NGAUT NGAUT
an interpretive guide

by Amy Roberts and the Mannum Aboriginal Community Association Inc.
Ngaut Ngaut is part of my heritage and culture. We have to preserve it for future generations. My life would be empty without my connection to this place.

Isobelle Campbell
Please enjoy and respect Ngaut Ngaut Conservation Park and open your minds and hearts to learn about our land, beliefs and culture.
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Please note: Ngaut Ngaut Conservation Park has been specifically reserved to protect sites and items of significance to Aboriginal people and their culture. Access is only permitted under supervision.

Please contact the Mannum Aboriginal Community Association Inc. or the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources for more information.
The Aboriginal people of the Mid Murray, Riverland and Mallee value Ngaut Ngaut as a place of great cultural significance. It is a place intimately tied to our Dreaming, a place where the ‘old people’ lived and a place that preserves the environment. It is also a place that demonstrates our ongoing connection to our country and provides us with a sense of belonging. Our community values Ngaut Ngaut as a place where we can teach our children about their culture.

We also acknowledge that Ngaut Ngaut tells stories about the development of archaeology in Australia and the role that this site plays in educating non-Indigenous Australia and the world about the deep and dynamic past of all Indigenous Australians.

My father, the late Richard Hunter, former chairperson of the Mannum Aboriginal Community Association Inc., developed Ngaut Ngaut as a cultural tourism site. His hope was that the tours conducted by community members would help Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people gain a better understanding of each other. He is greatly missed by his family and the broader community.

This book has been written to further my father’s aim to promote cross-cultural understanding through education and has been designed to complement the cultural tours conducted by
the Mannum Aboriginal Community Association Inc. In particular we wish to expand the general public’s knowledge about Ngaut Ngaut to include the cultural aspects of the site that we value in addition to the more widely known archaeological history. We feel that it is important the public understands the diversity and complexity of our culture and it is for this reason that we share stories relating to group boundaries, Dreamings, oral histories, totems and rock art just to name a few. These stories tie us to the land and river and all that they provide.

Please enjoy and respect Ngaut Ngaut Conservation Park and open your minds and hearts to learn about our land, beliefs and culture.

Isobelle Campbell
Chairperson of the Mannum Aboriginal Community Association Inc.

“ It is a place intimately tied to our Dreaming, a place where the ‘old people’ lived and a place that preserves the environment.”
“Whilst many non-Aboriginal people know of Ngaut Ngaut by its English name, Devon Downs, the Aboriginal community have and always will refer to this place by its traditional name.
Acknowledgments

Special thanks go to the Intellectual Property Issues in Cultural Heritage (IPinCH) research group who are supported by Simon Fraser University (British Columbia, Canada) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. IPinCH funded and supported the production of this booklet as well as the additional research that was required to make this happen. In particular, we are most grateful to George Nicholas for his support and guidance and to the IPinCH steering committee for peer reviewing this work.

Previous funding for an earlier stage of the Ngaut Ngaut Interpretive Project was also gratefully received from the Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation Division of the Government of South Australia’s Department of Premier and Cabinet.

Thank you to staff and students affiliated with the Flinders University Archaeology Department. In particular, we acknowledge the prior assistance of Lyn Leader-Elliot and Alex van Wessem.

Thanks also to staff at the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources for supporting this project.

We also acknowledge the South Australian Museum for providing copies of relevant materials for this project free of charge. Special thanks are due to Lea Gardam and Ali Abdullah-Highfold from the archives section for their assistance. We also thank the South Australian Museum for providing access to the archaeological collections.

The following members of the Mannum Aboriginal Community Association Inc. are also acknowledged for the lead roles that they played throughout the life of the Ngaut Ngaut Interpretive Project:

Isobelle Campbell
Ivy Campbell
Sam Stewart
Anita Hunter
Lynne Rigney
Dion Holland
Cynthia Hutchinson

A Few Words on Words

Whilst many non-Aboriginal people know of Ngaut Ngaut by its English name, Devon Downs, the Aboriginal community have and always will refer to this place by its traditional name. Even though the Aboriginal community have continued to use traditional names for places on their country, they also wish to see these names reinstated in the broader literature. In this booklet we privilege these traditional names.
The stories relating to Ngaut Ngaut involve a number of Aboriginal groups. In particular, the following groups are mentioned in this interpretive booklet: Nganguraku, Ngaiawang and Ngarkat.

