

The Permanence of Impermanence: Mapping the Indigenous Campsites (Humpy) on Arabana Country, South Australia

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Introduction

Humpy, commonly known as “wurlley” or “gunyah”, is a form of Indigenous dwelling. While it is widely established that humpy were used by past Indigenous communities during hot dry season or for shelter while travelling (see for example Sutton and Walshe, 2021); historical and Indigenous architecture records had indicated that this form of dwelling, on the other hand, represents an expression of a complex relationship between the Indigenous communities and their spiritual, physical and social environment in 19th-20th century Australia (Berndt, 1940; Builth, 2000; Memmott, 2007). This poster presents the preliminary data collected from two Indigenous humpy campsites in Edward Creek and Mount Dutton, along the Oodnadatta Track, on Arabana Country (far north South Australia) (Figure 1). The Project, co-led by Arabana Aboriginal Corporation (AAC), Arabana Rangers and BHP Copper South Australia (CuSA), aims to:

- produce a thorough record of Mount Dutton and Edward Creek Indigenous campsites through archaeological mapping and detailed 3D-Modelling, and
- further examine the relationship between these campsites and its evolving sociocultural landscape, during the post-European contact era.

The material presents here are based on two short field trips conducted between July and November 2024 at Edward Creek and Mount Dutton. At least 18 (predominantly domed-shape) humpies made of mulga wood, associated artefacts and other domiciliary features (i.e. fire pit) were recorded across two campsites.



Figure 1: Location of William Creek, along Oodnadatta Track, on Arabana Country (Map courtesy: G. Burgess)

Edward Creek and Mount Dutton Indigenous Campsites: Background, Location and Historical Context

Edward Creek is approximately 60km north of the rural town of William Creek, while Mount Dutton is approximately 60km north of Edward Creek. Both sites are located along the renowned Oodnadatta Track, in far north South Australia. Historically, Oodnadatta track was a part of early pastoral corridor established in mid-1800s (Nettelbeck et al. 2024). Oodnadatta Track later became the major transport and communications corridor for the Overland Telegraph Line and the Central Australian Railway (also known as Old Ghan) between 1870s and 1980. By mid-late 1800s, telegram stations, railway sidings and ration depots were mushrooming along the Oodnadatta track and its surrounding region (McCarthy et al. 2001).

The flourishing of inland far north, however, had placed enormous pressure on the local Arabana community. The widespread occupation of land for economic activities had limited the access of Arabana people to their Country. The expansion of pastoral activities had increased the reliance of Arabana people on European supplies as the extensive grazing activities made it challenging for the Indigenous community to survive entirely on a traditional subsistence economy (see for example Foster, 2000). Added to these stress was the Great Drought that sustained for half a decade during the 1860s. As a result, a series of “semi-sedentary” Indigenous camps began to establish on the fringes of sidings and pastoral stations to maintain access to water, supplies, rations, services or employment at pastoral stations (Nettelbeck et al, 2024; A. Stuart, per. coms, 27 Jul 2024; J. Warren, per. coms, 30 Oct 2024). The “semi-sedentary” camp community, in this context, refers to a camp community who maintain their traditional lifeways (i.e. language and spiritual belief) while partially dependent on European socio-economy system (see Memmott, 2007).

