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## Southern Cape Coast of Africa – The Origin of Humankind’s Cognitive Ancestors

13 FEBRUARY 2017 BY [ALAN STRATON](#) [ADD YOUR COMMENT](#)



Researchers (from left) Prof Curtis Marean, a palaeoanthropologist from Arizona State University and honorary professor at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, together with Prof Richard Cowling and Dr Alastair Potts, director and national deputy-director of [NMMU](#)’s Centre for Coastal Palaeoscience, provided extensive research content for [NMMU](#)’s “Point of Human Origins” exhibition, Bayworld exhibit builder Marvin Carstens recreated a number of

artefacts found in or near the caves, including the skull and horns of a prehistoric buffalo.

We are all aware that the Sterkfontein caves are seen as the birthplace of humankind best represented by Mrs Ples – the most complete skull of an *Australopithecus africanus* specimen ever discovered. The skull was found encased in a rocky matrix at Sterkfontein in 1947, by palaeontologist Dr Robert Broom and his assistant, John Robinson. Some people call her the missing link.

Now an ancient cave at Pinnacle Point, Mossel Bay could point to the earliest cognitive humans dating back to between 195 and 200 000 years ago.

The evidence certainly points towards the evolution of cognitive perception in humankind having taken place along the Southern Cape Coast which would support the theory even more of the origins of humankind in shape, form and deed from Africa and more specifically from the stretch of coast from [Port Elizabeth](#) to [Cape Town](#).

What an incredible claim to fame and probably the one reason why “An African Sunset in Africa” is on all international tourists bucket list.

One of the pointers to cognitive thinking came from the sea life remains in the caves – in ancient times the caves looked out on a plain and not the sea so the occupants would have had to employ cognitive thinking to measure when the spring tides would occur. The three days of spring tide would yield the largest return on investment in terms of food gathering and also were a valuable source of Omega 3. These ancients would have had to know when the sun and moon were in alignment to plan their trip to the coast to harvest seafood.

Many people will know that I bore them with my theory about humankind and Mrs Ples but now prepare to be even more bored/bewildered. I asked Prof Curtis Marean if he could fill in the gap between Mrs Ples of 2 Million years ago and his and his team’s discovery of Cognitive Humankind along the Southern Cape Coast around 200 000 years ago. My theory is that Mrs Ples and her buddies wandered North and South and evolved into modern man so that humankind’s shape and form was from Africa and more specifically South Africa. What a coup for South Africa as we also claim the Southern Coast of South Africa as the COGNITIVE spark for all humankind!

**He answered thus:**



*Prof Curtis Marean – Modern Evolution in a Nutshell*

Discovered over the past decade, archaeologists have uncovered critical information about our species in many caves along South Africa’s Southern Cape coastline.

Inter-disciplinary teams of researchers from Arizona State University in the United States, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and many other institutions have been collecting archaeological, botanical, geological, climate-related and other data in and around the Pinnacle Point caves near Mossel Bay, where it is believed that a small group of humans survived an Ice Age between 195,000 and 123,000 years ago, and could very likely be the ancestors of everyone alive today.

They have also uncovered an array of evidence that suggests modern humans first developed intellectually along this piece of coast: artefacts found show they used fire to engineer weapons out of stone, used red ochre for purposes of decoration, and perhaps even read the lunar cycles to know when the tides would be low enough to forage for shellfish. This advanced intellectual development may have played a key role in the survival of our species.

These groundbreaking findings are now being showcased in a unique exhibition at [NMMU](#), titled “Point of Human Origin”. It is being formally launched on 13 February at a closed event at the university’s Exhibition Centre on NMMU’s Second Avenue Campus – and will be open to the public from February 14 until the end of the year.

The exhibition is based on the research undertaken through the South African Coast

Palaeoclimate, Palaeoenvironment, Palaeoecology, and Palaeoanthropology (SACP4) project, which is led by palaeoanthropologist Prof Curtis Marean, a world leader in his field, from the Institute of Human Origins at Arizona State University. SACP4 is funded by the National Science Foundation, Templeton Foundation, and Hyde Family Foundations (United States). Marean is an honorary professor at NMMU.

NMMU botany professor Richard Cowling – an internationally-acclaimed researcher – is a co-principal investigator in the SACP4 project. In 2015, Cowling established the Centre for Coastal Palaeoscience at NMMU, which is linked to the SACP4 project.

What is also groundbreaking about the SACP4 project – and likely to set a precedent for other major archaeological explorations – is that the research group is not just relying on its own limited understanding to tell the story about how things were. Instead, they are using state-of-the-art technology to recreate the palaeoscape (the ancient landscape), based on the archaeological artefacts they find, along with the flora and fauna in the area. They then create a model of the behaviour of Stone Age humans by “releasing” them as “agents” within this computer-simulated landscape, checking how they may have gone about foraging for the available food resources.

“We are using the agent-based model to develop hypotheses about how people would have reacted to resources, how they would have obtained them, the success rates of their hunting, how they would have moved around, how many people would have lived and foraged in a 10km radius, and the optimal group sizes for hunting,” said Cowling.

“This is a very different approach – and it is a world leader in that sense.”

A number of articles about SACP4 have been published in the world’s leading science publications, among them Science, Nature and Scientific American.

The exhibition includes a recreation of part of Pinnacle Point’s cave PP13B – the handiwork of Bayworld exhibit builder Marvin Carstens, who has over 20 years’ experience in exhibit building, including being contracted by National Geographic and various museums and institutions, to design and create both static and interactive exhibitions.

For this exhibition, Carstens has also recreated a number of artefacts found in or near the caves, including the skull and horns of a prehistoric buffalo.

Dr Erich C. Fisher, an Assistant Research Scientist at the Institute of Human Origins at ASU and an expert in archaeoinformatics (computational archaeology), provided many of the photographs on display as well as several videos. He also co-created the exhibition’s touch screen virtual tour of one of Pinnacle Point’s excavation sites.

Apart from photographs, information panels and video footage about the caves, visitors can access additional information via their mobile phones, at the exhibition’s “augmented reality” points.

Marean, Cowling, NMMU Dean of Arts Prof Rose Boswell as well as Dr Peter Nilssen, who co-discovered the caves, will participate in a panel discussion at the launch, in which they will debate how and why the human ability to cooperate evolved.

“There were so many people who all contributed passionately to this exhibition,” said exhibition curator Christelle Grobler, of NMMU’s Archives and Exhibition Centre.

The exhibition, housed at NMMU’s Exhibition and Archives Centre on the university’s Second Avenue Campus, is open to the public from February 14, from 9am to 4pm on Mondays to Fridays. The exhibition will run until the end of the year.



The view of the ocean from Pinnacle Point’s cave PP13B. At the time Middle Stone Age people lived there, the ocean was several kilometres away.

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Chief Cook, Bottle Washer and Broom Mechanic at [MyPE](#)

Passionate about Port Elizabeth and definitely NOT packing for Perth. Alan's ethos is epitomised in the words of Nelson Mandela; "*I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the idea of a democratic and free society. If need be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.*" [See more articles by Alan.](#)

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