

Human skeleton discovered in park

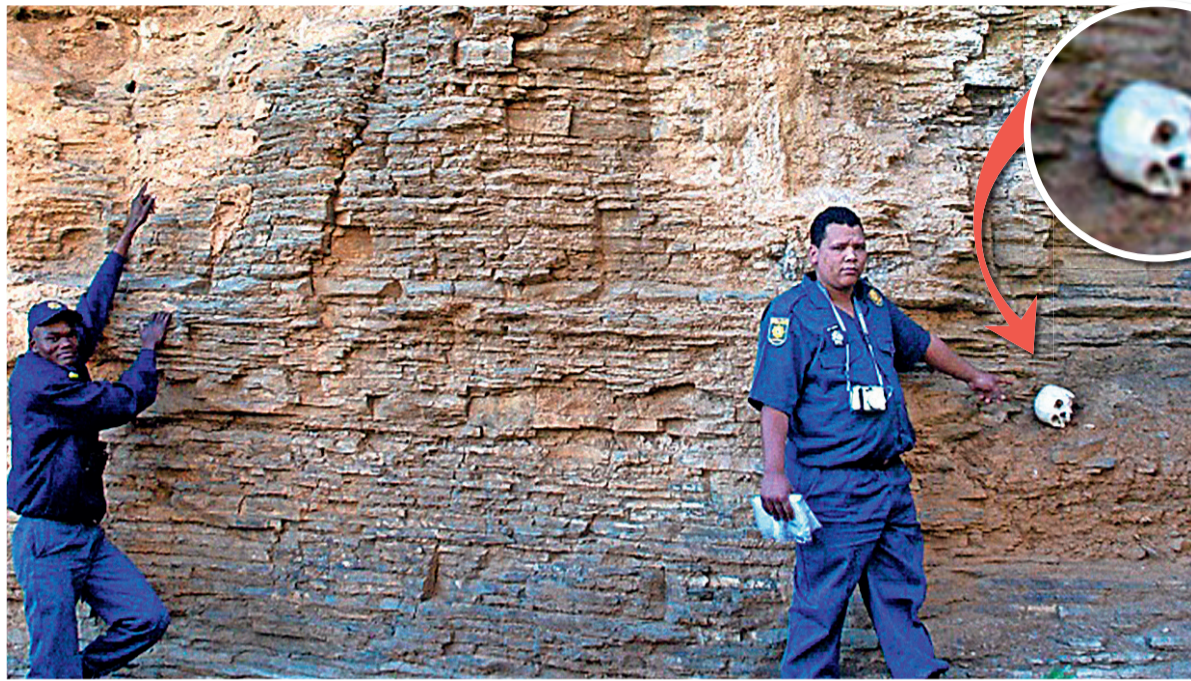
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A long, long time ago – though it is unsure how long – an elderly San or Khoekhoe (Khoikhoi) male was buried in a gorge in what is today known as Tankwa Karoo National Park. He lay undisturbed until 2007, when a previous landowner from the Perdekloof area of the park told management that his workers had come across a skeleton.

The skeleton, which lies about 950m above sea level in steep and rocky terrain, had been exposed by erosion and flash floods, and in time might disappear into the gorge.

Letsie Coetzee, section ranger at the time, contacted the local police. Realising that the skeleton was more than 60 years old, police decided not to open a docket.

With help from academics at University of Cape Town and SANParks, Tankwa has embarked on a process of identifying the skeleton and obtaining permission to date the burial. When that is done, teams will be able to construct a narrative around the man's life and death, and secure



The site where the skeleton was found.

his resting place into the future.

In 2015 Janette Deacon and Nicholas Wiltshire from the South African Archaeological Society's eastern Cederberg Rock Art Group described the archaeological value of Tankwa, noting that there is evidence that hunter-gatherers lived in Tankwa from early on.

But due to the harsh landscape, low rainfall, and limited plant food resources, and gauging from evidence of the scattered distribution of stone tools, it was likely that the presence of these hunter-gatherers was intermittent.

The area was also traversed by Khoekhoe herders. Could the

elderly male have been an itinerant hunter-gatherer or a livestock herder?

He was definitely buried but there is little evidence of artefacts which could have given insight into his identity and age.

What is certain is that about 10 000 years ago, people in the

Cape began burying their dead in graves for the first time. About 2 200 years ago, herders from East Africa migrated southwards, bringing their sheep with them. A small stone sheep kraal is present above where the skeleton was found.

Another possibility is that the skeleton was from one of the Khoekhoe herder-traders who met the sailors who rounded the Cape in 1488. By 1806 Khoekhoe and San people had become servants and farm labourers under British colonial rule. The virtual enslavement of indigenous people persisted in the Tankwa area and Roggeveld well into the 19th century. Perhaps the elderly male had stories to tell from any one of these times?

Understanding this man's story will provide a gateway to the history of Tankwa and will enrich the park and visitors' experience of the area.

Anyone who has any knowledge of the skeleton, or would like to make recommendations in this regard, should please email wendy.annecke@sanparks.org.



Tankwa secures the Succulent Karoo Biome

René de Klerk

The Succulent Karoo Biome is so small on a global scale that it should in theory almost be insignificant, yet it is extremely important for conservation. While this vegetation type only covers 1.4% of the planet, 60% of the world's plant and animal species occur here.

It is for this very reason that the Tankwa Karoo National Park plays such an important role in the conservation of this area. Recently, park management took additional steps to secure the future of this hotspot by adding more than 9 000ha to the park's existing footprint.

Two new properties have been incorporated into the park – Meintjiesplaas and Soekop. The latter is situated on the Roggeveld Escarpment at the top of Gannaga Pass. Meintjiesplaas lies on the east of Gannaga Lodge and is rich in fynbos elements, according to SANParks Park Planning and Development's Giel de Kock. This property has many natural landscapes that are still pristine which includes everything from



Ixa amethystina, a newly described species, was collected as a new distribution record at Soekop. Photo: Helga van der Merwe

bare moon landscapes to breathtaking vistas of rock formations.

Soekop is important mainly for its vegetation. It reflects that of the Succulent Karoo, but also contains some of the Roggeveld vegetation which even includes some mountain renosterveld. Although the property was a working sheep farm, the owners were conservation-orientated and farmed conservatively.

"We decided to sell the property to SANParks because

we should look after our natural environment," says Helga van der Merwe, botanist and scientist at the South African Environmental Observation Network, who previously owned the farm with her husband Jacobus. Van der Merwe has done extensive research in the area.

This region is rich in fauna and flora and Soekop is proof that many plant species not previously recorded in the area are found here.

"Six new species have been collected on the property. These include annual and perennial species as well as geophytes (bulbs)," says van der Merwe.

Park management are yet to define the role these properties will play in the park. "Once the newly acquired areas have been zoned we would have an indication of what is allowed where," says park manager Kennet Makondo.

"Hopefully we have made our contribution for future generations to be able to see and appreciate a unique part of our country," says van der Merwe.

LARGE ANTELOPE DO ROAM THE AREA

Driving through the vast landscapes of Tankwa, sometimes it feels like the park is only inhabited by ghosts. But strain your eyes – even the larger residents such as gemsbok have a sneaky habit of blending into their surroundings. Look a little closer and you'll find Cape mountain zebra, oryx, eland, red hartebeest and springbok scattered around the park. While the landscape is often barren, a single storm can transform the park completely. These large antelope have no doubt experienced the awesome power of the thunderstorms that can set upon the valleys with mighty force. Photo: Taryn Arnott van Jaarsveld

