

---

# TEACHER BACKPACK

**TASMANIAN  
ABORIGINAL  
CULTURE**



---

Welcome to the Tasmanian  
Museum and Art Gallery  
**Tasmanian Aboriginal Culture  
Teacher Backpack.**

We hope you and your students  
enjoy the discoveries you make  
using the objects provided.

The objects in the backpack  
relate to themes and items on  
display in the two exhibitions:  
**ningina tunapri** located on the  
ground floor of the Henry Hunter  
building, and **parrawa, parrawa!**  
**Go away!** located on the second  
floor of the Bond Store.

Each object has a card with  
some information and suggested  
discussion topics.

You can separate the cards if you  
wish.

The objects are to be carefully  
handled and passed around.

Please replace everything as you  
found it.

*Thanks,  
Centre for Learning  
and Discovery*

---

## Stone tools

---



These stone tools have been made from spongolite. For many thousands of years Tasmanian Aboriginal people quarried and worked suitable rocks and minerals, including spongolite, into highly effective tools for cutting, chopping and scraping purposes. Spongolite, comprised almost

entirely from fossilised sponges formed on the sea-bed millions of years ago, was favoured for its capacity to produce lightweight, extremely sharp tools.

Although spongolite occurs naturally at only one single location in Tasmania – at Rebecca Creek in the state’s rugged north-west – spongolite stone tools have been found at Aboriginal midden sites in all corners of the island. This provides evidence of a system of complex trade relations, as well as the value placed on this material. Spongolite was used extensively, and the spongolite quarry at Rebecca Creek is one of the richest and most extensively worked Aboriginal quarry and artefact sites currently known in Tasmania.

*Discussion:*

- Can you tell which surfaces were used for what tasks, such as cutting, scraping or chopping?
- What would other Tasmanian Aboriginal groups have traded in order to get a spongolite tool? Think about resources particular to local areas.
- Investigate the history of land hand backs, including of Rebecca Creek, to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. What makes a site significant?

*Spongolite is object 36 on the website 'Shaping Tasmania: a journey in 100 objects'.*

## Mutton bird oil

---



Mutton birds (*yula* in *palawa kani*) or short-tailed shearwaters (*Puffinus tenuirostris*) are a traditional food source for the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. They have been harvested for thousands of years around the coast of Tasmania, and in particular on the Bass Strait Islands where there is now commercial harvesting of the birds. The birds occur in large numbers on these islands, nesting

in burrows in the ground in summer. The largest colony, on Babel Island in the north east, has 3 million burrows. Remarkably these birds make an annual migration to the Bering Sea off Alaska each year, a round trip of approximately 30 000km.

It is the chicks that are harvested. Just before they fledge and prepare to make their first flight, the chicks are at their heaviest. Harvesting involves pulling the chicks from their burrows, killing them by breaking their necks, and processing them which includes removing gut oil (or gurru) and feathers. The oil that is in the jar and smell squeeze tube is from the stomach of several birds. It is very high in omega 3 compounds – the same compounds in fish oil tablets that many people take for health reasons.

But mutton birding is not just about the gathering of food for Tasmanian Aboriginal people. It is an important cultural practice that links present day community members with a

long tradition, helps strengthen connections to community and land, and instils pride in new generations of Aboriginal youth.

*Discussion:*

- What does the oil smell of? Why?
- How are the harvested chicks carried back to the harvesting sheds? How are they processed?
- What other some other cultural practices of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community?
- Who should be allowed to harvest mutton birds and why?

## **pulawini**

---



*pulawini* or red ochre is an important resource for the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. Used in ceremonies, in rock art, and on other objects, the rock is a naturally occurring mineral that has been quarried for thousands of years. Its use has continued to the present day. The ochre is prepared using grindstone and water mixed with other materials such as saliva and animal fat and blood, turning it into a paste that can then be applied to the hair and body.

*Discussion:*

- Identify some of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people featured in the 19th century artworks in the gallery who have used *pulawini*. What were these peoples' stories?
- Why might *pulawini* be used?
- Can you think of other naturally occurring ochres that are used today? Think colour.
- How might the *pulawini* hand stencils have been made?

