

Recording the Indigenous Maritime Cultural Landscape and Seascape in Saipan

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Background

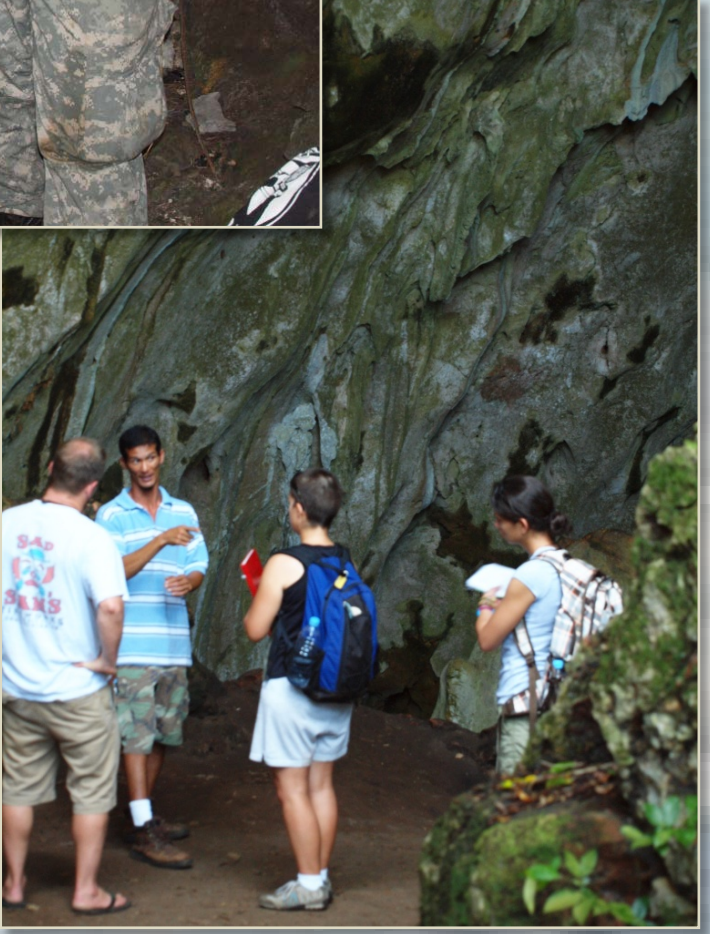
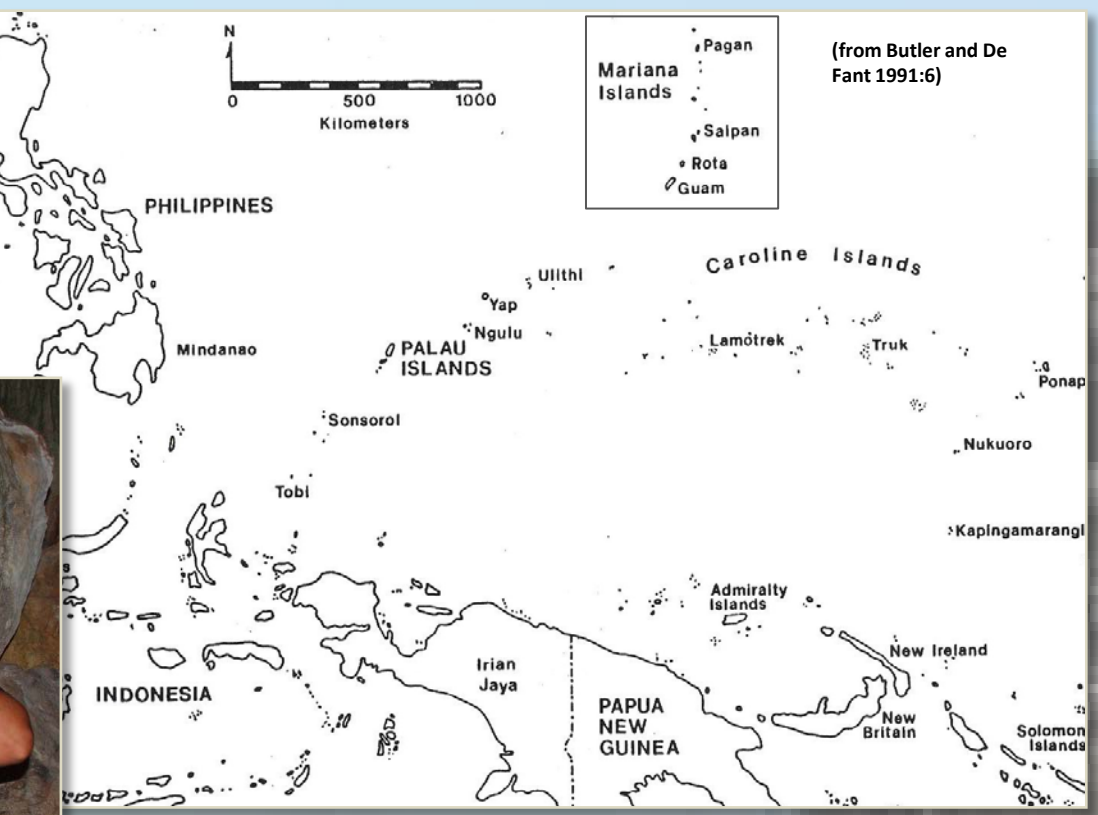
Saipan (Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands) has an extensive seascape history. The first group of people to populate the island, the Chamorro, possessed both the skills to build ocean-going watercraft and the knowledge of seafaring. For the first 2,000 years Chamorro communities lived exclusively in settlements at coastal sites and nearly every endeavour involved interaction with water. The sea was an important part of economic and social life and their main source of food came from catching pelagic, inshore fishes, crabs and clams by netting, spear fishing, and constructing fish traps. The sea also influenced village and settlement patterns set up on a hierarchical system where by coastal groups were of higher status. Chamorro people have also had a long history of contact with Carolinian people who sailed to and settled on Saipan in the 1800s. Carolinians have an extensive connection with the sea having their own traditions of seafaring and watercraft construction.

