**COMMENT ON
STERKFONTEIN PERMIT APPLICATION**

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*June 2012*

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**INTRODUCTION**

Sterkfontein fossil hominid site in the Gauteng ‘Cradle of Humankind’ is historically the best known of the sites and yielded both Mrs Ples and StW 573, known as Little Foot. A wealth of other remains have contributed widely, not only to our understanding of the various Australopithecine, Paranthropine and *Homo* species represented at the site, but also to faunal and environmental debates, and debates about early tool-making, etc.

In the past two decades, Dr Ron Clarke held the permit for excavation and research at Sterkfontein, first concurrently with Philip Tobias but later alone. Dr Kathleen Kuman worked with him on a range of related research projects. More recently Dr Dominic Stratford has worked at Sterkfontein, initially as a student and later under his own permit endorsed by Professor Clarke. His work, through his Masters and PhD theses, on the Milner Hall and Name Chamber, has contributed, through micro-stratigraphic studies and chemical analyses of the breccia towards the “clearer, more detailed picture of the inter-relationship of the various cave in-fills” towards which he is still working (Permit Motivation p.2).

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The site retains considerable research potential but years of research have resulted in a number of heritage conservation issues, identified in the management plan, which must be addressed during any further research and for which permit conditions must require redress.

The applicant, Dr Dominic Stratford is in a unique position to lead work at this site as he is the young scientist who has the greatest inherited ‘institutional’ and field-derived knowledge of the site. I would support this permit application.

SAHRA has, however, asked that applicants working at sites of equivalent significance in the Middle Pleistocene supply a clearer exposition of what areas of the site will be targeted for excavation in the three-year permit period. Of course this is negotiable with SAHRA at a later stage if research plans alter, but SAHRA needs to ask the applicant to indicate by means of maps of the relevant ‘caverns’/members what the general areas are that it is expected will be excavated. It needs to be explained that this has been a trend in permitting at other sites and allows the heritage resources agency a better understanding of what will be done and therefore of possible ways to avoid or solve any conservation issue.

Every effort must be made to redress the problems that have crept in where excavations are planned in these vicinities, such as, for example, excessively high walls without stepping (see sections 3.4.3 and 3.5.3 and 4.4 and pp.64-70 (Section 4 of the Management Table 1) of the 2009-2013 Site Management Plan). Where such areas are targeted for excavation, proposals for redress must be discussed with SAHRA before excavation commences and at each site inspection.

If possible, current Witness Sections (see section 3.4.7 of the 2009-2013 Management Plan) should be marked on these maps and, needless to say, they must be preserved for future reference. The need for the establishment of further relevant Witness Sections that record significant interpretive decisions about the relationship of the different members etc., of the site should be indicated by the applicant.

As a condition of previous permits, all copies of reports and theses should have been supplied to SAHRA. If this has not been done, the applicant must be asked to catch up on this as a condition of the permit.

Incidentally, given that excavations will proceed in a range of areas, site safety is a consideration. SAHRA must with some urgency obtain a site safety report from the COH Management Authority. This should have been included in each annual report and incidentally should include reference to visitor numbers to the site. I refer not only to the monitoring that the developer of Sterkfontein is required to do in the tourist route but also to the engineering report on the site safety issues at the excavation sites.

Sterkfontein is not only a National Heritage Site but also a research site of great value to the nation. SAHRA will want to encourage first class research there. Dr Stratford should be encouraged to continue to collaborate widely in related fields, to make every effort to make the research at this site interdisciplinary and team-based and to train students for the future as he has been trained.