

HERITAGE CONSERVATION AND ALLUVIAL DIAMOND MINING AT CANTEEN KOPJE, BARKLY WEST: A CHALLENGE FOR PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY

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Our archaeological heritage is fragile enough without the impacts of development. In the past, South Africa's National Monuments Act was interpreted such that mining and agriculture – the activities that most heavily impact archaeological sites – were exempt from certain critical provisions. The result has been, in MacIntosh's apt phrase, an ongoing "haemorrhaging of Africa's past". The new realities of development in South Africa highlight the need for public archaeology to promote heritage awareness and conservation at community level.

Some of the issues of conservation versus development were thrown into sharp relief early in 1997 at a site near Barkly West in the Northern Cape Province when the Provincial Minister of Agriculture and Land Reform officially declared open an alluvial diamond mining site for the African United Small Miners Association. The Department of Mineral and Energy Affairs issued permits whose only requirement in terms of heritage sites was a statement by the applicants as to whether they knew of any archaeological or cultural resources that would be impacted. In fact, the mining site was immediately alongside the declared national monument of Canteen Kopje where rich and well-preserved early Acheulean units, perhaps more than a million years old, have been documented. Prospecting pits dug by the miners indicated that the archaeological site extended into the mining area.

Access to mining permits, long denied to black miners, had been broadened in the 1990s, and pressure was soon exerted for re-opening the Canteen Kopje diggings. Mining permits continued to be issued for dozens of similar locales along the Vaal River and elsewhere, many of which have high negative impacts on archaeological sites. Sites in the Windsorton area, documented partially by van Riet Lowe and others in the early twentieth century, have been devastated.

In the case of Canteen Kopje, the then National Monuments Council was able successfully to assert a new reading of the old Act – namely that, while key provisions did not apply to the removal of archaeological material during mining, it did not exempt mining from requiring a permit to disturb, damage, excavate or alter the site. The miners applied for permits, which were granted with provisos concerning archaeological documentation and salvage. Happily, the old exemptions in the National Monuments Act no longer apply: heritage impact assessments and, where necessary, permits, are required for mining in terms of the National

Heritage Resources Act which passed into law in 1999. But issues of implementation and compliance are still with us.

The Canteen Kopje case was widely reported in the press. The Provincial Minister of Agriculture and Land Reform and the miners felt that it was possible to rehabilitate the site after extracting the diamonds – that the project would provide jobs for 200 miners and generate funds to conserve the site and establish an open-air museum. In response, the National Monuments Council pointed out that the mining process would totally destroy the archaeological aspect of the site.

At issue are conflicting perceptions of the nature and value of archaeological resources; a conflict heightened by the lure of diamonds to an underdeveloped community. Yet many community members were supportive of efforts to conserve and develop the site as a tourism and educational facility with long-term spin-offs for the people of Barkly West. Mining of the site, after all, would be of finite duration, and the benefits limited.

Even this partial support for conservation would almost certainly not have existed at all had the archaeologists involved not participated in community consultation from 1995, and the community formed a provisional local heritage committee (with small miner representation). An (unsuccessful) application for Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) funding for developing the site emerged from these meetings. One of the RDP principles was "to link culture firmly to areas of national priority ... to ensure that culture is entrenched as a fundamental component of development".

Subsequently both medium-scale miners and the Department of Mineral and Energy expressed regret that mining around Canteen Kopje had taken place, as it yielded only a limited return. Small-scale diggers had left the area in a mess, which medium-scale miners were called in to rehabilitate (Terlien & Miller 2000:94–95). Some of the region's richest archaeological heritage was destroyed in the process. Small-scale miners may still regard the declared area as a good opportunity for future mining (Terlien & Miller 2000:94).

The Canteen Kopje experience has highlighted some of the needs for public archaeology development in South Africa. Communities such as those at Barkly West lack background knowledge to most of the heritage sites in their environment. High levels of unemployment within such a community do not augur well for conservation when these same heritage sites also happen to contain diamonds. The concept of 'developer pays' is rather meaningless where the 'developer' starts from a position of poverty. Conveying the message that heritage sites are unique, non-renewable and can be of long-term benefit and meaning (in often intangible ways) to local people is perhaps one of the most difficult challenges that public archaeology in situations such as these will have to meet.

References

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