

BIANNUAL NEWSLETTER OF THE PALAEOONTOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

(HALFJAARLIKSE NUUSBRIEF VAN DIE PALEONTOLOGIESE VERENIGING VAN SUIDER AFRIKA)

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Front cover: A beautiful, and much photographed, trackway site on the Eccra-Beaufort contact in Natal. See John Hancox's contribution.

EDITORIAL

Halo all and welcome to 2006! I hope it will be good year for all of you! Scanning through and reflecting on the contributions in this issue, with news on all the palaeontological happenings of 2005, it once again affirmed to me what a big year the last one was for palaeontology in South Africa. Several big palaeontological events took place with both the *Albany Museum* and *BPI* celebrating 'significant-number' birthdays, the launching of visitors centers in places as far apart as the Cradle Heritage Area and Nieu Bethesda, and much more.

Turning to 2006, the one thing that immediately comes to mind that this is another biennial year, meaning that the PSSA will be holding its *14th Biennial Meeting* (as if you needed reminding), this time hosted by the Albany Museum in Grahamstown. As anyone who has ever been involved in organizing a conference knows, it is the last minute changes that give you grey hair. So please take note of the call for papers in this issue and remember the deadline for abstract submissions are barely three months away!

Also included in this issue is feedback from Bruce Rubidge, PSSA president, regarding issues that impact on all palaeontologists in South Africa. After you have worked your way through all the news and fun stuff, please read through this so that you are up to date with recent developments. If you have any comments or ideas, please voice them and contact Bruce or anybody else on the executive.

Thank you to everybody who contributed to this issue. Remember to keep some news in the tank for the middle-of-the-year issue. Lastly in our drive to keep on improving *Palnews*, Ludwig Döhne has come up with another innovative change to the electronic *PalNews* format. Please let us know what you think!
Until next time...

Johann

PSSA 2006 CONFERENCE



The **14th Biennial Conference** of the PSSA is to be held at Rhodes University and the *Albany Museum* in Grahamstown.

The conference will run from the evening of **Thursday 7th September** to the afternoon of **Sunday 10th** followed by a two-day field excursion on **Monday 11th** and **Tuesday 12th September, 2006**.

Conference proceedings will be held in the modern Edengrove Complex (Blue) on the Rhodes University campus, behind the Albany Museum. Registration costs: Members **R650**; Students **R350**.

Call for papers and posters:

We welcome papers and posters to be presented on any aspect of palaeontology.

Abstracts must be submitted by email to rose.adendorff@ru.ac.za no later than **15th July 2006**.

PRESIDENT'S CORNER - BRUCE RUBIDGE:

With the PSSA conference coming up in September and at the same time the BGM of the Society, there are some issues which we need to discuss and address. I bring them up here for you to think about in the meantime.

1. You will recall that in August 2005 I canvassed opinion amongst the PSSA membership after we became aware of the Gazette Notice "*Fees for Permit Applications made to the South Africa Heritage Resources Agency*". I received many replies. Based on these, on behalf of the PSSA I sent the following letter to the CEO of SAHRA Mr P. Buthelezi. I never received any response from him but do know that he received my letter. I have subsequently heard that he has overruled my response saying that only one palaeontologist wrote to complain.

31 August 2005

Mr P Buthelezi

CEO

South African Heritage Resources Agency

Box 4637

Cape Town

8000

Dear Mr Buthelezi

Proposed schedule of fees for SAHRA Permit applications

Please excuse the belated nature of this letter, but the Palaeontological Society of Southern Africa (PSSA) only very recently became aware of the Gazette Notice "Fees for Permit Applications made to the South African Heritage Resources Agency" and we had to receive responses from our membership.

The overwhelming membership of the PSSA question why SAHRA should be levying fees for palaeontological excavation permit applications when the research being undertaken under the permit is to the benefit of South Africa.

The main problem however is over the application fees for temporary export of fossils. Overseas scientists who take fossils on loan take them for research purposes and because they undertake preparation on the fossils they return them in a better state than they were when they left the country. For this reason curators of fossil collections like fossils to be taken on loan as it means that the South Africa institution does not have to bear the huge cost of preparation which is required for any fossil before it can be researched.

Curators of South African collections are responsible for submitting permit applications to SAHRA for people from overseas wishing to take fossils on loan for research purposes. This means that the South African institution is liable to pay

the fee to SAHRA and then has to recover the fee from the researcher who is overseas. Although all curators insist that material be carried personally (i.e. not via mail or commercial courier), often the specimens are carried by colleagues and not directly by the researchers themselves. This means that the researcher wishing to borrow the specimen may not even visit the country and this will make the task of recouping the amount of the fee that of the curator of the SA Institution. In addition, because of exchange rates, etc., the recovery of money will involve a great amount of unnecessary additional bureaucracy for museum curators, who do not have the infrastructure to handle this additional administrative load. It is important to bear in mind that the South African researchers are also dependent on loans of fossil material from overseas institutions for research purposes, which is done very much by reciprocal agreement. If South Africans suddenly have to pay Dollar or Pound based fees in retaliation, we may end up unable to afford to do research on comparable material from other countries.

On these grounds we request you please to have re-look at this proposal and especially the section dealing with the fee for the temporary export of fossils.

Yours sincerely

Bruce Rubidge

President Palaeontological Society of Southern Africa

2. Following the mandate given to the council of the PSSA to do all in their power to change the legislation of provincialisation of the issuing of permits by PHRA'S and rather have them issued by a single national authority, I have spoken to the minister of Arts and Culture and also wrote the following letter to him. I received an almost immediate reply to my letter saying that the matter will be brought to the minister's attention, but have subsequently heard nothing more.

14 October 2005

Dr. Z.P. Jordan
Minister of Arts and Culture
Private Bag 899
PRETORIA
0001

Dear Dr Jordan

SAHRA fossil collecting permits

Following our brief discussion at Sterkfontein in the Cradle of Humankind, I am writing to you as President of the Palaeontological Society of Southern Africa in connection with current legislation relating to permits to collect fossils by professional palaeontologists. This is important as Palaeontology

is one of the scientific fields of study which DST has identified to set up a special science platform.

