

‘HELICOPTERS, HIGH VIS AND HERITAGE’ A DAY OF ARCHAEOLOGY AT TERRA ROSA CULTURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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Hi there! I work for a now not-so-small heritage consultancy in Fremantle, Western Australia. Together with my 50 + colleagues, we work for, and with, a number of Aboriginal communities across the state to identify, record and provide recommendations for the preservation and management of their tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Today, I’m out working with two other archaeologists, Ben and Sarah, and an anthropologist, Zsuzsa, in the spectacularly beautiful and ancient Pilbara region of Western Australia. We’re involved with a long running survey for a 200 km long haul road for a mine site, which crosses through the traditional lands of two Aboriginal native title groups (for confidentiality reasons, I won’t name either the groups or the mining company involved). We’re currently working with six traditional owners from one of these groups – two of whom are community elders and are an absolute fount of knowledge. They know this country and it’s complex cultural history like nobody’s business, and I’ve often thought that our modern handheld GPS units are pretty rubbish in comparison with the spatial awareness that these guys have! We are extremely privileged to be able to work with and learn from the Traditional Owners of the country that we’re in as their understanding of the landscape makes the archaeological remains we discover come to life in a way that would pass us by if they weren’t there. Here, the archaeological (and ethnographic) sites that we identify are like jigsaw pieces which together form a dynamic cultural landscape.



The very beautiful Pilbara (though a bit flatter than where we were – up in those hills in the distance!)

So far we're on day 6 of this 8 day long 'swing'. We've walked just over 15 linear kilometres of a haul road, and about 4 square kilometres of associated borrow search areas for road-base and water targets without coming across anything terribly unexpected. A few isolated flakes here and there, a couple of small artefact scatters, the latter of which have been flagged as field site points for later investigation. The survey area is pretty isolated and the terrain is pretty tough – often steep, spinifex covered banded ironstone ridges and mesas, cut by rocky, densely vegetated gullies. As we're not able to get our 4WDs in, we've been helicoptered in and out and around the place. Our chopper pilot is amazing – he's ex-military so has been able to land us on some pretty ridiculous hill tops and into some tiny gullies.



Meg, Sarah, Zsuzsa and Ben with the tiny chopper on a mesa summit. Note Ben starring as King Kong.

Our starting point for the day is at the summit of a low mesa, which has been pegged out by the mining company as a borrow search area. Ben and I were in the first flight out (it's only a four seater and Ben's a tall boy), and we noticed a couple of interesting looking rock-shelters as we flew overhead in the chopper. We asked our pilot to land us in a nearby creek bed so that we could check them out while he's picking up the rest of the survey team. The long-legged Ben managed to scramble up the slippery scree slope much quicker than I am (I'm a much more miniscule 5'3", so it takes me a little longer to rock climb), so it's not long before I hear a startled "oh my god, Meg! You need to get up here!" crackling over the 2-way radio. Curious, I quickened my climb and found Ben crouched over an overturned bark bowl. It was about 70 cm in length, and solidly made from the bark of a white gum tree. We turned it over, and found that the

entire internal surface had been intricately carved with a geometric line pattern. By this stage one of the Elders, John*, and Glenys* had arrived in the chopper so we called them up excitedly.



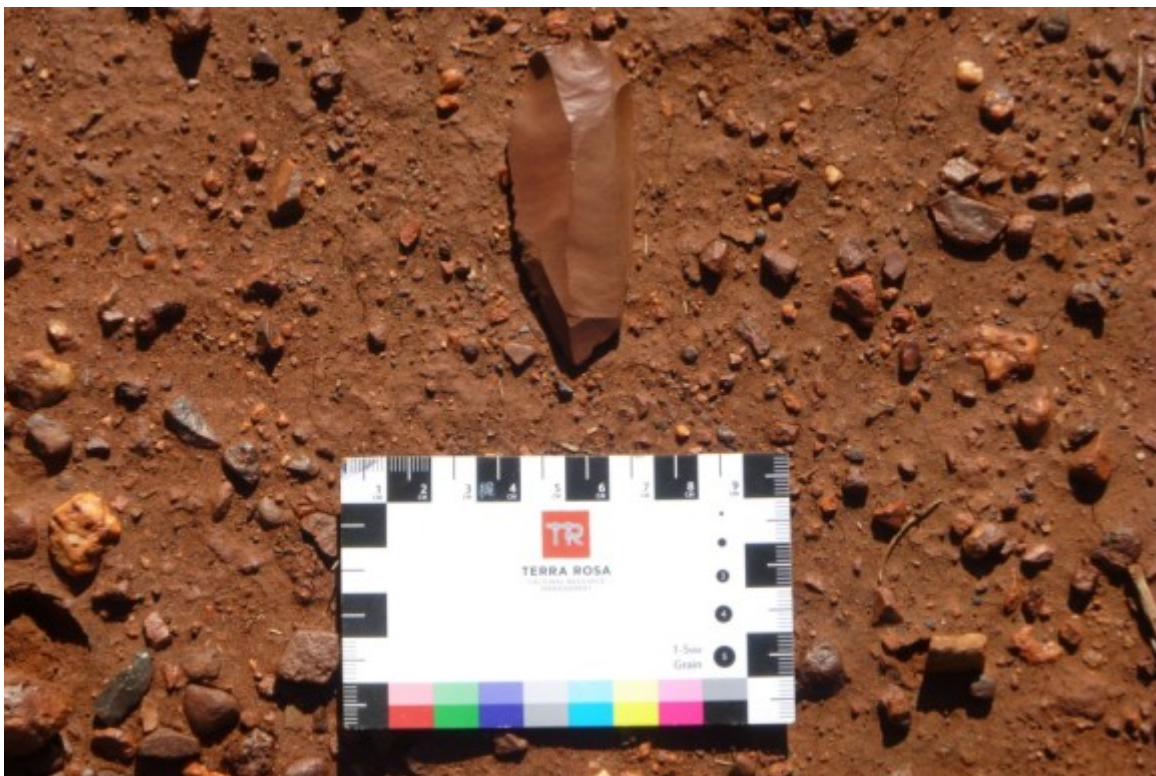
Example of a yandi bowl (also known elsewhere as a coolamon). These are cut out from the bark of eucalyptus trees, using the natural curve of the tree to create the curve of the bowl. The one we found was carved on the inside surface and was, sadly, being eaten away by termites (Image Source: The Australian Museum 2013)

