

A FIRST PHASE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF WILDE VARKENS VALEY 48

Prepared for

**Willem Buhrmann Associates
Town Planners and Valuers**

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Report by

Archaeology Contracts Office
Department of Archaeology
University of Cape Town
Private Bag
Rondebosch
7700

Fax 650 2352 (021)
Phone 650 2357 (021)

1. INTRODUCTION

This report contains the findings of a Phase 1 archaeological survey of the remainder of Wilde Varkens Valey 48 in the Vredenberg district, Cape Province. The Archaeology Contracts Office of the University of Cape Town was commissioned by Willem Buhrmann Associates, Town Planners and Valuers to assess the significance of any archaeological sites that would be endangered by the proposed property development.

A foot search of the shoreline development area produced no evidence of any archaeological sites that could be considered worthy of conservation. This area did not attract habitation by prehistoric people in the Late Stone Age although it is clear that this stretch of coast was utilised by pre-colonial people for the specific purpose of trapping fish by means of visvywers (tidal fish traps).

2. BACKGROUND

A number of visvywers have been recorded on the south coast and Cape Peninsula but so far only one has been recorded on the west coast. Archaeologists have proposed that concept originated among Later Stone Age people who lived on the south coast after 2000 years ago (see appendix A). "Ownership" of some south coast visvywers has continued through to the historic period with families maintaining the devices and achieving catches to the present day.

During the course of this survey we located the remains of at least 8 visvywers in the intertidal zone. Visvywers typically consist of stone pile-walled "dams" built in either gullies or low energy bays with an abundance of loose boulders and shingle. The dams range in size from a few meters in diameter to as much as 100 meters. The low piled stone walls were assembled with gently sloping seaward sides and almost vertical interior walls - thus the entry of fish at high tide was facilitated while their exit at low tide was prohibited. A number of south coast complexes near Stilbaai involve several tiers of dams extending from the high water mark to spring low areas to ensure catches through a range of tidal situations.

3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

The locations of visvywers recorded in the survey area are presented in Figure 1. Photographs of well preserved examples are presented in Figure 2. A brief history of the archaeology of visvywers is included as appendix A.

3.1 Wilde Varkens Valey 1 (WVV1)

A complex of 4 visvywers spreads along a stretch of very stony beach close to some noticeable low but sharp rocky outcrops in the intertidal zone. Three of these visvywers are extremely large but only partially preserved. Most noticeable are large spaces of beach denuded of boulders that have been cleared outwards to form the walls of the

