

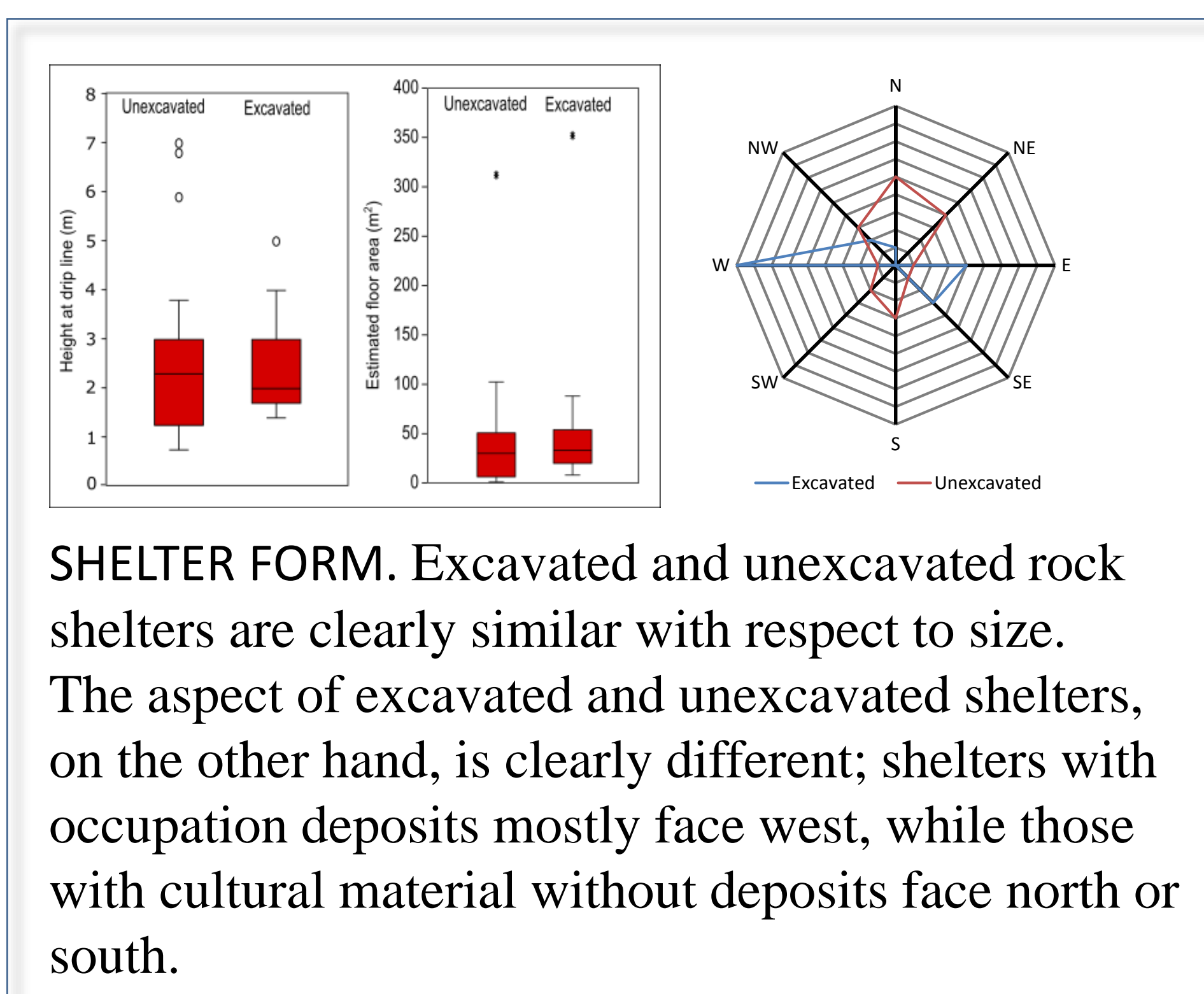
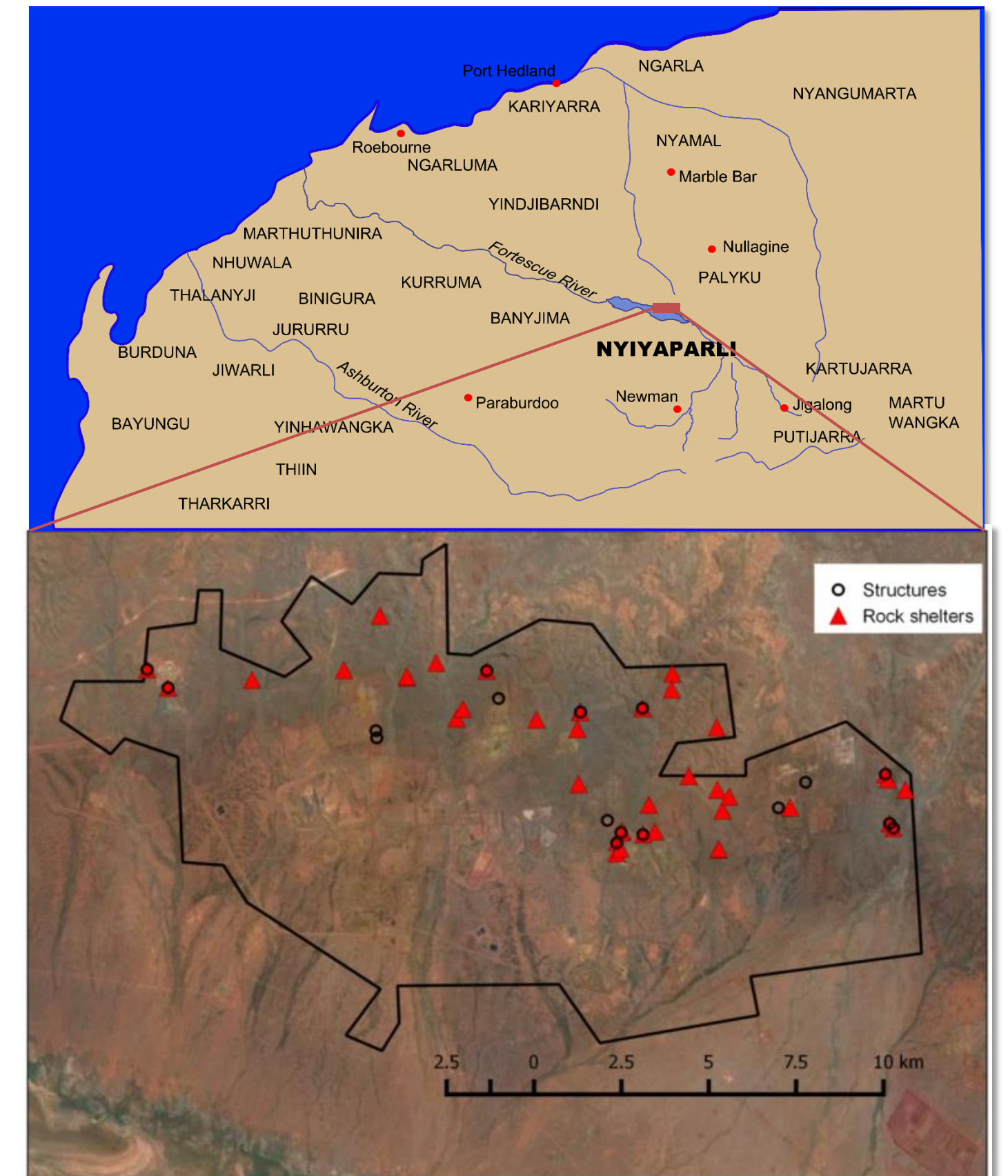
Provisioning places in Nyiyaparli country: the nature and use of rock shelters in the eastern Chichester Range

