

## SOUTH AFRICA – HERITAGE @ RISK!

South Africa has a long standing tradition of heritage conservation dating back to its first legislation in 1911, just one year after the creation of our country. Today the number of formally protected "provincial heritage sites" numbers close to three thousand and there are many other categories provided for by the national and provincial systems for heritage conservation. There is, however, no formal, national programme for risk prevention in the heritage sector and the former national heritage conservation body, the National Monuments Council, in its 30 years of existence did not take any initiative, other than the odd ad hoc policy decision, or attempt to create capacity in this area.

This situation has arisen for many reasons. South Africa has a fine record of systematically identifying and marking its architectural heritage, but has lagged terribly behind in the documentation techniques and the production of management plans that are necessary for, amongst other conservation actions, a successful risk preparedness programme. Most conservation has occurred only via the fairly strenuous permitting requirements that previous legislation provided for, and this created an ad hoc management system, whereby outside agents wishing to disturb protected sites were the stimulus for action. This tradition is one that was prevalent in many countries in the past and no doubt still is here and there, but its persistence in South Africa can probably be accounted for by the long years of isolation that saw many new trends in heritage conservation, as in other spheres of life, pass our country by.

Whilst a few conservationists "escaped" by seeking training elsewhere, it was only in the 1990s that a new wind began to blow. In 1995 South Africa formed an ICOMOS national committee and, amongst other things, was very quickly exposed to and brought into international initiatives around risk preparedness. Four years later the first world heritage sites were declared and as part of preparation for this, the heritage conservation profession was for the first time exposed to issues around conservation management planning on a large scale. At the same time, from 1996 onwards, an initiative was undertaken to create a new framework for heritage conservation which resulted in the passing of the National Heritage Resources Act (NHRA) (see <http://www.SAHRA.co.za>) in 1999 and the replacement of the National Monuments Council by the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) on 1 April 2000.

The NHRA places a very firm emphasis on management of the heritage resources, or "National Estate" of South Africa and provides SAHRA with powers to prescribe minimum stan-

dards. It also talks of conservation planning, and regulations under the Act prescribe that each national heritage site must have a management plan. The new legislation of KwaZulu-Natal, the first province to introduce its own legislation for heritage resources, goes a step further and prescribes that the provincial body, Amafa aKwaZulu-Natali, should introduce a risk preparedness programme.

Here and there, there have been reasonably successful policy decisions that have in effect created a situation conducive to risk prevention and these have focused primarily on the risk posed by visitors to sensitive sites. Based on a combination of "concealment" and "sacrifice", policies exist for underwater heritage and rock art and to a lesser extent for other archaeological sites. However, these are not the types of site that suffer greatly from exposure to the country's major destroyer of heritage resources, fire. South Africa is a seismically stable zone. (The last major earthquake in 1969 badly damaged the historic towns of Tilbagh, Wolseley and Ceres, and only Tilbagh underwent any major restoration.) Flooding and tornadoes are not uncommon occurrences, but have as yet had only limited impact on heritage. However, fire has a major impact and the small, but architecturally important city of Grahamstown, is good case in point. Over the past fifteen years, there have been five fires that have affected conservation-worthy buildings, culminating in 1999 with the destruction of a major portion of one side of its famous Church Square. Despite this, there remains no concerted or co-ordinated programme of risk preparedness for a city that derives large revenues from cultural tourism.

Whilst everything now looks good on paper and South Africa has a far more dynamic system for the practice of heritage conservation, the old adage of "the proof of the pudding is in the eating" still holds. It remains to be seen to what extent practice will increase awareness of the risks to which our heritage is exposed and make risk prevention a normal part of the daily routine in and on our country's heritage sites. It is here at the level of most basic preparedness that a programme must start. In few places are we ready to avert the destruction that can be caused by something as simple as a broken pipe, and only in rare instances do we regularly check such things as our fire fighting equipment, that is if it exists at all, and it is clear that our conservationists need more exposure and training in the techniques of risk preparedness if we are to pass sensitivity on to those who live in, or use, and should be caring for our heritage on a daily basis. Perhaps by the time of the next major international dis-



The wreck of the Maori

cussion of this topic, our country will have a major national initiative to report upon. If not we will have failed in our duty to use the tools that are now at our disposal.

### Case Study 1 – The Sad Case of the *SS Maori*

The impact of human agents on underwater cultural heritage is but one of a host of problems that beset the management of this fragile resource. In particular, the degradation of wrecks popular as good dive sites is an area of great concern to the South Af-

rican Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA), and is perhaps epitomised in South Africa by the case of the *SS Maori*.

Lost at Duiker Point near Cape Town on 5 August 1909, the wreck of the *Maori* retains a remarkable degree of structural integrity, and much of her cargo remained substantially intact, packed in her holds until relatively recently. On a violent coast, where most wrecks break up rapidly, the *Maori* is thus something of a rarity, both as an archaeological and diving site. Her location on the western Atlantic seaboard of the Cape Peninsula means that during the Cape summer diving conditions on the site are often optimal, with very cold, but very clean water. One of the early visitors to the site was Jacques Cousteau [the famous marine archaeologist], who in after diving on the wreck in the 1950s, declared it to be one of the best wrecks of its type that he had seen.

