

Shell Middens
The Beaches Conference
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Moderator: Abigail Lyon, Piscataqua Region Estuary Partnership

Note Taker: Abigail Lyon, Piscataqua Region Estuaries Partnership and Linda Littlefield
Grenfell, Wells Reserve

- Middens preserve 4,000 years of cultural record
- Indigenous & European components
 - Examples of mixing cultures
- Paleoenvironmental records
- “You can be a part of an effort to provide information to prioritize protection & education about these invaluable resources” – Alice Kelley
- Shell middens provide nutrients to buffer against acidic soils to preserve bones.
- Clam shell growth captures storm data (paleotemperature records)
- Using middens to study bluff erosion. Difficult to anticipate when shell middens will erode because there is no average for bluff erosion. Instead the erosion is often episodic.
- “Shell middens are a window into an ancestral past.” Chris S.
- Some shell middens are indigenous burial sites. Learning about burial practices within shell middens including that adults are buried with stone tools and children have been buried with bone tools.

Shell Middens

There are/have been over 2000 shell middens on the ME coast, up to 4000 years of human history remembered. Shell middens are the 'refuse' from centuries of humans gathering and tossing the shells, and other things, from food sources. According to Arthur Spies, some of the shell middens are small, less than 1/4 acre, and layers of shells. They would have been next to campsites, on beaches, and have cobbles and sand mixed in. Some are less than 18 feet, but the biggest one is Whaleback Midden in Damariscotta, which has been extensively studied.

There are middens on the York River. A man named Henry Mercer studied the middens on the York River in the 1800's. but his collection is lost.

Joe Kelly talked about bluff erosion, and the rapid loss of the middens, since they are bluffs. Chris Sockalexis, the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Penobscot People, referenced middens as exhibits of burial patterns. Bone tools have been found buried with children, and stone tools with adults; why is this? The tools have been found in the middens, and Chris is respectful of the ancestors. The tools were (and are) made from stone from Mt. Kineo, a sacred site for native peoples. Chris references Wananaki history before "gods, guns, and germs".

Q&A

- Curious about the location of middens. Did indigenous people return to these sites seasonally?

- o Art: archeological perspective that these were “designated” campsites. Used for a while, abandoned, and then people returned years later.
 - o Chris: we are still trying to determine/gain an understanding of the potential seasonality of these sites for indigenous people
- Looting – mention of the laws at the state and federal levels that protect against looting
- Alice mentioned that the database the Maine Midden Minders (MMM) is using is designed specifically to keep information confidential so as to not contribute to additional looting.
- A participant asked how they become a MMM. Alice directed the volunteer and the audience to the website which includes the information needed.
- Question about getting access to the wealth of data imbedded in the shells in the middens.
 - o Art noted that in order to have this data we need museum quality storage. Then to access the data you’d work with the facility who is storing the shells and artifacts, etc.
- What are some of the mitigation strategies for protecting the middens?
 - o Most of them (re: all) are short term strategies for protecting against erosion.
 - o Push to prioritize sites and do archeological digs to preserve and collect data where possible before we lose the middens
 - o Drains from landward side to keep runoff from further eroding sites – temporary, otherwise you need a hardened structure (wall) that has other negative impacts.
 - o We can’t save them all.