has revealed the presence of many springs in the areas of sandstone outcrop along the Norman, which provide reliable sources of freshwater.

Vegetation

The vegetation of the upland areas of Middle Park is dominated by lancewood (*Acacia shirleyi*). Very few other species of trees are present and much of the ground layer is bare, apart from spinifex (*Triodia* spp.) and occasional shrubs (Perry and Lazarides 1964).

In contrast, Georgetown Box (*Eucalyptus microneura*) and ironwood (*Erythophleum chlorostachys*) dominate the plains (Perry and Lazarides 1964). Other common plain species include quinine bush (*Petalostigma banksii*), bauhinia (*Bauhinia cunninghamii*), lemonwood (*Dolichandrone heterophylla*), conkerberry (*Carissa lanceolata*), *Terminalia* spp., *Melaleuca* spp. and *Acacia* spp. The grass layer of the plains is dominated by a mixture of three-awn grass (*Aristida* spp.), ribbon grass (*Chrysopogon fallax*), blue grasses (*Dicanthium* spp. and *Bothriochloa* spp.), kangaroo grass (*Themeda australis*) and spear grass (*Heteropogon contortus*), with spinifex also present in areas of rocky ground.

Archaeological background

Middle Park lies adjacent to a number of areas that are, by comparison, archaeologically better known: to the northeast is Cape York; to the northwest is the Gulf Country and Riversleigh; to the west is Mt Isa; to the south are the Mitchell Grass Downs of the northern Lake Eyre Basin; and to the southeast are the basalt-capped sandstones of the Upper Flinders region (referred to by Morwood as the 'north Queensland highlands'). A review of archaeological research in all of these areas is not possible within the limits of this paper, and so only Morwood's work in the Upper Flinders and that of Gorecki and colleagues near Croydon is provided herein, as both locations are environmentally similar to Middle Park.

In the first systematic archaeological investigations in inland northwest Queensland, Morwood and Godwin (1982) conducted surveys in a widespread area between Hughenden, Torrens Creek, Georgetown and Croydon, although they do not appear to have specifically visited Middle Park. These surveys recorded more than 90 Aboriginal sites, comprising mostly rockshelter art/occupation sites and open artefact scatters, as well as a small number of axe grinding groove sites, demonstrating a

Figure 2 Aerial photograph showing the rugged nature of the country along the Norman River and adjacent sandstone escarpments.

diverse range of site types and suggesting a high density of site occurrence.

Morwood (1984, 1990, 1992, 2002) followed up this initial work with more detailed investigations in the upland area immediately north of Hughenden (about 150 km SE of Middle Park). Mickey Springs 34 is a sandstone shelter site containing an extensive array of engravings and painted art located on a tributary to the Flinders River. In 1980 a test pit in the shelter produced a radiocarbon date of 8310 ± 80 bp[4] and further excavations in 1984 provided evidence for human occupation dated slightly earlier at 9920 ± 250 bp (Morwood 1990:13). Artefactual materials recovered included charcoal, well-preserved faunal remains, bone artefacts, ochre and stone artefacts. Nearby shelter sites Mickey Springs 33 and 31 were also excavated, producing near-basal dates of 7530 ± 160 bp and 5100 ± 70 bp, respectively (Morwood 1990:20). Morwood (1990, 1992) also carried out detailed investigations of the nearby Prairie-Porcupine Creek system. These studies included excavation of Quippenburra Cave which revealed a near basal date of 3280 ± 100 bp. This shelter also contained an extensive quantity of rock art, as well as substantial quantities of grinding material, evidence of quarrying, contact period artefacts, charcoal, bone, plant materials and stone artefacts. Morwood suggested initial occupation of the Upper Flinders had occurred during the early Holocene or terminal Pleistocene, possibly 'as a result of activation of the springs by changes in the local hydrological regime' (1990:20). He (1990:36) also posited that 'the development of a late Holocene commitment to seed processing to meet both domestic and social demands upon the production system allowed occupation of previously marginal country'. This was argued to be associated with an overall increase in population size and production in the region.

More recently, systematic surveys on Esmeralda Station near Croydon (about 150 km NW of Middle Park and also lying within the foothills of the Gregory Ranges) revealed the presence of a number of artefact scatters in low-lying areas (Gorecki et al. 1992). A great many more scatters, as well as grinding grooves and rockshelters with extensive art were also recorded in upland areas. In addition, large numbers of grinding patches were located. Grant (1992; Gorecki and Grant 1994) undertook more detailed assessment of the grinding patches to assess whether the region was part of a seed-based economy (cf. Morwood 1990 and Tindale 1974). Exploration of various lines of evidence led her to conclude that these sites supported such a theory (Gorecki and Grant 1994:24).

