

# New centre at university points to origin of mankind

## Mossel Bay cave dig gives insight into life of early humans

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**A** NEW centre has been launched at NMMU, celebrating breakthrough research pointing to the origin of mankind on the coast between Cape Town and Port Elizabeth.

Focusing on the historic archaeological dig at Pinnacle Point near Mossel Bay, the Point of Human Origin Exhibition Centre features fascinating artefacts and uses augmented reality technology to show how early humans used them and interacted with their environment.

The centre showcases the work by a team from Arizona State University in the US and NMMU whose finds indicate that a small band of hardy early humans on the Cape south and east coast survived the ice age 150 000 years ago to spread throughout Africa and the world.

Top NMMU researcher Professor Richard Cowling, who is on the team, said the number of early humans had at that point dipped perilously low.

"There were maybe a couple of hundred or a couple of thousand. We would have classified them today as a Red Data species."

Their environment and their developing ingenuity, however, is what saved them.

Project leader Professor Curtis Marean said the supply of food in the area had likely been unparalleled at that time.

"There was a coastal plain rich with game species, the richest intertidal zone in the world with a wealth of shellfish species – and lastly there were bulbs. It was the perfect three legs of the food table."



**HUMANKIND'S GROUND ZERO:** Work on Pinnacle Cave near Mossel Bay began a decade ago

Not only were the shellfish rich in omega three, perfect for brain development, working out how to harvest them was also key.

Pinnacle and other caves were at that time divided from the coast by this plain and the challenge of having to work out when to trek to the sea to harvest the shellfish helped them develop their brains, he said.

"The only way they could have done it was to work out the phases of the moon that coincided with spring low tide which was the best time to access the rocks."

Although the bulbs were plentiful, they were not easy to harvest and prepare, Cowling explained.

"It was and still is the richest area

in the world for bulbs. But many were poisonous or needed to be leached of their tannins. So once again it was a challenge but they worked out ways to survive and to flourish and this helped them to develop."

Another NMMU project member, Dr Alastair Potts, said the plains game had included giant species of zebra, warthog and buffalo.

Spears with fire-sharpened stone blades were used to hunt these animals, developing their ingenuity still further.

The centre at NMMU's 2nd Avenue Campus in Summerstrand is open to the public from today until the end of the year.



**ENVIRONMENTAL KEY:** The new exhibition at NMMU's 2nd Avenue Campus features artefacts discovered in and around Pinnacle Cave



**STARTING POINT:** The team behind the Point of Human Origin Exhibition, from left, project leader Professor Curtis Marean, from Arizona University, Professor Richard Cowling and Dr Alastair Potts of NMMU, and exhibition creator Marvin Carstens  
Pictures: BRIAN WITBOOI