There are varying accounts of Aboriginal groups, group boundaries and group names in the ethno-historical records for this region. One of the most well-known accounts about these issues was provided by Norman Tindale.¹

Tindale began working for the South Australian Museum in 1918.² During his career he worked in the fields of entomology, archaeology and anthropology. He remained an Honorary Associate of the Museum until his death, an association that spanned more than seven decades.³ Tindale spent many years recording archaeological sites and interviewing Aboriginal people along the River Murray. A portion of his map documenting ‘tribal boundaries’ for this region is reproduced on this page.

As you can see on the map Tindale located the site of Ngaut Ngaut (Devon Downs) on the boundary between the Nganguraku and Ngaiawang groups.

Contemporary Aboriginal community members often say that Ngaut Ngaut is in Nganguraku country.
Ngaut Ngaut is an ancestral being. Beliefs and Dreaming stories about Ngaut Ngaut are complex and at times Ngaut Ngaut is described as either a man or a woman. People in the Aboriginal community today may also refer to Ngaut Ngaut as a demon or a fire demon.

One Dreaming story about Ngaut Ngaut tells of a half-overgrown or giant-like man who lived at a place called Witjawitj. Witjawitj is a rockhole where Aboriginal people would collect water as they travelled between Nildottie and Loxton (to trade and attend ceremonies). Records indicate that this water source provided fresh water until the government or farmers put down a bore and ‘broke’ it by making the water salty. The country where Ngaut Ngaut lived may also be referred to as Ngaut Ngaut or Witjawitj country.

Witjawitj is also an ancestral being. He is believed to be powerful and is feared. The term Witjawitj may also refer to the ‘small people’ or ‘small beings’ who live in Ngarkat country (located east of Ngaut Ngaut).

Another Dreaming story about Ngaut Ngaut talks of a one-legged woman who steals children if they wander out into the bush alone. Dreaming stories like this are still told to children to keep them safe but they also hold much deeper meaning.

There are also other stories about Ngaut Ngaut. Some of these stories originate in places such as western Victoria.4
The Ngarkat People

The country of the Ngarkat people lies to the east of Ngaut Ngaut out in the dry mallee. During times of drought, or when the mallee root waters failed, the Ngarkat people would access Ngaut Ngaut and other places along recognised tracks in order to obtain water. An example of such a track is the steep path down the face of the cliff at the Ngaut Ngaut site. These tracks were used so that the game coming to drink at the water’s edge on the gentler slopes were not disturbed.

The Ngarkat people would indicate their approach to Ngaut Ngaut by making smoke signals. After they collected water they would take it back to their camps in the scrub. They would often stay by the river to take refuge from the heat during the day and return to their camps to the east at night.

During their visits local groups usually camped at the place known as Ranginj across the river or on Tartanga (Nildottie Island). The visits would involve ceremonies and the recalling of past events and intermarriages. Today the Ngarkat, Nganguraku, Ngaiawang and other river groups are closely related as a result of such intermarriages.

The Ngarkat people would also trade with other Aboriginal groups along the Murray River. In particular, they were known for the stone axes they would exchange.
Ngurunderi is one of the great ancestral creators for Aboriginal people of the Murray River and lower lakes. There are many accounts of the Ngurunderi Dreaming. Some versions present different perspectives of Ngurunderi while others reveal the detailed knowledge of local accounts. The following version focuses on the stretch of the river near Ngaut Ngaut.

Ngurunderi, the great ancestral creator, pursued Ponde, a giant Murray cod, down the river from the interior of what is now New South Wales. When he reached this section of the river he came to Kauwira (Cowirra). Ponde, in efforts to escape from Ngurunderi, cut new reaches into the river, sometimes weaving from side to side as he cut the deep water channel.