As noted earlier, Middle Park encompasses the late nineteenth century Woolgar goldfields, and today there continue to be a number of active exploration leases over the property. Unfortunately, the granting of these leases has not resulted in the pursuit of any systematic cultural heritage assessments, with the exceptions of Small (1998) and Wallis (2003a). Small (1998) undertook a preliminary visit to a mining lease application area in the eastern part of Middle Park during which he examined a series of rockshelters, reporting that several contained ash and artefacts. He also mentioned the presence of axe grinding grooves and carved trees as reported by Traditional Owners Helen Smith and John Keyes (who were present during the visit), but it is not clear as to whether Small himself actually observed such features or was simply reporting oral testimony to their existence from others. Wallis (2003a) briefly visited a mining lease area in 2003 with Aboriginal representatives Darby Smith, Bulla McIvor, Peter Street and Waylon Street. Unfortunately none of these representatives had any pre-existing knowledge about the presence of sites in the mining lease area. During this visit a small number of archaeological sites were observed, including a rockshelter with stone artefacts and stenciled art, open artefact scatters, axe grinding grooves, an ochre quarry and one possible stone alignment. The terms of engagement for these studies did not encompass the conduction of detailed investigations, although the mining company in question has indicated they will be supportive of such work in the future.

The only other survey undertaken on Middle Park has been that of Cooke (1995), during which he recorded 17 sites and noted the high likelihood of a great many more. Sixteen of these consisted of shelters or overhangs containing stenciled art, while the final site was a burial chamber described as 'heaps of rocks piled up inside a natural hole or cave in the wall' (Cooke 1995:23). Cooke's three day survey was undertaken as a precursor to the purchase of the property by the Indigenous Land Corporation, and he noted in his report that there existed Indigenous support for the development of cultural tourism on the property, focused on the apparently abundant art sites.

In summary, as elsewhere in Australia the regional archaeological record of inland northwest Queensland is dominated by surface scatters of stone artefacts (often associated with hearths), followed by high numbers of shelters in suitable areas (typically sandstone outcrop) containing abundant stenciled rock art. Axe grinding grooves and grinding surfaces are also extremely common in geologically amenable areas. The upland areas were occupied by at least the terminal Pleistocene, a phenomenon in some part presumably related to post-glacial climatic amelioration producing local environments that were particularly inviting for human occupation. There appears to be some evidence for a suite of mid-Holocene changes, including more regular use of sites, a broader

[4] All radiocarbon dates mentioned in this paper are uncalibrated.

Open sites	No.	Rockshelter sites	No.
Artefact scatter	8	With art	23
Axe grinding grooves	12	With grinding surface	2
Axe grinding grooves with artefacts	10	With artefacts	9
Quarries	3	With grinding grooves and art	1
Total	33	With grinding grooves and artefacts	1
		With grinding surface and art	13
		With grinding surface and artefacts	5
		With art and artefacts	10
		With art, grinding surface and artefacts	19
		With art, grinding grooves and artefacts	1
		With art, grinding grooves and grinding surfaces	1
		With artefacts, grinding grooves and grinding surfaces	1
		With artefacts, art, grinding grooves and grinding surfaces	9
		Total	95

Table 1 Summary of sites located during Middle Park surveys.

range of activities (with grass seed grinding becoming an important part of the subsistence economy) and an increase in local population and productivity (Morwood 1992, 2002; Gorecki and Grant 1994; Gorecki et al. 1992, 1996; Grant 1992). Well-documented trade and exchange networks also existed in the broader region during at least the late Holocene, by which time people also appeared to be regularly utilizing the lower plain country of the Mitchell Grass Downs to the south and west (Wallis 2003b; Wallis et al. in press).

Methodology

Survey on Middle Park was undertaken with the primary community-based aim of documenting Aboriginal sites, although this general goal served a number of more varied purposes. For example, the survey aimed to produce source material that could be used by the Woolgar Valley Aboriginal Corporation to help develop a greater awareness of their cultural heritage (both within the Indigenous and wider community). This was considered particularly important for some community members who, as a result of earlier dislocation, now live at Yarrabah, near Cairns, and who had limited, if any, opportunity to visit the sites in person; this is especially the case for less mobile, older community members. As alluded to in Cooke's (1995) report, some members of the Woolgar Valley Aboriginal Corporation have also expressed interest in the possibility of developing some form of sustainable heritage tourism on Middle Park. To this end the survey results provide an overview of the types of sites present, which can in turn be used to inform discussions regarding this concept.

