AN INSPECTION AND ASSESSMENT OF A MIDDLE STONE AGE SITE AT THE GROEN RIVER MOUTH: NAMAQUALAND

Prepared for

De Beers Namaqualand.

May 2001

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1. INTRODUCTION

The site consists of a surface scatter of Middle Stone Age (MSA) artefactual material and fossilised bone lying in an active dune field on the north bank of the Groen River mouth, at co-ordinates 30°50.573'S 17°34.524E as plotted on Figure 1.

In February, the presence of the site was brought to the attention of the De Beers Environmental officer by Mr. John Du Preez, who had observed and correctly identified the material as archaeological. He was concerned that indiscriminate use of 4x4 vehicles in the dunes was damaging the site. Although the land on which the site occurs is owned by De Beers, it is not being mined, and being in a remote location it is impossible to prevent members of the public from trespassing. Mr. Du Preez being concerned about the ongoing damage, collected some of the bone and stone artefacts. The collected material was shown to myself and I was able to recognise that some of the archaeological material had MSA characteristics and that bone was fossilised. It was suggested that it would be informative to be able to see the site to be able to fully comment on the occurrence.

As there is great interest in MSA sites which have bone on them, because of the potential for finding associated hominid remains, I suggested that I could combine a visit to the site with other fieldwork that I was undertaking for Transhex in March 2001. This was duly done and when I visited the site I was accompanied by both Charlene and Paul Kruger, the Environmental officers for De Beers Namaqualand.

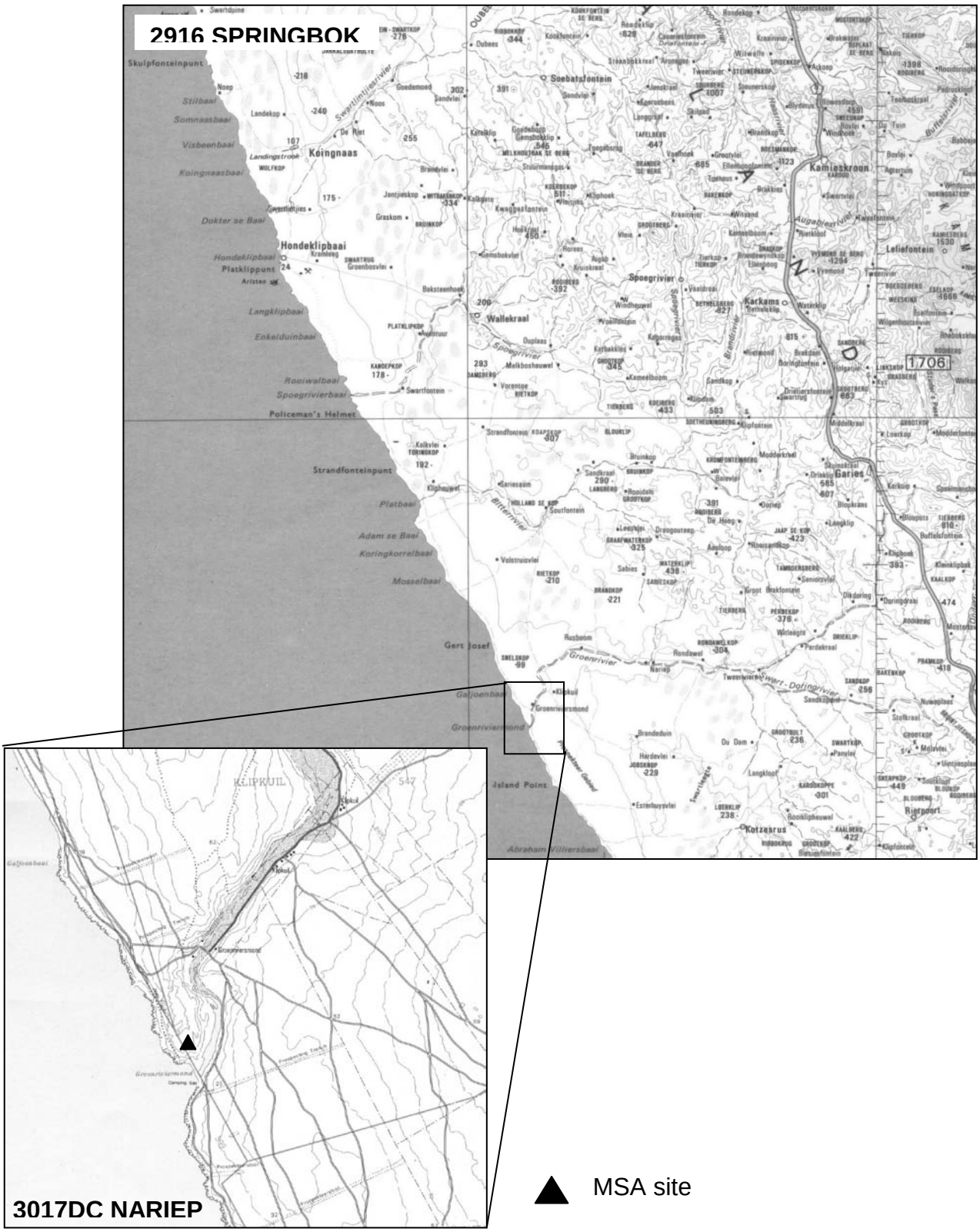
Although only a small amount of time was available during this visit, and bearing in mind that some of the material had been collected, it is clear that an MSA site of low density is present. There is also a large amount of Late Stone Age (LSA) material in the vicinity of the MSA site and the two have become mixed. Fortunately, the MSA bone and most of the MSA artefacts are distinct from the LSA material.

