



# Geoarchaeology and the archaeological record in the coastal Moreton Region, Queensland, Australia



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## ABSTRACT

Some 30 years of intensive archaeological research in coastal southeast Queensland and northern New South Wales have produced a large database of dated sites recording over at least 20,000 years of Aboriginal occupation. This database, and in particular the spatio-temporal distribution of dated sites, has been employed somewhat uncritically as a representative sample to support various interpretive models of cultural change in the region. However, as little attention has been paid to the substantial sample biases inherent in this important record such interpretive arguments remain rather speculative scenarios. This paper identifies and explicates critical issues relating to the use of such data in constructing models of cultural change in this region via three case studies and closes with an appeal for consideration of these in future research.

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## 1. Introduction

Over 30 years of archaeological research in coastal southeast Queensland and northern New South Wales produced one of the most intensively investigated regions in Australia. Excavation and dating of some 43 sites has established an Aboriginal occupation history extending back at least 20,000 years for the mainland coast and offshore islands between the northern tip of Bribie Island and the mouth of the Tweed River (Fig. 1). This result is largely attributable to two factors. The first was the introduction of state legislation in 1967 requiring investigation and mandatory public reporting of indigenous archaeological site discovery and any survey and excavation results. The second was the introduction in 1976 of archaeology courses and attendant research at The University of Queensland. The combination of university research projects and state government heritage oversight rapidly achieved a large database of recorded and excavated sites from which a geographical and temporal framework of regional Aboriginal occupation could be generated.

Currently, the 43 excavated sites are represented by 101 dates (Ulm and Reid, 2000; Ulm et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2014) and,

and as Fig. 2 indicates, this record is heavily skewed to the late Holocene. In some instances, and particularly for offshore islands, a number of constructive interpretations at a site or local level were generated (e.g. Hall, 1980a, 1984; Alfredson, 1983; Robins, 1983; Hall and Robins, 1984; Richardson, 1984; Hall and Lilley, 1987; Bowen, 1989). This data set and associated local interpretations have also been fed into broader regional and even continent-wide syntheses attempting to explain putative chronological change in the archaeological record, particularly through the mid-to-late Holocene (Ulm, 2011, 2012). For southeast Queensland, a perceived increase in the number of sites over time (see Fig. 2) has been inferred variously as: a result of increasing population (Walters, 1986; Morwood, 1987); increased use of more marginal environments (Morwood, 1987) including an establishment of new territories on Moreton Bay islands (Walters, 1986, 1989); increasing social complexity (Walters, 1986, 1992; Morwood, 1987); the introduction of new artefact types and stone artefact technologies (Morwood, 1987); and the late development of specialised fishing technologies (Walters, 1986, 1992). The bases for these broader regional interpretations have been challenged on a number of methodological grounds including environmental/geomorphic evidence (Hall and Lilley, 1987; David and Chant, 1995; Neil, 1998), taphonomic factors (Ulm, 2002; Ross and Tompkins, 2011), excavation strategies (Ulm, 2002:91), recovery techniques (Ross and Duffy, 2000) and analytical methods (Ulm, 2002:92). While all

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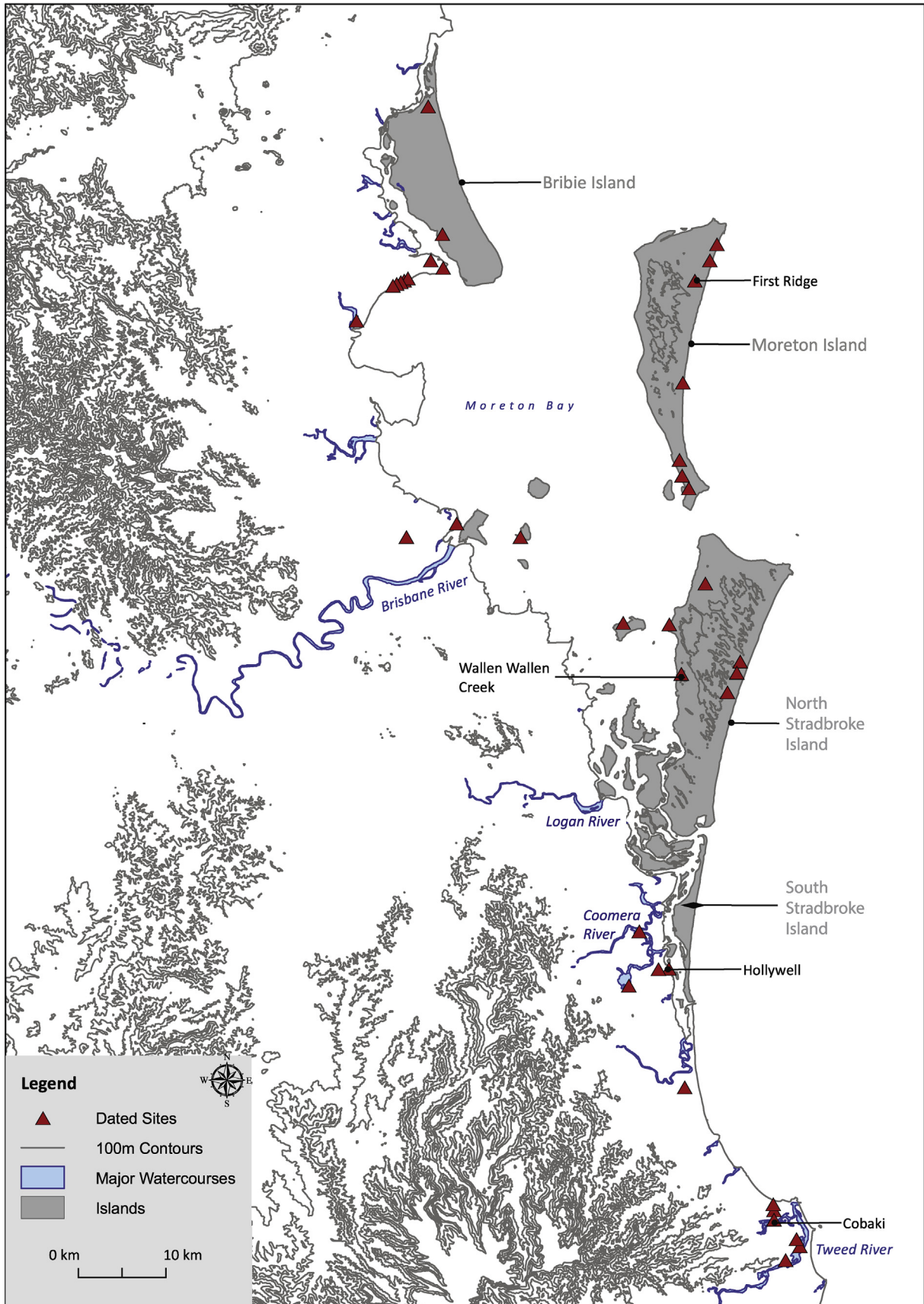


Fig. 1. Study area indicating dated archaeological sites and case study locations.

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