



THE DIGGING STICK

Volume 18, No 1

ISSN 1013-7521

April 2001

TANDJESBERG

San rock painting rehabilitation project: from catastrophe to celebration

David Morris*, Sven Ouzman[†] and Gabriel Tlhapi[†]

Tandjesberg, an eastern Free State San rock painting site, has arisen, literally, from the ashes. Disaster had struck on 5 September 1998 when a run-away veld fire swept up-slope towards Tandjesberg and its more than 530 exquisite rock paintings. The inferno engulfed the trees surrounding the rock shelter and then the wooden boardwalk inside the site. In the intense heat a massive 1.9 x 1.6 m painted panel, weakened by leached calcite, crashed face-down onto the shelter floor. Other painted panels were 'blistered' and fractured by the blaze. The remaining paintings were blackened by soot.

But all was not lost. Two and a half years on, the site has been fully rehabilitated and, on 3 March 2001 Tandjesberg was happily re-opened for public visitation. Pioneering rehabilitation and conservation efforts had drawn on the help and expertise of a wide cross-section of specialists and volunteers over



Mario Mahongo of the !Xun and Khwe community declares Tandjesberg open (above); with Sven Ouzman and Zeka Shiwarra (below)



Project co-ordinator Sven Ouzman gave an overview of the work, paying tribute to those associated with Tandjesberg, past

the previous 30 months. Funding was forthcoming from several generous sources. The opening ceremony was dedicated to the memory of the late Angelo Liguori, site custodian from 1941 until his death in 2000. The re-opening was marked by the cutting of a 'ribbon' of grass twine performed by Dominee Mario Mahongo, a leader of the !Xun and Khwe community at Schmidts-drift in the Northern Cape, and representing descendants of San people of the subcontinent.

"We as the San of Southern Africa appreciate this work, which preserves our history and our culture, through these paintings, for the generations who may yet come," Mahongo said. He was accompanied by Zeka Shiwarra and Henne Swart, also from Schmidtsdrift.

and present. Situated near Ladybrand in the eastern Free State, the shelter contains an extraordinary wealth of paintings, and



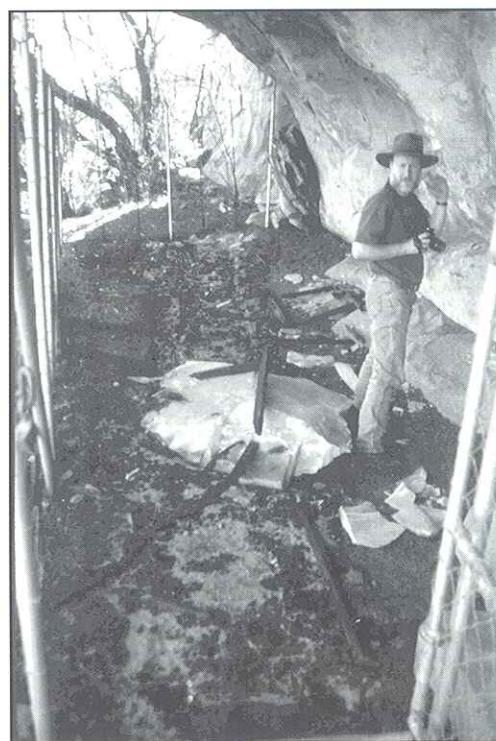
Tandjesberg with wooden boardwalk

an archaeological deposit dating back at least 800 years. There is evidence that the site was still occupied in the nineteenth century, the last of its San inhabitants interacting with immigrant Iron Age farmers. The sole instance of 'graffiti' in the site records the visit by one 'A.A. Hartmann' in 1881. Thereafter there is no record of the site until Angelo Liguori re-located it in 1941 while looking for a dam builder's lost chickens. Tandjesberg has been a focus of archaeological attention from 1943 when one of the founding fathers of South African archaeology, Clarence "Peter" van Riet Lowe, with eminent French prehistorian, the Abbé Henri Breuil, called in to assess the site. Regularly visited since that time, Tandjesberg's paintings were first traced by Jannie Loubser, Gordon Laurens and Paul den Hoed in 1991, and the site was afterwards excavated by Lyn Wadley and Gail McLaren. The paintings constitute a superb example of the complex and deeply religious shamanistic art of the San as well as having good examples of the recently recognised Apocalyptic rock paintings.

Because of increasing interest by tourists, Angelo Liguori (whose son, John, has now inherited the farm) fenced the site in 1972, controlling access by way of a key and visitor's book. Jannie Loubser, then of the

Rock Art Department at Bloemfontein's National Museum, proposed to Janette Deacon that Tandjesberg be proclaimed a national monument and so it became South Africa's tenth proclaimed rock art site (of which there are now twelve). A sectioned and fire-treated wooden boardwalk was constructed to protect the paintings from dust and human contact and to cap the site's archaeological deposit. Redrawings of the tracings were fixed to the boardwalk's handrail to help visitors make sense of the complex paintings, which have up to seven superimposed layers.