On returning to Cape Town I was able to establish that a small amount of archaeological work had previously been undertaken at Groen River Mouth during which a burial was removed (Jerardino et al 1992). The presence of the MSA site is mentioned in the published article about the burial although no detail about the content is presented.

A series of digital photographs of the site and its context was e-mailed to Professor R.G. Klein at Stanford University for his comment. He is currently involved in excavation of a similar bone and artefact accumulation at Duinefontein on the Cape Peninsula and is an expert on bone. He replied that he would be interested in visiting the site to see if it would warrant more detailed privately funded study. It was decided that in order to provide some additional information with regards to a decision about further study, that some very preliminary work be undertaken on the site to establish the extent of the finds and whether additional archaeological material was located below the surface. A series of small shovel tests on the site was undertaken during late April 2001.

2. CONTEXT

The site is located on a patch of very compact orange/brown sand that has been exposed in a deflation bay between the more recent white aeolian dunes. The darker sand is in paces associated with nodular calcretes which appears to underlie it. A series of small trial holes indicate that the darker sands continue beneath the aeolian dunes toward the east.



1 **Site location**

3. PRELIMINARY STUDY

The objectives of the preliminary study were threefold:-

1. map the extent of the presently exposed MSA material;
2. determine if the deposit on which the material lies is more extensive;
3. determine if any additional archaeological material is found below surface.

3.1 Mapping

The visible boundaries of the site were established utilising the tracking capabilities of a GPS receiver. While this does not provide an absolute plan, it does provide an acceptable approximation of the exposure. In addition, large, individual fossil bones were individually plotted with the GPS. The results of this exercise are shown in Figure 2.

3.2 Test Holes

Small shovel test holes were located at various points within the boundaries of the site and to the east where the deposit disappeared below the white aeolian sand. The positions of the holes are shown on Figure 2.

The surface on which the MSA material lies is the top of a compact brown deposit. This appears to contain claylike material mixed with a sandy matrix. It is difficult to scrape with a trowel. The deposit can be made workable by applying water. In this respect it is very similar to the Miocene palaeo-Berg river channel deposit in the E quarry at Langebaanweg. The deposit became lighter and progressively harder with depth. No archaeological material was found below the surface. It may therefore mean that bone that was observed protruding from the surface may have worked its way in from the surface rather than being eroded out from below.

The test hole excavated toward the west upslope from the 4x4 track had a greater depth of the brown deposit before reaching the lighter matrix.

