


# Cultural Knowledge

The processes of learning, maintaining and transmitting cultural knowledge are dynamic and responsive to changing circumstances. The following article outlines some of the ways in which people learn, maintain and share cultural knowledge.

## CROSS CURRICULUM PRIORITIES

 Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander Histories and Cultures

 Sustainability

## CONTENT AREAS

**E** English


**G** Geography

**H** History

**CC** Civics and Citizenship

**S** Science

## GENERAL CAPABILITIES

 Intercultural Understanding

 Critical and Creative Thinking

 Literacy

 Personal and Social Capability

## KEY CONCEPT

Cultural Knowledge... accumulated knowledge which encompasses spiritual relationships, relationships with the natural environment and the sustainable use of natural resources, and relationships between people, which are reflected in language, narratives, social organisation, values, beliefs, and cultural laws and customs.

Andrews, 2006

## SUPPORTING CONCEPTS

- › culture
- › knowledge
- › heritage
- › cultural transmission
- › construction techniques

## GUIDING QUESTION

How and why is cultural knowledge shared?

This printed material is **to be used with Shelters – a Living Cultures multimedia curriculum resource** that can be found at [www.theorb.tas.gov.au](http://www.theorb.tas.gov.au)

The Living Cultures Shelters resource and this supplementary printed material have been designed to foster culturally responsive practice when learning about Tasmanian Aboriginal Histories and Cultures.

# Introduction

Tasmania's Aboriginal cultural heritage provides a spiritual connection for Tasmanian Aboriginal people today and valuable information about one of the oldest living cultures in the world.

Aboriginal cultural heritage is the tangible and intangible legacy of Tasmania's Aboriginal people. It refers to those places, objects and traditions that have been passed down to us from past generations. It also includes intangible places where there may be no physical evidence of past cultural activities. These include places of spiritual or ceremonial significance, or trade and travel routes.

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## Living on Country



John Glover, Mills' Plains Ben Lomond, Ben Loder and Ben Nevis in the distance, 1836 | Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

Tasmanian Aboriginal people have demonstrated an ease and adaptability in living on Country through their long and continuing practice of constructing shelters when needed, using only available resources.

NJB Plomley, an historian who has contributed extensively to the historical record of Tasmanian Aboriginal history, states that:

Shelters were erected as needed, often simply made of sheets of bark resting on a framework of saplings or branches, but

sometimes elaborated into a cupola of bark interwoven with sticks.

Plomley, 1993

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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- › In what circumstances might temporary shelters be needed when living on country?
- › How were these temporary shelters made?

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## Sharing Cultural Knowledge

Danny Gardner demonstrates his willingness to share his cultural knowledge through storytelling and by teaching the young ones how and where to build a shelter. Danny, like so many Aboriginal sharers of knowledge, generously shares his culture and way of life with people who are interested.

We're a race of people who are all about sharing. I'm all about sharing my culture with anyone. I'm happy to share any bit of any knowledge. I'm a custodian – I don't own it.

I'm a caretaker and look after it (and) my job is to make sure it is continued on.

Danny Gardner, 2018



Danny Gardner sharing knowledge at St Helens, 2017 | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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- › Why is sharing cultural knowledge important?
- › How is cultural knowledge shared within the Aboriginal community, and with all people?
- › Why might it be important for all Australians to understand about place, culture and other Aboriginal ways of knowing and being as taught by Aboriginal people?
- › What can we learn about Aboriginal people's ways of life through the sharing of cultural knowledge?

# Rockshelters

The Tasmanian Aborigines used rockshelters from the earliest times, but left little trace of their structures; only on the inclement southern and south-western coasts were semi-permanent buildings erected, with a framework of hoops, an insulation of rushes and grass, an outer covering of bark, and a small door.

Ratcliffe and McNeill

Rockshelters were places of refuge from the weather, for short or long periods of habitation, and as places for performing ceremonies or making stone tools. Rockshelters may be found throughout Tasmania, usually in areas of limestone, dolerite and sandstone.

Limestone rockshelter sites in Tasmania's southwest are important to the Aboriginal community and are of particular interest to archaeologists due to the unique conditions in this region.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What were rockshelters used for?
- › What are the advantages of having access to a rockshelter?



Cave at Rocky Cape, North West Tasmania

Image: Nikki Brannigan

Floor deposits within limestone rockshelters are often covered by a thin layer of limestone deposited during the natural erosion of the shelter roof and walls. When the rockshelter is unoccupied for a long period of time this limestone deposit builds and hardens to form a “cap” that seals and protects the underlying floor from wind or water erosion.

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Sharnie Everett in a shelter, South West Tasmania | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd

Rockshelter sites are significant to the Aboriginal community. They are also significant globally as they hold valuable information about understanding past environments, environmental changes and dietary behaviours of Tasmania's original inhabitants.

The examination of material from rockshelters increases our understanding of past Aboriginal occupation and even the nature of the surrounding environment. The dating of charcoal from hearths provides an understanding of the nature of occupation within a rockshelter over time. Analysis of animal bones can identify diets and what species of animals Aboriginal people hunted. Organic materials can inform understanding of the past environments in which Aboriginal people lived.

Among the most remarkable Aboriginal rockshelter sites in Tasmania are those located within the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA). Considered to have high cultural value to Tasmanian Aboriginal people, they represent important physical evidence of Aboriginal occupation in the area for the past 35,000 years. They indicate Aboriginal habitation of the TWWHA was the most southern human occupation at this time. Recording and excavation within a number of these sites has uncovered extremely well preserved deposits and artefactual materials. This has increased understanding of past environments and the use and modification of the landscape by Aboriginal people.

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### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- › Why is it important to respect sites such as rockshelters?
- › What valuable cultural knowledge can be gained from rockshelters?
- › How can we ensure that cultural knowledge is preserved into the future?

## Contemporary Tools

Today's Aboriginal people use modern materials like the axe pictured here. They apply principles that are common to any construction project when selecting, preparing and transporting material to their chosen place.



Manella chopping wood, 2018 | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › How can contemporary tools be used to re-create ancient techniques?
  - › What are the advantages/disadvantages of using contemporary tools to re-create ancient practices?
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## Learning by Doing

Cultural knowledge can also be gained by reviving ancient practices and re-creating the techniques and processes used by traditional societies. 'Learning by doing' helps us understand how materials were sourced, the construction techniques used, the placement, aspect and effectiveness of traditional shelters, as well as the functions and uses of these structures.



Lean-to shelter at St Helens, 2018 | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › How might location and available materials affect decisions about building a shelter?
  - › What other considerations need to be taken into account in terms of aspect, position, purpose, and durability?
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## NOTE

Aboriginal rockshelters are protected.

Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural material or sites are defined as 'relics' and therefore protected under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1975*. It is an offence to destroy, damage, deface, conceal, remove or otherwise interfere with a relic. It is also an offence not to report the finding of a relic. So if you suspect that an Aboriginal rockshelter has been discovered during your activity, do not interfere with the site. Report the site to Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania.

[www.theorb.tas.gov.au/living-cultures/shelters/teacher-drawer](http://www.theorb.tas.gov.au/living-cultures/shelters/teacher-drawer)

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## REFERENCES

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