

## Earliest evidence of Aboriginal occupation of Australian coast discovered

*Archaeologists find artefacts in a cave on Western Australia's Barrow Island dating back more than 50,000 years, providing one of the earliest age brackets for the settlement of Australia*



*Boodie cave on Barrow Island, was used as a hunting shelter from as early as 50,000 years ago. Photograph: Peter Veth/James Cook University*

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Australia's earliest known site of human occupation of the Australian coast has been discovered in a remote cave in Western Australia, pushing back the start date of Indigenous occupation to more than 50,000 years ago.

Archaeologists led by the University of Western Australia found evidence of inhabitation on Barrow Island in the country's north west, discovering charcoal, animal remains and ancient artefacts that confirmed hunter-gatherer occupation.

Located 60 kilometres off the Pilbara coast, the Boodie cave on Barrow Island was cut off from the mainland roughly 7,000 years ago due to rising sea levels.

But researchers found the cave had been used as a hunting shelter from as early as 50,000 years ago, before becoming a residential base for groups of families from 10,000 years ago.

“This pushes back the age of occupation from the previous and more conservative limit of 47,000 years ago,” said lead archaeologist Peter Veth. “Even older dates are entirely plausible.”

The researchers said the site contained the longest record of dietary fauna in Australia. “Barrow Island provided rich records of ancient artefacts, gathering and hunting of marine and arid animals, and environmental signatures which show the use of a now-drowned coastal desert landscape,” said Veth.

“Particularly in the north west of Barrow Island there were rock shelters and deep chambers and caves where there were excellent and well-preserved remains ... we managed to piece together a picture of this extraordinary adaptation. The first evidence of Australians living on the coastline [and] the first Australians.”

“The cave was used predominately as a hunting shelter between about 50,000 and 30,000 years ago before becoming a residential base for family groups after 10,000 years ago. It was abandoned by about 7,000 years ago when rising sea levels finally cut it off from the mainland,” he said.

“Our current research at Barrow Island has provided the earliest evidence of coastal living in Australia. Remarkably the early colonists of the now-submerged North West Shelf did not turn their back on the sea or remain coastally tethered but rapidly adapted to the new marsupial animals and arid zone plants of the extensive maritime deserts of North West Australia.”

Published in the *Quaternary Science Review*, the research was assisted by the University of Queensland, the University of Adelaide, the University of Waikato and Oxford University, among others.

The team worked with four different international dating laboratories and was supported by the Buurabalayji Thalanyji Aboriginal corporation and Kuruma Marthudunera Aboriginal corporation.