“That’s a yandi bowl”, asserted John, a grin from ear-to-ear with the thrill of the discovery. He was blown away, having never in his entire life seen one ‘out on Country’. “It’s a big one too... would have been used to carry a baby”. Glenys agreed, immediately whipping out her phone to take pictures to show her family. As more and more of the survey team arrived at the site, more and more artefacts were identified within the rock-shelter; flaked artefacts, basal grinding stones and mullers (like mortars and pestles), potential hearth features, and fascinatingly, some small parcels of paper bark which had been niched on a cavity in the wall, tucked beneath several more basal grinding stone fragments. After we had established a boundary for the rock-shelter and taken some preliminary notes and photographs, it was time to move on to investigate the second rock-shelter, approximately 150 m to the north-west.

Forever outpacing the rest of the team Ben once again led the charge. Seconds later “You guys will never believe what’s here!” crackled over the radio. “What, have we got a set?!” hollered Dani*, another one of our Traditional Owners. “Yep. Got a set!”, came the reply. A second yandi bowl, this time with a very old, rusty tin billy can. Now, I should clarify here that finding one, let alone two, yandis is incredibly unusual, as wooden artefacts do not typically preserve well in the Pilbara, and especially not in an area which has and continues to be formed by large volumes of seasonal water movement (that these are likely to be no more than about a century old helps, though the first bowl we found was slowly but surely being eaten away by termites). Needless to say, the entire team was on a high at this point. Once again, we established a boundary and took photos.

Having now spent a couple of hours at these sites, it was decided that it was about time to push on with the rest of the survey. After taking a quick 15 minute morning tea break, we were choppered up to the top of the mesa and I lined people up 15 metres apart for the start of the days pedestrian transect. Walking a corridor like this one is a little more challenging than when surveying a block area as we don't follow a due north-south or east-west direction. You need a couple of people who are able to navigate along an imaginary path which meanders all over the place – often up cliffs, down gullies and through dense patches of vegetation where walking around a tree might suddenly throw you 10 or more metres off course. For this transect, I was walking the southern boundary of the corridor, whilst Ben took the northern one, with Sarah and Zsuzsa keeping an evenly spaced line so that the rest of the survey team were able to clearly see where the corridor was changing. Where there's a change in direction or people start to angle off their lines, we're then able to easily reposition to ensure that a decent inspection of the ground is made. It can be pretty laborious and frustrating work (I currently have palms and two knees full of the tiny needle-like spinifex silica tips), but the small thrill you get when someone calls out "I think I found something" doesn't really ever go away – or at least it hasn't for me.

We continued along the corridor for the rest of the day, identifying three pretty sparse, medium sized artefact scatters, two more rockshelters (this time both with flaked artefacts and grinding materials), and a large number of isolated artefacts.



A pretty nice isolated flaked artefact (scale = 10 cm).

At about 3pm we called it a day in the field and people started heading back out to camp. It's about a 10 minute chopper ride and with the number of people in the team it takes 5 trips back and forth to get every person, plus our six 20 L water drums. We've been out since 6.30am and the whole team is physically exhausted. But, alas, there's still no rest for myself, Ben, Sarah and Zsuzsa! Late afternoons (before dinner) are spent "dumping data" – We spent about an hour every day making sure that all our

photographs and GPS track logs are saved onto the master trip computer, and that all our photograph logs, isolated artefact forms and notebooks are completely filled in and accurate.



Sarah and I diligently managing our data

The rest of the night is spent on a social, communal dinner in a specially set up caravan (the camp we're staying at is not a permanent set-up like many others are), and I've followed that up by reviewing the day's work in a summary that has just been sent back to our office in Fremantle. My tiny caravan room looks like a bomb site, with equipment and maps spread out everywhere – I'm about to start planning out tomorrow's schedule. If I get the okay from the client, we'll get started on a detailed (what we call a site identification level) recording of the two rock-shelters we found this morning so that we can get the yandi bowls salvaged and conserved for the Traditional Owners, at their request.

And then, to bed! I've got a 5am alarm set, and no doubt the new day will reveal even more exciting discoveries...

*Names have been changed to protect the identity of our Traditional Owners.