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Doing Archaeology in Aboriginal Australia

The many different ways in which Indigenous people have interacted with the land and with each other over the last 50,000 years have left behind many physical traces. Indigenous Australians were dynamic and highly adaptable. By 22–30,000 years ago they had used these abilities to occupy a wide range of environments, ranging from the tropical zones of northern Australia to the peri-glacial zones of Tasmania and even refuge areas in the deserts of central Australia (see Mulvaney & Kamminga, 1999). Tasmania, isolated from the rest of Australia for the last 8–10,000 years, developed its own unique culture (for more information see Chapter 2). As a result of this diversity there are many different kinds of Indigenous sites in Australia. This chapter deals with the issues of identifying the types of Indigenous sites likely to be encountered across Australia, researching Indigenous sites, and working with Indigenous Australians.

6.1. Types of Sites

There are a wide range of Indigenous sites in Australia. These include rock art sites, stone artifact scatters or open sites, shell middens, carved and scarred trees, quarries, burials, stone arrangements and post-contact sites. While a fieldworker can easily identify some of these sites with experience gained outside Australia, the majority are identified more easily once you have got your “eye in”, through gaining fieldwork experience in, or other familiarity with, Australian archaeology (see Figure 6.1).

6.1.1. Stone Artifact Scatters

These are the most common type of site across Australia—groups of stone artifacts found scattered on the ground surface. To differentiate these sites from those that occur within the protection of a rock shelter, such scatters are often referred to simply as “open sites”. You should remember, however, that there are also other types of open sites, such as middens, grinding grooves and stone arrangements. Indigenous Australians used different kinds of stone artifacts for



Ceremonial sites



Rock art sites



Grinding grooves



Fire-stick farming



Rock shelters



Contact sites



Dreaming sites



Scarred trees

FIGURE 6.1. Some Aboriginal site types around Australia.

Ceremonial sites. Activities at these places may leave few physical traces.

Grinding grooves. The edges of stone axes were kept sharp by grinding them on suitable rock surfaces.

Rockshelters. These habitation sites often contain evidence for a wide range of activities.

Contact sites. This statue marks the location of Colebrook, Home, South

Dreaming sites. Many natural features of the landscape are invested with meaning by Indigenous people. This is a women's dreaming site in Arnhem Land, N.T.

Rock art sites. Hand stencils such as this are found across Australia.

'Fire stick farming'. Regular burning is just one of the ways in which Indigenous people managed the natural environment.

Scarred trees. Bark removed from trees was used for a variety of purposes, from drinking and carrying vessels to canoes.