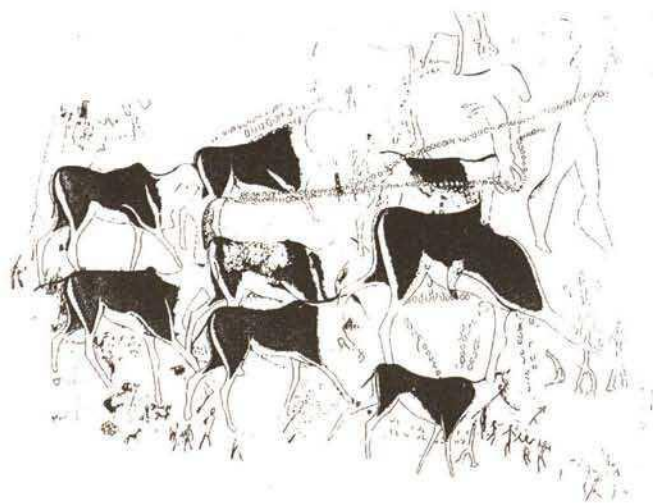
It is hardly surprising therefore that with the growth in sport-diving in the last 30 years, the *Maori* has become a site favoured by divers. Sadly, this popularity has not been without price. Although never salvaged on a commercial basis, the *Maori* has been the victim of years of souvenir hunting by thousands of divers, and today is a shadow of her former self. Her holds are virtually empty, and her structure has been damaged by scores of irresponsibly placed anchors.

Although this problem is not limited to the *Maori*, and manifests itself on many other underwater heritage sites along the South African coast, no broad risk preparedness policy is yet in place for underwater heritage. A current attempt to address part of this problem is a pilot project being undertaken by SAHRA, in conjunction with the South African Maritime Museum, to establish the Cape Peninsula Shipwreck Route around Cape Town. The project has the dual aims of formalising access to a number of popular, threatened wreck sites, while at the same time increasing general public awareness of the importance and fragility of our underwater heritage. Aside from a land-based information component aimed at tourists and locals alike, the proposed route will also include underwater information plinths on the sites often visited by divers, such as the *Maori*. These plinths will not only provide information about the history of the wreck and layout of the site, but will also carry a strong conservation message, stressing the legal protection that such sites enjoy, and the responsibilities of divers when visiting such sites, and will carry a mooring buoy to which visitors will be obliged to tie up.

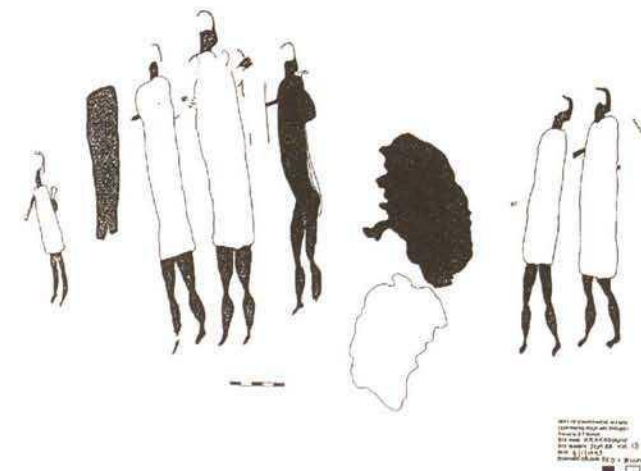
While this approach to managing threatened underwater sites is in some senses post hoc, if it proves successful in managing risk on a heavily utilised site such as the *Maori*, SAHRA envisages its useful extension to other threatened, or potentially threatened sites, in the future.



Graffiti on a rock painting



Rock paintings in line drawings



## Case Study 2 – Rock Art in Western Cape Wilderness Areas

On the rock surface of thousands of rock shelters and caves in South Africa is a fragile record of the art of the San people. Much of this art probably dates to the last 400-3000 years, but painted rock fragments, buried in cave deposits take the tradition back over 20,000 years. Research has shown that the value of the art lies not only in the beauty of the elusive images of hunters, eland, elephants, kudu etc, but also in its capacity to provide a window into San thought and belief.

Sadly, it is under threat from a variety of causes, including flood and fire. It is important that boardwalks, built to protect such sites, be made of fireproof materials. Modern visitors, however, who scrawl their names across the images, pose by far the greatest threat. Culprits are difficult to apprehend. A concerned park ranger laid a criminal charge against a suspect, whose name he found on a unique ochre painting of a sailing ship at a nearby farm. Later, he found his own name on the rock! The case was dismissed in court, as there was “no proof” that the suspect had done the damage. Such graffiti can often be removed, but this has its own problems and the ideal, of course, is to avoid damage to the art in the first instance.

Management Guidelines, established as a result of a project investigating the rock art of the Cederberg and Groot Winterhoek, by the Government heritage agency, have been a solution to protection for rock art sites in these two wilderness areas in the Western Cape. At the end of a comprehensive survey, nearly 100 sites had been identified, recorded and classified into three groups on the basis of their importance and vulnerability, that is, Special, Visitor and Regular. For each group of sites, a slightly different management strategy was devised and implemented. Visitor interest and knowledge was tested with a questionnaire and this meant that management strategy and brochures could be tailored to visitor needs and behaviour. The management guidelines also included a procedure for the regular inspection of the sites; a short course on rock art management for field rangers, and the publication of a booklet on rock art in the Cederberg for the general public.

The education of both park staff and public, through this project, has enabled successful management of the sites. In the case of Special sites, this has effectively involved their “concealment”, whereas sites that were more appropriate for, and less sensitive to, visitors were “sacrificed” as Visitor sites.

ICOMOS South Africa