## Australian Aboriginal flag

---



The Aboriginal flag was designed by Harold Thomas in the early 1970s as a symbol of land rights. The colours signify the relationship Aboriginal people have to Country: black represents the Aboriginal people of Australia; red - the red earth, red ochre and the spiritual relation to the land; yellow - the sun, the giver of life and protector.

The flag was first flown in Adelaide on National Aborigines Day, 12 July 1971. In 1995 the Australian Government officially recognised the flag and it is flown now throughout the country as a symbol of our Indigenous community.

*Discussion:*

- Who was Harold Thomas and where was he from?
- What does the flag mean for you?
- What sorts of occasions should the flag be flown and why?
- How does the meaning of the Aboriginal Flag compare with the other proclaimed flags of Australia and Tasmania?

## Tasmanian Aboriginal recordings

---



The three recordings on this player are all related and yet recorded centuries apart.

### Recording one

The wax cylinder recordings of Tasmanian Aborigine, Fanny Cochrane Smith, are some of the earliest recordings ever made in Australia, and the only sound recording of the traditional Tasmanian

Aboriginal language – preserving this language for time immemorial. They were recorded in 1899 and again in 1903 by Horace Watson. Fanny was born at Wybalenna, Flinders Island, in 1834. She was the daughter of *Tanganutura*, a *Trawlwoolway* woman from the north-east, and *Nikamanik*, a *Parperloihener* man from Robbins Island in the north-east. The Aborigines at Wybalenna escaped into the bush to practise their culture. Here, Fanny learnt her language, songs, dances and ceremony. In 1847, Fanny and the other survivors of Wybalenna were moved to an abandoned convict settlement at Oyster Cove in Tasmania's south.

*This recording is object 39 on the website 'Shaping Tasmania: a journey in 100 objects'.*

## **Recording two**

In 2007 Dewayne Everettsmith was recorded singing a song celebrating the Tasmanian Aboriginal people's connection to Country. This is an edited version of a song written by Roger Sculthorpe, Heather Sculthorpe, June Sculthorpe, Chris Mansell, Di Cook and Theresa Sainty from the Tasmanian Aboriginal community and sung in *palawa kani*, Tasmanian Aboriginal language, to school students on a TMAG program.

This land is my land  
From Eddystone Point, to Oyster Cove  
From Mount Wellington to the Bass  
Strait Islands  
This land is us blackfellas  
We blackfellas are this land

*A video and translation of this recording is on the TMAG website under Learning and Discovery Resources.*

## **Recordings three and four**

The Welcome to Country recording was made by Theresa Sainty and is used in the entrance to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Additionally there is a recording by Theresa's grandson Cooper Marshall. Both these recordings are in *palawa kani*.

*palawa kani* is the name of the revived Tasmanian Aboriginal language.

There were several individual languages spoken across Tasmania before European invasion. The *palawa kani* language program (run by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre) uses linguistic methods to reconstruct words as close to the original Aboriginal word as possible. Although very little of the original languages survives, the early records of non-Aborigines and later recordings of Tasmanian Aboriginal speech are used to retrieve, rebuild and revive Tasmanian Aboriginal language – *palawa kani*.

## **TEXT / TRANSLATION**

*Welcome to Tasmania, Aboriginal land.*

*Welcome to Hobart, Muwinina country.*

*Tasmanian Aborigines have walked long way this Country.*

*We have hunted and gone mutton birding; our women have gathered shells for necklaces.*

*Families have danced around many fires in ceremony, singing Country strong.*

*Country holds the knowledge and songs of the Old People. The strength of our Ancestors is within us. Growing our people strong*

*Our Ancestors are still here – in the trees, in the wind, in the earth and in our hearts.*

*They will always be here. As will we.*

— Tasmanian Aboriginal Community member, Theresa Sainty

*Discussion:*

- Describe some of the ways knowledge and customs could be shared without using a written language. What are some techniques an oral tradition uses?
- How does naming something affect our relationship to it? Think in particular about place names, and people's names.
- What are some names commonly used in English that are in fact Tasmanian Aboriginal names?

## Shells for necklace making

---



This box contains many of the shells used by Tasmanian Aboriginal women for making shell necklaces. The practice of shell necklace making has been one that has continued for many thousands of years and remains an important cultural practice amongst women. Traditionally the piercing of the shells in order to be threaded was done using the 'eye' teeth of a wallaby jaw. With the introduction of metal needles and awls smaller shells have more recently been used, such as the tiny rice shells, but other such as the *marinas* remain particularly prized by necklace makers. The *marinas* are small conical kelp shells found only at a few locations around the Bass Strait islands.