FIGURE 1: LOCATION OF VISVYWERS

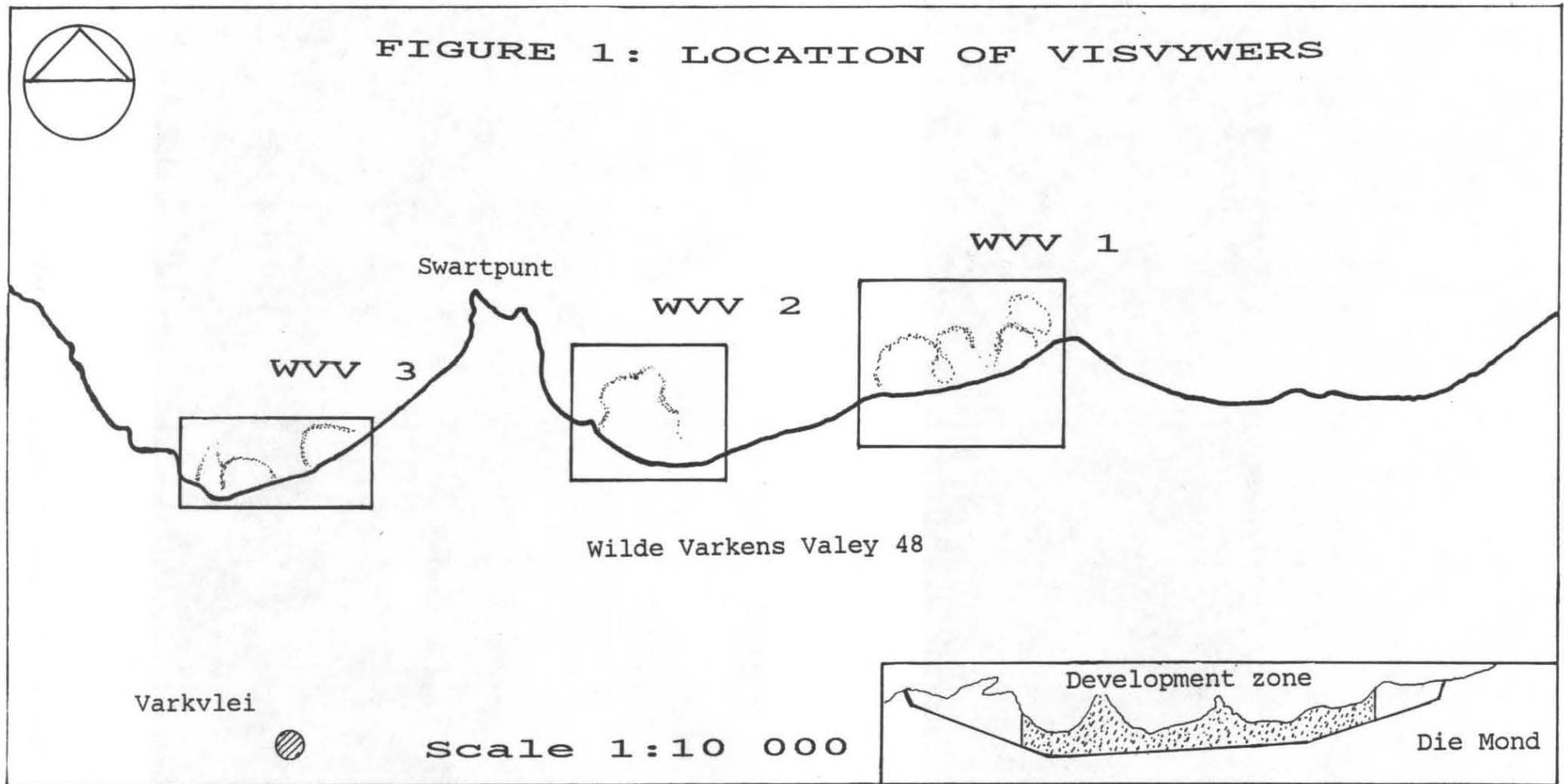




Figure 2: Well preserved visvywers at Wilde Varkens Valey (WV 3)

"dams". At least 1 smaller visvywer has been sandwiched between 2 of the larger individuals.

3.2 Wilde Varkens Valey 2 (WVV2)

This is a very large visvywer built on a broad intertidal zone of a small sheltered bay east of Swartpunt. The walling near the high water mark is poorly preserved but that close to the low water mark is easily visible and well 'cemented' by silt accumulation and marine organisms.

3.3 Wilde Varkens Valey 3 (WVV3)

Two extremely well preserved visvywers lie in a small sheltered bay north of the farm house. It is possible that these visvywers are still in functioning condition and may have been maintained in recent times. More stretches of walling extending seawards indicate that a further visvywer (seaward tier) may exist towards the water mark.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In recent years an archaeological research programme on the Vredenberg Peninsula has produced strong evidence indicating that this area was extensively used by Khoi herders who are thought to have arrived in the Cape about 1800 years ago. Besides living off the products of their sheep and cattle, these people made use of marine foods that included large quantities of shellfish as well as seals and fish. The unique shoreline topography west of the Berg River mouth is suited to the construction of Visvywers. It is quite possible that during the last 1800 years, people were making seasonal visits at times of spring low tide for the sole purpose of constructing, maintaining and operating the visvywers which, when conditions were right, would have produced substantial fish catches. We suspect the lack of habitation sites is due to the fact that fluctuation in salinity levels in the sea caused by the influx of fresh water from the Berg River negatively affected shellfish populations. At present neither mussels or limpets are common on this stretch of the coast. In contrast, the Vredenberg Peninsula to the south west is noted for its concentrations of important archaeological sites.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Archaeologists have been researching the history of the Western Cape coast for nearly 3 decades. In addition, members of the Archaeology Contracts Office have undertaken surveys of substantial tracts of De Beers owned coastal areas to the north of the Olifants River mouth. We can safely state that this particular group of visvywers is not only one of the best examples on the west coast but also the most northerly documented to date. For this reason we would urge that active measures be taken to ensure their protection for posterity.

