

Shell Middens

Ancient Village and Camp Sites

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Throughout British Columbia, there are tens of thousands of locations where old village or camp sites are located.

The evidence of ancient settlements is found on the coast in the form of middens or ancient refuse heaps. Middens reveal, layer upon layer, the discarded remains of activities that happened over hundreds or thousands of years. They are called shell middens because a visible feature is the mollusc shells – clams, oysters and mussels – discarded from numerous human meals. Some shell middens are over three metres deep and hundreds of metres long. However, most middens are only about 30 to 80 centimetres deep and about 30 by 10 metres in size.



Close-up of a shell midden.

Acid soils cause the disintegration of organic material such as bone and antler. When shells are added to human garbage piles, the calcium carbonate (lime) in them neutralizes acid soils. This results in the shell middens becoming special places, where plant remains and artifacts made of organic material, can be preserved.

By preserving evidence of past activities, a shell midden serves as a valuable source of information on the environment and the way of life of people over thousands of years.