*At the biennial meeting of the Palaeontological Society of Southern Africa in 2000, the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) presented the new permit system to the palaeontologists of South Africa where it was mooted that permitting for fossils would in the future be undertaken by Provincial Authorities (PHRAS). On that occasion the society unanimously responded that it wanted permits to be issued by a **single National authority**. This was strongly reiterated at subsequent meetings of the society in 2002 and 2004. Since 2000 numerous letters have been written to various ministers and MECs charged with heritage responsibilities, and apart from Western Cape Province we have had no response to our numerous letters on several occasions.*

The problem is that the act now requires that all palaeontological permits must be issued by PHRA'S and not by a single national authority. The Palaeontological Society of Southern Africa is deeply perturbed that its advice has not been heeded and that administrators have put legislation into effect which goes against the requirements of experienced scientists. Palaeontological heritage is very different to that of Archaeology and the same rules must not apply to both. Archaeological heritage is site specific and limited to a particular occupation site, whereas palaeontological heritage is

much older (long before humans) and occurs in rock formations which cross provincial boundaries. It is therefore natural heritage and not cultural heritage as in the case of archaeology.

*The reasons for wanting a **national** rather than a provincial system are as follows:*

- Fossil-bearing strata extend across our country and specific deposits under research are not contained within provincial borders. Thus any researcher would have to apply for several permits from different provincial bodies in order to undertake a single study.*
- The scientist would have to submit separate reports for each permit on a regular basis*
- Dealing with more than one authority for any one project increases and duplicates time consuming administrative duties, at all levels and for all parties, leading to inefficiency and confusion.*
- The Palaeontological Society of Southern Africa (PSSA) believes that such a cumbersome system would impact negatively on future palaeontological research, as well as environmental surveys, in South Africa.*
- In addition it could, and almost certainly will, lead to inter-provincial academic rivalry and discourage collaborative research.*
- The National Monuments Council Act of 1966 granted Archaeological and Palaeontological applications under a single permit system. Archaeological sites are limited to*

small geographical areas, whereas palaeontological sites, that contain no human-derived artefacts, are global in extent and significance. It is clear that different criteria should apply when granting permits for these two disciplines.

- Palaeontology is a global science, because rock formations even cross continental boundaries, and South Africa holds a prominent international position in this respect.*

*The professional palaeontologists of South Africa, through the Palaeontological Society, wish permits to be issued by a **central national office**. A possibility to address this issue within the framework of current legislation would be to declare palaeontological sites as Grade 1 Resources ("Heritage resources with qualities so exceptional that they are of specific national significance"). The new Act stipulates that fossils form part of the National Estate and this proposal is therefore in line with the status which the Act accords fossils.*

The permitting system in the past required us to write a single annual report to SAHRA and because I serve on the relevant SAHRA committees I know that very few reports are up to date. SAHRA has in the past not been able to call up one report --- what chance have they now of getting in nine reports every year from each researcher. The new system is a bureaucratic nightmare and totally impractical. I ask you for guidance to get

a system in place that will ensure that palaeontological research in South Africa will be able to continue in the future and not be hindered by unnecessary beaurocracy which only adds to the frustration of all people.

I, or any members of the Society will be keen to meet with you at a convenient date to you do discuss the way forward to sort out this problematic situation.

Yours sincerely

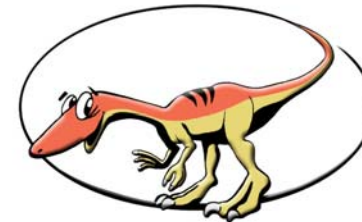
Professor BRUCE RUBIDGE

President: Palaeontological Society of Southern Africa

NEWS FROM:

ALBANY MUSEUM - BILLY de KLERK & ROSE PREVEC

Must be an age since we last submitted news from the Eastern Cape, so here goes. In late June I was invited to participate in the "Kirkwood Wildsfees 2005" and set up a fossil display to highlight the dinosaurs that have been found in the Kirkwood Formation sediments over the years. The steering committee of the annual agricultural show adopted "Nqwebasurus" (Kirky), the small theropod dinosaur (coelurosaur), that had been found in the vicinity, as the festival theme. As some of you may have noticed, Rose and I have also adopted this cute logo for the PSSA'2006 conference which will be held in Grahamstown in September 2006.



By far the more important focus of activity during 2005 has been the celebration of the **Albany Museums 150th Anniversary**. To this end a concerted effort was made to complete our palaeontological gallery titled - "Fossil Heritage of the Eastern Cape". A huge effort, on the part



Mike Raath & Billy de Klerk at the Albany Museum's birthday festivities - photo courtesy F. Thackeray.

of a number of people, went into this project which eventually resulted in the official opening which took place on the 9th September 2005 - the closest date to the Museum's official birthday 11th Sept. Dr Mike Raath of the BPI was invited to officially open the gallery and also present the *Hewitt Memorial Lecture*. This he did with style and flair and we were pleased to see a very large turnout at his lecture. Mike had the locals in Grahamstown

spellbound with his "*Collections, Cold Clues and Conundrums: the tales told by old bones.*" The new palaeontology display in the Museum has been well received will now provide a wonderful educational and tourism resource. In a nutshell the gallery represents a "walk though time" depicting the fossils and the environmental reconstructions of both the animals/plants and landscapes as preserved in the four major sedimentary rock sequences found in the Eastern Cape - Cape, Karoo, Uitenhage and Algoa Group rocks. Palaeo-artwork was provided local artists Gill Maylam and Lindy Wright and by Gerhard Marx, now resident in Oudtshoorn. The majority of life-size animal reconstructions were done by Terence Coffin-Grey of Jeffery's Bay.

Once this project had been completed I joined forces with Bruce Rubidge and Ian McKay at the BPI to set up the "*Kitching Fossil Exploration Centre*" at Nieu Bethesda, adjacent to the "Owl House" in the central Karoo. Some display elements, like landscape paintings and fleshed out therapsids models in the Albany Museum gallery, were duplicated and placed on display in Nieu Bethesda. Hats off to Bruce Rubidge for raising the necessary finances to establish the "multi-purpose" Karoo fossils display centre.

Not only has it provided jobs for five young unemployed people as palaeo tour-guides, but it has also ensured that the fossils exposed in the Gats River are kept under watchful eye and hopefully the vandalism of these fossil will come to an end. The palaeo tour guides have been fully trained at the BPI at Wits and since its opening on the 27th November 2005, take tourists, visiting Nieu Bethesda and the "Owl House", on a walking tour of the Gats River bed where a number of well exposed fossils are evident. Visitors are then shown the interpretive centre where they hopefully get a better idea of what the Karoo looked like 250 million years ago. Well worth a visit!