Seascape approaches view the sea as connective rather than divisive and recognise the sea as part of forming social and cultural identity. Studying seascapes can help describe the relationship people have with the sea, how the sea influences culture and how it can be manipulated into a cultural space. Seascape studies have largely focussed on Indigenous interaction with water and the sea, in contrast to maritime cultural landscape studies which primarily focus on historical, Western heritage. Maritime cultural landscape studies investigate the combination of terrestrial and underwater heritage related to maritime activities. This approach erases the artificial boundary at the water’s edge to look at maritime culture in a more holistic way. This project borrows concepts and methods from both approaches to investigate the Indigenous maritime heritage of Saipan.

If you were to break it down into western and local perspective you’d say oceans divide, but for us oceans unite. You say typhoons are devastations, yes it is devastation, but it’s also a blessing for us. Without those storms we wouldn’t get our fair shares of our [fish] runs, our oceans will not shift, provide us with our annual [fish] runs
Herman Tudela - 2011

The Project

Many Chamorro and Carolinian people feel that their maritime heritage is being impacted by human and natural interference. Thus, the more oral stories and traditions that can be recorded for future generations to read, the better. The goal of this project is to work with the community of Saipan to record their heritage and explain their long standing relationship with the sea. Historical, ethnographic and archaeological data is being recorded to understand the maritime cultural landscape and seascape of Saipan. Two field seasons (2010 and 2011) have focussed on this effort and the results, although preliminary, demonstrate a longstanding and strong connection with the sea and varied related sites and material culture.