At Kauwira, the giant Murray cod changed direction and left the country of the Nganguraku people at the great bend in the river still known as Ponde to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

The Ngurunderi Dreaming continues beyond Nganguraku country towards the lower lakes.
This region is known as the place of the black duck totem (Pacific black duck – *Anas superciliosa*).\(^{20}\) There are also other known totems for this region.\(^{21}\) The black duck is strongly linked to the swamps in the Mannum area.\(^{22}\) Aboriginal people in this region may also use the Ngarrindjeri word *ngatji* to describe their totem or simply refer to it as their ‘bird’. A recorded Nganguraku word for totem is *tinda*.\(^{23}\)
Ngaut Ngaut in 1929 before the main excavation began. Norman Tindale is photographing the site. Photograph by Harold Sheard. Image courtesy of the South Australian Museum Archives, AA290/3/1/24, Sheard Collection.
Ngaut Ngaut’s Role in Educating People about the Indigenous Australian Past

Hale and Tindale Conduct the First Scientific Excavation in Australia

Ngaut Ngaut was the first stratified rockshelter deposit to be scientifically excavated in Australia. Herbert Hale and Norman Tindale began their archaeological investigations at Ngaut Ngaut in 1929. Hale, a zoologist, was the Director of the South Australian Museum from 1931 to 1960. As previously noted, Tindale began working for the South Australian Museum in 1918 and worked in the fields of entomology, archaeology and anthropology.

It was at this site that Hale and Tindale demonstrated the potential of careful, layer-by-layer, excavations using equipment still employed by archaeologists today such as trowels, brushes and sieves.

Stratigraphy

Stratigraphy refers to the layers that make up an archaeological deposit. In an undisturbed deposit layers buried more deeply are older than the layers above. Burial pits and other features can be dug down into earlier levels so great care must be taken to identify any disturbances to the original layers.

Because of the many layers in the archaeological deposit at Ngaut Ngaut (and the artefacts and remains found in association with these layers) this site provided the first clear evidence for the presence of Indigenous Australians in one place and over a long period of time. This was later confirmed in the 1950s when the deposits were radiocarbon dated and demonstrated to be over 5000 years old.

A Turning Point in History

Prior to Hale and Tindale’s work little systematic research had been conducted in the field of Indigenous Australian archaeology. In fact the thinking of the day was that Indigenous Australians were recent arrivals to Australia and that their material culture had not changed over time. Hence, the research at Ngaut Ngaut provided a turning point in the way the Indigenous Australian archaeological record and Indigenous history was viewed by non-Indigenous people.

Because the artefacts and other remains that Hale and Tindale uncovered were from a finely layered (stratified) context they were able to consider possible environmental and cultural changes since the arrival of humans. One of Tindale’s theories stated that changes in Indigenous Australian artefact assemblages at Ngaut Ngaut and other sites reflected the immigration of new groups of people over time (which he gave names such as Murundian, Mudukian, Pirrian and Tartangan).

A New Theory

John Mulvaney, the first university-trained prehistorian to make Australia his subject, however, criticised Tindale’s theory. Mulvaney did this by discussing the artefactual evidence from Ngaut Ngaut in relation to his own 1956-1963 excavations at nearby Tungawa (Fromm’s Landing). He suggested that changes in the archaeological record could instead be explained by adaptation to local conditions rather than immigration. Thus, while Tindale was right to investigate the dynamic nature of the Indigenous Australian past he failed to consider the prospect of regional diversity and technological adaptation.
Sheard’s Early Excavations

Hale and Tindale, however, were not the first researchers to take an interest in the archaeology of Ngaut Ngaut nor would they be the last. A few years prior to their landmark excavations they were preceded by Harold Sheard, a member of the Anthropological Society of South Australia. Sheard had noted the potential of the site and had also dug a small trench (to a depth of 3 feet). His excavations were not of the standard of Hale and Tindale’s and were only partially examined. Sheard also investigated the limestone cliffs at the site and observed the smoke staining as a result of the fires of Aboriginal people and photographed some of the rock engravings.