Dr Rose Prevec (née Adendorff) was awarded her Ph.D. in June 2005 by the University of the Witwatersrand, and has taken up a postdoctoral fellowship in the Geology Department at Rhodes University. She is continuing her work on taxonomic and biostratigraphic aspects of *Glossopteris* leaves, as well as her studies of Permian plant-insect interactions with Dr Conrad Labandiera from the Smithsonian Institution in the USA. She is also involved in continuing investigations of the changes in the flora and plant-insect interactions that occurred across the Permian Triassic boundary, with the international

SAPTTE working group. Rose was invited to attend a workshop in July at the Smithsonian Institution as part of an initiative to explore global climatic changes, as reflected by fossil floras, during the Late Carboniferous/Early Permian Periods. Recently, she presented a paper on her Ph.D. work on glossopterid ovulate fructifications at the Gondwana 12 congress held in Mendoza, Argentina.

**JENNIFER BOTHA, NATIONAL MUSEUM,
BLOEMFONTEIN**

Since July 2005, I've been working on the biodiversity of the *Lystroraurus* Assemblage Zone and recovery rates following the end-Permian extinction. In August I attended the *5th International Bone Diagenesis Meeting* in Cape Town and presented a paper on *Cynognathus* and *Diademodon* tooth enamel chemistry using Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy and stable light isotopes. The FTIR analysis revealed an apatite structure similar to that of living reptiles and the isotopes indicated differing responses to climatic fluctuations.

In November, I attended the *Gondwana 12* meeting in Mendoza, Argentina and presented a paper on the Early Triassic vertebrate recovery after the end-Permian extinction in the Karoo Basin. After the conference, I spent a month travelling around Peru before returning home in December.

I'm still sorting out the fossil collection at the museum, with assistance from colleagues from the BPI and abroad, which has been much appreciated. At the moment, myself and Dr Sean Modesto are working on a *Sauropareion* skeleton and in February we plan on returning to the locality to search for more specimens.

Jennifer

FRANCIS THACKERAY (TRANSVAAL MUSEUM, NFI)

A new **Visitors Interpretation Centre** was opened at the Sterkfontein Caves on September 29. The facility has been named in honour of Professor Phillip Tobias, who celebrated his 80th birthday in the company of the Deputy President, Phumzile Mlambo-Nguka. To mark the occasion, the original "Mrs Ples" was taken back to Sterkfontein for temporary display. Stephany Potze and

Francis Thackeray accompanied the fossil under tight security, from the Transvaal Museum to the caves where an excellent new interpretation centre has been established. After the celebrations, the fossil was quietly taken to the exact spot where it had been discovered by Dr Robert Broom and John Robinson in April 1947. This was an historic event as it was the first time that the fossil had been brought back to the cave since its discovery.



Photograph: "The original Mrs Ples returns to Sterkfontein, with Dr Francis Thackeray and Isaac Makei. Courtesy of Sterkfontein caves, Maropeng a'Afrika".

BPI PALAEOLOGY

The past year, our 60th jubilee, has been an active one for the BPI as staff and students were involved in various activities in a number of different countries. A major development at Wits is the establishment of a *Rock Art Museum* in The Wedge building, alongside the section of The Wedge which is currently used to store the Caenozoic collections of the BPI, and accommodates the offices of Lee Berger and Lucinda Backwell as well as postgraduate students. Building activities for the rock art museum have disrupted palaeontological activities at the Wedge this year as, apart from the noise, a new roof has been erected on the entire building. This meant that the entire ground floor of the BPI section of The Wedge had to be cleared, and staff and students moved to the old BPI Geophysics building. For a while the collections became inaccessible. The building activities have been inconvenient, but is part of progress and the BPI now looks forward to being part of the new *Origins Centre* at Wits.

-Research-

Fernando Abdala has been very active with a number of projects. After the recently published account of the cynodont fauna from the Subzone C of the *Cynognathus*

AZ (with **J. Hancox** and **J. Neveling**) he has a description in press of a new species of trirachodontid *Langbergia modisei* from the Subzone A of the *Cynognathus* Assemblage Zone (in collaboration with J. Neveling and J. Welman). This paper also presents a phylogeny of Gondwanan gomphodont cynodonts.

The re-description of the procynosuchid cynodont *Parathrinaxodon proops* from the Late Permian of Tanzania (with **Matt Allinson**) is also in press. This paper includes a discussion about the palate in Late Permian cynodonts and a faunal comparison between the Late Permian Kawinga fauna of Tanzania with Karoo Late Permian faunas.

The description of the world's oldest cynodont from the *Tropidostoma* Assemblage Zone of the Karoo Basin in collaboration with **Jennifer Botha** and **Roger Smith** has now been submitted. This paper presents a phylogeny which includes basal cynodonts and several therocephalia, and concludes that Therocephalia is not a monophyletic group. While on the subject of cynodonts Fernando is in the final stages of completing the very-ultra-delayed re-description of *Platyacranellus elegans*, a quite strange and poorly known cynodont from the *Lystrorhynchus* Assemblage

Zone which includes an extensive phylogeny of late therapsids, including therocephalians, non-mammaliaform cynodonts and basal Mammaliaformes.

The Latin fringe of the BPI has been very active with Fernando Abdala, Juan Cisneros and Maria Claudia Malabarba (from Brazil) publishing a joint description of new pareiasaurid material from the Brazilian Late Permian and a discussion on the implications of this find for Late Permian biostratigraphy of the Brazilian faunas. In addition Juan, Roger Smith and Fernando have submitted a manuscript on a faunal aggregation of a galesaurid cynodont and an owenettid procolophonian in the Early Triassic of South Africa. In this paper they proposed that this is possibly the earliest evidence of shelter-sharing among tetrapods.

In addition to fossils, Fernando is also involved in work on living mammals and together with D. Flores and N Giannini (Argentinean mammalogists) is looking at the skull of the australidelphian marsupial *Dasyurus albopunctatus*. They have a paper in press comparing the cranial ontogeny of this Australasian marsupial with those of South America.

Juan Cisneros, who is very busy trying to complete his PhD thesis, has also been working on projects with colleges from this and the other side of the Atlantic. Some projects are related to his thesis subject of procolophonids, but he has also been involved with the description of a new Pleistocene fauna from his home country, El Salvador which was published in December. In November Juan joined many representatives from South Africa, at the *Gondwana Conference* held in Mendoza, Argentina. At that meeting he presented a paper synonymising all *Procolophon* species, even although they show many differences. Juan plans to complete his PhD thesis by mid-year and then to return to South America.

