

CLAIM YOUR HERITAGE

Dr. Janet du Plooy

Our heritage celebrates our achievements and contributes to redressing past inequities. It educates, it deepens our understanding of society and encourages us to empathise with the experience of others. It facilitates healing and material and symbolic restitution and it promotes new and previously neglected research into our rich oral traditions and customs.

The quotation from the National Heritage Resources Act (NHRA) encapsulates the spirit of the new legislation to provide for communities to participate in the identification, conservation and management of our cultural resources. The Act follows the principle that the levels of government closest to the community should manage heritage resources. Local authorities must manage heritage resources as part of their planning process.

The national estate encompasses heritage resources of cultural significance for the present community and for future generations. It may include places to which oral traditions are attached or which are associated with living heritage; historical settlements; landscapes and natural features of cultural significance; archaeological and palaeontological sites; graves and burial grounds, including ancestral and royal graves and graves of traditional leaders; graves of victims of conflict; and sites relating to the history of slavery in South Africa.

The national estate includes movable objects such as those recovered from the soil or waters of South Africa; objects associated with living heritage; ethnographic and decorative art; objects of scientific interest; and books, documents, photographs, film, material or sound recordings.

A place or object is considered part of the national estate if it has cultural significance because of its importance in the community, or pattern of South Africa's history, its possession of rare aspects of South Africa's natural or cultural heritage, its strong or special association with a particular cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. In accordance to section 34 of the Act: no person may alter or demolish any structure or part of a structure which is older than 60 years without a permit issued by the provincial heritage authority. Permits are also required to damage, destroy, alter or disturb any archaeological or palaeontological site or material. All graves older than 60 years and not

in a cemetery (such as ancestral graves in rural areas) are protected by the Act.

Anyone who intends to undertake a development must notify the heritage resources authority and if there is reason to believe that heritage resources will be affected, a heritage impact assessment report must be compiled at the developer's cost.

The incentives provided in the Act for those interested in the conservation of the national estate are more than flexible. Fines for the unlawful destruction or damage to heritage resources are extensive. Disincentives include community service, reconstruction of a heritage resource, or payment equivalent to the cost of disturbing or damaging a heritage resource and the forfeiture of equipment being used when committing the offence.

For further information on heritage resource management, contact West Rand Heritage Consultants at info@wrhc.co.za or fax 086 632 9455.