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BACKGROUND

Rock shelters are often regarded as ephemeral sites in the Pilbara. They form a numerically small element of the regional archaeological record, which is dominated by surface scatters and anecdotal ethnographic evidence suggests that shelters were not much used (Ryan & Morse, 2009), though a closer reading suggests a more nuanced interpretation (Clarke, 1983). Here we present evidence from rock shelters in the Cloudbreak-Christmas Creek project area, eastern Chichester Range, to explore the nature of rock shelter use in the area and interpret them in their landscape context.

All of the more than 40 rock shelters investigated in the Project Area occurred in the foothills of the Chichester Range, commonly in the sides of gullies along ephemeral creeks in outcrops of banded iron formation or conglomerate. Most shelters are small, although there appears to be little relationship between characteristics of shelters and potential for excavated cultural material, with test pits in some small cramped shelters yielding relatively rich deposits (Dias & Rapley, 2014). CB10-133 is clearly the exception as it is a large and spacious shelter yielding substantial amounts of cultural material. Nineteen rock shelters were judged to have excavation potential and proved to have sub-surface cultural material.



GRINDING MATERIAL.

Several shelters have millstones or mullers. At CB09-83, a dolerite muller was cached in a niche within the shelter wall.



Ethnographic evidence from the Pilbara and Western Desert indicates that millstones were often left in shelters or other regular camping places for future use (Gould, 1980; Guruma Elders, 2001; Nicholson & Cane, 1991; Tonkinson, 1978). These are facilities, or site furniture, and signal the intention to return.

STRUCTURES. Many shelters have structural modifications. Walled enclosures are the most common, but cairns, and niches also occur. These features are likely to have a range of functions. Some walled enclosures in the project area seem to be for trapping animals. Others were most likely for storage (cf. Bindon & Lofgren, 1982).



SURFACE ARTEFACTS. Surface artefact assemblages in excavated rock shelters are distinctive by comparison with both excavated assemblages and surface scatters. Typically, a surface scatter outside the shelter is flake-dominated, while within the shelter most artefacts are cores, hammer stones or grinding material. At CB10-147 and CB08-427, for example, the only surface artefacts in the shelters are six and three banded iron formation cores, respectively; CB10-93 only has five manuports – all banded iron formation cobbles. At CB10-98, a dolerite core was cached in the rear of the shelter. Manuports and cores also occur in shelters without deposits. These include CB10-145, which contains a single river cobble, possibly used as a hammer stone, and CB11-103 where a single platform core was found.

Clearly assemblages like these are not typical flaked stone assemblages dominated by waste flakes; nor have the cores been discarded because their potential for flake removal was exhausted. Like grinding material, these cores and manuports seem to represent deliberate provisioning of these places with supplies of raw material and indicate planned future use.