Marion Bamford took sabbatical leave for six months in the earlier part of the year and spent most of the time in the field on various projects. In February she went to Kenya and joined Prof **Jack Harris** and his students, **David Braun**, **Jack McCoy** and **Hannah Carter-Menns**, from Rutgers University, New Brunswick. It took three days to drive from Nairobi northwards along the east side of Lake Turkana to their field camp near Ileret, just south of the Ethiopian border. Because the daily temperatures were over 40 degrees C they only excavated or collected early

in the mornings and late in the afternoons. Fossil woods had previously not been reported from there but their team recovered nearly 400 specimens from four strata spanning 2.2 Ma to 10 ka. Preliminary identifications of the wood and the fossil fauna show that the older deposit was much wetter in the past with hippo, crocodiles, alcelaphines and reduncines living in the pools and riverine or swamp forest. Hominid modified bone and artefacts occur in the same levels. They also made collections near the Leakey Field Camp at Koobi Fora and enjoyed swimming in Lake Turkana.

In March and April Marion teamed up with **Charles Peters** to do some work on modern wetlands (Seekoivlei, Okavango Delta, Lake Ngami) as part of modelling and modern analogue work for the East African palaeoenvironmental reconstructions. This was cemented by the discussions at the *3rd Workshop on the Olduvai Landscape and Palaeoanthropology Project* at the University of Barcelona in early May which afforded an opportunity to present and integrate their diverse approaches (botany, geology, palaeontology).

Two palaeobotanists from the Swedish Museum of Natural History, **David Cantrill** and **Hervé Sauquet**, joined her for fieldwork at Kleinzee and visits to the fossil plant collections in the South African Museum and Albany Museum. They were specifically looking at the diversity of early angiosperms in southern Africa and comparing them with Antarctic and Australian floras. In spite of heavy rain, the two visitors enjoyed trips to Kirstenbosch and Cape Point to see the modern flora.

Marion further spent five weeks at Olduvai Gorge in July-August with a small group of scientists - **Rob Blumenschine**, **Fidel Masao**, **Jackson Njau**, **Ian Stanistreet** and **Harald Stollhofen**. With such a small team of scientists and support staff only a few trenches were excavated so there was plenty of uninterrupted time to write papers in the solar-powered field laboratory. Then it was back to city life and lecturing to undergraduates, tests and exams for the rest of the year. Marion will take the rest of the 12 months sabbatical owed to her, early in 2006 and has planned more fieldwork.

Rose Adendorff and **Conrad Labandeira** (Smithsonian Institution) have spent several weeks at BPI working

through the *Glossopteris* leaf morpho-typing and insect damage. This is a sideshoot of the floral and insect diversity changes over the Permo-Triassic boundary project that Rose, Johann Neveling and Marion are doing with Conrad, **Hallie Sims** and **Bob Gastaldo** (see Gastaldo et al 2005, *Palaios* 20, 479-497). Dr **Sarah Fowell**, a palynologist from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, is visiting BPI for her sabbatical. She has been looking at some Early Jurassic samples for Adam Yates and also some Permian material. **Ray Renaut** continues to count pollen and spores for us even though she has settled into Cape Town and life in the Cape.

John Hancox moved from the Geology Department to a twelve month contract research position at the BPI and has been active in a number of research projects. With **Johann Neveling** and Bruce Rubidge he has been researching the fauna of the *Cynognathus* Assemblage Zone and their relevance to the fluvial sedimentology, basin development and biostratigraphy of the Burgersdorp Formation. He has also, at last, been working on the completion of the manuscripts describing *Angonisaurus* and a new shansiodontid from this biozone. Work on the new Early Triassic archosaur from the lowermost

Cynognathus Assemblage Zone is underway with **David Gower**, who spent a week at the BPI earlier in the year.

A project on Late Jurassic ammonites and other interesting invertebrates from near Nacala in northern Mozambique is being undertaken in collaboration with **Herbie Klinger** who has identified a number of new taxa and has important implications for correlations with the Madagascan ammonite faunas.

Under the supervision of John and Lee, **Robyn Pickering** completed her M.Sc. describing the cave site at Gladysvale, particularly the younger fill and this will lead to several important papers.

In June 2005 **Lucinda Backwell** began excavations at two Late Quaternary inland South African sites. Her aim was to explore the role of artefacts and bones in calibrating environmental sequences of climate change. The Wonderkrater peat mound, which provides the pollen sequence on which South African climate history is based, was excavated in collaboration with **Zoë Henderson** and her team from the National Museum, Bloemfontein. The second site, Heelbo, is located in an eroding donga on a

game farm near Rosendal in the eastern Free State. This site, excavated with **Christine Steininger**, **James Brink** and **Johann Neveling**, appears to be the earliest evidence of a game drive in southern Africa, with in the order of 60 wildebeest preserved in one deposit. In August Lucinda and **Francesco d'Errico** launched the book *From Tools to Symbols. From Early Hominids to Modern Humans*, the outcome of a conference held two years earlier in honour of Philip Tobias. In September she gave a public lecture at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, before moving on to *The World of Elephants Congress* at the mammoth site in Hot Springs, South Dakota. There she presented the results of research on the earliest use of elephant bone - a reappraisal of the evidence from Olduvai Gorge. She spent December in France, at the University of Bordeaux with Francesco d'Errico, conducting ongoing research on the identification and use of early hominid bone tools. They used an interferometer to acquire 3D features to quantify surface roughness, and compare results between sites, on experimental bone tools used in different tasks, and bones modified by non-human agents and processes.

Mike Raath continues with his mammoth task of managing the collections at Wits University, but between times manages to get some time for research. The multi-authored paper under the lead authorship of Robert Reisz describing the clutch of Early Jurassic dinosaur eggs from the Golden Gate National Park, which were originally discovered by James Kitching, stirred up a great deal of international media interest and has led to even more exciting discoveries in the field. This project will continue after Mike retires at the end of 2006 when **Adam Yates** will be taking over the BPI role in this project. A major task for Mike over the past year, with the dedicated assistance of two Honours students Zubair Jinnah and Bonita de Klerk, has been the re-organisation of the Karoo fossil store. New steel shelves were installed and all specimens were checked back onto the shelving units and their new storage locations recorded.

Adam Yates has continued to make discoveries amongst the dusty boxes of various collections around the country. One of these is a new predatory dinosaur found in the collections at the BPI, this large animal was a relative of the Early Jurassic *Dilophosaurus* from North America and China. Another recent discovery in the collection of the

National Museum is the first indisputable evidence for rauisuchians in the Triassic of South Africa. The presence of these had long been suspected but no one had found any incontrovertible remains. Adam has also continued his collaboration with **Matt Bonnan** (University of Western Illinois) and **Johann Neveling** in excavating new sauropodomorph dinosaurs from the Elliot Formation. He has also spent three weeks in China studying the Early Jurassic dinosaur fossils of that country. Hopefully a greater collaboration between South Africa and China can be forged.

