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COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN ROCK ART SITE MANAGEMENT IN NAMIBIA

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Abstract. This paper concentrates on the threat of deterioration of rock art in Namibia and is aimed at raising issues concerning conservation and preservation of rock art. Twyfelfontein will be used as a case study because at least three major causes of deterioration have been identified there. Furthermore, the site is currently being used to monitor deterioration of rock art and it is hoped that the knowledge obtained through this pilot study will be used to manage similar rock art sites in the country. Twyfelfontein was chosen because most of the rock art studies in southern Africa, and Namibia in particular, concentrate on paintings, and petroglyphs are often omitted. The paper will also hint on the question of citizen participation or community involvement in cultural heritage management.

Introduction

Archaeological research in Namibia has for the past fifty years concerned itself mainly with rock art. This is by no means surprising, if the concentration, which is believed to be one of the largest in Africa (Viereck and Rudner 1959), and diversity in style and images are taken into account.

Two overall approaches to rock art research have developed in Namibia, documentation (empiricist) and interpretation (explanatory) (Gwasira 2000). This research forms the basis on which issues of conservation can be deliberated. Documentation and interpretation of rock art is in itself a form of preservation. There is no established rock art research unit in the country. This leaves the role of conserving rock art to the National Monuments Council of Namibia and the National Museum of Namibia. Both institutions are trying to preserve and conserve the cultural heritage with the assistance of foreign institutions. Therefore, stronger links have to be established between the local and foreign-based institutions so as to co-ordinate efforts towards rock art conservation. Such links would allow smooth sharing of resources such as databases and expertise. The museum's role is to preserve, conserve and interpret to the public, Namibia's cultural and natural heritage. As far as rock art is concerned, the National Museum is the custodian of the earliest rock art copies of researchers such as Rudner, Maack, Scherz and Breuil (e.g. Breuil 1957). These invaluable copies are accessioned and stored in the Archaeology Laboratory and are available to *bona fide* researchers. Thousands of Scherz' black and white photographs of rock art are also housed in the Laboratory. These have been recently accessioned as part of the Department's '*Endangered and threatened heritage*' program.

Recently the Department, in collaboration with the Heinrich-Barth-Institute of the University of Cologne, constructed a permanent rock art exhibition entitled '*Rock art in Namibia: its past, present and future*'. This is one way of educating the general public about rock art. The exhibition (funded by the Federal Republic of Germany) addresses the key issue of conservation. It was built to convey simple messages about how to behave at rock art sites. The location of the exhibition was deliberately chosen as the Alte Feste Museum in Windhoek because most tourists visit this museum before proceeding to the sites. The exhibition creates awareness among museum visitors about the different models of interpretation that dominate rock art research in Namibia today. University students use it as an alternative source of historical data. Many primary school and high school teachers have realised the potential of the exhibition as a teaching aid and have brought their pupils for arranged guided tours. The museum can disseminate useful information about preservation of the fragile art through exhibitions and pamphlets. Since conservation is viewed as one of the museum's major areas of concern, it has embarked on a process of monitoring the agents of deterioration at Twyfelfontein with the aim of using the data obtained from this project at other sites that might suffer from similar forces. Preliminary results of this project are reported here.

Twyfelfontein

Twyfelfontein valley is about 150 kilometres north of the Brandberg in the present day Khorixas district of Namibia (20° 35' S, 14° 23' E). The name Twyfelfontein means 'Doubtful Fountain' and is named after a spring that is found on the slopes of the valley. The site is complete with material culture such as stone tools and even well preserved stone circles that suggest that pre-Historic people lived there. It was declared a national monument in 1947.

after the vigorous campaign of Scherz (Viereck and Rudner 1959). It is reported that the same person who first made public his encounter with the 'White Lady', Reinhard Maack, was the first to make known his 'discovery' of the petroglyphs at Twyfelfontein during the First World War (Viereck and Rudner 1959). All the petroglyphs and paintings at the site are executed on sandstone of the red Etjo formation. The rock engravings are found on flat rock slabs. Some are hammered into upright standing slabs (van Hoek 2002). As with many rock engraving sites of southern Africa some of the petroglyphs are made on low-lying slabs such that it is very easy to walk on them without noticing the art. Contrary to petroglyphs, the paintings at Twyfelfontein are on rockshelter walls. It is a rare occurrence to find both petroglyphs and paintings at the same site. The site is now under the management of a community-based tourism group. The rock art of Twyfelfontein remains threatened until a proper site management plan is put in place. This does not mean that there is no current management of the site. It is, however, imperative that a management and conservation plan that is scientifically informed should be developed for use by the community group that manages the site. The problems experienced at Twyfelfontein do affect other sites in its vicinity.

The major problem experienced at Twyfelfontein is that of tourist influx. Tourism is fast becoming a major source of foreign currency in Namibia and most of southern Africa. Rock art research in the region should take into account the pace at which cultural or archaeo-tourism is taking place. This paper supports the kind of tourism that is developing in Namibia, which seeks to empower the local communities. Rock art sites need adequate policing and local residents are best suited to do this job. The moment a sense of ownership of the sites is developed in the minds of the community, a sense of responsibility towards the art develops. What this entails is that the community needs to be adequately trained as guides and site managers. They should be trained to offer the different interpretations of the art and the general environment at the sites.

The threats to the art that have been linked to the tourist factor are threefold. The first and foremost is what they take from and what they leave at sites. Many stone artefacts are strewn all over the site at Twyfelfontein. Some of them are easy to find because they are made of quartz and this raw material stands out amongst sandstone. Once these surface scatters are disturbed the whole picture of early human cultural activity is distorted. One other serious problem is that of graffiti. Some visitors leave their names painted on the rocks where petroglyphs exist. Some even engrave their names, dates or just initials. The problem of graffiti is becoming widespread and has been reported at other sites such at Spitzkoppe and the Brandberg.