Shell types:

Description:	Scientific name:	Names used by Aboriginal women:
Black and white shell	<i>Nerita atramentosa</i>	Black crows
Very small sand coloured shell	<i>Truncatella scalarina</i>	Rice shells
Small white	<i>Marinula xanthostoma</i>	Toothies
Colourful greenish spiral shells	<i>Phasianotrochus irisodontes</i>	marinas
Yellowish conical shells with a lip	<i>Austroginella muscaria</i>	Penguins

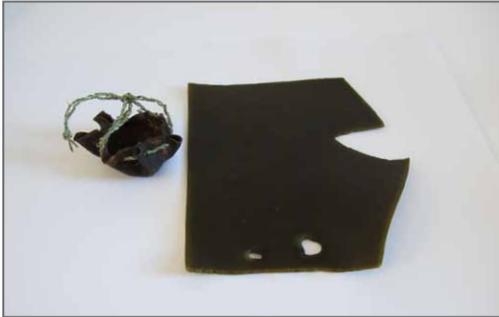
Shell necklaces are featured as object 40 on the website 'Shaping Tasmania: a journey in 100 objects'.

#### Discussion:

- Look at the shell necklaces on display and try and recognise the different shells used.
- What are some of the differences between the older necklaces and more recently made ones?
- How has the knowledge of shell necklace making been shared?
- What are some of the threats to the continuity of this cultural practice?

## Kelp and kelp object

---



Bull kelp (*Durvilleae potatorum*) is found along the western and southern coasts of Tasmania, as far north as Bicheno on the east coast, and around the west islands of Bass Strait. Its thick, almost leathery, texture has made it an ideal resource for Tasmanian Aboriginal people. In the 18th Century French explorers recorded kelp water carriers able to hold up to 5 quarts (5.7 litres) of water. Whilst there has

been a resurgence of making water carriers, contemporary kelp artists have expanded the medium's use to include decorative sculptures such as those shown on display and the one included here, made during an education program.

Weaving and basket making is also a long standing cultural practice amongst Tasmanian Aboriginal women. The fibre cord on this kelp object is Tasman flax lily (*Dianella tasmanica*). The tayenebe website has considerable information on Tasmanian Aboriginal women's fibre work. Additionally in the ningina tunapri gallery several historic and contemporary baskets can be viewed.

*A Tasmanian Aboriginal woven basket is object 41 on the website 'Shaping Tasmania: a journey in 100 objects'.*

*Discussion:*

- Feel the difference between the shrink-wrapped specimen and the kelp object. What's happened to the kelp in the making of the object?
- What other things could you make with kelp? What are other uses of kelp?
- Tasmania has another type of kelp, giant kelp, that is one of the fastest growing plants in the world. It is mentioned in the *Tasmania: Earth and Life* exhibition. Why might this type of kelp not have been suitable for kelp carriers.

## Brighton Bypass protest

---



This image is of a protest at the site of the Brighton bypass road in 2011. The bypass, now built, crossed the Jordan River which was archaeologically surveyed in 2010 and revealed material dated to about 40 000 years, including Aboriginal stone tools and artefacts. This makes it one of the most significant sites in the nation. An area of the Jordan River Levee was listed on the National Heritage List on the 23 December 2011, the 98th place to be included.

The listing states:

*“After a century of being denied their identity, Tasmanian Aboriginal people reassert their Aboriginality through their cultural places that have indigenous heritage value. The Jordan River [Kutalayna] Levee site is important to Tasmanian Aboriginal people as the place and its stone artefacts provide a connection to their collective ancestors, to their way of living and to their traditional cultural practices that can be handed on to succeeding generations. The place is of outstanding heritage value to the nation because of its special cultural association with Tasmanian Aboriginal people and its exceptional symbolic importance arising from their collective defence of their identity in the face of the threats to their heritage.”*

The protest was about the protection of this important cultural site.

*Discussion:*

- What makes a place culturally significant?
- How should Tasmanians treat our Aboriginal heritage and cultural sites?
- What places would you protest to protect?
- What does placing a site on the 'National Heritage List' mean for that site's protection?