Bruce Rubidge continues with his project on the lower Beaufort around the Karoo basin. Early in the year he, **Billy de Klerk**, **John Nyaphuli**, **Nthaopa Ntheri** and **Charlton Dube** undertook a collecting trip to the Ecca Pass area north of Grahamstown, where several small dicynodonts were collected as well as several temnospondyl skulls from a single locality very low in the Beaufort. **Richard Mason** has been working on his MSc on the geology and stratigraphy of the same area, and is in the final stages of writing up.

Later in the year Bruce, Billy and **Rose Adendorff** spent a few days on the palaeosurface on Rensburgspruit, the farm of Dave and Dorothy Green, casting a beautiful trackway made by an amphibian. This fieldwork is toward a paper on the Beaufort-Ecca contact in Kwazulu-Natal by Bruce, John and Billy. In October Bruce attended the *Terrestrial Permian Conference* in Albuquerque. This was a most enjoyable conference organized by the ever energetic Spencer Lucas and his team, and was followed by a memorable 2 day field excursion to the Permian of New Mexico.

Postgraduate Students registered at the BPI during 2005

PhD Students

* ADENDORFF, R. "*The habitat, variation and biostratigraphic correlation of Glossopteris in South Africa*". Graduated 2005.

Supervisor: M.K. Bamford

* CISNEROS, J. "*The Triassic parareptile procolophon: Cranial anatomy, variation, biostratigraphy and biogeographic distribution*"

Supervisors: B.S Rubidge, R. Damiani

* GOVENDER, R. *"Morphological and physiological analysis of the postcranial anatomy of the Triassic dicynodont Kannemeyeria (Therapsida: Dicynodontia).*

Supervisors: P.J. Hancox, A. Yates.

* LACRUZ, R.S. *"The analysis of growth markings in enamel tissue of Plio-Pleistocene hominids of Africa".*

Supervisor: L.R. Berger, F Rossi, T Bromage.

* NICOLAS, M. *"An assessment of vertebrate biodiversity changes through the Permo-Triassic Beaufort Group (Karoo Supergroup) of South Africa and its significance in terms of biological basin development, hiatus periods and extinction events."*

Supervisor: B.S. Rubidge

* POLE, S. *'Development and validation of non-invasive chemical methods for cleaning of palaeontological specimens'.*

Supervisors: E. Cukrowska, L Backwell.

* SANDERSEN, A. *"A later Cretaceous biostratigraphy based on palynomorphs derived from southern African sediments".*

Supervisor: P.J. Hancox, L. Scott.

* STEININGER, C. *"The emergence of early Homo and the extinction of paranthropus robustus: environmental and*

faunal change in the Blaauwbankspruit of South Africa".

Supervisor: L. Berger, N van der Merwe, P Unger..

* ZIPFEL, B. *"An investigation into the morphological and pathological variation of the first metatarsal ray in the genus Homo during the Pleistocene and Holocene".* Graduated 2005.

Supervisor: L.R. Berger, R Kidd

MSc Students

* BOSHOFF, P. *"Fossil coprolites in the Plio-Pleistocene aged cave deposits of South Africa"*

Supervisor: L.R. Berger

* FRANKLIN, R. *"The recognition, frequency and taxonomic association of pathologies from the Plio-Pleistocene Aged sites of Coopers D, Witwatersrand, South Africa"*

Supervisors: L.R. Berger, L Backwell

* MASON, R. *"A stratigraphic and biostratigraphic synthesis of the Ecca-Beaufort contact in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa".*

Supervisors: BS Rubidge, PJ Hancox.

* PICKERING, R. *"The chronostratigraphy of a Pleistocene cave fill, Gladysvale Cave (South Africa): a key to*

understanding climatically controlled cyclic cave fills".
Graduated 2005.

Supervisors: L.R Berger, PJ Hancox

* RENAUT, R. "*The morphology and physiology of the Permian sphenophytes of South Africa and the implications to taxonomy and biostratigraphy*".

Supervisor: M.K. Bamford.

* RUTHERFORD, A.B. "*A multi-disciplinary sedimentological, stratigraphic and palaeoenvironmental appraisal of the Permian and Triassic Karoo strata in the vicinity of Thaba Nchu, in the Free State.*"

Supervisors: P.J. Hancox, B.S. Rubidge.

* VASCONCELOS, C. "*Proposal of a neotype for Massospondylus carinatus Owen (Dinosauria, Sauropodomorpha): the postcranial morphology and implications for prosauropod phylogeny*"

Supervisors: M.A. Raath, A. Yates

- Outreach -

Apart from the normal research and teaching activities, the BPI has also been active in several public awareness and outreach programmes which are run by **Ian McKay**. To mark the 60th anniversary of the BPI Palaeontology a day long programme entitled "*The Story of Life - A new perspective on South Africa's 3.5 billion year fossil record*" was organised by **Bruce Rubidge** and **Terence (Spike) McCarthy**. This programme, which was widely acclaimed by the more than 1000 members of the public who attended, comprised a series of 15 minute lectures on the origin and development of life. Our thanks to all the palaeontologists from around South Africa who participated in the programme and made it possible (see Table 1 for a full list).

The evening before this series of lectures the book "*The story of Earth and Life - a southern African perspective on a 4.6-billion year journey*" edited by Terence Mc Carthy and Bruce Rubidge was launched in Johannesburg. Within two months of the launch the entire print run was sold, and it has now been reprinted.

Speaker	Title
1. Maarten de Wit	Clues to the origin of life in the Barberton Greenstone Belt
2. Nic Beukes	Life in the Proterozoic and its effect on the Earth's atmosphere
3. John Hancox	Gondwana - Last of the supercontinents
4. John Almond	Complex organisms colonise a new southern supercontinent
5. Marion Bamford	Floral radiations
6. Bruce Rubidge	Life before dinosaurs
7. Roger Smith	Mother of all extinctions - Resetting the evolutionary clock
8. Adam Yates	Dinosaurs dominate
9. Mike Raath	The world's oldest dinosaur eggs and embryos
10. Anusuya Chinsamy-Turan	Dinosaurs` way of life- What the bones tell us
11. Billy de Klerk	Cretaceous landscapes
12. Uwe Reimold	Impact catastrophes and mass extinction
13. James Brink	Plio-Pleistocene faunal radiations
14. Lee Berger	Hominid origins and radiations
15. Himla Soodyall	Human origins - genetic clues
16. Lyn Wadley	Human technological development
17. Ben Smith	The origins of art and religion
18. Terence McCarthy	Lessons from the past

Table 1: The Story of life - a new perspective on South Africa's 3.5 billion year fossil record.

