

The archaeological survey of the Leopard Mountain Cave

For Amafa aKwaZulu-Natali

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Archaeological Assessment Of Leopard Mountain Cave (LMC)

Amafa aKwaZulu-Natali requested Umlando to undertake a brief assessment of a cave at Leopard Mountain Game Lodge. This was undertaken due to a request from Mr Vivier from Leopard Mountain Game Lodge, who wanted the cave assessed in terms of tourist potential (i.e. general information).

The cave itself occurs near the top of the hill and is located in the Natal Sandstone Deposit. Access to the cave is difficult since the only access to the cave is via a short descent. There is a steep drop in front of the cave as well. The cave has a narrow opening ± 3 m wide. There are several fallen boulders in the entrance resulting in two “entrances”. Very little deposit occurs in this area. There is a small opening at the back left-hand side of the cave. This opening is ± 1.5 m in diameter and leads to a small cave, with several recesses. The cave roof is between 1 – 2 m high. Unfortunately this cave deposit is covered in bat guano and we did not enter, since we did not have masks¹. The artefactual material is located in this posterior cave.

A single dry stone wall occurs outside the cave.

The copper² beads associated with this cave were found by an employee and are now in the possession of the landowner. Apparently there are pottery sherds in the back of the cave as well. The occurrence of copper beads is documented in various historical and archaeological papers. They appear to be used as trade items, denoting status, ritual and/or ornamental value.

Significance of the cave

¹ Bat guano is considered to be toxic due to the amount of viruses/bacteria. We will enter the cave the next time we are in the area and have masks and gloves.

² We presume that it is bronze, and not brass, due to its weight, however the correct terminology would be to label the bead as copper until the alloy has been correctly identified. A metallurgist would need to identify the artefact.

The Difiqane in the 1820s resulted in large-scale movements of people. Oral traditions in the Pongola area suggest that villagers left their important possessions in caves during the Difiqane. The villagers were to return at a later stage and retrieve their possessions. However, few villagers did return to retrieve these goods. (see A. Smith. The trade of Delagoa Bay as a factor in Nguni politics 1750 - 1835). The copper beads may date to a much later period as well. The pottery associated with the deposit may be able to assist the dating of the site.

Another ritual associated with the storage of artefacts at the backs of caves is that one of rainmaking and/or appeasement of the ancestors. Many overhangs and caves in KZN have small areas with pottery sherds and/or other artefacts.

Either of the above scenarios does however indicate that the site has ancestral (-spiritual) value.

It is difficult to assess the use of LMC without further research. Given the types of artefacts associated with the cave, we would rate the site as of medium to high significance. However, in terms of pure research the cave would be of low significance if the bronze beads did not occur.

Management of LMC

I do not believe that LMC can be accessible to the public/tourists. The cave should not be placed as a tourist attraction, nor should people be allowed to enter the cave. If there is continual/uncontrolled access, then further copper beads may be removed from the site.

The landowner will need to obtain a "collectors permit" from Amafa aKwaZulu-Natali, for the few beads that he currently possesses. This permit should also include the stone tools that have been collected around the farm.

Stone Tools on Leopard Mountain Game Lodge

The stone tools on this farm are similar to those found in the Mkuze area. These are large stone tool scatters in a lag deposit. That is the tools date over a long time period and subsequently occur on similar geological horizons. These sites tend to be of low significance as there is little research value. The stone tools tend to be eroded and out of their primary context.