Amidst the devastation of September 1998, Sven Ouzman and visiting researcher Paul Taçon - from the Australian Museum - drafted a five phase rehabilitation plan. Approved by the National Monuments Council (now the South African Heritage Resources Agency), a permit was



Assessing the devastation, September 1998

issued for the work to begin. Critical to the endeavour was the expert input of a con-

sulting geo-technical engineer, Mike van Wieringen, whose prior experience in heritage matters included the recovery of the famous Langebaan footprints. Innovative and challenging rehabilitation procedures at Tandjesberg involved the reshaping and re-positioning of heat-warped chunks of fallen shelter wall, and the gluing and pinning of other unstable portions - with all repair work being sensitively disguised. No less than seventeen stakeholder groups, comprising about 120 individuals, contributed to the success of the R300 000 project - which could not have been completed without support from the National Monuments Council, the National Museum in Bloemfontein, the Trans-Vaal and Transgariep Branches of the South African Archaeological Society, the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Anglo-American, De Beers, the Getty Conservation Trust, and local farmers. A key element of the project was the training of twelve local guides, and the development of marketing strategies to promote aware-



Team effort in the final phase of rehabilitation



Excitement and delight at the re-opening of Tandjesberg

ness of this and similar heritage sites. The site will be monitored at six-monthly intervals. The rock art management plan now in place here is one of the most complete in Southern Africa. As the Tandjesberg experience shows, calamity can be turned to advantage.

A 1999 report noted that "heritage tourism is the fastest growing kind of tourism", and that Tandjesberg is but one of a vast regional network of heritage sites. Well-managed ar-

chaeological site museums have great potential, not least as educational resources. These sites have an "air of authenticity" reflecting powerfully "our country's world-class heritage".

Mario Mahongo's vision went even further: *"We, as San, can read much through the messages the artists left us,"* he said, *"and the central theme is this: that people and animals are here on earth to live, while the earth is here to support us - therefore we must preserve the earth together, helping one another to save our earth and everything on it."*



Tandjesberg: Recommended reading

Loubser, J.H.N. 1993. A guide to the rock paintings of Tandjesberg. *Navorsinge van die Nasionale Museum, Bloemfontein* 9:345-384.

Ouzman, S. Public rock art sites of the Free State: Tandjesberg. *Culna* 52: 32-34.

Wadley, L. & McLaren, G. 1998. Tandjesberg shelter, eastern Free State, South Africa. *Natal Museum Journal of Humanities* 10:19-32.

*McGregor Museum
PO Box 316
Kimberley, 8300
email: dmorris@kimberley.co.za

[†]Rock Art Department
National Museum
PO Box 266
Bloemfontein, 9300
email: rockart@nasmus.co.za



Countdown looms on registering fossil and artefact collections *SAHRA reminds nation that the clock is ticking*

On 1 April 2000, the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) replaced the National Monuments Council as the official governing body overseeing the protection of South Africa's cultural heritage. SAHRA is a statutory organisation established under the National Heritage Resources Act (Act 25, 1999). Central to the SAHRA mission are mandates to encourage public understanding and enjoyment of the national estate and to promote public interest and involvement in the identification, assessment, recording and management of heritage resources.

Further details and registration forms are available at SAHRA. Please contact:
Mary Leslie, Archaeologist, SAHRA, PO Box 4637, Cape Town, 8001. Phone: 021-462-4502. Fax: 021- 462-4509.

Under the National Heritage Resources Act (NHRA) (activated by Parliament in April 2000), owners of privately held collections of fossils and artefacts have one year to register those collections with the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA).

Explains Pumla Madiba, CEO of SAHRA, "Just as fossils and artefacts with archaeological and palaeontological value owned by universities and museums are catalogued and listed as part of the South African 'national estate' (historical elements which define our collective national identity), it is important that the public record also include those elements which remain in the hands of the private sector. The specifications set out by the NHRA with regards to this are in keeping with progressive conservation legislation found around the world and the goal is to gift future generations with a thorough record of South Africa's past."

Collections that must be registered with SAHRA include:

- All collections of archaeological artefacts including artefacts older than 100 years, rock paintings or rock engravings, artefacts associated with military history older than 75 years and associated with ships and other wrecks
- All collections of fossils and other palaeontological material (including trace fossils such as ancient footprints)
- All collections of meteorites

Madiba is quick to note that while the registered collections remain the property of the private owner for the duration of his or her lifetime, SAHRA must be notified about who the successor will be in the event of death. Under the NHRA legislation, such material may not be destroyed, damaged, excavated, altered, defaced, disturbed or collected without a permit from SAHRA and the penalties for infringement are far greater than before.