Archaeological Excavation Guidelines
Guideline Document

Report prepared for Department of Defence
February 2012
Report Register

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1.0 Archaeological Excavation Guidelines

1.1 Preamble

The Department of Defence (Defence) is committed to protecting its heritage places and conserving their heritage values. Among those places with heritage values are archaeological sites, deposits and remains that comprise the archaeological resource of the history and occupation of a place.

Archaeological investigation, by its nature, is a destructive process and has the potential to cause a significant environmental impact. It therefore warrants careful assessment prior to approval and implementation.

Archaeological excavation is not a preferred approach for Defence in managing or investigating its heritage sites.

In cases where a Defence development would result in the destruction of an archaeological site, the need for archaeological excavation may be warranted, as this may be the only way the heritage values can be adequately managed. In these instances it may be necessary to consider the approval of an archaeological excavation.

In most cases regarding development proposals, the management of matters related to excavation would be set out as part of any impact assessment process. The principles and guidance set out here may assist these considerations.

Generally Defence does not allow archaeological sites on the Defence estate to be excavated solely for research purposes.

1.2 Defence General Guidelines on Archaeological Excavation

Guideline 1—Defence is committed to managing heritage values on its estate, including the archaeological record of the past

Protecting heritage values is part of Defence’s obligations under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act).

Defence will ensure that all Defence heritage and environmental personnel have an understanding that some areas of the Defence Estate may contain archaeological sites, or may be areas of archaeological potential. Any archaeological sites or areas of archaeological potential may have heritage values that need to be managed. Generally these sites are managed by way of avoiding their disturbance and managing threatening processes, such as erosion. Defence manages heritage values through its environmental management system. This includes policies, processes and procedures covering heritage related planning and works activities.

Reference:

Defence Heritage Strategy “From a Proud Past to A Better Future”, Department of Defence.

Guideline 2—The archaeological record on Defence sites is not to be disturbed through unnecessary excavation activities

Defence adopts a ‘principle of conservation’ in regard to the archaeological record.
Defence will conserve the archaeological record through avoiding archaeological excavation, except where it is unavoidable through Defence business and/or in the National interest.

Unnecessary excavations do not comply with Defence Guidelines.

Reference:

The Burra Charter: Article 2: Places of Cultural significance should be conserved; and Article 28.1: Disturbance of fabric should be minimised.²

Guideline 3—Proponents for Defence estate developments and others conducting activities on a Defence estate will avoid significant impacts to archaeological sites by undertaking relevant Defence environmental impact assessments

Development proposals should be assessed for their archaeological values through Defence’s heritage impact assessment processes, in conjunction with assessments for impacts against other heritage values.

Reference:

The Burra Charter, Articles 6 and 26: Burra Charter Process: Assess and understand significance first.²

1.3 Guidelines for Managing Excavations

Guideline 4—Defence environmental impact assessment related policies and procedures will guide the planning and management of Defence activities, including developments which have the potential to impact known archaeological sites or areas of archaeological potential

Where development is proposed, all prudent and feasible alternatives to disturbing an archaeological site will be explored prior to any approvals being given.

Approval for disturbance to an archaeological site will only be given where there are no alternative options. As a last resort, development disturbance to an archaeological site will be preceded by an archaeological salvage excavation. Environmental impact assessment processes, as set out in DI(G) 40_3 and related environmental clearance conditions, will be applied to the management of archaeological sites.

Management of the archaeological record will be through a process of conservation and planned management policies.

Reference:

The Burra Charter Article 3: Cautious Approach.²

Guideline 5—Defence implements a three-tiered approach to managing and investigating the archaeological record

Areas assessed as having significant archaeological deposits, or having the potential for significant archaeological deposits, should be managed through the following preferred conservation management options:

1) Avoidance of impacts through the development of alternative approaches. This process includes redesigning a development such that areas assessed as having significant
archaeological deposits, or the potential for significant archeological deposits, are avoided and conserved in situ.

2) Test excavation to establish the nature and extent of the archaeological resource with a view to making alterations to the development proposal to avoid impacts.

A proposal to implement an archaeological test excavation should be established when an assessment (Guideline 4) demonstrates that sub-surface archaeological remains (of significance) have a high probability of being present in a proposed development area, and the area cannot be substantially avoided by the proposed activity (Guideline 5.1).

A test excavation program should be established with a view to determining the nature and extent of the archaeological area, its significance and the likelihood of further remediation/mitigation measures.

The first priority in test excavations must always be to avoid or minimise, as far as practicable, the risk of damage or disturbance to the archaeological deposits under investigation. This means due care must be taken when excavating and recording a site and collecting artefacts.

3) Salvage excavation to retrieve the information that is held within the archaeological site (the embodied heritage value).

As a last resort, where alternative development designs cannot be established to avoid impacts (as required in Guideline 4), the archaeological site should be excavated to salvage its embodied heritage values.

Guideline 6—Impact assessment processes will include the requirement for a detailed Research Design to accompany proposals to excavate sites with known significant archaeology

A comprehensive ‘Research Design’ must be prepared as a pre-condition for the approval of an archaeological excavation. This applies to test excavation and salvage excavations.

A Research Design will outline the purpose of the proposed excavation works, their potential or suspected heritage values context, and the methodology.