Visitors often come in large numbers and this usually exerts stress on the site. Groups of up to thirty individuals have been observed at Twyfelfontein. Such groups have to be divided into smaller groups of less than ten people and should not visit the same panel at the same time because otherwise the purpose of division is defeated. Rock art is generally very sensitive to dust and hence dividing visitors into smaller groups ensures that less dust is kicked up during walks. The problem with dividing the visitors is that not all tourists welcome the idea and usually the tour operators support their tourists. Ideally some walking boards would lessen the problem of dust but again such extreme measures should be taken cautiously because they are not always environmentally friendly.

Two routes exist at Twyfelfontein. The shorter route takes about forty minutes while the longer takes about an hour. It is therefore easy to divide visitors according to their preference and finally have fewer visitors on either route at a time. The footpaths are well defined but one other problem that has been observed at Twyfelfontein is that visitors do not want to keep to the footpaths. It has already been mentioned that some petroglyphs are found on flat slabs and many at Twyfelfontein have been damaged by people walking on them. Besides wearing down the petroglyphs the ecosystem is disturbed. The routes are designed so that keeping to defined tracks can save the art, microfauna and flora.

Community involvement

Most of the rock art in Namibia is found in communal areas and is therefore more threatened than that found on private farms. Some of the art is damaged by local communities who advertise its existence since they have realised the potential financial value from growing cultural tourism. They, however, damage it out of ignorance and for that reason the archaeology laboratory of the National Museum of Namibia has designed a public program (*Endangered art, threatened heritage*) aimed at the 'neighbours of rock art' (communities that live in the vicinity of the sites). The public program involves consultations with the local communities, slide shows and workshops on presentation of the past to visitors. The workshops and seminars have been prompted by the gradual move by communities to using the sites as a source of income. The slide shows will focus mainly on the destruction of the heritage due to unregulated visits, and the beauty of the rock art. It is hoped that through such contacts with the communities the Museum will assist in the preservation of the pre-Historic art and will obtain feedback from the people who are 'living' with the art daily.

The public archaeology program is a reaction to the recognition that public education is vital for the conservation of immovable cultural heritage. In southern Africa and in Namibia in particular, communities are beginning to claim their heritage, which was alienated from them for a long time due to colonial domination. Rock art sites that were and still are of outstanding scientific and aesthetic value were declared national monuments and in some cases were fenced off. Communities were moved from their ancestral lands and were forbidden to interact with their cultural heritage. The dawn of independence ushered in new opportunities for the previously marginalised communities, especially in the communal lands where they are free to settle where they feel comfortable. This, coupled with the fact that heritage management of rock art sites in Namibia is centralised in the capital and yet the sites are in remote

areas, calls for a well-designed approach towards (1) gaining the trust of the people and (2) convincing the general public of the importance of archaeological sites and the need for their conservation. One way of achieving this goal is by involving communities at every level of site management. The fundamental principle used in this exercise by the archaeology laboratory is informed by the understanding that '... it is not stricter laws that are desired but rather the understanding and support of the general public' (Mazel 1982: 7). In other words, as heritage managers we have to make our work and presence relevant to the communities if we are to make an impact at all, or else we will end up facing the harsh truth of Fritz and Plog's words:

> We suspect that unless the heritage specialist finds ways to make their research relevant to the modern world, the modern world will find itself increasingly capable to getting along without past remains (as cited in Ndoro 1999)

Be that as it may it is important to note that the approach favoured by the 'Endangered art: threatened heritage' program does not view the education of the communities as a top-down process but rather a lateral procedure. The archaeology laboratory in return gains immensely from the traditional systems of conservation and even ancestral models of interpretation of the rock art, which would otherwise be left untapped if such a mutual approach were not employed. The approach has opened new dimensions that have allowed for information concerning the inherited memories about rock art to be collected. The next step after gaining the confidence of the communities is to set up management structures that can assist in the 'decentralisation' of supervision and administration of rock art sites. It is granted that the process of citizen participation is complex and will take a long time to be achieved but it is equally believed that a solid foundation for community involvement is based on the general understanding of the need for conservation and the potential benefits on the part of the community involved.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been observed so far that the main causes of rock art deterioration at Twyfelfontein are:

(1) poor management (resulting from a lack of a site management and conservation plan);
(2) lack of regular inspection by the responsible state officials;
(3) tourist influx; and
(4) the natural disintegration of the sandstone due to temperature fluctuations.

All of these factors have to be monitored but the main question is who should monitor. There is a great move towards creating sustainable resource management plans. The communities who live in the vicinity of the rock art have realised the economic gain that they can obtain by being involved or involving themselves in cultural tourism projects. Obvious questions that arise when community or citizen involvement is concerned are: who are the community members? To what extent should they be involved? And who should set the parameters concerning community involvement—and the basic question is *what is* community involvement?

The '*Endangered art: threatened heritage*' program mentioned above, as part of its agenda, is involved in a research project that aims at addressing the issues pertaining to co-management of rock art sites. In the meantime it is clearly evident that more work has to be done at Twyfelfontein. The question of management, ownership and custodianship of archaeological heritage in Namibia still remains to be thoroughly dealt with. It is noteworthy, though, that part of the problems with the management of Twyfelfontein is caused by the state of pseudo-community involvement that exists at the site. Community-based projects function smoothly once the interests, level of participation and the benefits of all stakeholders are clearly outlined, understood and taken into account. It is hoped that the lessons that will derive from this project will be useful to other sites such as the Brandberg, especially now that it is being prepared for nomination to the World Heritage List.

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