Setting up the Kitching Fossil Exploration Centre at Nieu Bethesda



One of the major projects that the BPI initiated in 2005 with funding from the DST and a private donor, was setting up the *Kitching Fossil Exploration Centre* (KFEC) down in Nieu Bethesda. This was done as a partnership between the BPI Palaeontology, the Albany Museum, and the Owl House Foundation. Setting up the KFEC turned out to be a far more involved process than any of us ever anticipated. First, we had to renovate an old building next door to the Owl House. Next we had to fill the space with exhibits and reconstructions, mainly adapted from existing displays in the Albany Museum, BPI and the South African Museum. Then we had to advertise, interview and appoint guides. Setting up the exhibits in Nieu Bethesdsa had its own special challenges: many of our graphics spontaneously

delaminated (ageing Billy De Klerk visibly overnight), replacing a missing screw entailed an hour and a half trip to Graaff- Reinet, and frequent power breaks resulted in us having late night group wall plastering and hole drilling sessions- all of which turned out to be great fun and an adventure. The task was also made a great deal easier because of the considerable support which we received from the Nieu Bethesda community.



Guides and visitors congregate outside the KFEC

Together the displays pay tribute to a century of palaeontological endeavour in the area as well as give insight into life at Nieu Bethesda during the late Permian. The displays also covered the End-Permian Extinction event, which is scripted in one not far away in the Loodsburg Pass. A special feature of the KFEC is that after visitors have studied casts and reconstructions in



Reconstructions loom ominously in the interior of the KFEC.

the Centre itself they can experience the thrill of finding real fossils in the Gats River Bed only 100's of meters away under the supervision of trained guides. All in all we hope that the KFEC will inform and entertain visitors for more than an hour extending their knowledge for the history of the area from decades to hundreds of millions of years.

Renovating a building and setting up displays was only part of the story. We also trained five guides from the local community to guide tourists around the centre and the Gats River fossil trail. For the guides this meant intensive on site training and also visiting BPI for two weeks for more advanced palaeontological training. This was an eye opening experience as this was their first visit to Johannesburg. Lastly, KFEC needs to be managed and for that a Section 21 company was set up under the direction of Bruce Rubidge.

KFEC was opened on 27 November and thus far (*January 2006 - Ed.*) has been visited by over 500 visitors, whose response, as recorded in the visitors book, has been very good. So if you know of somebody who is visiting Nieu Bethesda, please have them pop-in and tour the KFEC.



A tour of the Gats River bed on opening day.

Outreach Programme

2005 was an extremely busy year for our programme. 1500 visitors, mostly school children visited the museums as part of formal organised tours mostly guided by graduate students. In addition, we had to assemble an exhibition for the annual "Yebo Gogo" show organised by the Biologists more formally known as the School of Animal Plant and Environmental Science. This show proved to be a challenge because the theme was the TV show "Survivor"- we had to scratch our heads and puzzle over which fossil plants and

animals could be considered "survivors" or "runners up", or even more sadly, "voted out"- a conversation which caused considerable acrimony around the BPI tea table. Next, there was organising school children for the day of talks in the Great Hall in September- Wits invited 100 learners to attend the talks free of charge- which they duly did. Most learners stayed the day, and afterward, said that they really enjoyed the talks even if they were a bit difficult to understand in places. Finally, we also helped set up the KFEC- an event which is reported elsewhere.

Launch of the Geosciences Educators Association

Another exciting event of the year for outreach was the launch of the Geosciences Educators Association, which is actually a division of the Geological Society of South Africa. The division has among its members; school teachers, education department officials, museum curators, researchers, and university lecturers. It aims to use the unique assembly of talents, skills and networks of its members:

- To promote and support geoscience education in South Africa at all levels

- To work for the enhancement of quality in the provision of geoscience education in South Africa/Southern Africa
- To encourage the developments that raise public awareness of geosciences.
- To bridge the gap between industry and educators at all levels and in all contexts.

In 2005 the GEA organised a "*Geoscience Education Symposium*" as part of the GSSA Conference in Durban. We also organised an excursion for teachers and education department officials that looked at the Geology of Durban. The GEA would very much like to work with all Geoscientists and societies, including the PSSA, in achieving its aims- so if you are interested in outreach please do join up by contacting Ian McKay at the BPI.

JOHN HANCOX

2005 was a bit of an upheaval for me, having left the comfort and safety of a Lecturing post to become a researcher again - anyhow it has been a fun year full of different activities as outlined below.

Student Projects

2005 has seen the award of three higher degrees that I have co-supervised. **Robyn Pickering** and **Louis Coney** both received their M.Sc.'s and **Romala Govender** completed her Ph.D. Robyn's dissertation on the stratigraphy, chronology and palaeoenvironment of the Pleistocene cave fill at Gladysvale Cave, South Africa was awarded *Cum Laude*, and I would like to congratulate her on an exceptional piece of work. Most of you will have seen one of Robyn's presentations on her project, and will agree that she really did a sterling job, one which has changed the way we look at hominin bearing cave fills.

Louise Coney's work on the geochemistry of the Permo-Triassic boundary (PTB) sequence at Komandodrift Dam in the Eastern Cape has filled a significant gap in continental PTB studies and (watch this space) it looks like her latest findings will completely revolutionise non-marine PTB

studies. I would also like to take this opportunity to wish her all the best for her Ph.D studies on the Bosumtwi impact crater in Ghana.

Last, but definitely not least, Romala Govender completed her Ph.D on the postcranial anatomy of the Triassic dicynodont *Kannemeyeria* and is busy doing some final corrections - congratulations on addressing one of the most overlooked aspects of dicynodont studies.

I also have two outstanding M.Sc. students (well pretty good anyway). **Anthony Rutherford** is busy completing his project on the stratigraphy, sedimentology and palaeontology of the Late Permian and Triassic sequence in the vicinity of Thaba Nchu in the Free State, and **Richard Mason** is focussing on the contact between the Ecca and Beaufort groups in the Eastern Cape, where it is anomalously mapped as occurring between the Fort Brown (Ecca) and Koonap (Beaufort Group) formations.

Andrea Sanderson is almost finished her Ph.D on the palynology of two Cretaceous-Tertiary sequences off the west coast of South Africa, and is hoping to have submit-

ted before this newsletter hits the stands - good luck for the final stretch.