It was also anticipated that baseline archaeological data would be gathered, allowing more specific research questions to be generated for future field investigations. A longer term goal was to develop an understanding of the chronological framework of Aboriginal occupation in the area, and it was hoped that sites with stratified deposit suitable for excavation and dating would be identified. While of direct research value, this goal was also of primary interest to the Indigenous members of the team, who expressed great interest in learning how old some of the sites are.

Given the aims and community focus to the project, the survey deliberately targeted areas with a high probability (based on regional site patterns) of containing sites. Logistical factors were also an important consideration in selecting survey areas, as much of Middle Park is extremely remote and inaccessible even by 4WD. This resulted in a focus on areas of sandstone outcrop in close proximity to water sources with access via existing station tracks. This approach was in preference to what might be considered a more scientifically rigorous, systematic sampling strategy across various land units and environmental zones. It should also be pointed out that this initial survey did not attempt to document post-contact Aboriginal sites relating variously to mining and pastoral activities although it is recognized that this would also be a useful and interesting exercise. Unfortunately, two key Aboriginal informants who may have been able to provide a wealth of information about such sites were suffering limited mobility and were unable to participate in the fieldwork.

Survey methods involved the use of small teams of 2-4 people, including at least one representative from the Woolgar Valley Aboriginal Corporation. Typically survey teams concentrated on sandstone outcrops and along watercourses, and hence there was much less than 100% coverage within the broad survey areas investigated. Sites were recorded by GPS against the relevant topographic maps. Photographs were taken and, in the case of rockshelters, site sketches were also drawn. A general record of all archaeological evidence (including rock art) was made, including all information required to meet Queensland site recording standards. Upon the completion of data entry site recording forms (via an electronic Indigenous site card database) were completed and submitted to the Queensland EPA.

Survey results

Over the six week survey period, 129 archaeological sites were recorded, described below in terms of open versus rockshelter sites (Table 1).

Open sites

Given the survey strategy adopted it is not entirely surprising to learn that only about one-quarter of the sites recorded were open sites (n = 33). These can be grouped into three main categories: (1) axe grinding grooves with or without associated artefact scatters; (2) artefact scatters; and

(3) quarries (which by definition were associated with artefacts). Sites such as waterholes without associated archaeological evidence, which would undoubtedly have been utilized by Aboriginal people, were not recorded as sites, mainly due to a lack of supporting oral testimony.

As discussed in detail by Dickson (1980, 1981) axe grinding grooves are easily identified features of indisputable function. Consistent with such sites recorded elsewhere, these features on Middle Park were typically located on exposed sandstone ledges/pavements adjacent to small creeks and the major river courses, although some were also situated around semi-permanent waterholes. They usually occur in clusters of between 5 and 80, although at one site (Rocks Crossing) more than 300 were recorded in a 400 m^2 area. Approximately half of the axe grinding groove sites are associated with stone artefact scatters. Scatters were typically low density sites dominated by artefacts made from locally available quartz. Three quartz outcrops with evidence of quarrying were also recorded during the survey. A small proportion of artefacts in the open sites were also made from chert (though no chert sources were recorded), with only isolated artefacts manufactured from silcrete or volcanic raw materials. No portable grinding material or hearths were observed in association with any of the recorded open sites.

Rockshelters

By far the most common site type recorded on Middle Park was rockshelters (n = 96; 74%). Evidence for human use of these sites took the form of either rock art, stone artefacts, grinding surfaces[5], axe grinding grooves or combinations thereof.

Of the rockshelters, an overwhelming majority contained art (n = 77; 80%). During surveys, Darby Smith offered the opinion that, in his experience, shelters with a high occurrence of mica within their matrix tended not to contain rock art, although there is no empirical data to support this general observation. A more detailed analysis of the Middle Park art sites will be presented elsewhere, although some preliminary observations are described below. The Middle Park art assemblages always included stenciled motifs; in addition, four shelters contained pecked or engraved motifs, one shelter contained hand prints and a further shelter contained small circular painted motifs. The stenciled art was dominated by adult hands (with left hands more common than rights), although children's hands were also well represented. Often the hands included 'missing' digits, which were either amputated or bent over during stenciling giving the illusion of amputation. Other distinctive stenciled motifs included human arms and feet, dingo paws and images that can be clearly identified as material culture items including boomerangs, axes, spears, digging sticks, spear throwers and shields/coolamons. The most commonly used ochres in the assemblages are red, orange and red-purple; other colours such as white, yellow and black were rarely encountered, although whether this is the result of preservation factors, ochre availability or deliberate cultural preference is not clear.

