

RICHARDS BAY MINERALS' CULTURAL HERITAGE PROGRAMME

A remarkable archaeological survey operating on the dunes in RBM's mining lease area has, since 1994, been steadily unearthing the heritage of the people of Mbonambi who live there. This unique partnership between RBM, a rural community and the heritage authorities of KwaZulu-Natal took on a new dimension in 1998 with the opening of the Mananga Heritage Centre, an archaeological interpretative centre named after the dune where the local *amakhosi* (chiefs) are buried.

Described as a living memorial combining the Western concept of a museum with the truly Africa sense of history, tradition and ancestry, the Mananga Heritage Centre explores the history of the Mbonambi community dating from the Early Iron Age. User-friendly exhibits and fascinating examples of artefacts which have been uncovered on the dunes are housed in a series of traditional thatched rondavels with clay walls and floors of polished anthill and dung. Growing within the stick-built fence surrounding the complex are a *muthi* garden with traditional herbs and a mini plantation of Shakan bananas favoured by the legendary King.



King Goodwill Zwelethini opens the Mananga Heritage Centre in 1998. With him is the RBM managing director at the time, Keith Rumble.

It will, in time, become a valuable educational resource for local schools and a living cultural monument where traditional crafts will be made and sold.

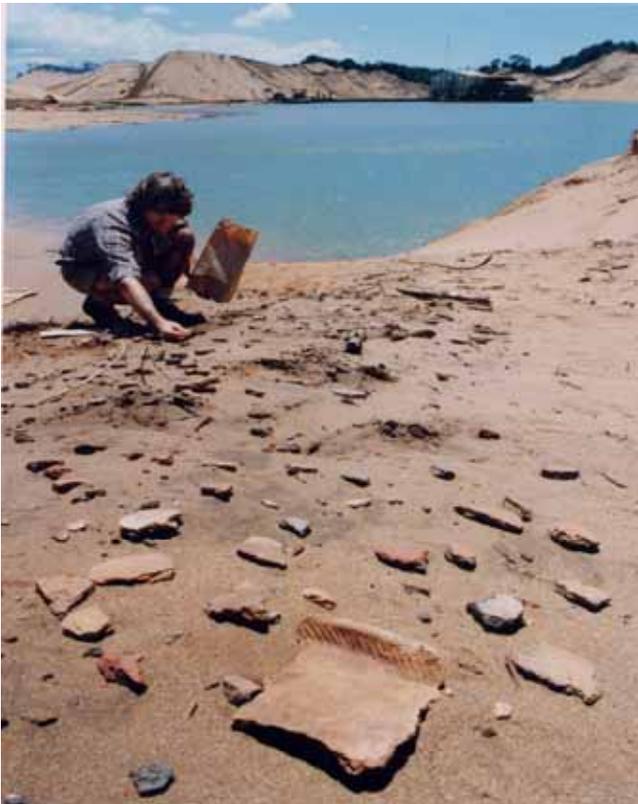
The building of the centre grew out of an ongoing project that has been undertaken for the last nine years by archaeologists and anthropologists of the Natal Museum and Amafa aKwaZulu-Natali (formerly the KwaZulu-Natal Monuments council) who have been contracted by RBM to assess the cultural resources exposed during mining.

This has involved excavating or recording over 160 archaeological sites spanning 1700 years and conducting a two-year project to record *amasiko*, the dwindling centuries-old African tradition of preserving history via oral story-telling, told by the wisdom keepers of the Mbonambi and Sokhulu tribal authorities.

The archaeological sites have been divided into three main periods:

- The Early Iron Age (AD300-1000) when the formative farmers of southern Africa kept domestic animals, cultivated crops and manifested a complex hierarchical society and sophisticated iron working technology. The people spoke a Bantu language and decorated ceramic vessels distinctively.
- The Late Iron Age (AD 1000-1830) which heralded a dramatic change in society. The sites tended to be situated on higher locations such as hilltops, and homesteads were spatially reorganised. According to Gavin Anderson of the Natal Museum, few late iron age sites have been systematically excavated in ZwaZulu-Natal, and this time period remains a relative mystery other than that, in the Richards Bay area, it includes the Northern Nguni (colloquially referred to as Tsonga) and some of the Zulu occupation of the area.
- The Historical Period from 1830 to the present which coincides approximately with the settlement of European colonists in the province.

Some of the sites are shell middens or refuse dumps outside former homesteads. These have stratified deposits which can show changes of food through time. Shellfish like oysters can be used for oxygen isotope analysis to indicate changes in sea temperatures, while fish bones from nearby lakes may show variances in salinity over the years.



Archaeological work in progress on the dunes.

Pottery shards found on the sites reveal a number of styles indicative of different entho-linguistic groups, as do necklaces, beads, smoking pipes and tools. Many of the sites have hearths or fireplaces. All of these features and artefacts tell a story about the lifestyle of the inhabitants, providing information on subsistence patterns, environmental change and the impact of social activities on the resources of the area.

The archaeological remains in the lease areas appear to be confined to the well-vegetated dune crests and the intervening valleys which are extremely difficult to access. Consequently, any attempts to locate sites prior to mining proved to be an almost impossible task. The archaeologists discovered that the most productive time to identify, sample and map the sites (which lie about 30cm below the vegetation) is

after the dunes have been cleared of vegetation and topsoil just prior to mining. A week or two after the vegetation is removed, they literally walk onto the exposed sites.

People have suggested that the archaeological sites should not be damaged by mining, but the Natal Museum believes that this is not the case because the coastal dune cordon is biotically active and undisturbed sites are not preserved indefinitely. Mining has therefore created the opportunity to uncover sites that could otherwise have been lost forever.

RBM funded the archaeological programme in the belief that it was essential to ensure a balance between the protection of heritage sites and commercial development.