Research:

Karoo

With only two months to go before my year of research ends, I find myself with a few too many projects still underway, and too few days. A number of projects have however been brought to fruition, and hopefully I will find a way to finish off the remainder. From the base of the Karoo up, I am involved with projects spanning the Ecca-Beaufort contact to the upper Elliot.

Studies on the Ecca-Beaufort contact have focussed on the contact in the Eastern Cape around Grahamstown with **Bruce Rubidge** and Richard Mason, as well as in Natal, where a fantastic boundary sequence is preserved with a remarkable trace fossil assemblage (Figure 1). This is currently the focus of a combined effort including Bruce Rubidge and **Billy de Klerk**.

Work progresses with **Johann Neveling** and Bruce Rubidge on the Burgersdorp Fm and its included *Cynognathus*



Figure 1: Remarkable trackway site on the *Ecce-Beaufort* contact in Natal, preserving dicynodont trackways, amphibian drag marks and numerous invertebrate traces.

Assemblage Zone (AZ) fauna. These studies are focussed on the fluvial sedimentology, basin development and biostratigraphy of the Formation, with one paper *in press*, and a further two in advanced stages of preparation.

Ten years on and an official threefold biostratigraphy of the *Cynognathus* AZ has still not been submitted, however collaboration with Johann Neveling and Bruce Rubidge may see this rectified in the very near future. Expect to see a formal subdivision based on the trirachodontid cynodonts. Driefontein, in the lowermost *Cynognathus* AZ, is still one of the most amazing sites in the country (maybe I am slightly biased) - especially for the Early Triassic microfauna that it produces (Figure 2). This site should really be preserved and systematically excavated.

By invitation of **Robert Reisz** I have become involved with the description of the depositional environment of the amazing dinosaur egg locality at Rooidraai in Golden Gate National Park. These are some truly amazing fossils of which we can be justifiably proud.

Plio-Pleistocene

Now that Robyn has completed her M.Sc. expect to see a flurry of papers describing the cave site at Gladysvale, particularly the younger fill. I am also still involved with a number of fluvial and alluvial Plio- Pleistocene sites (Erfkroon, Mara & Cornelia), including having the privilege

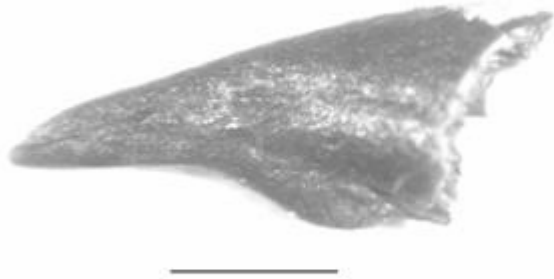


Figure 2: Archosauriforme terminal phalange from Driefontein. Scale bar is 1mm.

of seeing **Lucinda Backwell**, Johann Neveling and **James Brink's** fantastic new site at Heelbo in the Free State.

Impacts

Kgagodi, Botswana's first proven meteorite crater, is still the focus of a project with **Uwe Reimold** and **Dion Brandt**. Efforts are currently underway to get this phenomenon re-drilled, as it has a unique stratigraphy for this part of

southern Africa, possibly covering the timespan from the Late Cretaceous through the Tertiary. It also contains an unparalleled record of Tertiary palaeoenvironments and climatic change for this part of southern Africa, and could potentially be a site of scientific excellence for Botswana.

Palaeontology

Still battling with dicynodont phylogeny, however **Ken Angielczyk** is prepared to pull me out of the mire that this has become - so hopefully some good news on that front. The manuscripts on the two new dicynodonts from the uppermost *Cynognathus* AZ (*Angonisaurus* and a shansiodontid) are both nearing completion, and should be submitted by March.

Work on the new Early Triassic archosaur from the lowermost *Cynognathus* Assemblage Zone is underway with **David Gower**, and hopefully this too will be completed before I take my leave from the science.

A project on Late Jurassic ammonites (Figure 3) and other interesting invertebrates from near Nacala in northern Mozambique is being driven by **Herbie Klinger** of the Iziko



Figure 3: Late Jurassic ammonite from Nacala, northern Mozambique. Coin for scale is 25mm.

Museum Cape Town. This study has identified a number of new taxa and has important implications for correlations with the Madagascan ammonite faunas.

I have somehow also gotten involved with two projects on shark teeth. The first is in collaboration with **Chris Duffin** on *Lissodus* and ?*Polyacrodus* teeth from the lowermost

Cynognathus AZ, and the second on an amazing shark fauna (Figure 4) from the Palaeogene of northern Mozambique. This latter project is being undertaken jointly with Dr David Ward. Dr Duffin is also interested in the coprolites from Driefontein and will hopefully torture some unsuspecting M.Sc. student with this material.



Figure 4: Lamniform shark tooth from the early Palaeogene of Northern Mozambique.

Early in 2005 I hosted Dr Raoul Mutter who was working on our Triassic fishes - with a particular interest in the saurichthyid material from the lower *Cynognathus* AZ. I hope that this brief overview of our Triassic fish has enthused him to continue.

In closing I would like to take this opportunity of thanking everybody who has influenced my time in palaeontology, and to wish everyone in the field in South Africa, as well as our friends abroad, all the best with their research and science. It has been a wonderful decade and a half - and I will miss the people, stimulation and thrill of the science.

Please note in future I can now be contacted at the following e-mail jhancox@cciconline.com

Best wishes for 2006.

John

Recent Publications

Published

1. Abdala, F., **Hancox, P.J.** and Neveling, J.N. 2005. Cynodonts from the uppermost Burgersdorp Formation (Karoo Supergroup),

South Africa, and their bearing on the biostratigraphic subdivision and correlation of the Triassic *Cynognathus* Assemblage Zone. *Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology* **25**(1), 192-199.

2. Bordy, E.M., **Hancox, P.J.** and Rubidge, B.S. 2005. The contact of the Molteno and Elliot formations through the main Karoo Basin, South Africa: a second order sequence boundary. *South African Journal of Geology* **108** (3), 351-364.
3. Bordy, E.M., **Hancox, P.J.** and Rubidge, B.S. 2005. Turner, B.R. and Thomson, K. Discussion on 'Basin development during deposition of the Elliot Formation (Late Triassic - Early Jurassic), Karoo Supergroup, South Africa' (South African Journal of Geology, 107, 397-412) - A Reply. *South African Journal of Geology* **108**(3), 454-461.

