Preserving Southern Mornington Peninsula’s Coastal Middens Against Visitor Erosion

Alexandra-Rose Hackel-Calvi

Woodleigh School, Langwarrin South, Bunurong Country

As a proud Palawa woman, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we stand today – the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. I pay my respect to these custodians whose cultures are among the oldest living cultures in human history. I acknowledge that this land, that we live, work, and learn on, was, is, and always will be Aboriginal land.

And its land – Aboriginal land – that I’m going to talk about today.

Indigenous people connect deeply to the land as part of their culture; artefacts embedded into the landscape are significant to Indigenous people as they have survived colonisation, assimilation and degradation of the land and culture.

According to Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania, middens are ‘distinct concentrations of shell, bone, ash and charcoal.’ They are embedded into the layers of sand and dirt within dunes and cliff faces, which have been exposed due to natural or unnatural erosion. Along the Mornington Peninsula, Middens are places of significance that represent areas where indigenous people have visited, come together and shared meals and stories. Radiocarbon testing of these Middens by Mornington peninsula shire in 2018 suggested they were created between 900–3,500 years ago.

Every year, 5.2 million domestic visitors are spotted along the beaches and coasts along the Mornington peninsula. These numbers are forcing the environment to crumble under the immense impact of this saturation of people. I wanted to understand how these significant artefacts can be better protected from and by visitors for future generations.

From this, my research questions became: What protective methods are best suited to preserve the southern Mornington Peninsula’s coastal Middens from visitor erosion? My investigation aimed to explore the knowledge and awareness levels of Middens held by visitors to the southern Mornington Peninsula. From this, I explored the protective measures employed to mitigate erosion of these middens and indigenous perspectives on the importance of the Middens.

Now, middens are protected under The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984, which states that disturbing Aboriginal sites of significance is illegal. However, visitors to the Southern beaches of a Mornington Peninsula are ignorantly damaging these sites due to a lack of awareness and education.

To accurately understand the different perspectives, I conducted a three-stage investigation, a survey, interview, and site visit. A survey was distributed to local students as a convenience sample due to geographical proximity, as Creswell describes. The survey was anonymous and did not ask for age or gender as per the NHMRC when using data from individuals under 18. The survey needed a minimum confidence score of 60 participants to achieve a 95% confidence level. It was hypothesised that the general population lacked education surrounding Middens and how to care for them appropriately.

The aim was to respectfully collect expert knowledge to support the co-management approach. This became vital to exploring the existing tension in midden protection between current Parks Victoria practice and additional advice from Aboriginal Advisory bodies. Previously this co-management approach has been successfully used to manage the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, balancing viewpoints of both indigenous councils and government land managers. The interview was held with James Hackel, an indigenous Palawa man of Oyster Bay, Tasmania, and a previous employee of Parks Victoria with expert knowledge of the changing landscapes along the Mornington Peninsula.

This interview was unstructured as the responses drawn would be more organic and provide a more personal response, as well as give in-depth and straightforward answers to themes rather than specific questions, as stated by Creswell. Stage 3 of the method was a case study of the Port Nepean National Park and coastline; this generated evidence on how Parks Victoria is balancing the need for cultural protection and the pressures of the visitor economy. It also provided insight into the public’s actions towards the beach and coastal Middens.

Results from the survey suggested that the general population’s awareness of coastal Middens is insufficient to rely on visitor responsibility to protect and preserve Indigenous sites of significance.

65% of survey respondents did not know what a coastal midden was. 67% were unaware that Middens are culturally significant to Aboriginal peoples. 80% of respondents answered ‘no’ to the question ‘Are you are that Middens are protected under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Act?’

Research from the interview and survey reflects there is a huge lack of awareness, which is essential in protecting coastal Middens. Most visitors from the awareness survey have significant gap sin knowledge of Middens on the Mornington Peninsula.

The interview supported the survey results. James Jackel explains, ‘Where someone has constructed their own track, not sticking to the path, unknowingly they have exposed a Midden.’ He went on the mention that ‘This is a lot of the story of tourisms’ impact on coastal areas where tracks have been made and are causing ground disturbance just from the foot traffic.’

Now what can be implemented to address this issue? The use of signage as a protective measure was discussed during the survey, interview, and site visit. Signage is one of the management strategies that may be employed to help inform visitors of significant sites and deter them from these specific areas. Two types of signage were discussed: Explicit signage and suggestive signage.

The evidence from the interview and the survey shows that explicit signage as a protective management strategy is still a strongly debated measure. Supporting Nicken’s 1997 viewpoints that outlined that there are both positive and negative attributes to using explicit signage. A majority of the population surveyed believe signage should include:

* An overview of what Middens are
* The legalities
* And a map

Hackel discussed a contrasting perspective. He mentions that ‘While signage can provide visitors with the educative information on what Middens are and it is important that they are aware of the implications involved with disturbing coastal Middens. Introducing a map of where they are draws an incredible amount of unwanted attention to the sites and inevitability has the opposite effect that the signs were devised to do.’

Traditional owners also advise suggestive signage to deter visitation away from delicate sites. Instead of explicitly telling the visitors that sites are nearby, they’ll say ‘revegetation’ or ‘unstable cliff’. Hack agrees ‘that can be enough’ to keep visitors away from the sites. Although this method effectively protects the sites, it is clear from the survey results that there is a need and a want to educate the population on Middens and Indigenous culture, which should be considered when managing the protection of Midden sites.

There was another protection method also considered during the interview and site visit. Covering specific Midden sites that hold higher cultural value to the traditional owners has been employed in Port Nepean National Park. This process includes layers of geotextile fabric laid down the protect the Midden and trap soil and sand; then, rocks are placed against it at an angle. While this method is more expensive and laborious than signage, it is a highly effective way of protecting a cultural site.

Hackel explained, ‘For indigenous people, it’s not necessarily about seeing the site with their eyes; it’s about knowing that their culture is preserved for generations to come and that when they walk on this land, they are connected to their ancestors.’ This viewpoint reflects the research conducted by Dockery, which emphasises how indigenous Australians connect to their land and ancestry and, by doing so, can build a connected community.

As Hackel explained, ‘The management groups need to focus on the long-term perspective of the sites while balancing the needs of visitor tourism and indigenous cultural values.’

This research has revealed that there is a need to educate the public on coastal Middens as well as a need to provide appropriate protection management strategies, ensuring coastal Middens maintain their stability.

The most effective co-management strategy should combine Parks Victoria and the Bunurong Land Council for an ‘all in’ approach to educating visitors by leading indigenous voices to share the stories of the coast. The most preferred protective measure is explicit and suggestive signage, as it is the most cost-effective approach and is versatile for different environments.

The population of visitors on the Mornington Peninsula will continue to rise, and visitation access to the Southern Mornington Peninsula coasts will still need to be maintained.

A protection strategy must be developed as a diverse approach to balance visitor needs and indigenous values and culture while creasing visitor awareness with effective protective designs.

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