Shoreline and coastal strip: The survey has not resulted in the location of any archaeological sites that require mitigation. On these grounds we have no objection to any development taking place within the area as indicated on the development proposal.

Intertidal zone: We are concerned that the construction of slipways, piers as well as increased use of the intertidal zones for launching of boats as well other recreational activities will result in damage to the visvywers. We recommend that the following measures be taken to offset any negative impacts.

1. Piers and slipways should positioned so as to avoid any visvywers.
2. Members of the public, resort users and residents should be made aware of the presence of the visvywers as well as their significance as a cultural resource. An option would be the erection of suitable signs detailing the location of the features as well as some explanatory information. It would be most desirable that an attitude be fostered in the community that would result in residents taking it upon themselves to make sure that the visvywers are not damaged. These features lend a particular focus of interest to the area, and in this sense can be used to the advantage of the developer and community alike.
3. It is proposed to the National Monuments Council that the visvywers be formally declared a national monument. This will ensure their protection. Should this not be possible before the construction of the development we would strongly recommend that archaeologists be hired to map and photograph the visvywers in detail.
4. All archaeological sites are protected by the National Monuments Act. The removal of archaeological remains requires a permit which is issued at the discretion of the National Monuments Council to suitably qualified persons. This means that should it be necessary that any part of a visvywer require removal for development purposes, an archaeologist will have to be hired in order to obtain the permit, and ensure that the feature is adequately recorded.

6. SUMMARY

The fluctuation of local salinity levels close to the mouth of the Berg Rivers has resulted in decreased quantities of shellfish which would have attracted long or medium term prehistoric occupation of the area. Instead, the sheltered conditions, gently sloping and rocky shoreline have resulted in conditions ideal for the construction and successful operation of visvywers. It is likely that these would have attracted visits by people in precolonial and colonial times. We have no objection to the development of this area provided that measures are taken to accommodate preservation of the visvywers. The National Monuments Council should monitor the preservation/protection efforts.

Field work and report preparation by:

Tim Hart
Dave Halkett

APPENDIX A

Tidal fish traps were first documented when Professor A.J.H. Goodwin published a paper in 1946 on his observations of the archaeology of visvywers of the southern Cape coast (Goodwin 1946). He suggested that although a number of visvywers were in use at the present time, these structures had been in existence for hundreds of years. Many of the structures have suffered considerable deterioration over time, while others had been cemented into place by sea organisms. Goodwin noted that archaeological deposits attributed to the Later Stone age contained a great deal more fish bone than deposits of greater antiquity. Goodwin (1946) concluded that prehistoric people of the Late Stone Age had invented a fishing method that enabled them to effectively exploit large quantities of vertebrate fish - namely, by means of visvywers at suitable areas on the coast.

In 1975 Dr G. Avery of the South African Museum published the results of some of his research on visvywers of the Cape South Coast. He attempted to date the construction of these features by referring to what was known at the time about changing sea levels (Avery 1975). Factors such as the effectiveness of the traps being dependent on the stability of the intertidal zone, combined with the knowledge that traps are still working today, led Avery (1975) to believe that the visvywers could not be more than 3000 years old.

Broader regional research has showed that shortly after 2000 years ago, significant economic changes had taken place among the prehistoric people of the Cape. This involved the introduction of domestic animals into what was previously a hunting and gathering society. It is thought that the first building of visvywers may date back to 1800 years ago when social changes resulted in larger bands of pastoral people who could economically build and exploit visvywers (Avery 1975). The tradition of use of these devices continued into the historic period through to the present day.

References

- Avery, G. 1975. Discussion on the age and use of tidal fish traps (visvywers). *S. Afr. archaeol. Bull.* 30:105-113.
- Goodwin, A.J.H. Prehistoric fishing methods in South Africa. *Antiquity* 20:1-8.