

Aboriginal sites to be excavated



Surveys by members of the Western Australian Museum on the Dampier Salt leases Aboriginal sites in recent weeks have ended.

The surveys were in connection with the gazetting of sites under the Aboriginal Heritage Act of 1972.

Leading the survey was Mr Warwick Dix, Registrar of Aboriginal Sites at the museum. He was accompanied by Mrs Angela Calder, an archaeologist at the museum.

Several large shell midden sites were found. These middens are mounds of empty shells left by Aboriginies after eating. Mr Dix said that engravings and midden sites were prolific in Gum Tree Valley on the salt lease. The interesting point, he said, was that there were so many varied works in such a small area.

The museum team hopes to return next year to carry out excavations of midden in this area.

Mrs Calder said that the area selected was undisturbed and could yield much valuable information. The likely approach was to establish a 2-metre chequerboard grid over the area, then dig each alternate square.

Materials found by excavation could be considerable and include remains of fish, birds, animals, stone tools, seeds, etc. Organic materials found can be readily identified. Preserved fish scales, for example, upon examination indicate the type of fish, its age, the part of the body it came from and even the time of year it was caught.

The latter information can indicate if a camp site was used for all of, or only a particular time of the year.

The study of such excavations provides a graphic record of how the environment was used by the Aboriginies. It also establishes the way of life of an ancient people.

Carbon dating techniques can be used to establish dates of fish bones etc found.

The museum team had been in the area for a month and had located and detailed as many sites as time had permitted. During their survey, they also made a dozen latex casts of deeply gouged engravings. These loose casts will be taken to Perth. A mould will be produced from the casts and a reproduction of the original will be made in fibreglass.

Picture above shows Warwick Dix preparing a latex cast assisted by Angela Calder. Each cast comprises six layers of latex and takes about two hours to prepare. Casts are usually prepared in the morning as curing time before the cast can be removed takes several hours.