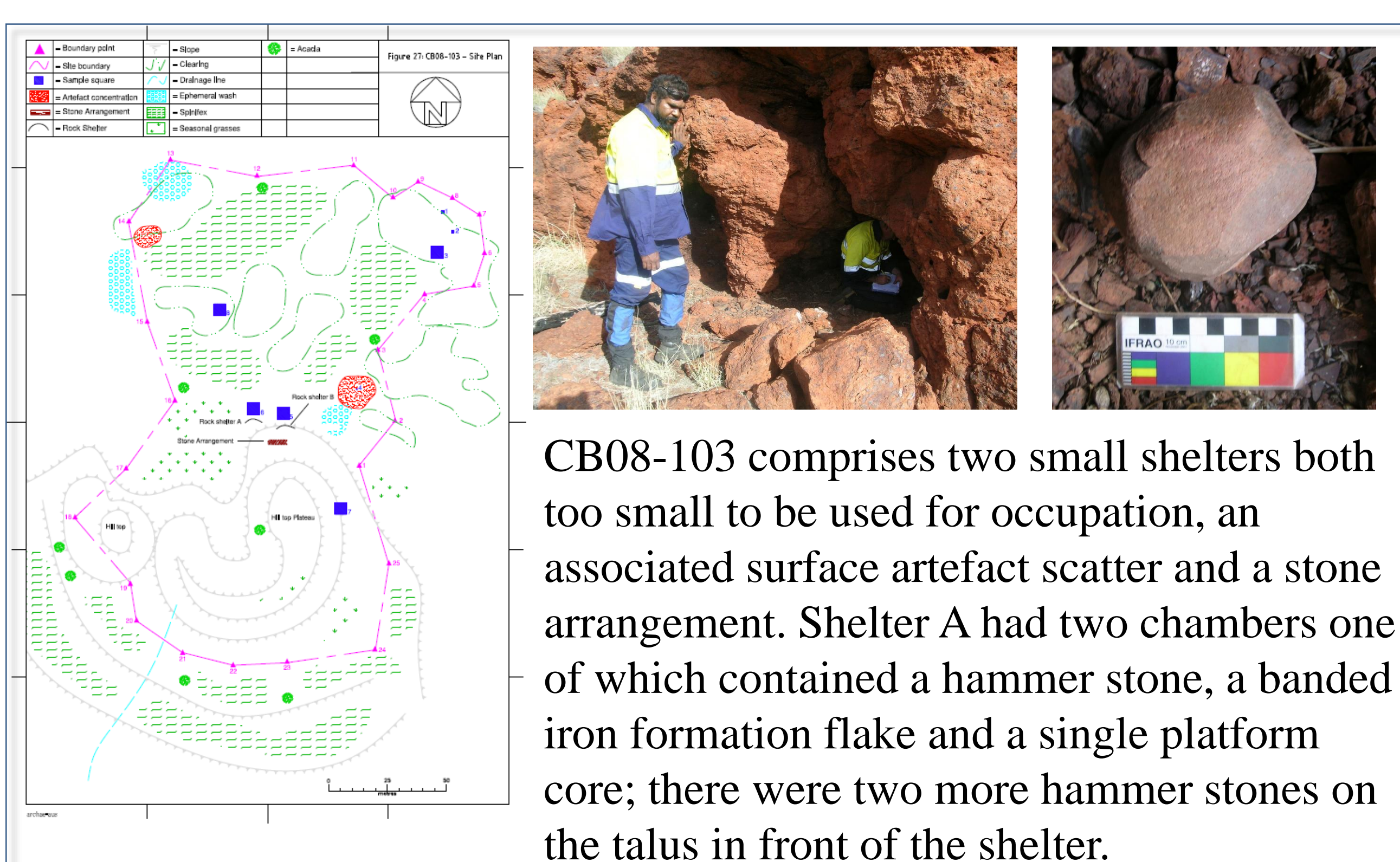
CONCLUSION

Surface assemblages and site furniture in rock shelters provide evidence of a regular pattern of planned visitation. Storage of raw material, hammers and grinding material implies intention to return. Shelters that are close to one another often seem to represent different and complementary uses. The associations we describe are likely to be characteristic of many parts of the Pilbara uplands. Provisioning these places with raw materials suggests that these sites formed part of a network of regularly visited places. As permanent and prominent features in the landscape, rock shelters with cultural material are charged with meaning as markers of 'persistent places' and focal points in the landscape for a range of past activities.

A consideration of the relationships between individual archaeological components and their landscape context should be paramount in interpreting and assessing these site complexes, or complex places, as well as more in keeping with Nyiyaparli understandings about place.

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SITE COMPLEXES. Rock shelters are typically associated with a range of surface archaeological features including surface artefacts, stone features and quarried outcrops. These may occur within the confines of the shelter or in the immediate vicinity. Indeed, shelters typically occur as part of site complexes with individual components appearing to have complementary uses.