Most shelters contain less than 20 stencils, although there are a handful that contain galleries in excess of 100 distinctive motifs; in such situations the stencils are often superimposed to such a degree that individual motifs can no longer be discerned. While many stencils are faded and difficult to observe, with waterflow and exfoliation actively contributing to the natural decay processes (cf. Salmon 1992), there are still many excellent examples of well preserved stenciled art on the property. The array of engraved art was almost entirely restricted to lightly pecked, circular motifs. One exception was the use of pecking to create a hatched patterning on the interior of a stenciled shield coolamon and a second was a goanna motif created by a series of pecked marks. In a third example, the interior of a pair of hand stencils had been filled with pecking. Almost all engraved art appeared to be relatively recent, owing to its 'fresh' appearance and its superimpositioning over painted art. However, one site contains a great many deeply pecked and abraded circular motifs covered by a thick patination, giving the appearance of much greater antiquity, although this impression has not been confirmed by any absolute dating methods. Contemporary Aboriginal people possess extremely limited knowledge about the production of either the stenciled or engraved art, and are unaware of its intended purpose.

A little over half of the shelters recorded on Middle Park (n = 55) contained stone artefacts on either the shelter floor itself or spread down the talus slope. Like the open scatters, these were typically low density scatters dominated by quartz artefacts, with almost no formal tool types or portable grinding material present. Half of the shelters contained fixed grinding surfaces of variable sizes (n = 48). As noted above, a small proportion also contained axe grinding grooves (n = 15); these shelters always had an obvious source of water in the immediate vicinity.

Almost all shelters explored during the survey had bedrock floors with minimal or no sediment accumulation. Nevertheless, three sites (MP76, MP83 and MP102) were located with some depth of deposit in which test pits were excavated (Wallis 2003b). Site MP76 is a small overhang formed against a large sandstone outlier on a plain a few kilometers to the south of the Norman River. Excavations revealed a maximum depth of 30 cm deposit with quartz artefacts throughout, with a near basal date of 4820 ± 70 bp (ANU-11897). Site MP83 is a medium-sized shelter that contains an extensive array of stenciled art and is located in sandstone outcrop on the southern margin of the Norman River. Bedrock was reached at a depth of 75 cm (again with predominantly quartz artefacts to the base), with the lowest sedimentary unit dated to 2280 ± 220 bp (ANU-11896). Site MP102 is another medium-sized shelter located on the southern margin of the Norman River in which two test pits were excavated. The first excavation square had a maximum depth of 60 cm, producing a date of 14,080 ± 210 bp (ANU-11904), and the second was excavated to a depth of 130 cm (bedrock was not reached) with artefacts throughout and produced a date of 6090 ± 100 bp (ANU-11895). Owing to space constraints in this short report, detailed results from these excavations will be presented elsewhere.

Discussion

In many respects the results from these surveys are in line with those conducted in nearby areas in that a similar range of site types were observed. However, at a more

[5] These are typically smooth, circular patches with little depth located on rock surfaces and thought to be related to food processing activities (cf. Grant 1992; Gorecki and Grant 1994).

specific level there are some differences.

While 50% of the Middle Park shelters contained grinding surfaces, these features only occurred in 15% of shelters on Esmeralda (Gorecki et al. 1992). In contrast, more than half of the open sites on Esmeralda included grinding surfaces, while such features were almost entirely lacking from observed open contexts on Middle Park. A similar discrepancy is noted between the abundance of portable grinding material present in sites recorded by Morwood in the Upper Flinders area north of Hughenden, and the absence of such material on Middle Park.

While Gorecki and Grant (1994) and Morwood (1990) have argued on the basis of archaeological evidence that the people of both the Croydon and Hughenden regions were probably involved to some degree with a seed-grinding economy (even if seeds could not be regarded as a 'staple'), on current evidence such an argument cannot be sustained for the people of the Middle Park area. Further, given the strong association of the grinding patches with art in Middle Park shelters, it seems probable that at least some of these features may have been associated with ochre grinding, rather than food production. Unlike the grinding patches on Esmeralda, most of the Middle Park patches are not situated on the edges of rocks (Grant 1992). Analysis of residues on fixed grinding surfaces, or phytolith analysis of archaeological sediments offer some means by which this issue could be investigated further.

