

Green Pages

Mining yields ancient past*

Mining plants operating in dunes north of Richards Bay have uncovered Iron Age archaeological material that spans the greater part of the past 2000 years. This was announced by archaeologists Gavin Whitelaw of the Natal Museum's Institute of Cultural Resource Management (ICRM), and Len van Schalkwyk and Mlungisi Ngubane of the KwaZulu Monuments Council (KMC), who are currently contracted by Richards Bay Minerals (RBM) to assess the cultural resources exposed during mining activities.

To date, discoveries of pottery, iron-smelting residues, and other cultural debris show that people settled on the coastal dune cordon as early as 300 to 400 years AD. The archaeologists have also unearthed evidence of people living in these areas between 700 and 800 AD. These, say the archaeologists, are the remains of homesteads of the very first black farming communities to settle on our eastern seaboard more than 1500 years ago. There is also evidence that people continued to live in this area until fairly recently.

According to the archaeologists, the research conducted so far suggests that farming communities have continually occupied the dune cordon for at least the last 1500 years. They say that, in the light of the present mining activities, it is 'somewhat ironic that, apart from the suitable agricultural conditions, it was partly the plentiful supply of timber for charcoal and iron ore for smelting that continued to draw these original inhabitants to the area'.

Len van Schalkwyk and Gavin Whitelaw explained that what is slowly being pieced together is the culture history of the first farmers in the region, people who, until recently, were marginalized. They feel that this story needs to be heard far and wide. They believe that a project such as this, in its small way, begins to give recognition to the cumulative history of all the region's inhabitants.

During their earlier surveys, conducted at the exploration stage ahead of mining, Van Schalkwyk and Whitelaw had great difficulty in finding archaeological sites in the heavy undergrowth characteristic of the coastal vegetation in this area. Because the archaeological remains in the mining leases appear to be confined to the well-vegetated dune crests, it was almost impossible to track these down before the bush-clearing stage ahead of the mining operation.

The archaeologists have since synchronized their surveys with the bush-clearing activities, and have successfully identified, sampled, and mapped the sites that became exposed. Bush-clearing not only provides access and greater site visibility but also, in disturbing the humus layer on the forest floor, exposes sites that have settled 25 to 30 cm below the current surface.

'If mining had not taken place, the vast majority of these sites would probably have remained undiscovered, and subsequently lost', says Van Schalkwyk.

Asked whether these historical sites should be excavated at all, the archaeologists explained that the coastal dune cordon is a biotically active environment. 'Even undisturbed sites do not survive in their entirety indefinitely. The sites we have discovered dating to the first 1000 years AD have yielded no organic remains, and obviously the sea air does not allow for long-term preservation of iron artifacts.'

They pointed out that the best organic preservation occurs on the more recent sites, those dating to the last 150 to 200 years. Animal bones, seafood remains, and the odd iron artefact are all indicators of past subsistence and economic practices. This is the evidence needed for archaeologists to begin piecing together the cultural sequence and history of the ancestors of extant peoples in the area. Van Schalkwyk and Whitelaw maintain that, it is to RBM's credit that, in recognizing the inevitable loss of this rich source of historical information, the company has given them an invaluable opportunity to salvage a part of it.

The archaeologists have found that a number of 'wisdom-keepers' among the neighbouring Mbuyazi and Mthiyane clans remember specific places within the dune cordon where iron was smelted in the historical past, and also the homes of at least eight of their past *amaKhosi* (chiefs). In recording this *amasiko* (oral history), the Monuments Council's anthropologist, Mlungisi Ngubane, has been able to feed this information back to the archaeologists. They, in turn, have then been able to focus their surveys on specified areas of known past habitation and mining activity. More than ten sites have been identified through *amasiko* to date, including a number of areas where iron was worked in pre-colonial times.

The oral history, whilst assisting in the archaeological surveys, is also being collated for a proposed community history publication. 'The participation of members of the neighbouring communities in drawing up their own histories, as opposed to being passive observers of a research process, has been most gratifying', says Van Schalkwyk.

The archaeological research and the *amasiko* have fired the imaginations of RBM personnel. 'The interest shown in our project, from dozer-operators to senior management, has been phenomenal', explained Whitelaw. 'People are continually coming forward to report further finds or offer new information.' ♦

* Issued by Sussens Mann, Natal. Tel. (0358) 791-233.