Shell Middens and Sea-Levels

Inferring Environmental Change from Archaeological Marine Faunal Assemblages

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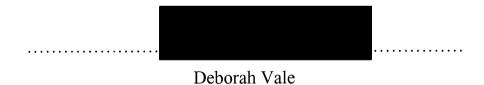
A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of New England

October

2004

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

Any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in the text.



ABSTRACT

This research project focuses on the potential of archaeological evidence to address questions about environmental change. Specifically, the aim of the project was to examine the relationship between coastal shell midden sites and proposed sea-level fluctuations in the Mid- to Late-Holocene on the east coast of northern New South Wales, using marine faunal assemblages from two sites located on the mid-north coast of New South Wales.

I examine the history of attitudes to the relation between sea-level and coastal economies in and outside Australia. This study realises the fact that there are extensive shell midden sites along the Australian coastline, they are relatively easy to radiocarbon date, and they often contain large amounts of marine fauna. Marine faunal ecological studies indicate that fish and shellfish are susceptible to a changing environment, and therefore their adaptive responses to changing conditions and habitat should be evidenced in the archaeological record.

The shell midden sites of Clybucca 3 and Stuarts Point 1, located on the Lower Macleay floodplain, and excavated in the 1970s, were chosen as the case-study sites for this research. These sites contained extensive marine faunal remains in archaeological deposits which dated to the Mid- to Late- Holocene. Hypotheses predicting the impact of changing sea-levels on marine faunal species were developed, and the results of the re-analysis of the archaeological remains, along with the re-dating of the Stuarts Point 1 site, were compared with these models.

The archaeological evidence supports the hypothesis that sea-levels had fluctuated on the coast adjacent to the Lower Macleay floodplain during the time of occupation of the sites. At Stuarts Point, a striking change in the shellfish represented in the midden over time, and also some change in the fish species represented, indicated an environmental change occurring in the Midto Late-Holocene. The Clybucca site, which is now located 12 kilometres from the sea, showed little variation in the shellfish and fish represented. However, the amount of marine faunal remains increased greatly in the time period proposed for a sea-level rise.

This research has shown that archaeological analysis of coastal midden sites can be greatly enhanced by the use of research from other disciplines. At the same time it shows that archaeological evidence can contribute importantly to the evaluation of hypotheses from those disciplines.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have helped and supported me and my research over the last four years. Some of those whom I wish to sincerely thank are:

Professor Graham Connah. Thank you for the excellent job you did excavating the Macleay Sites, and for supporting my research by allowing me to use all of your field notes and drawings to re-analyse the material. Thank you also for the time you spent talking to me about the excavations, and the advice which you gave on draft chapters of this dissertation.

Associate Professor Wendy Beck. There were times when you must have thought we would never get to this stage. Thank you for hanging in there and quietly encouraging. For reading endless drafts of chapters, and never saying how bad they were. And for sharing your knowledge and your friendship. I would never have coped without your support and sensible advice.

Professor Iain Davidson. Thank you for encouraging me to tackle this topic, for your support, and sense of humour. I would not have been able to contemplate a project such as this without your 'not so gentle' persuasion. But I am now glad that I listened. Thank you also for your exacting comments and guidance over the last few weeks, and for your belief that this was a worthwhile and exciting topic of research.

Mike Roach. Thank you for the wonderful maps and drawings which you have done for this project. I would also like to thank you for all of the friendly smiles and cheery 'good morning Deb' over the last couple of years. And for the Belizean flag!

Cate Mitchell. I WILL always be grateful for your belief in my ability to pull this off. I WILL be eternally thankful that I had a friend who was capable of really 'tough love' when I needed it. Thank you for the editing, all the cups of coffee, and for the shoulder to cry on.

Peter Flood, Bob Haworth and Robert Baker. The trip to the Macleay was definitely educational! I learnt more about coring floodplains and acid sulphate soils than I thought possible. I also learnt how much enthusiasm you all put into your research, and how much fun it can be (even when wearing gum boots). Thank you all for your encouragement of my project in so many ways over the years. And thank you Bob for taking the time to read over some of these chapters, even though you weren't my supervisor, and for offering advice and explanations on some of the more tricky geomorphological issues.

Dr Anita Smith and Dr Peter Grave. I would like to thank you both for the help you gave me with the calibration of the radiocarbon dates. Thank you Anita for allowing me the use of you data base of dates; and thank you Peter for making OxCal run when I was starting to feel a bit desperate!

The 'Left Wing' Coffee Club, Amanda Davies, Bettyann Doyle, Kerrie Grant, Ken Kippen, Mark Moore, June Ross, Jay Smith. It's a very sad fact, but morning coffee was probably the highlight of my life for the last twelve months! Thank you all for your support, for keeping me grounded, for the presents, hugs, tea bags, chocolate, and friendship.

The Staff, (Michele, Kristy, Kerri, Kylie, Cathie, Lynette and Kelly), and all of the children at Hobbit Preschool. Hobbit has been my reality check and comic relief over the last four years. You are all so wonderful and easy to work with. Thank you for not telling me to just shut up and FINISH IT!

The Staff and Students of the School of Human and Environmental Studies. A big thank you to Carmel and the staff and students of the department who have helped me in so many ways.

Thank you also to my Mum, my wonderful family, and Christine and Jenny, who have encouraged, never doubted, and put up with my self absorption.

And finally, Ziggy, who always knows what's important in life – food and walks!

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