

Ancient Aboriginal burial mounds identified in far north Queensland.

The Western Cape Communities Trust in partnership with Virtus Heritage and Mapoon families have undertaken a research project in the Mapoon area of the Western Cape to investigate and protect Aboriginal burial mounds.

The project is within the country of registered native title claimants, Mokwiri PNC who represent several Traditional Owner families, including Tjungundji Elders and family members.

Using state-of-the-art, non-destructive, ground penetrating radar (GPR) and magnetometer technology, archaeologists have been able to determine the inner content of the earth mounds, giving a glimpse into ancient burial practises and changes in cultural practises over time.

The initial GPR investigation of 11 mounds showed many included human interments.

Dr Mary-Jean Sutton of Virtus Heritage said they now appreciate the mounds are part of an ancient landscape that had great importance to Tjungundji people and Traditional owner families as well as scientific research significance.

“The origins, ages and functions of these mounds have been debated by researchers for decades and the age of these features is uncertain,” Dr Sutton said.

“Our research indicates, in this area of northern Australia, ancient societies had more complex mortuary and cultural practices than previously recognised, which continued through the mission era. Many of these mounds, once believed to be natural features, our research indicates are burial mounds and culturally constructed features connected to an intricate cultural landscape of antiquity”.

“There are hundreds of mounds with similar features along 60km of coast in Mapoon from Cullen Point down to Batavia/Pennefather. We don’t yet know if they are natural or cultural in origin”.

“There are likely to be many more of these features in western Cape York”.

The geophysical data were collected by Dr Emma St-Pierre from Virtus Heritage and Dr Chet Walker from Virtus Heritage with data interpreted and analysed by world GPR expert Professor Lawrence B. Conyers from the University of Denver, Colorado. They worked in partnership with Tjungundji Aboriginal Corporation and Mapoon Elders and family members during 2015 and 2017.

The GPR technology is recognised by Elders as being culturally sensitive as it does not involve disturbance of the site.

Aunty Diane Nicholls stated that “This project is important to Tjungundji people because of our customary law to protect our old people and respecting and continuing our culture with our Elders. We value this non-invasive technology because it is culturally appropriate and does not disturb the resting places of our old people. It helps us maintain our cultural law and assists us with protecting and managing our cultural heritage”.

Not only are these mounds more complicated than originally thought, they also give an important insight into pre-mission era practices and attest to the continuity and strength of Aboriginal culture through time. A substantial research contribution to how we think about Aboriginal culture and the impacts of European settlement.

Prof Conyers believes the mound locations and variability in structure and content are indicative of changes in culture possibly related to population increase and increased social complexity.

Tjungundji Aboriginal Corporation, and Elders with the Western Cape Communities Trust, and Virtus Heritage will continue research to identify and protect these features and this important cultural landscape.

The next step will be to map additional mounds in the area to look for differences between the mounds and pre-mound features in this area of northern Australia using tools such as LIDAR data and further survey.

This initial research project was funded by the Western Cape Communities Trust in Weipa which represents the eleven Traditional Owner Groups of the Western Cape whose lands form Mining Lease 7024. The Traditional Owner Groups include Ankamuthi, Taepadhighi, Tjungundji, Warranggu and Yupungathi in the North of the Western Cape, Algnith, Anathangayth, Peppan, Thanikwithi and Wathayn in the Central Cape and Wik and Wik-Waya in the South.

For more information, or to arrange an interview, please contact: Dr Mary-Jean Sutton, Principal Archaeologist, Virtus Heritage. Images and data representations are also available for publications.

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