

Kakutungtanta to Warrie Outcamp: multi-audiences and the communication of archaeology

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As part of a Fortescue Metals Group funded research project, Archae-aus developed a book with the Niyiyaparli community that communicates the cultural and archaeological riches of the Chichester Ranges. The aim was to explain information from consulting archaeology and anthropology to multiple audiences. The Niyiyaparli were the primary audience, closely followed by primary school age children and tourists. This raised the problem of how to transform scientific information for a non-technical audience.

Communicating a good story

Consultant archaeologists are required to act as scientists and produce knowledge within the western scientific paradigm. The requirements for reporting and assessing sites are commonly set down by government agencies administering heritage legislation within this framework.

Consultants are also required to communicate effectively with clients about the interpretation of their results, including both Aboriginal communities and clients such as mining companies, government agencies and so forth. However, the discourse they are expected to employ undermines that very communication. The uncertainty and ambiguity that is inherently part of the archaeological record undermines the capacity of consultants to speak authoritatively about their results. And the scientific paradigm tends to depersonalise and dehumanise what is in essence a very human narrative. The resulting failure to tell effective stories about the past has real consequences for the archaeological record in terms of site preservation and management.

One attempt Archae-aus has made to overcome this dilemma has been to develop books and web media for a variety of audiences. This requires transforming scientific consulting data and reports to present a humanistic narrative that interests the Niyiyaparli as well as general audiences such as school children and tourists.

CB08-500 is one example of how we achieved this within the book.

The narrative structure of this account begins with the discovery and naming of CB08-500 by the field team of archaeologists and Niyiyaparli.

The brief description of the site at the time of discovery highlights shelter and shade and water and the signs of past occupation in the form of stone artefacts including a millstone.

It continues by focusing on drawing meaning from individual finds highlighted in the description – a fireplace.



Further evidence is revealed by the presence of tiny flakes, worn out adzes, the flakes which might have come from resharpening one of the adzes.

Using these finds the reader is invited to imagine a snapshot of life at the site – a vignette of a family, a camp fire, men working wood, and one man trying to resharpen the stone blade of his adze and finding it was too worn and throwing it away.

The karla or fireplace provides the means of locating this vignette in time. The median calibrated dates range from 303 to 113 cal BP – the date could therefore be in the 1800s.

This invites speculation about connections between the place and its people and broader historical narratives. Perhaps the Niyiyaparli who camped here also saw Gregory's exploring party, which passed through their country not far from this place in 1861.

The Niyiyaparli narrative about archaeological sites generally is thus part of the story of their ongoing connection to country. This raises the question why archaeologists in this region regularly prioritise research questions about antiquity and change over questions about continuity and the recent past. It also raises the question why relatively well preserved sites like CB08-500 with the potential for fine-grained investigation at a scale more comparable to the ethnographic scale than is usual in the region are not more frequently investigated. This is particularly problematic when it is clear that TOs may be as directly linked to such sites than many of the sites that archaeologists rate as more important archaeologically.

Scientific Data
Given the expedient reduction of cores at this site, the low artefact variability and the moderate lithological diversity this site is interpreted as a short term satellite habitation site which was utilised post 1600 cal BP. The major activities identified in the assemblage include core reduction, artefact manufacture and wood working. (Hook et al., 2008:40)

Transformation

Narration
We can imagine a family camping at the shelter about 200 years ago. As they roiled around the camp fire, some of the men spent their time wood working. One of the men resharpened the stone blade of his adze, but found that it was too worn to stay in its handle. Perhaps he carried a spare adze flake with him or perhaps he made a new one on the spot. He then replaced the stone blade and threw away the worn out adze flake" (Niyiyaparli Community, Bird, C., & McDonald, E., 2013: 47)

Conclusion
Our alternative narrative makes sense of CB08-500 through connecting past and present, highlighting both the Niyiyaparli connection to country and the intersection between Niyiyaparli and non-Aboriginal others. This draws attention to heritage values focused not on antiquity but on the quality and preservation of the record and how it can be used to tell an engaging story and connect with recent past. These values are presently barely represented in the assessment of sites, but suggest how archaeologists in the applied sphere might more effectively communicate with clients and the wider community.

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References
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