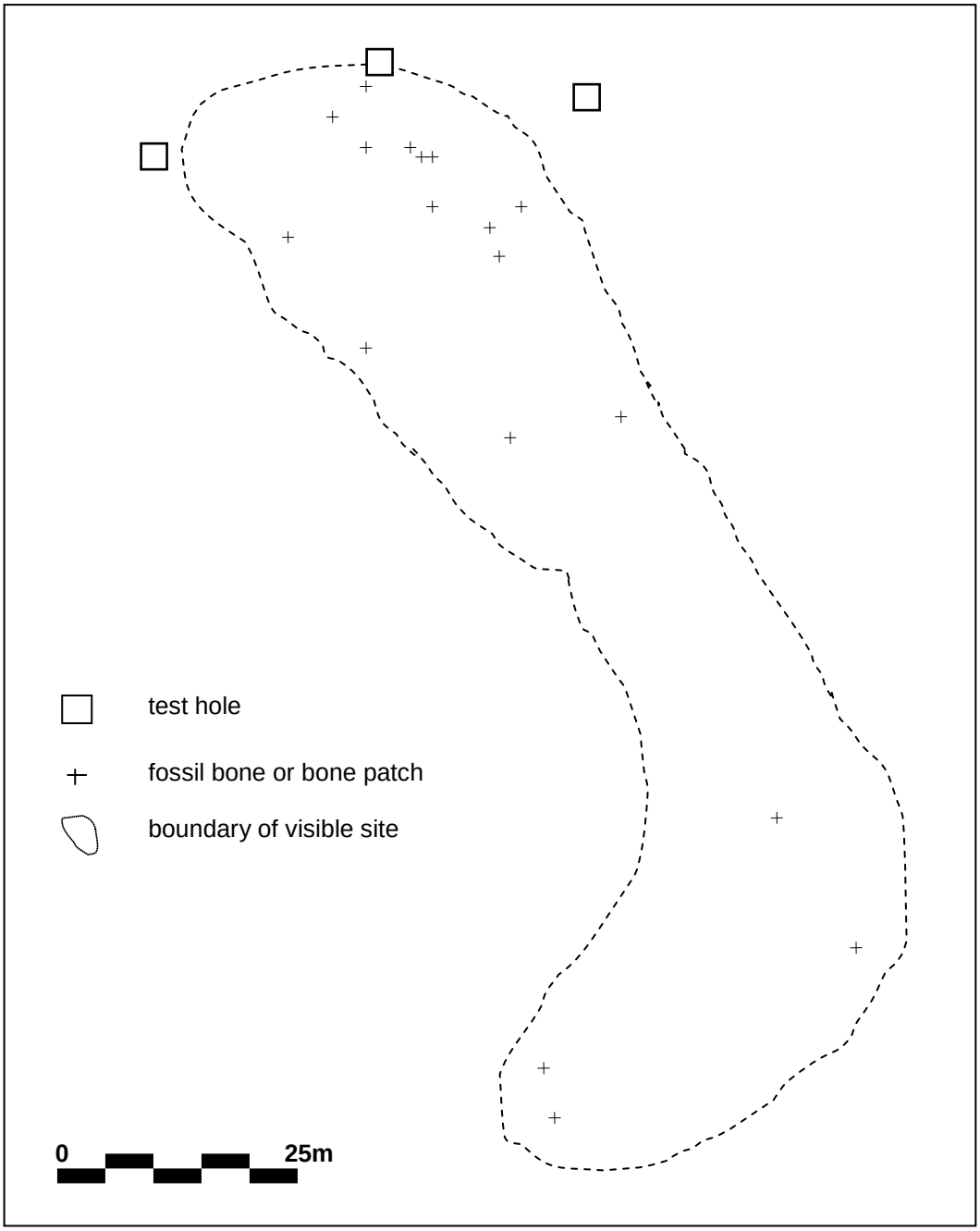
4. CONCLUSIONS

It would appear that the MSA archaeological material at Groen River mouth is a largely a surface phenomenon that has settled on an erosionally resistant surface. It has not been possible to fully investigate all the areas for buried material but given the observations which have been made to date this is the most likely scenario.

As a result, a detailed investigation of the site can be largely confined to collection and mapping of items on the surface. This is far less complicated and less time intensive than excavation.

No obviously fossilised marine shell was observed and may indicate that the site accumulated at a time when the coast was further away than its present position.

Material that was collected by Mr. Du Preez, is currently in the possession of the Archaeology Contracts Office. A request has been made to return the material for display in the museum at Kleinsee and I have indicated that I have no objection to this provided that SAHRA agree to it. They are the statutory body that decides on where material may reside. However, if a study of the site goes ahead, the collected material would form part



2 **Extent of MSA site at Groen River Mouth**

of a larger collection and the study thereof may take a year or two. No material could be returned until that study was completed.

5. FUTURE WORK ON THE SITE

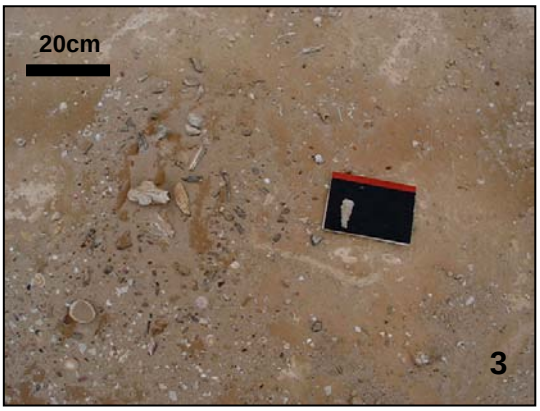
An arrangement exists to show the site to Professor Richard Klein from Stanford University at the end of July. Based on the outcome of this investigation, it may be possible for him to raise research funding to undertake the more detailed work on the site.

6. PROFESSIONAL TEAM

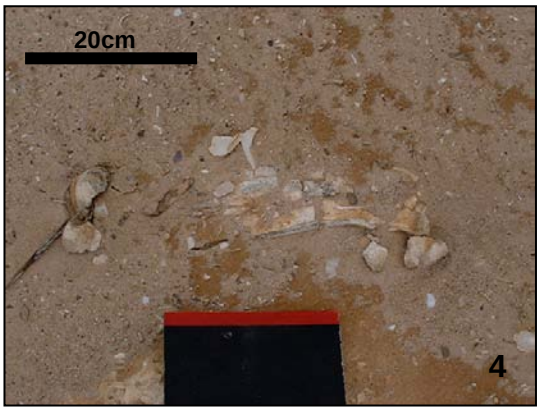
Fieldwork	Dave Halkett
	Tim Hart
Report	Dave Halkett

7. REFERENCES

Jerardino, A.M., Yates, R., Morris, A.G. & Seally, J.C. 1992. A dated human burial from the Namaqualand coast: observations on culture, biology and diet. South African Archaeological Bulletin, 47:75-81.



Fragmented fossil bone on the surface. A typical MSA flake lies on the book



Fragmented fossil long bone with pieces still in place