Recent Archaeology

More recently, Mike Smith, an archaeologist now known for his extensive work in the Australian desert, also took an interest in the archaeology of Ngaut Ngaut. From 1976-1977 he reanalysed the material Hale and Tindale excavated with the greater part of his time spent studying the faunal assemblage from the site. In July 1977 he also visited the rockshelter to collect additional samples. On the basis of his analysis he concluded that the local environment would have provided the habitat requirements for all the species exploited from the rockshelter. Smith also argued that the faunal remains in the deposits suggest that the site was primarily used in the winter/early spring and autumn months – with a possible change in seasonal emphasis during the time the rockshelter was used.
Hale and Tindale demonstrated the potential of careful, layer-by-layer, excavations using equipment still employed by archaeologists today.
Norman Tindale and Herbert Hale’s Excavations

Where did they excavate?

Norman Tindale and Herbert Hale put down three excavation trenches at Ngaut Ngaut. These trenches, along with the original trench excavated by Harold Sheard, are illustrated below.

Hale and Tindale’s preliminary excavation, Trench B, was excavated to a depth of 5 metres in May 1929.39

They later carried out a second and larger excavation, Trench C, in November and December of 1929.40 Trench C was excavated to a depth of 6.2 metres.41

Their final excavation, Trench D, was conducted in December 1929.42

Plan of Ngaut Ngaut adapted from Hale and Tindale’s 1930 publication.
A = location of Sheard’s excavation and B-D = location of Hale and Tindale’s excavations.
Image courtesy of the South Australian Museum.
What Did They Find?

Hale and Tindale found a variety of remains representing the past lifeways of Aboriginal people including the remains of their food, tools and cultural lives.

The types of food remains they excavated included:

- Mussel shells and other shellfish
- The stomach stones (gastroliths) and claw tips of crayfish (the yabby was the main species present)
- Fish otoliths (ear bones) and bones (including Murray cod, callop and catfish)
- Tortoise remains (including both long- and short-necked species)
- Reptile remains (including snakes and lizards)
- The remains of birds including egg-shells (emus, musk duck and teal duck)
- A variety of mammal bones (including kangaroos, wallabies, wombats and other marsupials)
- Quandong stones

Quandong stones collected by contemporary community members. Photograph by Alex van Wessem.
Hale and Tindale also excavated a variety of artefacts. For example, they found stone tools made to perform different functions such as cutting, scraping, hammering and grinding (created from a variety of materials such as chert, quartz, quartzite and limestone – many of these materials were imported to the site from other areas believed to be at least 4km distant).

They also found other artefacts including:
- Burnt hearth stones
- Ochre pieces of different colours (including various shades of red and brown)
- Bone points
- Resin
- Pipe-clay pieces
Human burials were also uncovered during the excavations. Aboriginal people in this region may use terms such as the ‘old people’ and ‘merrily bones’ or ‘merildi bones’ as a way of respectfully referring to such remains. In particular, the remains discovered included those of a young baby approximately 3 months old, the skeleton of a young child about 15-18 months old, the remains of another young child and the remains of a child around 5 years of age.

Hale and Tindale also excavated the remains of other predator species in the deposits such as the Tasmanian devil (*Sarcophilus harrisii*), Tasmanian tiger (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*) and the dingo (*Canus lupus dingo*). The Tasmanian devil and Tasmanian tiger both became extinct on mainland Australia sometime before the arrival of Europeans. Dingos are believed to have been introduced to mainland Australia by humans approximately 4000-4500 years ago.

Dingo remains are not found below Layer II (there is no specific date for this layer). Hale and Tindale thought that a molar from Layer XII (older than 5180±100 BP) was a dingo tooth, however this was later identified by Mike Smith to be from a Tasmanian devil.
How old are the deposits?

