

**The shell mounds of Albatross Bay: an archaeological
investigation of late Holocene production strategies near
Weipa, north eastern Australia**

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Abstract

This thesis presents the results of an archaeological investigation of shell matrix sites, and in particular, shell mounds sites that occur around the shores of Albatross Bay, near Weipa on the north western Cape York Peninsula, northern Australia. It is the contention of this thesis that earlier approaches to the investigation of shell mound sites in northern Australia have tended to place too much emphasis on developing long-term explanatory models that gloss over explanations for the specific roles of these unique sites in past economic systems. While long-term explanations represent important contributions, it is argued here that short-term decadal scale modelling of the production systems associated with shell mound formation and use are required in order to fully understand the significance of the mid- to late Holocene emergence of these types of sites. A focus on production – defined in a substantive economic sense – is a suitable avenue through which archaeologists can expand our understanding of the role of these features in past gatherer-hunter societies, and their broader importance on longer-term time scales

The thesis thus develops a detailed model of the production strategies associated with the formation of shell mound sites that occur around Albatross Bay, while also considering the broader significance of this model, particularly within the context of Cape York Peninsula. It presents the results of field surveys and excavations carried out around Albatross Bay by the author, as well as a detailed review and analysis of work carried out by others. It is argued that shell mounds are the result of relatively specialised production activities focussing on a very specific resource base: mudflat shellfish species. Shell mounds offered a range of unique benefits for people engaged in these specialised activities, including as camp sites and as specialised activity

areas. These events were inherently flexible in size and in terms of timing, reflecting the dynamic nature of the resource base itself; yet the flexible nature of this production strategy also enabled more regular small scale social gatherings, along with a range of social and economic benefits to participants, than would have been otherwise possible. It is proposed that these types of strategies may represent an important characteristic of the production systems employed by gatherer-hunter peoples in late Holocene Cape York.

Overall, this thesis makes a significant contribution to both our understanding of late Holocene lifeways at Albatross Bay as well as to our understanding of the broader significance of the emergence of shell mound sites in Cape York. Furthermore, it highlights the range of insights that can come from a focus on short-term modelling of gatherer-hunter lifeways alongside approaches oriented toward longer-term explanations of economic, social and environmental change.

Statement of Sources

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature

Date

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Michael Morrison
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