In press

4. Catuneanu, O., Wopfner, H., Eriksson, P.G., Cairncross, B., Rubidge, B.S., Smith, R.M.H. and **Hancox, P.J.** The Karoo basins of south-central

- Africa. In press *African Journal of Earth Sciences*.
5. Neveling, J., **Hancox, P.J.** and Rubidge, B.S. Biostratigraphy of the lower Burgersdorp Formation (Beaufort Group; Karoo Supergroup) of South Africa - implications for the stratigraphic ranges of early triassic tetrapods. *Palaeontologia Africana*.
 6. Renaut, A.J., **Hancox, P.J.** and Welman, J. A tuskless specimen of the Triassic dicynodont *Kannemeyeria* (Synapsida: Therapsida). *South African Journal of Science*.
 7. Sidor, C.A. and **Hancox, P.J.** *Elliotherium kersteni*, a new tritheledontid from the Lower Elliot Formation (Upper Triassic) of South Africa. *Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology*. March 2006 (80/2).

Submitted

8. Hall, G., Berger, L.R., Lacruz, R., Pickering, R., **Hancox, P.J.** and Schmid, P. An Achulean handaxe from the Gladysvale Cave Site in the Witwatersrand region of South Africa. *South African Journal of Science*.

9. Pickering, R., **Hancox, P.J.** and Lee-Thorp, J.A. The Stratigraphy of the Peabody Chamber, Gladysvale Cave: a key to understanding sequence boundaries within cyclic cave fills. *Journal of Human Evolution*.
10. Vasconcelos, C., Damiani, R.J., Renaut, A.J. and **Hancox, P.J.** *Dolichuranus primaevus* (Therapsida: Anomodontia) from the Middle Triassic of Namibia and its phylogenetic relationships. *Palaeontology*.

ROBYN PICKERING, BERN, SWITZERLAND

I have quite a bit of PalNews: I submitted my MSc last December and then moved to Switzerland in April this year (2005) to start a PhD with Prof. Jan Kramers at the University of Bern on the Uranium-Lead dating of the South African hominid bearing caves, especially Sterkfontein. The project is being done in collaboration with Tim Partridge and Ron Clarke and involves a review of the stratigraphy at Sterkfontein, as well as dating as much speleothem material as possible. After two freezing months in Switzerland (it snowed in April), I spent about two months back in South Africa doing field work and

graduating with my masters (with distinction) and collecting 99 kg's of samples which were shipped back to Switzerland. So now I am beginning to massive task of dating all these rocks but am really enjoying being here and am even learning to speak German.

Cheers,
Robyn

COUNCIL FOR GEOSCIENCE, PRETORIA

2005 was a whirlwind year at the *Council for Geoscience*. In March we picked up fieldwork exactly where we left off in December 2004 - i.e. in the northern Free State with **Adam Yates & Co.** excavating dinosaur material from the Elliot Formation. During the last months of 2004 an enthusiastic (and rotating) group of excavators descended on the Senekal district to dig up a tantalizing dinosaur find from the upper Elliot. Every now and then yours' truly slipped away to stare at rocks, write strange observations in a tired notebook and generally enjoy the slight breeze affording the higher parts of the hill, i.e. do geology. We also managed a bit of exploration here and further south in the Lady Brand district, although none of our finds were as spectacular as the Senekal dinosaur. In

March 2004 we got down to more of the same, although it was admittedly much more pleasant to sweat away on north-facing hill slopes in the early autumn than it was in early summer.

As it turned out, one Stormberg-Aussie combo led to another and July saw me dropping down to the Molteno Formation when I joined my old (like in ex-) colleague **Barry Millsteed** and **John Dunlevy** (University of KwaZulu-Natal) in the field at Underberg. The mission: this time to measure freezing sections of the Molteno in the shadows of Sani Pass. The reason for us working here sprang directly from recent work by Emese Bordy & Co. on the Elliot and Molteno, coupled to interesting observations made by John when he visited the Sani Pass area while on holiday there.

In between these two trips I joined **Bob Gastaldo** (Colby College) and his crew of students in the Middelburg district, on two separate occasions where we continued our work on early Triassic strata, looking at the basal Katberg this time. The first results of the collaborative Permian and Triassic palaeo-botanical and ecological research project involving Bob, **Marion Bamford** (BPI), **Rose Prevec**

(BPI & Albany Museum), **Hallie Sims** (Iowa University) and **Conrad Labandeira** (Smithsonian) have been collated and published in *Palaeis* (Vol. 20). In other developments **Fernando Abdala** and I continued our work on cynodont fossils during the first part of 2005. This work, which looked at the new trirachodontid material from the Burgersdorp Formation, has grown significantly in scope since the project's early stages and it provided great satisfaction when our final product was accepted for publication in the *Memoirs of the Linnaean Society* (*in press*).

My spring arrived early during August when I joined **Lucinda Backwell**, **Christine Steininger**, **Lucy Perreira**, and **James Brink** in the field. The flavour was definitely fresh and new to me - very late Cenozoic to be exact - working on, amongst other things, donga-fills in the Northern Free State containing spectacular accumulations of black wildebeest bones. This was followed immediately by work of a different nature. For a while now the CGS has been investigating closer cooperation with earth scientists in Botswana and Namibia and the various Karoo sequences found throughout southern Africa would form an ideal way to conduct mutual research. Thus a significant

part of the second half of 2005 was spent developing this concept and proposal. The response has thus far been very positive and it looks like this project will form a significant part of our program over the next two years.

We were fortunate to have acquired **Linde Karny's** services for a little while longer. As diligent as always, she kept on working on the physical curation of both the Karoo and Cenozoic Cave fossil collections, as well as the electronic fossil database. As most people with previous 'collection-experience' will know, the scope and dedication demanded by such a task is not for the faint-hearted. The results have however been great and Linde has done a great job updating and ordering our collection.

The year ended on a highlight as I spent most of November in South America (making it the most beautiful month of them all) where I attended the *12th Gondwana Conference* in Mendoza (Argentina). The South African palaeontological contingent almost outnumbered their geological counterparts and included Rose Adendorff (who saved my Powerpoint presentation), Jennifer Botha, Roger Smith, Fernando Abdala, Juan Cisneros and myself. Mendoza, which is situated at the foot of the Andes

mountains which erupt abruptly and spectacularly behind it, was a great conference venue. Not only is it situated in the heartland of the Argentinian wine industry, but on the 1 day visit to the Triassic Cuyo Basin we visited, amongst other things, *in situ* wood fossils that were first described by Charles Darwin! During the aftermath of the conference I paid a quick visit to Peru before returning to the office to tie up a few loose ends ahead of Christmas.

Johann

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**NEXT DEADLINE FOR CONTRIBUTIONS - FRIDAY, 9th of
 JUNE 2006**