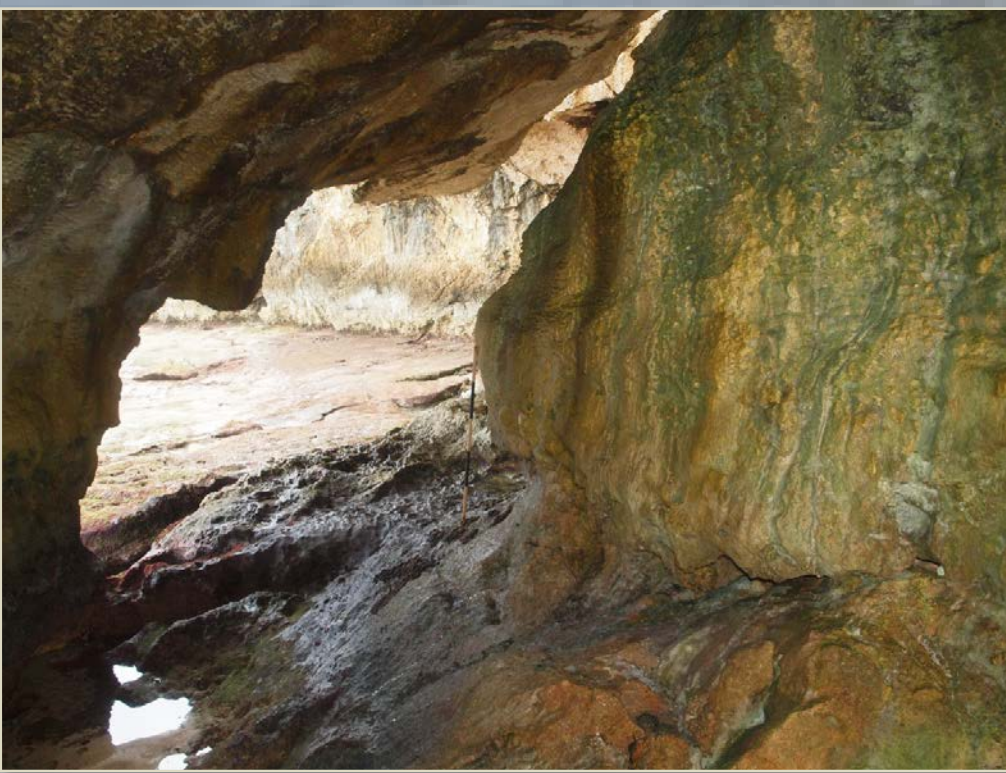
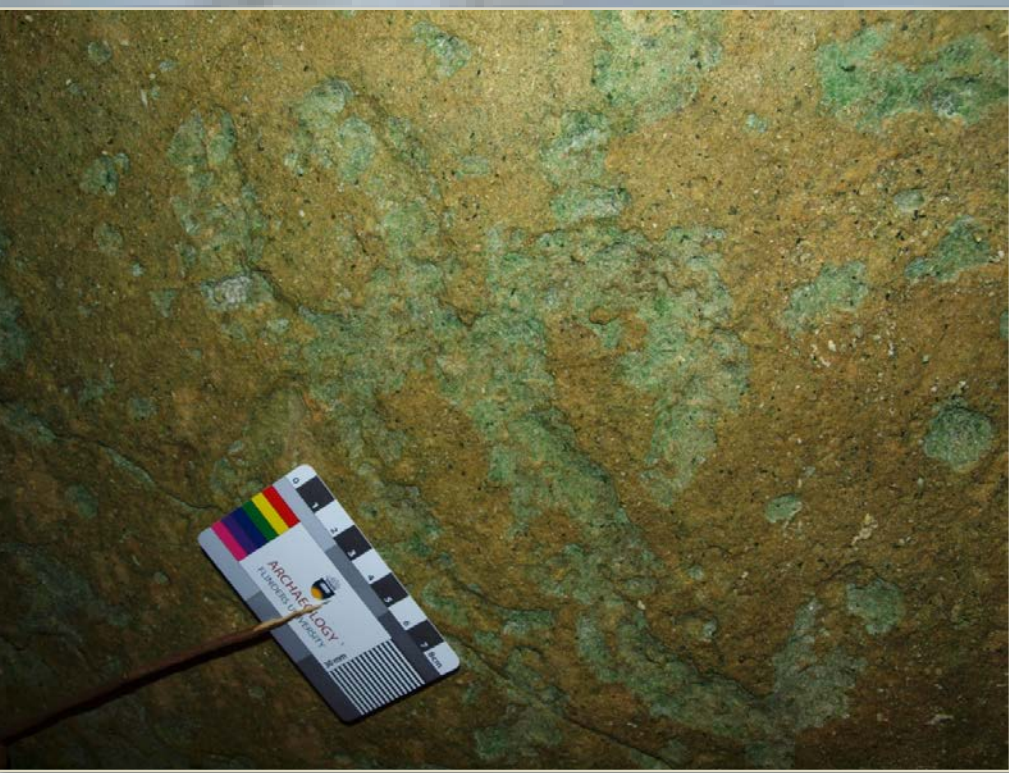
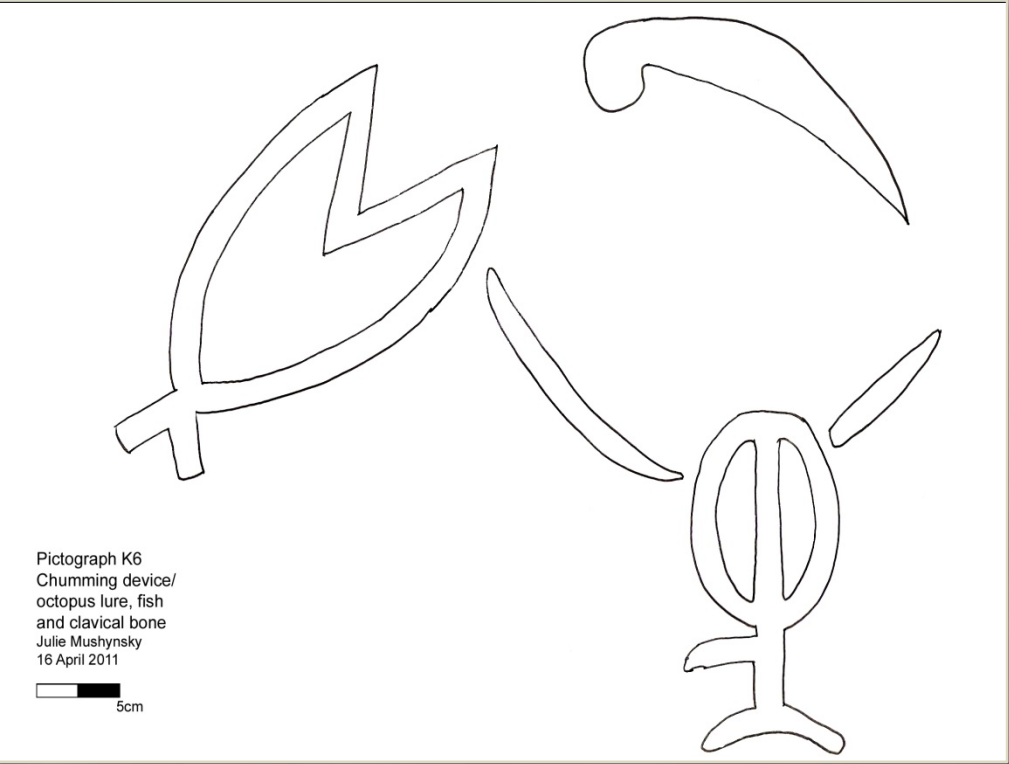
Many Chamorro feel that the more information pertaining to Indigenous culture that can be put down on paper for young people to read, the better
Genevieve Cabrera - 2011

Community Archaeology

Communication and consultation between community members and archaeologists occurred at all stages of research. During fieldwork, Indigenous researchers identified sites significant to them and decided which sites should be archaeologically recorded. Collaboratively, sites were recorded, photographed and mapped. This joint effort allowed for sites of importance and value to the community to be clearly identified and their significance to be recorded.

Preliminary Results

Tangible and intangible links of Indigenous relationships with the sea are demonstrated through a number of types of heritage including: fish traps, caves with rock art depicting maritime themes, canoe access points, ancient coastal latte sites, Indigenous fishing locations, oral traditions and a number of navigational features in the island’s topography. Researchers were able to establish continuity, demonstrating how the past seascape still manifests itself today in fishing practices, rituals and issues surrounding sea tenure.



Traditional Carolinian watercraft

“Chumming device, fish and clavicle bone” rock paintings in Kalabera Cave

Navigational features in topography

Maritime themed petroglyphs

Possible fish weir in Laulau Bay

Latte pillar at Unai Bapot Latte Site

Sagua (channel/canoe track) in Laulau Bay

“Netting site”

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