Hale and Tindale conducted their research in such a methodical manner that they kept and labelled much of the material they excavated for future reference. Their approach proved to be very beneficial because after the radiocarbon dating technique was developed in the late 1940s some of the shell samples could be dated. Dates were obtained for a number of levels with the oldest date for the site being 5180±100 BP (Layer XI). The first date (for Layer IX) was published in 1956.48 Other dates were published in later articles and books and some dates are referred to in unpublished letters.49

“Hale and Tindale also excavated the remains of other predator species in the deposits such as the Tasmanian devil, Tasmanian tiger and the dingo.”
Key

a = remains of an infant
b = remains of a child (about 15-18 months old)
c = possible grave capping stone
d = pocket of debris
e = large rock fall
f = former position of large rock fall on the roof of the rockshelter
g = burial pit
h = possible grave capping stone
i = remains of a child
j = possible grave lining stones
k = remains of a child (about 5 years old)
l = teeth of a child (about 5 years old)
m = upper limit of ‘grooves and scratch marks’ on wall
n = lower limit of ‘grooves and scratch marks’ on wall
o = position of a bone implement found in a cavity in the rockshelter wall
p = Tasmanian devil teeth
q = Tasmanian devil jaw
r = deciduous human tooth
s = deciduous human tooth
The South Australian Museum Collection

The remains that Hale and Tindale excavated are now housed at the South Australian Museum. Contemporary community members continue to visit the collection and guide researchers in the appropriate study of the artefacts.

Isobelle Campbell, Ivy Campbell and Anita Hunter looking at artefacts from the Ngaut Ngaut excavations. Image courtesy of the South Australian Museum. Photograph by Amy Roberts.

Storage boxes that hold materials from the Ngaut Ngaut excavations. Image courtesy of the South Australian Museum. Photograph by Amy Roberts.
“Seeing the Ngaut Ngaut collection at the South Australian Museum made us emotional. In the future we plan to build a keeping place and interpretive centre at Ngaut Ngaut to look after the artefacts – they are ours to take forward now – they have more meaning when they are on country.

Isobelle Campbell, Ivy Campbell and Anita Hunter
Ngaut Ngaut Rock Art

There are a variety of different motifs engraved into the limestone cliffs at Ngaut Ngaut. Contemporary Aboriginal community members interpret the meanings of some of these motifs during cultural tours of the site. Ethno-historical accounts also record the recent cultural meaning for some of the rock art motifs at Ngaut Ngaut and nearby rock art sites. These descriptions were recorded by Norman Tindale from the Nganguraku man Tarby Mason and are included on the opposite page. Tarby Mason also had connections to other countries such as Ngarkat country to the east of Ngaut Ngaut.
Ethno-Historical Accounts

Moon people

Sun people

Double cross people

Crow’s foot people

The two motifs above record the death of a ‘travelling’ man.
The marks indicate on which side of the river the man was travelling.

Images courtesy of the South Australian Museum Archives,
AA338/1/31/2/pp. 7 and 9, Tindale Collection.
Children’s Activity

When you visit Ngaut Ngaut with a cultural guide they will talk to you about many different aspects of the Ngaut Ngaut site. What did your cultural guide teach you about the images below?

Photograph by Alex van Wessem.

Photograph by Amy Roberts.

Photograph by Michael Diplock.
Notes

1 See Tindale 1974.
2 See South Australian Museum 2011.
3 See Jones 1995.
17 See Tindale and Pretty 1978:5.
18 See Tindale and Pretty 1978:5.
26 See South Australian Museum 2012.
27 See Hale and Tindale 1930:175.
31 See Mulvaney 1960; Mulvaney et al. 1964.
32 See Mulvaney 1960:75 and 79; Mulvaney et al. 1964:491-492.
33 See Mulvaney and Kamminga 1999:42.
34 See Hale and Tindale 1930:174; Sheard 1927:18.
36 See Smith 1977:2; Smith 1978:19.
39 See Hale and Tindale 1930:147 and 175.
40 See Hale and Tindale 1930:147 and 175.
41 See Hale and Tindale 1930:175.
42 See Tindale 1922-1930:419.
44 See Pate et al. 2011; Roberts et al. 2005.
48 See Broecker et al. 1956:124.
References


Ellis, C.J. 1964 Language elicitation and cultural discussion. Transcription by Amy Roberts.


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Tindale, N.B. 1940-1956 Journal on Campsites and Stone Implements of the Australian Aborigines; and others; Notes, etc. Vol. I with Index. South Australian Museum, AA338/1/40/1.