As well as an absence of grinding material, certain other types of archaeological sites were not encountered on Middle Park. Despite the considerable evidence for edge ground axes in the form of axe grinding grooves, no axes were found cached in any shelters and very few volcanic flake fragments were observed in surface or excavated stone artefact assemblages. Given the remoteness of the area it seems unlikely that axes could have been taken by collectors and hence explaining their absence requires further attention. Open context hearths, burials, freshwater mussel shell middens and stone arrangements are other site types that to date remain conspicuously absent on Middle Park, despite their occurrence elsewhere in similar environmental contexts (e.g. Morwood 1984). Despite a great many quartz outcrops of apparently reasonable quality stone occurring in the sandstone country of Middle Park, only a small number of these retained any convincing evidence for their exploitation as stone procurement areas. While the restricted use of quartz outcrops may be a means of ensuring continued resource availability, it could also be the product of other cultural / social factors resulting in a preference for particular outcrops. Similarly, although ochre sources are reportedly common on the property (Arthur Barnes, pers. comm.) none were recorded during this survey [although a white ochre quarry was noted on a different occasion by Wallis (2003a)].

Elsewhere in the region open artefact scatters dominate the archaeological record (e.g. Gorecki and Grant 1994:233). It therefore seems highly probable that the small number of open sites recorded on Middle Park is a consequence of the particular constraints of the survey strategy. Undoubtedly their low numbers were also affected by factors of poor ground surface visibility owing to heavy grass coverage and the taphonomic effects of water and sediment movement along watercourse margins during the wet season. It is possible that future survey adopting a more systematic approach, or particularly focused on the recording of open sites, might uncover a wider range of sites.

The Middle Park rock art assemblage (dominated by stenciled art) is extremely similar in both its abundance and motif array to that described by Gorecki et al. (1996) for Esmeralda, with two exceptions:

(1) engraved art is even less common on Middle Park, and contains a more restricted range of motifs, lacking parallel lines, crescents, stick figures and tracks; and

(2) Middle Park painted art sites lack the stick figures argued by Gorecki et al. (1996:224) to be part of the local signature of the art between Croydon and Hughenden.

Nevertheless, the survey results do lend weight to suggestions that art in inland northwest Queensland is distinct from that north of the Mitchell River (cf. David and Chant 1995), Mt Isa (Franklin 1996) and the Mitchell Grass Downs (Border and Rowland 1990), and falls within the northern limits of the Carnarvon Province to the southeast (Quinnell 1976; Walsh 1984).

The high incidence of art in shelters supports Gorecki et al.'s (1992:57) assertion that shelters in the Gregory Ranges were used 'predominantly for specific activities relating to rock painting', although the occupation deposit within the excavated Middle Park sites demonstrates that at least some shelters were also used for more secular purposes. Given problems common elsewhere [ie lack of superimpositioning, absence of European or other chronological marker items and general absence of stratified archaeological deposits (cf. Morwood 1992:62)], the presence of mud wasp nests overlying stencils probably offers the best opportunity for producing minimal ages for art production in the region (cf. Roberts et al. 1997; Wallis 2002). This might, to a degree, be supplemented by further excavation of archaeological deposits if suitable sites can be found. Given that there is no art production in the area today (or indeed over the last 100 years), it is inevitable that in coming years much of the art will be lost and it is therefore critical that sites are recorded for posterity.

Conclusion

The Middle Park survey revealed a rich archaeological landscape that offers great potential for addressing research questions of both regional and local interest. Of even greater advantage, as a consequence of its remote location, the record has not suffered substantially from encroachment of development and the Aboriginal proprietors and Native Title Claimants of the property are eager to see sites investigated, recorded and conserved. Nevertheless, natural transformation processes are gradually causing the loss of sites, seen most obviously in the faded nature of much of the stenciled rock art. Documentation programs such as the one described in this report are therefore highly valuable as a means of creating a permanent record of sites. Further, for many of the Traditional Owners of the area who have had minimal contact with their country for generations and who retain minimal surviving knowledge about sites, archaeological surveys offer a means by which they can 'rediscover' elements of their heritage.

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