A Research Design will specifically include:

- background research into the context of the archaeological values and likely significance of the site;
- a statement of the purpose of the excavation work;
- the proposed conservation/research framework that will capture information relating to the embodied heritage values;
- evidence of consultation with relevant stakeholders;
- methodology for investigation;
- provisions for artefacts analysis and reporting; and
- provision for artefact curation and storage.
A Research Design will be prepared based on the best available information about the site and its significance. The Research Design will take account of any Heritage Management Plans, methods for site investigation and detailed description of how the soils and materials from the excavation are to be managed.

Research Designs need to be formulated with an approach and methodology that is appropriate to the proposed investigation and appropriate to the significance of the site. For example, a research design for a test excavation should not be formulated to achieve the outcomes of a salvage operation.

Defence needs to ensure that Research Designs are assessed with a view to understanding the research benefit of the archaeological work, and that the methods and approaches are appropriate for the intended outcomes of the proposal.

Reference:

DECCW—Code of Practice for Archaeological Investigation for Aboriginal Objects in NSW.3
Aboriginal Affairs Victoria—Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006, Practice Note: Subsurface Testing.4

Guideline 7—Defence aims to comply with state, territory and local government environmental legislation and requirements to the extent that these do not conflict with Commonwealth legislative obligations

As appropriate, archaeological investigations will be undertaken with reference to, and in accordance with, state, territory and local government requirements and practices.

Reference:

Department of Defence

Guideline 8—Defence engages appropriately experienced/qualified people to undertake archaeological site assessments and investigations

Archaeological investigations (both assessment and excavation) are to be conducted only by qualified archaeologists. Defence will ensure that archaeologists are familiar with the provisions of the relevant heritage legislation and policy documents.

Archaeologists are to be engaged from the Defence Environment and Heritage Panel for relevant category of service provision.

Reference:

AACAI Code of Ethics5
The Burra Charter: Article 4: Knowledge, skills and techniques, and;
DECCW—Code of Practice for Archaeological Investigation for Aboriginal Objects in NSW
Aboriginal Affairs Victoria—Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006, Practice Note: Subsurface Testing

Guideline 9—All proposals for archaeological investigations (assessment and excavation) will be accompanied by complete and relevant consultation with stakeholders and community

Where Indigenous cultural heritage values are to be assessed, appoint appropriately qualified people to undertake culturally sensitive community consultation at all stages of the project.
Consultation methods employed should be relevant to the local community and should follow the principles of the Ask First: A guide to respecting Indigenous heritage places and values guidelines. Relevant stakeholders should be identified through appropriate enquiry (in the case of Indigenous community consultation this may require a public notice in media).

Sufficient time should be allocated to assess projects to ensure that adequate amounts of consultation can be undertaken.

Reference:
Australian Heritage Commission 2002, Ask First, A guide to respecting Indigenous heritage places and values.
DECCW—Code of Practice for Archaeological Investigation for Aboriginal Objects in NSW.
Aboriginal Affairs Victoria—Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006, Practice Note: Subsurface Testing.

Guideline 10—Artefact curation and storage will be a consideration in the environmental impact assessment processes and where possible should favour the retention of artefacts on the site

The Research Design will need to make provisions for the treatment of any found artefacts after they have been analysed and reported on. This may include their collection, curation and storage. The responsibility for the curation and storage of artefacts will reside with the Defence service, or area, responsible for the excavation.

Defence’s preferred position is for artefacts to be retained on site and to be incorporated into site specific interpretation and presentation where possible and appropriate.

Artefacts are part of the remains of the archaeological site and therefore may embody some of the heritage significance of that site. Therefore the artefacts from an excavated site may have heritage values that warrant conservation.

Appropriate storage and curation methods should be applied to collections of post-excavation artefacts. Where artefacts are Indigenous, post-excavation requirements should take into account the views of the local Indigenous community in regard to the curation and storage of artefacts. This may include the need to address means of Indigenous access, where appropriate, to any stored artefacts.

Reference:
Australian Archaeological Association Code of Ethics’ Principle 2.4—repatriation.
The Burra Charter, Article 33: Removed Fabric

Guideline 11—All archaeological investigations are to be accurately recorded with the appropriate levels of documentation

All stages of the archaeological process—assessment, consultation, Research Design, excavation fieldwork, and results and artefact analysis—should be adequately documented and reported, including provision of plain English reports to Indigenous stakeholders, with copies to relevant authorities (eg the Commonwealth Department responsible for the EPBC Act).

Relevant report writing and documentation standards can be found in standards and guidelines such as:
- DECCW—Code of Practice for Archaeological Investigation for Aboriginal Objects in NSW.
- Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Standards and Guidelines Kit 1997—NPWS

Reference:

The Burra Charter: Article 31: Documenting evidence and decision making, and;
Article 32: Record keeping

DECCW—Code of Practice for Archaeological Investigation for Aboriginal Objects in NSW.

1.4 Endnotes

1 Defence Heritage Strategy “From a Proud Past to A Better Future”, Department of Defence.
4 Aboriginal Affairs Victoria (DATE) Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006, Practice Note: Subsurface Testing. Guideline published by the Department of Planning and Community Development (Victoria).
6 Australian Heritage Commission 2002, Ask First, A guide to respecting Indigenous heritage places and values.
8 NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service 1997 Standards and Guidelines Kit. Published by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service.