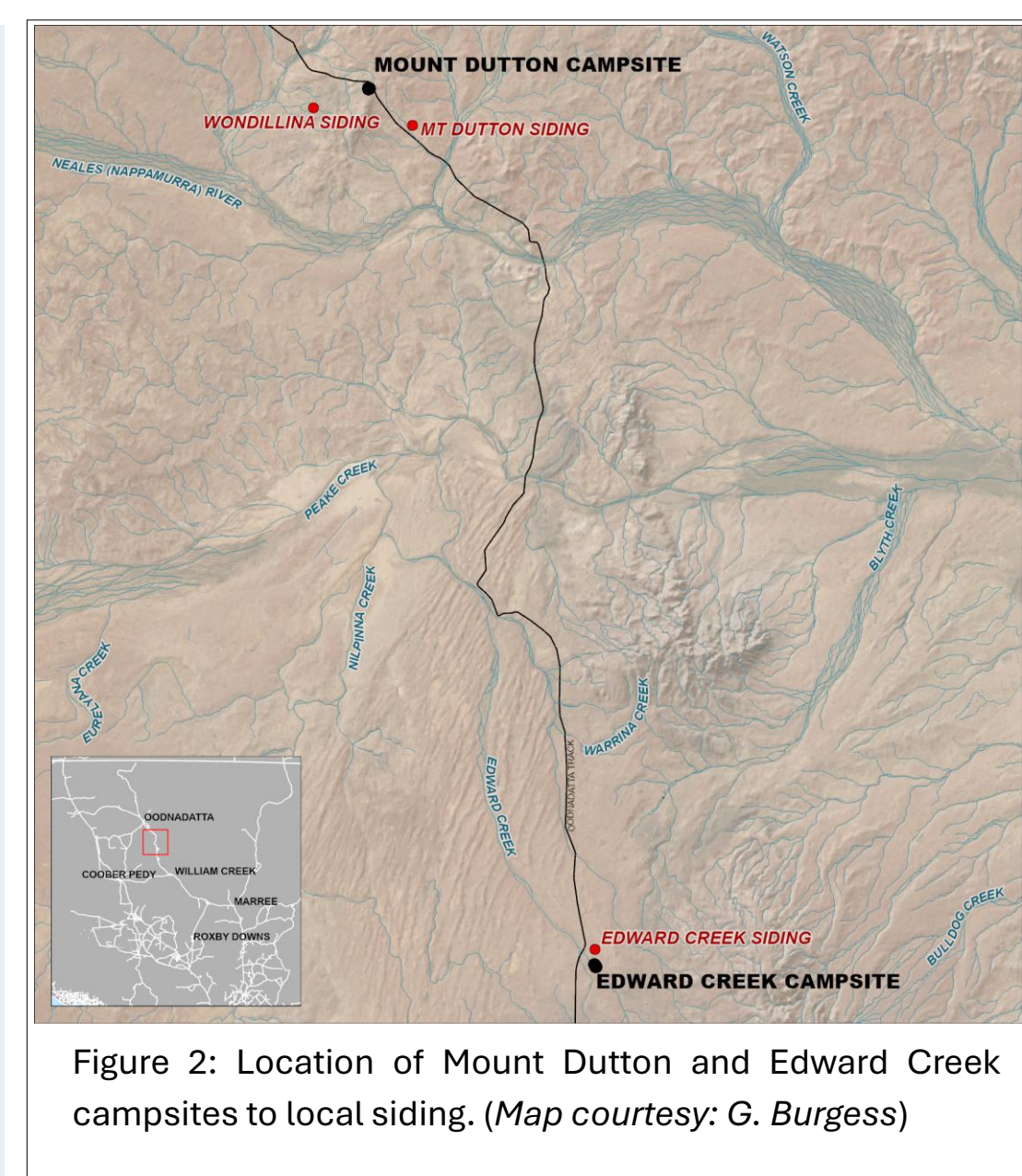
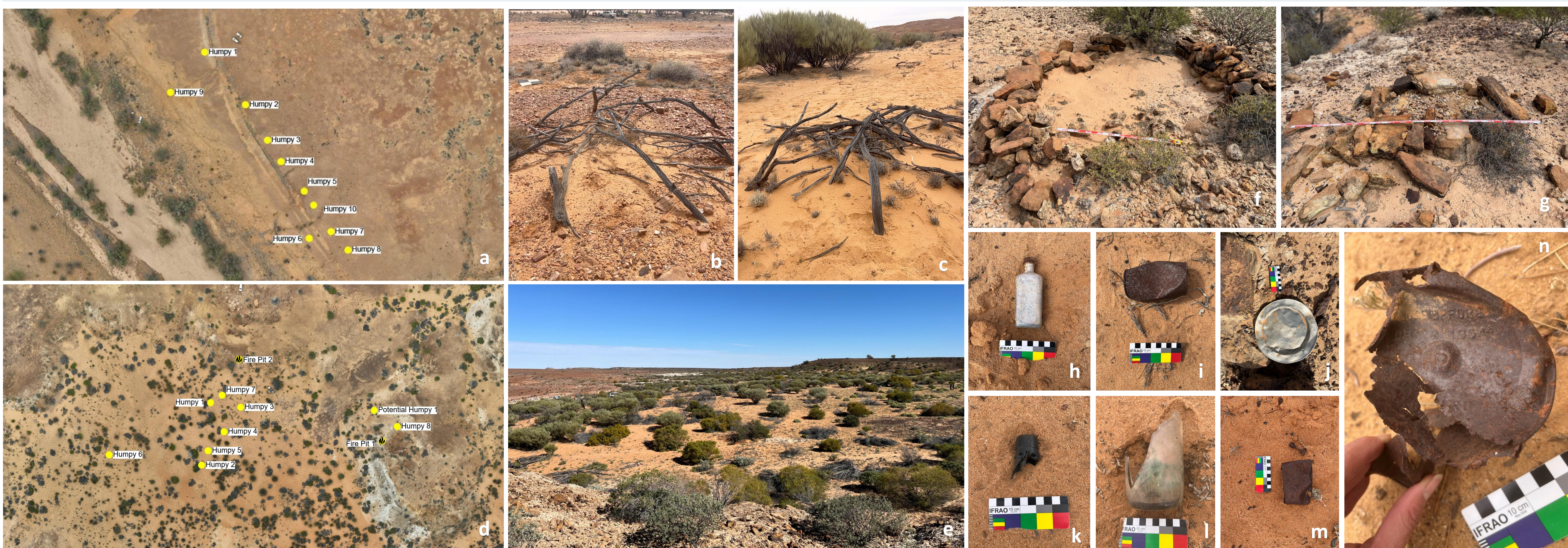


Figure 2: Location of Mount Dutton and Edward Creek campsites to local siding. (Map courtesy: G. Burgess)

Edward Creek and Mount Dutton: Preliminary Survey Outcome

The Edward Creek Campsite was established on a lowland gibber plain next to Edward Creek. It is located approximately 1km to the south of Edward Creek Siding (built in 1889) (Figure 2). The preliminary surveys recorded at least 10 domed-shape humpies built on circular stone structures with a diameter range between 2.9 and 3.1 metres (Photo a). The humpies of Edward Creek were made of sawn mulga wood and were constructed in a dome form by implanting the stems of branches in a roughly circular floorplan. Of 10, only two humpies maintain their structural integrity to date (Photo b & c).

The Mount Dutton Campsite was established on the lowly elevated sandhill at the foothill of Mount Dutton. It is located approximately 3km northwest of Mount Dutton Siding and surrounded by chain of six mound springs (~5km radius) (Figure 2, Photo d & e). The preliminary surveys recorded at least eight domed-shape humpies made of sawn mulga wood with a diameter range between 3 and 3.4 metres (Photo f). Of eight, seven were built on sand dune and another one was built on a circular stone structure (Photo f). This campsite demonstrates a more complex domiciliary arrangement compared to the Edward Creek campsite, with the presence of some additional ancillary structures such as fire pit (Photo g) and wind break (elevated low-stone wall) (Photo f). Surface artefacts predominantly consist of historical artefacts such as tin can of various sizes and shapes, glass bottles, square cut nails, screw bottle cap and tin plate (Photo h - n). Stone artefacts including flake tool and core made of chert and quartzite were also recorded at Mount Dutton.



Summary and Discussion

The architecture and domiciliary characteristics of the campsites at both Edward Creek and Mount Dutton are closely attributed to the Indigenous campsites recorded across Central Arid Australia (see Berndt, 1940; Memmott, 2007). Tindale (1972) previously indicated that the presence of water and firewood, great visibility and sandy ground are among the factors that influenced the campsite location across the arid zone. Both Edward Creek and Mount Dutton seem to offer those domiciliary qualities. The antiquity of these humpies is yet to be scientifically determined, but early assessment based on the surface artefacts, anecdotal account and published evidence all suggested that these camps were likely constructed in early - mid 20th century, during the booming of Oodnadatta Track as the main service thoroughfare (rail and telegram) between South Australia and Darwin (1872-1960). In summary, this study provides an opportunity to explore the early Indigenous lifeways on Arabana Country and it strongly illustrates the resilience and adaptability of past Arabana communities in response to the marked transformation of sociocultural landscape in post-European contact era. While humpies were widely identified as temporary dwelling, these structures, however, represent a permanent record of sociocultural interaction between the Arabana people and their evolving Country over the past century. To date, this project has produced a baseline archaeological record and a detailed 3D model for Edward Creek and Mt Dutton humpy campsites. Future study will involve an archaeological science programme in partnership with AAC and Arabana Rangers.

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